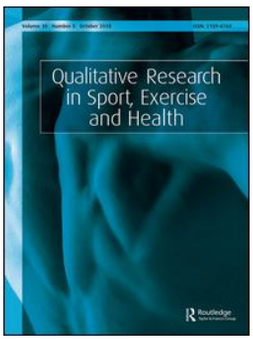

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Parental involvement and children's enjoyment in sport

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was two-fold: 1) to examine children's preferences for parental involvement that enhances their enjoyment in sport, and; 2) to identify the factors that facilitate or prevent parents from being involved in the ways preferred by children. Utilising an interpretive descriptive methodology, the study was conducted in two stages. First, focus groups with 31 children (8–12 years, M = 9.39) involved in field hockey, football, golf, gymnastics, swimming, and tennis were conducted. Second, 26 parents participated in focus groups, during which they reviewed the results of stage one and explained whether they could or could not engage in the desired ways. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Overall, four preferences for parental involvement to enhance children's sporting enjoyment were developed: 1) show you care about your child's sport by facilitating and prioritising participation; 2) listen and learn from your child to ensure you can engage in informed conversations; 3) understand and support your child's pre, during, and post competition preferences; and 4) support and recognise your child beyond their sport. The extent to which parents were able to engage in the manner children preferred was influenced by personal, social, and environmental/contextual considerations. The results illustrate the complexity of parental involvement in sport, and the importance of clubs and sports organisations understanding children's *and* parents' experiences when educating parents on appropriate involvement.

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Children's participation in sport is motivated by a variety of factors, not least enjoyment. In fact, enjoyment is often recognised as the main reason that children initiate and subsequently maintain sport involvement (Visek et al. 2015). In contrast, when there is a lack of enjoyment, children often lose interest and drop out of sport or pursue other activities that they deem more enjoyable (Crane and Temple 2015). Given the significance of enjoyment on children's sport participation, there has long been interest in examining factors that may influence it (McCarthy, Jones, and Clark-Carter 2008). These factors are most notably identified within Scanlan and Lewthwaite (1986) sport enjoyment model. Within this model, enjoyment is conceptualised across four quadrants, suggesting that sources of enjoyment can be intrinsic (e.g. excitement, personal accomplishment) or extrinsic (e.g. winning, pleasing others), as well as achievement or non-achievement related in nature.

One of the extrinsic sources that influence children's sporting enjoyment is the involvement of parents. For example, positive parental support such as the provision of praise and encouragement can increase children's overall enjoyment in sport (McCarthy, Jones, and Clark-Carter 2008). Conversely, parental pressure through directive behaviours such as criticism has been associated with reduced enjoyment (Leff and Hoyle 1995). However, although it is tempting to conclude that certain parental

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behaviours will always increase enjoyment while others reduce it, parental involvement is far more complex than this (Charbonneau and Camiré 2019). In fact, it has been recognised that the same parental behaviours can lead to positive and/or detrimental outcomes for children (Dorsch, Smith, and Dotterer 2016). For instance, certain behaviours (e.g. involvement, provision of advice, help with skill acquisition, encouragement/push, and emotional support) may be positive during children's early engagement in sport, but subsequently lead to conflict with coaches and/or athletes (Lauer et al. 2010a). Thus, rather than certain parental behaviours being 'good' or 'bad' it appears that a key element of optimal parental involvement is the extent to which parents match their involvement and behaviours to their children's preferences (Knight and Holt 2014).

To date, a handful of studies has been conducted to identify how athletes prefer their parents to be involved in their sport (Knight, Boden, and Holt 2010; Knight, Neely, and Holt 2011; Omli and Wiese-Bjornstal 2011). Taken together, these studies have indicated that children's preferences for their parents' involvement are specific to the individuals concerned and may vary in relation to temporal factors such as before, during, and after competitions. Parents' knowledge of the sport and the relationship that exists between the parent and child may also influence children's preferences (Knight et al. 2016b). Moreover, what children want from their parents and how they interpret their parents' comments and behaviours, may differ depending upon their performance or the outcome of the competition (e.g. Elliott and Drummond 2015; Tamminen, Poucher, and Povilaitis 2017).

The aforementioned studies have provided an interesting insight into what children want from their parents regarding their sporting lives. Nevertheless, there remains a need to explore the link between different parental behaviours and specific psychosocial outcomes, such as enjoyment (Harwood et al. 2019). Further, research examining athletes' preferences for parental involvement has generally focused upon adolescents rather than children (i.e. individuals under the age of 12 years). Given the substantive influence parents have during childhood, exploring children's preferences for parental involvement seems pertinent. Thus, the first aim of this study was to examine children's preferences for parental involvement to enhance their enjoyment in sport.

However, although knowing what children want from parents is important and useful to help guide parents' involvement, parents can not always behave in the ways that children prefer (cf. Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough 2009). For instance, drawing on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1974, 2005), sport parenting researchers (e.g. Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough 2015; Dorsch, Smith, and Dotterer 2016) have identified numerous influences on parents' socialisation and involvement within sport. For instance, Holt et al. (2008) identified that parent's sideline comments could be influenced by factors ranging from perceived sporting knowledge and expertise, feelings of empathy with their child, to game criticality and specific policies. Further supporting the influence of relational and contextual factors upon parental involvement, there is growing evidence that behaviours of coaches and other parents (e.g. Knight et al. 2016b), sporting culture/norms (e.g. Dorsch et al. 2015; McMahon and Penney 2014), and broader societal expectations pertaining to parenting (Pynn, Dunn, and Holt 2019; Stefansen, Smette, and Strandbu 2018) can all influence the types of behaviours parents display.

Given such insights, it is evident that there are various considerations that may enable or prevent parents from engaging in their children's sport in specific ways. Thus, as researchers and practitioners, it is important to ensure that guidance and suggestions provided to parents regarding their involvement in their child's sporting life accounts both for what children want and need, but also demonstrates an understanding of factors that influence parents' involvement. To our knowledge, an examination of these two aspects together, that is children's preferences and factors that influence parents' involvement, have yet to be conducted. As such, the second aim of this study was to identify the factors that would facilitate or prevent parents from being involved in the ways that children prefer.

