

Brunel Centre for Sport, Health and Wellbeing



Young athletes' perceptions on promoting positive
parental behaviour in sport

Executive Summary

Dr Daniel Rhind, Charlotte Murphy and Sam Giles

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Questions can be addressed to Daniel.Rhind@Brunel.ac.uk

Executive Summary

Introduction

Parental support is key in promoting a child's participation in sport (Côté, 1999; Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffet, 2002). There is however, a continuous stream of cases where parents have behaved inappropriately in youth sport, causing a negative effect on their children (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2008). This can result in children not having positive experiences in youth sport and can ultimately contribute to drop out (Siekańska, 2012).

Despite the widely acknowledged importance of promoting positive parental behaviours in youth sport, there remains a clear lack of research in this area which has focused on listening to children's voices. Existing research has tended to be sport-specific and has been conducted in North America. The present research addressed this gap through conducting focus groups with young people from a range of sports across the UK. The research focused on the question "What factors do young people perceive as promoting positive parental behaviours in youth sport"?

Method

Participants were sampled (N =45, 16 males and 29 females) from national youth forums across the United Kingdom. From the sports approached, volleyball, netball, swimming, badminton and Paralympic table tennis agreed to participate; providing a unique perspective across individual/team sports and able bodied/disabled sports. The researcher was invited to attend one of their quarterly meetings to conduct a focus-group. All participants had competed at the county level or higher and were currently aged between 14-26.

Results

The key themes derived from the data are summarised and represented within three intersections in Figure 1. This approach highlights the need to consider each of the different relationships which are created within a child-parent-coach triangle. Five broad

themes were identified; understanding the sport, following the performance process, emphasising total development, understanding importance of the sport, and having clear boundaries. Each of these themes, and their associated sub-themes, are outlined below and illustrated with quotes from the participants.

