

Understanding Parental Stressors & Players Preference of Parental Behaviors: A Brief Review

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The student staff of Dr. Nicholas Holt's *Child and Adolescent Sport Activity Lab (CASA)* (<http://www.ualberta.ca/~holt/>) is comprised of several masters and PhD students who have conducted some very interesting studies examining various aspects of youth sport. The focus of this article will be the investigation into the psychological aspects of interactions between parents, athletes and coaches. Heading up this topic is second year PhD student Camilla Knight who, prior to her work with the University of Alberta and CASA, was involved in several projects that examined the stressors experienced by parents of competitive junior tennis players (Harwood & Knight, 2009a; Harwood & Knight, 2009b). To supplement these findings, Camilla was involved in another study, to determine the stressors placed on tennis coaches via parents (Knight, C. & Harwood, C., 2009). And most recently, Camilla's latest investigation dealt specifically with how child-athlete's would prefer their parents to behave in sporting situations (Knight, C., Boden, C. & Holt, N., 2009). Key points from the articles directed at stress placed on parents will be highlighted, meanwhile the themes of the latter study, "Players preference of parental behaviors", will be the focus of discussion hereafter.

According to the work by Côté (1999), highlighted in Harwood and Knight's first works, there are distinct chronological levels of sporting participation: sampling, specializing, and investment, each linked to different kinds of stress. Sampling occurs in early childhood, where parents assume the role of provider; they introduce their children to sports and initiate sporting experiences, they offer transportation, as well financial and emotional support. The specialization stage is characterized by the transfer of focus from participation, play, and fun to the development of specific sport skills related to an increase in time and monetary commitment from parents. Finally the investment stage denotes the pursuit of elite, which evidently will be accompanied by a significant increase in expenditures for

travel, equipment, training and coaching costs as well as increased commitment for practices, workouts and competitions.

Selecting parents for their study based on this model, Harwood & Knight (2009a) interviewed 22 tennis parents to determine what stressors are: a) present and b) of these, which are the most prominent in each stage of development. These results revealed that all parents experienced competitive, organizational and developmental stressors. For parents with children in the earliest stage of development encountered the most competitive stressors emerged most frequently, whereas parents in the latter two stages experienced more pressure owed to organizational issues and their child's development. Overall, the specialization stage was determined to be the associated with the most stressors, whereas the sampling stage revealed the least. In conclusion to their study, Harwood and Knight suggested the creation of stage-specific parent education resources to prepare parents before they are confronted these unavoidable demands. Knowing that certain challenges and responsibilities are necessary at specific developmental stages of children's competitive progress, the installment of parent resources by sports organizations aimed at psychological, financial, and logistical planning and preparation is substantiated.

In her most recent study, where the focus shifted to the players, a qualitative study was conducted with 42 high level Canadian tennis players between the ages of 12 and 15 (Knight, Boden & Holt, 2009). This research was intended to identify how players would like their parents to behave during competition. Analysis of the data uncovered one dominant theme: players wanted their parents be involved in their sporting experience in a supportive manner. So, instead of behavior that puts players under pressure to perform and succeed, they would prefer comments of support that address good things about their attitude, gamesmanship, and effort. Second, unless their parent had legitimate experience with their sport, the athletes did not want technical or tactical coaching from them. However, they were happy to receive practical advice. As well, the athletes were cognizant of when their parent's verbal comments were not representative of their non verbal signals, and what their body language indicated. The support they felt from their parents was as dependant on their parent's body language as it was on their verbal commentary. If players parents facial expressions, posture and tone of voice display frustration, nerves, or disinterest, this could affect their child's mental game, and in turn, their performance. If their parents maintained a relaxed but interested posture and expression,

and these gestures matched their verbal remarks, the athletes would feel better supported. Lastly, players simply wish that their parents show respect to the rules and officials involved. For more information, please take a look at the “Parental Do’s and Don’ts” sheet or contact Camilla at cjknight@ualberta.ca.

In conclusion, it is important to note how critical parents are to the sporting experience of their children. Sporting participation would be impossible without parents. Parents play a key role in the development of children’s attitudes toward and participation in sport; they introduce the sport, foster interest, provide equipment, teach the rules and the purpose of the game, as well as invest time and emotional support to their child, a responsibility that begins in early childhood and lasts until the mid teens. With this, it is evident that parents of child-athletes will encounter their fair share of sport related stress. At the same time, the child is under pressure too, and this pressure can be either alleviated or further disturbed during competition depending on the behavior of their parent. The athlete absolutely wants their parent involved, and now thanks to the information derived from this group of youth tennis players, we have a clearer idea of what the most constructive behaviors are for parents that will allow their children to perform their best and have a good time doing it.

References

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