Method

Methodology and philosophical underpinnings

Interpretive description (ID; Thorne 2016) was employed in this study. Developed by Thorne, Kirkham, and MacDonald-Emes (1997), ID is a non-categorical qualitative approach that aims to generate relevant grounded knowledge in applied research settings (Thorne 2016). ID studies seek to produce a coherent conceptual description of a phenomenon under investigation, while accounting for commonalities and individual variations (Thorne, Kirkham, and O'Flynn-Magee 2004). Further, ID utilises inductive analytical approaches, while operating within the methodological guidelines that stimulate a critical examination of a phenomenon that is in line with the specific disciplinary understandings of the intended application (Thorne 2016). Thus, ID is deemed to be particularly beneficial when research aspires to understand complex disciplinary questions and seeks to generate credible defensible new knowledge that will be relevant to applied practice context (Thorne 2016). Given the complexities of trying to understand both parents' and children's thoughts, and producing practical information for sports organisations, ID was deemed appropriate.

The philosophical framework of ID recognises that human experience is socially constructed and subjective, but also allows for shared realities (Thorne 2016). Aligned with this, the current study was approached through a constructivist perspective. Thus, it is acknowledged that multiple realities exist, and understanding is not attainable merely via empirical analysis, but through holistic inquiry. As such, this study does not claim to represent a definitive truth instead it aims to produce a 'tentative truth claim' (Thorne, Kirkham, and O'Flynn-Magee 2004). The findings are intended to display naturalistic generalisability, meaning that the results may resonate with individuals who have had similar experiences, in this case parents with children involved in sport or children themselves (Smith 2018). Extensive interview quotes from the parents and children, as well as images produced by the child participants are included to provide insights into the experiential accounts of the participants to enable a reader to see connections between this study and their own experiences (Smith 2018).

Participants

Participants were recruited for two distinct stages of the study. For stage one, 32 children (9 boys and 23 girls) participated. They were selected based on maximum variation sampling (Patton 2002) using the following criteria: (a) aged between 8 and 12 years; and (b) currently participating in an individual or team sport at any level. Child-participants were asked to identify their main or preferred sport, with six sports being identified, including field hockey ($n = 4$), football ($n = 4$), golf ($n = 4$), gymnastics ($n = 10$), swimming ($n = 7$), and tennis ($n = 3$). The children ranged in age from 8 to 11 years (M age = 9.39, SD =.86), had been engaged in their self-declared 'main' sport between 1 and 6 years (M duration of sport = 3.28, SD = 1.30), trained for 1 to 22 hours per week (M = 4.43, SD = 5.84), and competed at club/grassroots level ($n = 25$) or county/regional level ($n = 7$) between 1 and 20 times per year (M = 11.57, SD = 5.25). To align with ID, these criteria were selected to provide a comprehensive representation of children across a range of sports and levels to maximise opportunities to identify both commonalities and differences in preferences/experiences.

Thereafter, 26 parents (10 fathers and 16 mothers) were recruited for stage two of the study. The parents were selected based on the following criteria: (a) were a parent of a child aged between 8 and 12 years; and (b) had at least one child involved in one of the sports clubs included in stage one. The parents had children involved in field hockey ($n = 5$), football ($n = 2$), golf ($n = 2$), gymnastics ($n = 10$), swimming ($n = 3$), and tennis ($n = 4$). Two were single parents, four were parent-coaches, and five had playing experience in their child's sport (the highest level reached in the sport was University). In total, from the child and parent participants, 16 were familial dyads (e.g. a/both parents and a/multiple child from the same family participated). These dyads provided insights

into a reciprocal relationship, though, the focus of the study was to understand children's and parents' perceptions, rather than interactions within relationships.

Procedure

Following receipt of ethical approval, consent to approach local clubs was obtained from six national governing bodies. The first author then attended training sessions for each of these sports to disseminate information sheets and talk to parents regarding their and their child's participation in the study. Parents were asked to contact the researcher directly if they were willing for either their child or themselves to participate in the study. Assent was also obtained from children following receipt of parental consent. The first author liaised with each of the parents to organise a convenient time for the children and/or parent focus groups.

Data collection

Focus groups were used for data collection due to their unique ability to generate rich information based on the synergy of a group discussion (Rabiee 2004). In addition, focus groups can encourage participation from people who are less inclined to be interviewed individually, which was considered important given the age of the children in stage one (Owen 2001). The opportunity for participants to share individual experiences and highlight agreement or disagreement with others also aligns with the philosophical underpinnings of ID, which appreciates experiences from the perspective of others, while acknowledging the cultural and social factors that may have shaped opposing perspectives (Thorne 2016).

Stage one

Nine focus groups were conducted with children assembled as such: field hockey (n = 4), football group 1 (n = 2 boys), football group 2 (n = 2), golf (n = 4), gymnastics group 1 (n = 6), gymnastics group 2 (n = 3), swimming group 1 (n = 4), swimming group 2 (n = 3), and tennis (n = 4). Unfortunately, six participants who had initially agreed to take part were unable to attend the focus groups due to logistical reasons and other participant commitments. This led to particularly small numbers in the football focus groups.

Each focus group began with general questions that sought to create rapport with the participants. These questions were focused on children's sport, things they enjoyed about their sport and the things they found challenging, for example, 'what are the main things you like about your sport or enjoy about your sport?' The children then discussed more specific questions regarding parental involvement in sport, for example, 'what do your parents do to help you in your sport participation?', before being split into pairs for a creative arts-based activity.

Art-based methods pertain to the utilisation of art in qualitative inquiry for the purpose of generating, communicating and/or interpreting information (McMahon, MacDonald, and Owton 2017). Such an approach includes various artistic mediums such as, drawings, craft making, collages and others, which are used as tools to collect, produce, and analyse data (McMahon, MacDonald, and Owton 2017). Within the current study, children were asked to create an A3 poster to illustrate "how parents can help them enjoy their sport?" Specifically, they were provided with marker pens, crayons, glue, scissors, painting materials and pictures from magazines and newspapers, and were given creative freedom to use the materials to develop their poster. This activity was selected to provide children with a fun way to think about the study topic, to further develop rapport, and to give children who might be less confident communicating verbally, an opportunity to share their ideas (Punch 2002). This arts-based method was selected to provide a unique insight into children's preferences for their parents' involvement, because, by permitting participants to 'speak' through visual methods, their voices could be represented beyond the conventional use of quotations within text (Tisdall, Davis, and Gallagher 2009). In addition, it enabled the participants to creatively express

their experiences and was selected due to the potential to capture alternative types of vocabularies and grammar that is not always able to be expressed through oral interviews (Busanich, McGannon, and Schinke 2015).