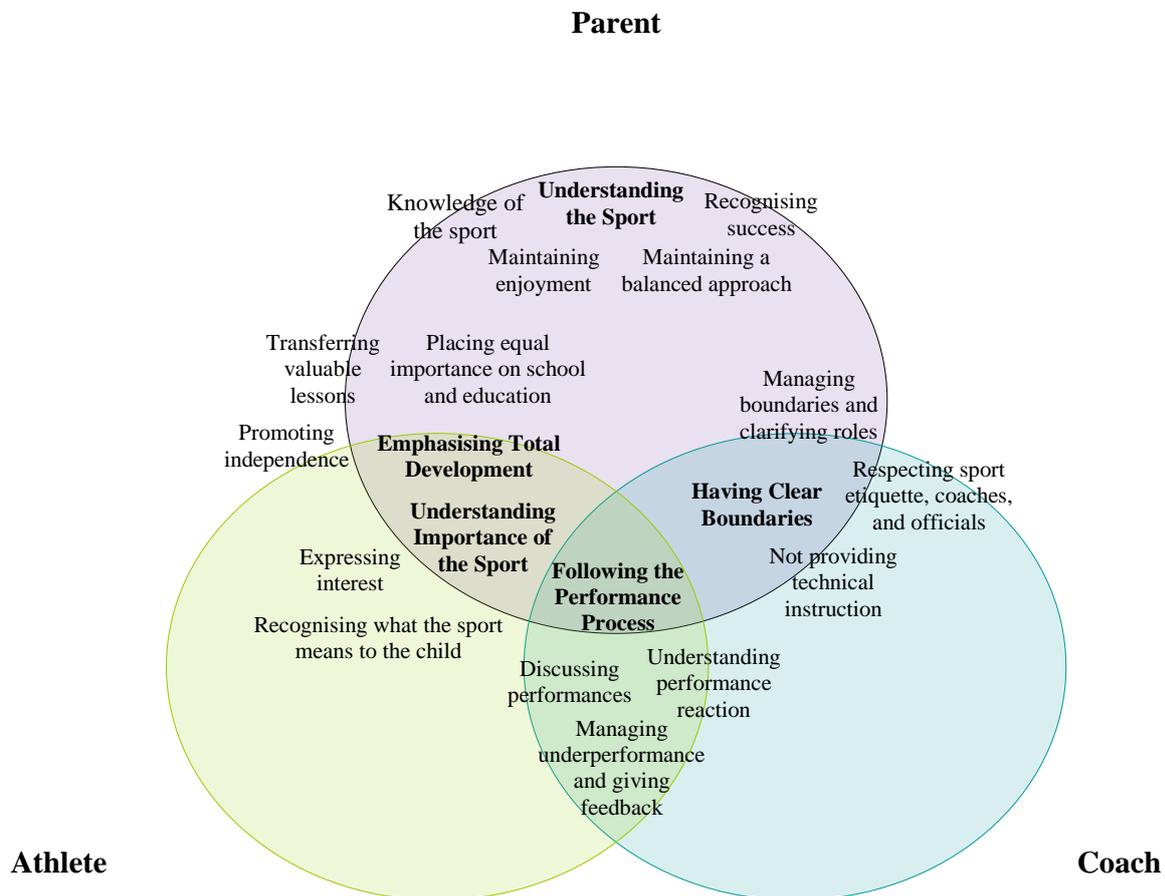


Figure 1. Higher and lower order themes representing positive interactional behaviours between the parent, athlete, and coach.

1. Understanding the sport

Knowledge of the sport

A: My mum had no idea what was going on, she did like synchro-diving so team sports were just over her head and my dad was always with my brother so my mum like took me everywhere I needed to be and did what she could but in terms of what was going on, she had like no understanding, if I had come off a match and been like that was

rubbish I did bad or even like vice versa if I played really well she would have the same reaction, she couldn't gauge what I was talking about so she was really supportive but maybe I had got further if she understood what was going on, she could have given me that extra bit... like when you say about how it went wrong and if your mum sat there and talked it over with you but I would talk at my mum and she would say okay try harder next week. She didn't do it on purpose she just didn't know and that was just her so maybe that would have helped more but she supported me in every way she could.

Maintaining a balanced approach

A: Me and my sister would never let our mum come watch us play because I played county and my sister did regional and my mum is a PE teacher so she's really competitive and she would stand on the side lines and like scream like the whole time, she's a hockey player so she doesn't even know what she's talking about and it was oh my god like so annoying and it would just wind us up like it wasn't really supportive shouting like she wants the best for us and I definitely know that but I don't know it was never supportive and used to proper bother us we would only let our dad come watch us and dad would like just sit there quietly and not say a word and always be at the end "oh really well done" or "that was unlucky today"... she is always so loud and keen and just be screaming and oh my god it was such a nightmare and if she ever came to watch we would make her stand on the furthest netball court possible so she could barely see the game like I know she means the best but she was just too keen.

Maintaining enjoyment

A: What I would say is just hope that your child does the best that they can and they can't ask for anything more really, just try your best to keep them happy playing the sport, you don't want them to feel uncomfortable or forced to do it so they just want to really enjoy it and have fun and do their best while doing it.

Recognising success

A: It depends on the different sports like my parents weren't very pushy although my dad is a football fan so when I played football he would always stand aside and want me to do well or whatever but when I got into volleyball, even if I was doing really well I would come home and go "oh we won the south west under 18 championships" and he's like "oh that's good" and it's like you've watched my whole football career and I've never done anything in my football career that's matched that and if I won a football game he would be like "oh that's brilliant" but this is a huge achievement [yeah it's a lack of understanding] but there is nothing like I got to the point where I was runner up in the national under 18 championships and he was like "hmmm" and it's like "what do I have to do for god's sake?!"

A: It's quite nice because their kind of celebrating all their hard work as well. It's not only celebrating what you have done its celebrating what they have done for you as well... They have helped you, get closer to what you want to be.

A: It does put it into perspective because . . . you are seeing winning at the national level . . . its good but I have got other things, like the next stage to think about whereas, . . . because they have never done it themselves, it's a bigger deal for them. It is nice to sort of have someone that's like actually that's really good."