Previous research has utilised arts-based methods in a sport context (e.g. Blodgett et al. 2013), although, this approach is relatively unexplored within youth sport research (Gravestock 2010). Indeed, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study in the youth sport parenting literature to utilise such an approach. Adopting such an approach was useful because it was enjoyable for participants, minimised power inequalities between the researcher and the children, and generated different ideas than those previously identified in sport parenting research. In addition, it alleviated children from feeling the need to respond rapidly, while providing them with control over their self-expression (Fargas-Malet et al. 2010).

Once participants had completed their A3 poster they were then asked to share their poster with the group and explain the meaning of the contents. When there were less than four participants in a focus group, participants worked together and presented their poster back to the researcher. After this activity, and building on the previous discussions, main questions relating to parental involvement at training, competitions, and home, were then asked. Finally, participants were asked to summarise the best things their parents could do to enhance their sport enjoyment. On average the focus groups in stage one were approximately 55.34 minutes (SD = 5.90), ranging from 53.53 to 65.57 minutes.

Stage two

After all the stage one transcripts had been analysed, stage 2 commenced. Each focus group began with introductory questions that focused on the characteristics of being a parent of a child involved in sport, before moving onto discussions regarding the individual challenges and benefits of being a parent in sport. Thereafter, the main questions explored parents' perceptions of the preferred types of parental involvement identified by the children. Specifically, parents were asked to identify any barriers and facilitators which they thought would prevent/enable them to provide the preferred parental involvement. In order to protect confidentiality A3 posters were not shown to parents.

Data analysis

Thorne (2016) suggests that any data analysis techniques can be applied in ID studies, as long as they align with the phenomenon being investigated. Consequently, data were analysed based on Braun, Clarke, and Weate (2016) reflective approach to thematic analysis. This approach was considered appropriate because it is theoretically flexible and can be used within different theoretical frameworks to address different types of research questions. The A3 posters were not analysed in their own right, instead they were used alongside children's verbal comments to allow for deeper contextual understanding.

The audio files from each focus group were transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after every focus group. To ensure confidentiality, all identifiable information was removed, and participants were allocated pseudonyms. The first phase of analysis then involved the lead researcher becoming immersed and familiar with the data by reading the individual transcripts repeatedly and searching for meanings and patterns. Then initial codes were produced across the entirety of the data set for each stage, with the purpose of answering the research question. Specifically, each transcript from the focus groups were read repeatedly and the researcher used the opportunity to highlight items of potential interest and notes were made in the margins as memory aids and triggers to be used in the coding process.

The next phase involved systematically examining the collated data and filtering through the codes in order to establish relationships between codes and develop potential themes according to that relationship. For example, statements which related to parents providing children with help in relation to skills training, were coded under technical advice. These codes were then rearranged into

main themes and sub themes dependent on their association to form a set of candidate themes. Next, the candidate themes were closely scrutinised to ensure they accurately represented the coded extracts. For example, candidate themes were reviewed, and considerations were made to see if they formed a coherent pattern in line with the research question. Similar/related themes were collapsed into one, such as children's desires for physical and psychological support, which were combined as both related to children's desires for parental support. Finally, definitive and informative names were then developed for each theme and sub themes, and to tell a complete story, the interconnections between all the themes were identified. During this process the lead researcher summarised each theme in a few sentences and reviewed each theme to ensure the core issues within the themes related to the overall research question, with no overlap.

Methodological rigour

Sparkes and Smith (2009) argued that the quality or rigour of qualitative research should be assessed based on the extent to which it fulfils specific and relevant characterising traits of the chosen methodology. Aligned with this approach, appropriate evaluation guidelines for ID research were used to guide the methodological rigour of this study. These guidelines are focused upon epistemological integrity, representative credibility, interpretive authority, and moral defensibility (Thorne 2016).

Epistemological integrity emphasises epistemological consistency throughout the study. This was achieved by using focus groups and interpretive thematic analysis, underpinned by an ID methodology, to gain an understanding of each individual experiences and subjective truths. Commonalities and differences between participant's experiences are also presented throughout the results to align with a constructivist approach. *Representative credibility* was achieved by recruiting a heterogeneous sample and thereby representation of multiple interpretations of perceptions and experiences throughout the study. The research process, including the research aim, the methods adopted, and the conclusions drawn, were also aligned with interpretive approaches, and in line with the study's intended claims.

Although data analysis was completed by the lead researcher, the research team regularly discussed emerging patterns, themes, and relationships in the data, which provided a sense of analytical balance. Specifically, a critical friend challenged the lead researcher's interpretations throughout the analytical process, thereby encouraging the production of findings that reflected the data gathered, and so engendered *interpretive authority*. Further, an audit trail was maintained of the data analysis process to ensure the lead researcher demonstrated the rationale behind his interpretations and knowledge claims. Finally, *moral defensiveness* was considered by establishing that the study (including its Method) addressed a pertinent gap in the literature, and offered applied findings that could be used to enhance parents and children's experiences within sport.

Stage 1 results

All children involved in the study reported that parents impacted their enjoyment in sport and had specific preferences for how parents could enhance their enjoyment. These were: (a) show you care about your child's sport by facilitating and prioritising participation; (b) listen and learn from your child to ensure you can engage in informed conversations; (c) understand and support your child's pre, during, and post competition preferences; and (d) support and recognise your child beyond their sport.

Show you care about your child's sport by facilitating and prioritising participation

Children's participation in sport was very important to them and their enjoyment was enhanced if their parents demonstrated that they cared about their child's sport participation as well. Firstly, children felt their parents could demonstrate this by facilitating opportunities for sport participation.

Specifically, children discussed the need for parents to provide the resources for them to take part, as Graham (football) said, 'Well they pay for you to play football and they always help you and support you in everything you are doing.' Children explained that as well as paying the required costs to enable their participation, their parents also needed to provide sport-specific equipment, apparatus, and sporting kit. For instance, through the poster activity (Figure 1), Daniel (golfer) explained that his parents contributed to his sporting enjoyment by, 'making sure you have the equipment you need when you play,' while Hannah (a gymnast) explained, 'I need loads of equipment to do it (gymnastics), like a trampoline and new mats and then I can keep practising.'

Children also wanted their parents to provide them with as many opportunities to play and develop skills as possible. In particular, they wanted parents to help them access facilities outside of coaching/competition sessions. For example, Josh explained, his parents can help him enjoy golf by, 'taking you out on the [golf] course the day before, to get you prepared.' If parents could also participate this was seen as particularly enjoyable, as Jamie shared:

> Maybe go out, with like my dad … on a beach or a park, we'll take a football and he'll have a kick around with me, which I think is good and if we did it more often that would be a lot better … It's fun because he's very good at football, he can do a lot.

The second way parents could show they cared about their child's sport, and enhance enjoyment, was by prioritising their participation. Ash (football) explained, 'what they [parents] should help you do, is like getting you to as many matches as possible and try and get you to your sport,' while Alisha (high-level gymnast) explained, 'Before competitions [parents] don't take you on holiday, don't book them because you won't be able to go to competition.' Beyond ensuring children had transport to enable them to attend training and matches/competitions, it was particularly important to children that parents ensured they arrived on time. As Taylor (tennis) explained, it is important for parents to, 'Drive to the right place and be early because you can't be late.' For the children, such behaviours were important and helped them enjoy their sport because, by prioritising their participation, parents demonstrated that they understood and valued their sport participation. As Craig explained, 'If they don't really care about your sport it's not like they are going to be bringing you to football and watching you if they didn't care about it.'

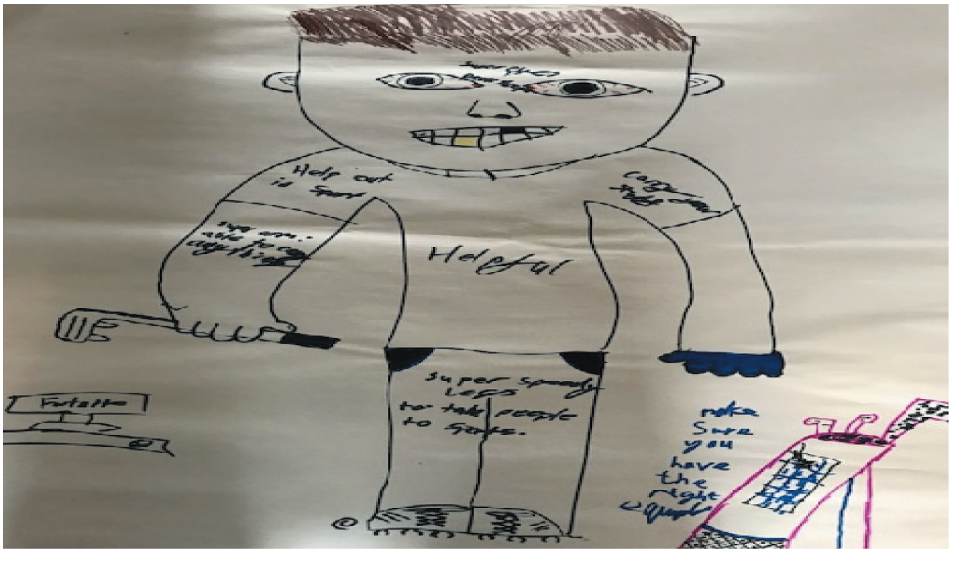

Figure 1. Picture of desired parental involvement, golf group 1.

Listen and learn from your child to ensure you can engage in informed conversations

Children explained that communication with parents was essential because it enabled them to share their sporting experiences with their parents. As Chelsea (hockey) explained, 'it's fun [when] they [parents] talk to you about it [sport].' Further, children liked it when their parents talked to them about their participation and subsequently gave them ownership over their involvement. For instance, during the focus group with the golfers, Eben identified that by talking to his parents he could ensure they supported him, 'like not in a, "you've got to do it", they make sure you *want* to do the sport?' Similarly, on their poster (see Figure 2), Kerry and Jody (gymnastics) wrote under a heading of bad parental behaviour, 'are your parents forcing you to do stuff?' When asked what they would prefer, the children indicated they preferred it when parents talked to them about activities they wanted to continue because it gave them a sense of control over their participation. This was particularly important for the children involved in higher level sport (e.g. gymnastics and tennis) who often encountered periods of intensive or frequent training which resulted in them feeling tired and wanting a break. In such situations, the children explained they needed their parents to listen to them and understand what they were experiencing, and when, for instance, they might need a break to recover. As Andrew (Golf) said, 'you'll just get frustrated and tired and you're just like, "I want to go to bed, I'm way too tired," that kind of feeling.'

In addition, children also wanted their parents to learn about their sport or draw on their own experiences of the sport so that they could engage in informed conversations. Such informed conversations were seen as particularly enjoyable because, as Rachael (hockey) stated, 'If there [are] a few new things, they [parents] can talk about what you need to improve on, what you did wrong.' However, if parents were misinformed or lacked knowledge of their child's sport, it could limit conversations and cause frustration, as Amelia (gymnastics) illustrated, 'They may not have a clue what you are doing in the training session and they won't understand. Then you'll do something else and then have to explain it again, then you've wasted your time trying to explain!' Further, children suggested that when parents provided incorrect evaluations it was

Figure 2. Picture of desired parental involvement, competitive level gymnastics group 1.

counterproductive because it gave them a false sense of their ability. Consequently, from the children's perspective if parents are approached for technical advice or feedback, it was important to ensure they only engage in conversations in which they are fully/appropriately informed.

Understand and support your child's pre, during, and post competition preferences

Adding to the importance of talking and listening to your child, the children further highlighted the importance of parents' understanding specifically, the competition experience and acting in a way that they found supportive before, during and after events. The children explained that competitions were enjoyable because they provided an opportunity for them to demonstrate the skills they had been learning. But they had individual physical and psychological needs and preferences that they wanted their parents to understand, to maximise opportunities for them to be successful and thus enjoy the competition. As Rachael (hockey) explained, when parents understand what you need, 'it makes me happy because I know, I have got them behind me supporting me and helping me.'