These athletes highlighted the importance of parents taking time to understand the sport and to promote enjoyment. Particularly important was the recognition that success is not purely based on defeating an opponent. Success can also come in a variety of other forms such as trying one's best, learning a new skill or working well as a team.

2. Following the performance process*Managing under-performance and giving feedback*

A: My mum aggravates me when I lose because I'm one of these people that knows if I've played rubbish and I don't need her to come over and go "oh well you played

alright” and I'd rather ignore her and I'd rather not hear that at all, she is one of these people who I would always end up having a go at because she's like “don't worry about it you'll be fine you've got another game” and all this stuff and I'm just like shut up I don't want to hear about it, I know I've played rubbish and I don't need you to come over and pretend I've played well type thing but then in other times when like, like when I got selected for England I didn't want to go to the training because I wasn't very well and she forced me to go and now looking back I'm pleased she forced me to go but I hated it while I was there and I think it's because she forced me to go like obviously it's for my own benefit and now I realise that but at that point we had big arguments about it because I had just got over being ill and I was like I don't want to go she made me go, I went and I hated every second of it and thinking back I enjoyed it when I was there it was when we got told we got to go to bed or do you know that type thing and I just thought it's her fault that I was not enjoying it type thing so sometimes she is very comforting but not when I want her to be and then other times she's not comforting and like very pushy in that respect.

A: I think one of the biggest tips I'd want to give to someone else's parents is if they lose or something, to be positive. Because if my parents weren't positive I could see myself giving up or quitting because I'd either lost or wasn't happy.

Understanding performance reaction

A: My mum had more of a background presence with me like she would come and watch and stuff and support me but she would never get involved in the whole performance side of it and I think I appreciated that like she never wanted to get involved in that side and I didn't want her to I liked her being there if I needed support like if I had a bad day or something like that I could always go to her but it was a background presence which is what I wanted and that's what she did for me.

Discussing performances

A: I think it's totally dependent on the person and like what you need and what you require and I think it can vary depending on the situation as to what the suitable

approach is like ill know if something happens whether I want to speak to my mum or my dad and I might even tell the other person that that's happened which is quite easy now because they are separated and it doesn't really matter but like even before it would always be like "she phoned you because she doesn't want to reflect on it" or like "she phoned you because she wants to make a joke out of it and just carry on", she wants the hard love or the soft love, like "oh you will be okay" or "get over it, man up and go to training" so I think that depends on yourself and the situation and your parents recognising that as well.

Parental influence was identified as being particularly important at times when the athlete had perceived themselves to have underperformed. Parents have a role to play in helping to manage expectations and in defining what is meant by a "good performance". Similarly, parents can discuss performances with their children to help to highlight positive aspects and any lessons to be learned for the future.

3. Emphasising total development

Placing equal importance on school and education

A: The one thing my parents always said to me is that education comes first no matter how high you get in sport, if you get injured your still going to need your education so they never let me sacrifice that.

Transferring valuable lessons

A: Well my mum and dad have never come to a tournament since last year and they were delighted to see me play really and it hasn't changed they have always said as long as you enjoy it, that is the main thing and table tennis has taught me valuable lessons about losing, respect and things like that and my parents just enforce that really in everyday life so yeah its good.

Promoting independence

A: My advice would be to let them have more freedom and let them choose what sport they want to do. I know a lot of people who have been pushed into sport, they don't want to play.

A: You want to be more independent and its, obviously hard for them to let go...because it's been so much of their life as well as yours.

These athletes discussed how the overlaps between sport and other areas of their life represented opportunities for both positive synergies and conflicts. Athletes recognised the need to balance their participation with their other commitments. They also appreciated how parents helped them to understand that life skills can be learned through sport which can be transferred into other aspects of their lives.