Being prepared for competitions was particularly important for children, 'you've got to be prepared, you've got to get everything sorted for the day of competition' (Olivier; tennis). In particular, children wanted parents to help them prepare so they could perform at their best. For example, they wanted parents to prompt them to remember what to pack for their sport, as Lucas (golf) stated, 'They [parents] can help you remember your stuff because I sometimes forget and I left all my balls at the house so I had to borrow some.' Without their own equipment, the experience was less enjoyable because children did not feel comfortable.

A key part of physical preparation and recovery was related to nutrition, with the children placing great importance on their parents providing appropriate types and amounts of food before, during, and after training/competitions. For instance, Harrison (football) explained that before competitions parents should, 'make sure you have a good breakfast, make sure you have a healthy meal before you go out.' While Olivia thought a key role of parents is to, 'make you food, because I'm always hungry when I get home.' Ensuring appropriate timing of food to limit any impact on performance was deemed particularly important as Tiffany (swimming) stressed that parents need to, 'feed us nicely before we come here [. . .] you have to eat an hour before training otherwise you will sink.'

Receiving support and encouragement from parents was important. However what children perceived as appropriate varied considerably, and as such, it was important to them that parents understood their specific preferences and needs. For instance, before competitions some children preferred their parents to say nothing, whereas others such as Carla (swimmer) liked it when, 'they [parents] give you a nice hug and they say good luck.' For most children, such as Chelsea (hockey), encouragement before competitions, 'makes me feel less nervous,' and was particularly useful when it focused on effort and enjoyment. By focusing on effort rather than outcomes, children enjoyed competitions more because, as Maya (tennis) stated, 'It makes me feel unpressured.'

Most of the children wanted their parents present during competitions, although preferences for vocal support or non-vocal support and encouragement differed. For instance, some children such as Karina (swimming) shared, 'I'd just want them to be there but like silent,' while others, such as Remy (Hockey) said, 'like cheer me on [. . .] if I was like scared, that would make me more happy.' Children who preferred silence felt their parents' attendance was sufficient to show support, and reassurance through a small hand gesture or eye contact was all they needed to boost their confidence. In contrast, those children who liked vocal support wanted to hear their parents on the sidelines for encouragement and to boost their confidence. Though, they wanted feedback to be provided in a sensitive manner. For instance, parents shouting after mistakes was seen as an additional pressure, as Jermaine (football) explained, 'they [parents] are very passionate and they just want you to improve, but [. . .] it's not very nice to hear them when they are shouting.' Further, if parents were too loud on the sidelines, it could embarrass and/or distract children. As Amiya and Alison (gymnasts) wrote on their picture (Figure 3),

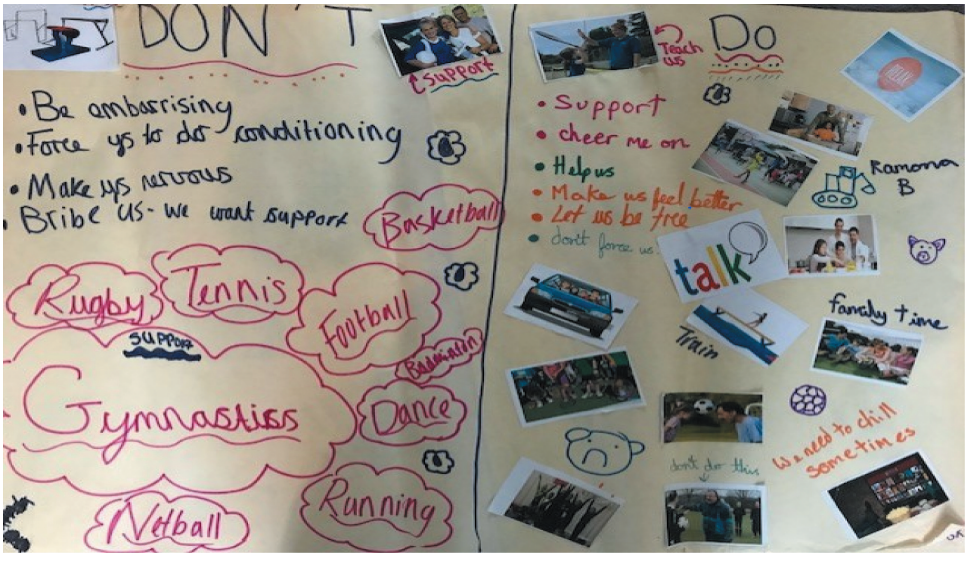

Figure 3. Picture of desired parental involvement, community gymnastics group 3.

and Ash (football) explained, 'sometimes I want my mum to be quiet because [. . .] you are just about to do something and they shout, then you look, and then the balls gone and that's quite annoying.'

Support and recognise your child beyond their sport

Finally, although the children placed great importance on their sport and they wanted their parents to also see it as important and valuable, they did not want to be defined by their sport. Rather, to ensure they continued enjoying their sport, children wanted their parents to recognise that it was just one part of their life and they wanted to do 'normal' things away from their sport. Such activities ranged from reading to playing games and seeing friends, and often engaging with technology, as Pete (football) said, parents should, 'Let you go on you Xbox.' Children enjoyed these activities and said they helped to them to relax and 'feel like a kid.' Further, children discussed a desire to disengage from sport once they were away from that setting. As Jadene (gymnastics) said, outside of sport parents should, 'just act normal,' when asked to expand, another gymnast Elish said:

> When I come out the gym, they [parents] are like, 'what did you do in the gym blah blah blah' and then we will change the subject and then we won't talk about it . . . that's how I like it because in gym, I do gym stuff and after I do gym . . . I talk about other things. My life doesn't revolve around gymnastics.

Interestingly, this point was raised by children involved in all standards of sport, not only those who were competing at a high level.

The children also wanted to have time with their family when they were not playing sport. For example, Jermaine (football) said, 'Family time is really important . . . you can have family time with anything, you can go to the beach, swimming, bikes.' The children particularly discussed how valuable the time spent with their family was, because it was good for their mood, as Pete (football) shared, ' . . . if you don't spend time with your family, you're grumpy all the time.' Children recognised that they and their parents had busy schedules, but that they enjoyed doing 'fun stuff' with their families when they could because they were such an important part of their lives.