4. *Understanding importance of the sport**Recognising what the sport means to the child*

A: It's the other way for me because the way it's been with my club, I've always had the minibus and always had my coach wanting to take us everywhere so all my parents used to do was drop me off at school or walk me down the road or dropping me at the coaches house because they didn't know what I was doing, they didn't know I was going to Birmingham for a massive national competition, they just thought "oh she's going to a tournament in Birmingham let the coach do it" and like at that time I didn't realise how big it was, how massive it was compared to other sports neither did they so they have become more supportive the older I've got because they actually understand how much it meant to me and what competitions there are so they actually understand it more.

Expressing interest

A: Yeah talking about classes, netball is obviously not a male sport but men take courses like me and it increases, there are more and more men coming through courses and if you ask them why they do the course the usual answer is “oh my daughter plays and I want to know more” and I think in terms of advice it is about getting the balance right, I think you can have under-involved and just stand on the side line or you can have that over-involvement and its finding that balance between the two as a parent and its knowing what your child wants sometimes it might be appropriate to be that little more involved or that little less involved but its finding that strike of balance.

Having a sense of balance was a key message which ran throughout the focus group discussions. Some athletes described how their parents had not appreciated the importance of participation in general, or in a specific event, was to the child at the time. In contrast, other athletes talked of instances where participation in a sport or event was of far more importance to their parent than to them.

5. *Having clear boundaries**Managing boundaries and clarifying roles*

A: I think the perfect relationship between the parents and coaches is where parents are just enough involved to be able to share your achievements and know how you get on and to make sure your enjoying yourself but you don't want them too involved because where sport in its nature is very competitive parents could easily get caught up in that and with the coach and if they are taking too much interest in what you're doing it suddenly becomes what they want and not what you want, they need to be there just to monitor and just see how it's going and be able to share successes but it can't become their goal, they are not playing- I know some cases where parents live

through their offspring and they never got the chance to do it so they are doing it through their child.

A: I think when you're younger they should be more open and let you experiment with different things and just kind of help fund what you want to do and when you go selective then they should. . . listen to other people, like coaches around them. And help drive you."

Respecting sport etiquette, coaches and officials

A: Just don't forget your position, I know we have spoken a lot about coaches but one of my issues as an official is parents who speak negatively about officials in front of divers and they are like "what is that score about?!" and it's not helping because then the kids aren't going to have respect for the officials. It's about good sportsmanship and respect for other competitors, respect for officials and respect for coaches and parents need to remember that, remember that they are there to support their child and not to moan about everything else that goes on, especially not in front of children, if you want to go home and phone the other parents, do it as much as you like but not in front of the children because the kids need to learn to respect the people who are helping them in their role as an athlete.

Not providing technical instruction

A: As a coach the worst thing ever is when I see parents coaching divers like where I sit when I'm coaching we have windows that reflect from the spectators gallery and when I see the divers looking up from the water there are parents in the reflection, like what are you doing, you don't have a coaching qualification, you have never dived so just stop it, it doesn't help when I'm trying to give a correction and the divers are looking at the parents instead of me so they are not getting the correction I am trying to give, they probably get something wrong from up in the balcony, it just doesn't help the divers progress and the divers don't have the respect for the coach that they need and I think the other thing is that the parents need to be respecting the coach positions and the officials position especially if they don't hold those roles then they

don't have the experience and knowledge to be able to talk to their kids about it, it's not going to help the kids progress.

Having clear boundaries in all areas of the child-parent-coach triangle was consistently discussed as being a vital consideration. These athletes identified that much of the conflict they had experienced was due to the blurring of the lines between roles (e.g., when the parent was trying to coach the child).

Conclusions

The young people involved in this research highlighted 5 key ways in which they feel that positive parental behaviours could be promoted in youth sport. Specifically, parents should be encouraged to understand the sport, follow the performance process, emphasise the total development of the child, understand how important the sport is to the child, and to have clear boundaries, roles and expectations for the child, the coach and their own behaviour.

Whilst generic themes have been identified, it is very important to emphasise that the children called for an individualised approach. This can be facilitated through on-going communication between the child, parent and coach. To facilitate this, it is recommended that a blank version of the diagram of overlapping circles is made available to key stakeholders. Children, parents and coaches can then work together to fill in the diagram in order that everyone has agreed expectations.

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