Stage 2 results

Parents identified a range of barriers and facilitators that may affect whether they could engage as desired by the children. In some instances, the same factor could be a facilitator for one parent (e.g. location of home or working hours), but a barrier for others. The facilitators and barriers were categorised within: (a) personal considerations; (b) social considerations; and (c) contextual/environmental considerations.

Personal considerations

Throughout discussions with parents it was evident that their personal circumstances differed and subsequently influenced their ability or desire to engage in the way children desired. Particularly, it was apparent that parents' work commitments and schedules, as well as their knowledge and experiences of sport could be both a barrier and facilitator to different types of engagement. In particular, it impacted on parents' ability to prioritise their children's sporting participation, engage in informed conversations, and understand and attend to children's competition needs.

As discussed, children wanted their parents to prioritise their sport participation. Unfortunately, some parents work schedules such as Darren [Football] were fixed, 'my work is more of a clock in clock out, so I don't have flexibility,' therefore they had limited time to engage in their child's participation. This impacted on the amount of sporting opportunities they could facilitate as well as the number of competitions they could attend. As Trevor (golf) simply explained, 'it's time, it's the logistics really, I'm working and trying to fit it in [child's participation] it's difficult.' Consequently, if parents could not attend children's training or competitions it was challenging for them to learn about and subsequently fulfil their child's pre, during, and post-competition needs or to learn about the sport and engage in informed conversations.

In contrast, however, a number of parents indicated that they had flexible work schedules or large amounts of holiday and as a result could spend substantial time within their child's sporting environment and/or learning about their child's sport. As Joseph, a teacher (gymnastics) said, 'Yes mine [work schedule] is totally fixed, but I do benefit from the amount I do get off in school holidays you know, because like if anything comes up in the school holidays, I can cover.' Furthermore, due to having a flexible schedule, Danielle (tennis) explained, 'I've had to take up tennis lessons so that I can, warm up with her, because I'm useless, I haven't got a clue, so that's helped a bit, because I know a bit more.' As a result of spending time in the environment, these parents felt they would be better equipped to engage with their child regarding their sport.

Beyond time commitments, previous sporting knowledge and experience influenced the extent in which parents were able to engage in the ways their child desired. For example, many parents had been involved in sport for an extended period of time as coaches or as sport parents. These parents had gained knowledge which they believed would help them fulfil their child's preferences, as Eliza (hockey) explained, she found it easy to talk to her daughter about hockey because, 'I played all the way through school and then I played in my first year in university, but then I got involved in the rugby, so I shelved hockey.' Similarly, when it came to understanding and supporting their child during competitions, parents with more experience and knowledge felt more confident in providing their children with psychological encouragement prior to competitions, as Rhonda (tennis) said, 'Yea I tell him to concentrate if he's about to play a match, you can feel the crowd. I just say 'keep your eyes on the court.' In contrast, parents with less experience in their child's sport often had limited knowledge, experience or interest and consequently indicated that they may struggle to fulfil their child's competitive preferences because, as Donna (tennis) said, 'I find it quite hard the right things to say to encourage her a lot of the time, because I don't know much about the sport.' Similarly, Tony (gymnastics) shared his struggles of providing feedback after competitions:

> I don't fully understand the sport … [so] on a competition day it's like that was good and I think yea, you didn't fall off or anything like that. … I can never do what these children do, it's not even on my radar … I can't judge against what I've done or what somebody else has done. I haven't a clue!

Moreover, parents without sporting knowledge often did not know what opportunities to provide to their children, as mentioned by (Danielle, Tennis):

> The hardest thing is making the right, decisions because I feel I'm in the dark a bit and sometimes, I pick the wrong tournament or go somewhere and I don't quite know, if it's the right one to go to or the right level and there is a lot of jargon a lot of different grades and rankings and you don't quite know at first what it all means

Social considerations

Beyond individual factors, parents' access to social support and their family structure were also highlighted as key considerations with regards to meeting children's needs. For instance, the number of parents, siblings within a family, access to extended family, as well as relationships with other parents, were all seen to influence parents' ability to support their child's participation.

Many parents had more than one child, often involved in different sports, and as a consequence, parents indicated that providing their children with opportunities to participate or attend all required sessions, could be challenging. As Silva (hockey) explained, '… having three children, just makes it that much more of a logistical planning exercise in terms of how we are getting each child to what they need to do.' Kirsty (gymnastics) similarly shared:

> I've got three children, one trains twenty plus hours a week, another […] three times a week and also does trampolining. My third daughter, she also does trampolining and netball. So, it is a juggling act, it's a massive commitment.

However, some parents explained that all their children were involved in the same sport and consequently, it was not so challenging to facilitate and prioritise their children's participation. For example, Zoe (gymnastics) explained:

> That is the advantage of having 3 who have engaged with gymnastics … I don't have that logistical issue … because 1 of them has to be in football or a different place. So, I am here in the same place all the time, six days a week, but it is the one place.

Moreover, because they spent so much time in that one sport with their various children, they felt better placed to meet their children's needs and engage in informed conversations.

Parents in single parent households or those with a limited wider support network described challenges associated with enabling their child to be physically prepared for training and competitions, ensuring they arrived on time, or prioritising their child's sport. As Carla (swimming) stated, 'I find it a bit more difficult … because I'm a single parent … it's just hectic.' For single parents, finding time to facilitate activities outside of sport (which was desired by children) was particularly 'difficult, you're in a routine, you've got [sibling] … we run around and have got the routine that we have and we just try for the best' (Carla; swimming). Meanwhile, parents who were part of two parent families indicated that being able to share responsibilities with their partner would enable them to meet many of the children's preferences. For example, Silvia (hockey) said, 'we are quite lucky because I tend to say right, I'll sort the hockey out and my husband does the child care. How single parents do it I'm not really sure.' Similarly, Tara explained how she was able to facilitate both of her children's sport participation, 'Mostly myself but my partner obviously he is going to be over picking up the trampolining one tonight, because I'm here doing the gymnastics.'

Beyond the social support parents had from their partners, some parents explained they were able to draw on social support from other family members or other sport parents, which would help them to facilitate their children's participation and provide social opportunities for their child beyond their sport. Parents highlighted the benefits of frequent communication and sharing responsibilities

(e.g. transporting children to and from practice) with other parents, as Natasha (swimming) explained:

> It's good because we are all together. We message a lot, so say we are stuck in traffic; "please grab Joanna till I finish," that happens quite often. We share lifts and so we work together to make it happen.

By developing relationships with other parents, children had additional opportunities to socialise and have a 'normal' life outside of their sport, as Kirsty (gymnastics) mentioned:

> It's because the girls train so much, you know the other girl's schedules so you know when you can actually fit in some play time as well. It's like okay you are training with Cleo today so you know, Cleo will come over before gym, on Saturday.

Contextual and environmental considerations

Given the diverse range of sports included in the study, there were substantial differences in terms of childrens' performance levels, where they trained and competed, as well as, the frequency of their training sessions and competitions. In addition, there were different expectations for children, depending upon their sport. As a result, various contextual and environmental factors such as, where parents lived relative to their child's training venue, and the nature of their child's sport, influenced how parents could support their child.

As indicated, children wanted their parents to learn about their sport and talk to them about it. However, in certain sports, namely the higher level gymnastics club, parents were restricted from watching their children practice, which prevented them from knowing what children were learning or how they were performing. Consequently, parents indicated that it would be challenging to provide appropriate feedback or engage in the informed conversations that their children wanted. Greg (gymnastics) explained, 'To be honest I think that the communication could be a little bit better between coaches and parents because it's very much left in gym. So, we walk away not knowing anything about it [gymnastics].' This issue was exacerbated for parents who did not have a background in the sport.

Children also discussed a preference for certain types of encouragement and support at competitions, however the etiquette and environment of different sports influenced whether parents could provide their desired support from the sidelines. For instance, Danielle (tennis) explained, that in line with tennis convention, 'I don't think it's appropriate to cheer, in a way, you give like a nice clap and say "come on, well done," but discreetly.' Similarly, Trevor (golf) discussed, 'It's [golf] not really a spectator sport, it's a child with his clubs playing the course.' Thus, although some children involved in these sports wanted their parents to cheer them on, the etiquette of the sport prevented such involvement. In contrast, for other sports, such cheering from the sidelines was encouraged so it was easier for these parents to engage as their children wanted. As Kirsty (swimming) explained, 'I think the girls are now encouraged to cheer for each other as well, … they're there to support each other and so you can feed off them cheering really.'

Parents of children involved in higher-level/more competitive sports, such as gymnastics and tennis, also indicated that because they were involved in large volumes of training, the time available for other activities was limited. Kaitlyn (gymnastics) shared, 'Sometimes it's just playing with school friends because they miss out on so much, they miss out on parties because they have training.' The challenge of finding time for activities outside of sport was exacerbated during intense training blocks, which often aligned with school holidays, as Neil (gymnastics) explained, 'the time they could be with their friends is school holidays, [when] they're out and about playing. But that is during the time when they have all their camps and the intense training.' Further, most parents explained that even when there were social opportunities available, their children were often too exhausted from training and competitions to attend. As a result, to alleviate tiredness, parents often did not encourage their children to participate in the types of activities a 'normal kid' might do.

However, other parents were fortunate because their child's sport was not overly demanding, their child had friends in the same sport, and parents lived close to facilities. All of which enabled them to facilitate more sporting opportunities for children with their friends. For example, in the focus group with football parents Clive said, 'we live quite near to a park [. . .] so I take them there [. . .] for a kick around because it is quite contained [. . .] we are quite lucky because of where we are based,' Other parents reported encountering challenges as a result of where they lived, as Greg (gymnastics) shared:

> Yeah, that is the hard bit [social opportunities] you find, because I don't live locally so you do find it difficult some nights when they get given homework say on a Tuesday and you know you are not going to be walking in till 20.30 quarter to 9 and they've got a piece of homework to hand in the following day.

Consequently, as a result of living a substantial distance away from the training venue, parents felt unable to facilitate opportunities for their child outside of their sport.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to first, examine children's preferences for parental involvement that enhanced their enjoyment in sport, and second, to identify the factors that would facilitate or prevent parents from being involved in the ways preferred by children. Overall, the findings suggest that parents can influence children's enjoyment of their sporting experience through their behaviours displayed at home, in relation to training, and at competitions. Specifically, it was apparent that parents' active engagement with their child to understand their unique needs, experiences, and interests, both within and beyond sport, were important to maximise enjoyment. Interestingly, although this is one of the first studies examining children's (aged 8–12 years) preferences for parental involvement, many of the preferences and subsequent requirements of parents were similar to those identified by adolescent athletes (Knight, Boden, and Holt 2010; Knight, Neely, and Holt 2011; Omli and Wiese-Bjornstal 2011). Such similarities across the age groups point to certain actions from parents that may be useful throughout children's sporting journeys. Namely, it appears beneficial for parents to communicate frequently with their child regarding their involvement and actively seek to learn about their child's sport and their child's experience.

Secondly, the findings indicate that a variety of factors affect the extent to which parents are able to engage in the manner suggested/desired by children. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study that has sought to examine explicitly, what may enable or prevent parents from engaging in the specific ways that children want. Therefore, by combining both children's desires with parents' realities, the results of this study indicate a layer of complexity to sport parenting. In line with the Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner 1974), parents' abilities to engage in the ways children wanted was influenced by a range of personal, social, and environmental/contextual factors. Thus although the children's preferences for parental involvement are understandable and consistent with previous findings (e.g. Knight, Boden, and Holt 2010; Knight, Neely, and Holt 2011) this study has demonstrated that some parents are unable to meet those preferences. Particularly, single parents, those lacking family support, families with multiple children, those working flexible hours, parents lacking knowledge of sport, and those living a substantial distance from training/competition venues may encounter specific barriers. As such, when seeking to optimise parental involvement in sport, it cannot be the case that parents are simply told what they should or should not be doing, based on children's (or others' such as coaches, NGBs) perspectives. Rather, there is the need to consider the support parents may need to fulfil the behaviours being asked of them.

The findings indicate that children want their parents to facilitate sporting opportunities and prioritise participation to demonstrate that they care about their sport. Hence, as identified consistently throughout the sport parenting literature, the children in the current study highlighted the need for parents to provide tangible support to facilitate their sport engagement. However, providing opportunities for children is not always easy for parents, and is dependent on factors such as

their support network, work commitments, and/or where they lived. Such challenges have been reported as sources of parental stress in sport (e.g. Harwood and Knight 2009) and shown to influence the experience of both parents and their children (e.g. Kay 2000; Wiersma and Fifer 2008). Given the societal desire to encourage more children to be physically active and engage in sport, it is important to recognise the differing abilities of parents to provide sporting opportunities and facilitate strategies to overcome such challenges. Within the current study parents indicated that, whatever their family/work context, they often drew heavily on support from others to be able to provide opportunities. Thus, it may be beneficial for coaches, clubs, and sports organisations to enhance parents' access to social support by, for instance, developing parent networks. This should enable more parents to provide their children with enjoyable sporting opportunities.

Beyond facilitating engagement in sport, children wanted to be able to talk about their sport with their parents, and to do this, parents needed appropriate knowledge and understanding. This finding corresponds with recent research which suggested that children and parents can enjoy engaging in conversations in the car journey home after sporting events if they are conducted in appropriate ways (Elliott and Drummond 2015; Tamminen, Poucher, and Povilaitis 2017). The current study extends such findings by highlighting the importance of such conversations beyond the car ride home, and into the training and home environment.

Nevertheless, there was also the need for time away from such conversations, as sport was not children's only interest. Clearly, parents who had previously engaged in the sport their child was involved, had sufficient knowledge to talk to their child. Though, there is a need to ensure conversations are focused on the child's experience, rather than their own, and that sport was kept in perspective. Unfortunately, many of the parents in the current study did not have experience of their child's sport. Recognising their lack of knowledge was impeding their ability to be involved in their child's sport appropriately, many parents in the current study attempted to learn about their child's sport. However, and again aligned with previous literature, it seems that accessing the useful information was not straightforward within certain sports (Knight and Holt 2013), due to, for instance, viewing restrictions. Given the importance children placed on their parents having sufficient sporting knowledge, it would be advantageous for sports organisations to increase the accessibility of appropriate information for parents, that includes access to training, or regular update on training plans/progress.

The need for parents to have access to information from sports organisations is further strengthened when reflecting on children's preference for their parent to provide advice or feedback, which is appropriately informed. A desire for appropriate technical advice from parents has been recognised previously as a preferred behaviour among adolescents (Elliott and Drummond 2015; Knight, Boden, and Holt 2010). Consistent with this research, the children in the current study found it particularly frustrating when parents lacked knowledge, for it limited the amount of assistance their parents could provide, and at times, resulted in incorrect feedback or evaluation of the performance. Moreover, it appeared to result in parents engaging in ways that were less than preferable at competitions. This issue of parents providing technical advice is a contentious one within youth sport, with many coaches indicating that parents should not interfere with this aspect of the child's sporting experience. However, and as indicated within this study, a blanket ban on parents providing children with technical feedback (which is often advocated in social media and by sports organisations) is not desired by children themselves. Moreover, given the central role parents play in their children's lives, and the frequency of communication between parents and children, it is highly likely they will discuss sporting performances and development. Thus, rather than suggest that parents should not provide feedback for their child, it may be more beneficial if coaches/clubs/organisations 'upskilled' parents to ensure that when they do talk with their child, they can do so with sufficient knowledge (Harwood et al. 2019).

Although children spent considerable time discussing preferences for parental involvement relative to their sport, they also wanted parents to recognise them as children beyond their sport. Children wanted parents to allow them to switch off from their sport and at times, limit

conversations related to their sport. This finding corresponds with research by Knight et al. (2016a) with elite junior slalom canoeists, which suggested that athletes preferred it when parents did not solely focus on their sport when at home, and away from their sport. The recognition of children beyond their sport aligns with calls to ensure that athletes are provided with various opportunities to develop a multidimensional identity given the range of negative consequences that can arise from having a unidimensional sporting identity (e.g. burnout and issues with transitions). Unfortunately, despite this desire for recognition beyond their sport, parents highlighted that as a result of their children's intensive schedules, as well as their own work commitments and locality, this was not always easy to achieve. Although the conversation pertaining to age-appropriate amounts of training/competition is beyond the scope of this paper, recognising the impact this has on allowing children to 'just be kids' is important. If sports are going to implement intensive training/competition schedules at a young age ensuring that they at least integrate social and family opportunities within their sporting provision is evidently, advantageous.

Limitations and future research directions

This study utilised a two-stage process including a creative method to enhance the quality of the data collected from children. It is, to the authors' knowledge, the first study, to have adopted such an approach and consequently been able to clearly highlight the complexity of this area. Nevertheless, there are certain limitations to this study that should be considered when applying these findings or seeking to extend them. Firstly, data were collected through one-off focus groups, so participants were not provided with an opportunity to reflect on what they have shared or expand on previous answers. The findings may also only represent one point in the season. The young age of the participants in stage one, at times, also resulted in limited depth to their responses. Children were given the opportunity to freely express their experiences within the art project – which is a highly recommended way of engaging children to elicit pertinent information, nevertheless, having multiple opportunities to obtain information would have been useful. Follow up individual interviews with the parents may also have been useful, because their responses were more complex and further interviews may have enabled the researcher to refine the findings further, while also allowing the parents to disclose information they may not have felt comfortable sharing within a group setting. Finally, a few parents were coaches, and as such, their experiences differed from others, meaning the dynamics of their role warrant future consideration.

Conclusion

Overall, the present study highlights the range of ways in which parents can impact children's enjoyment in youth sport, through their involvement both within and beyond sport settings. Further, it illustrates the complexity of parental involvement in sport and the importance of understanding parents' experiences when providing guidance for parents, regarding how they should be involved in their child's sport. As the findings of this study demonstrate, it is important to recognise that not all children and parents are the same; rather children have different preferences regarding their parents' involvement, and parents will face different challenges when supporting their children in sport. Thus, it would be beneficial for parents and children to regularly engage in conversations regarding parental involvement, so that children can tell their parents what they would like, but then parents can explain why this may not always be possible. The findings also highlight the importance of clubs and sports organisations drawing on both children's and parents' perspectives when developing parent education or support programmes. This will ensure that any suggestions provided to parents to enhance their involvement, are feasible and effectively optimise children's enjoyment of their sport.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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