

## PARENTAL BELIEFS CONCERNING THE FACTORS THAT SHAPE THE COACHING CLIMATE IN YOUTH SPORT. A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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### Abstract

*In youth sports the roles of parents is pivotal in fostering a coaching climate conducive to the growth and development of young athletes. Particularly in the formative ages of 10-12 years, parents' influence is extending beyond mere support to significantly shaping the experiences of young athletes, both in positive and negative ways (Burke et al., 2021). Examining the parameters that constitute successful parental involvement has been a topic of exploration for the scientific community in recent years (Dorsch et al., 2020; Higgs et al., 2019; Vierimaa et al., 2012). The dynamics of parental involvement in sport is an important factor in both the retention and development of young athletes (Burke et al., 2021; Dorsch et al., 2016). Thus, understanding parental beliefs and their impact on young athletes' sport experiences becomes paramount. The aim of this study was to explore parents' beliefs concerning the factors that shape in the creation of a climate of positive growth and development within their children's team. The analysis of the parents' experience revealed four main themes: 1. The holistic value of youth sport engagement. 2. Information regulation and management. 3. Socially determined sport club choices. 4. Adult influence on the creation of the sport coaching climate. The research was contextualized within the framework of a parent training program aimed at fostering a positive youth development in sport. Parents clearly recognize their supportive and formative roles in their children's sporting experiences. They associate their own and their children's satisfaction with the creation of a positive youth development climate, emphasizing the cultivation of individual and social skills such as managing defeat, promoting equal participation, and fostering fairness, equality, and respect.*

**Key words:** parental beliefs, youth sports, football, positive development, parental role

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### Introduction

There is no doubt that participation in sport has a positive effect on the physical, psychological and emotional well-being of children and adolescents, and throughout their lives (Bailey, 2006; Weiss, 2016). This phenomenon is global, with a vast number of children participating in organised sports from an early age. Research has unequivocally demonstrated that an individual's overall experience of sport is crucial to their developmental trajectory (Bengoechea & Streat 2007; Burke et al., 2021; Dorsch et al., 2016, 2017; Dorsch et al., 2020). Frederic and Eccles (2004) present a compelling argument for studying parental influence on their child's involvement in sport in developmental terms. Coakley (2011) demonstrates that children and adolescents' participation in organised sports does not necessarily lead to positive developmental outcomes. A significant number of researchers have identified early specialisation in sports, the objective of 'producing high-level athletes', and the pressure transferred to young athletes due to excessive and unrealistic demands from their environment as the primary reasons for this phenomenon. These reasons are supported by the findings of Dorsch et al. (2020), Frederic & Eccles (2004), Frederic & Eccles (2005), Frederic & Eccles (2005), Holt et al. (2017) and Vierimaa et al. (2012).

It is evident that parents exert a considerable influence on young athletes at these ages, as they begin to comprehend themselves through comparison with their peers (Dorsch et al., 2020; Holt et al., 2017). Concurrently, the child of this age is in the conventional morality stage (Kolhlberg & Hersh, 1977; Tenenbaum & Eklund, 2007), whereby right and wrong are determined by the criteria of significant others. According to Horn and Horn (2007), parents' beliefs and values are the key shaping factor for their children's behaviour. This behaviour is determined by a multitude of factors, including the beliefs and values of young athletes. Consequently, positive parental involvement can enhance both children's

motivation to participate and the enjoyment they experience through sport (Frederic & Eccles, 2005; Sanchez-Miguel et al., 2013; Sanchez-Miguel et al. Tenenbaum & Eklund, 2007).

Parents are the most important and influential members of the social support system in sport represent the cornerstone of support for young athletes. The influence of parents during these early stages is significant, as young athletes embark on their journey of athletic discovery. Primarily, they compare themselves to their peers (Dorsch et al., 2020; Holt et al., 2017). Concurrently, the child in question is at the stage of conventional ethical reasoning (Kolhlberg & Hersh, 1977; Tenenbaum & Eklund, 2007), and is able to distinguish between right and wrong based on the standards set by significant others. According to Horn and Horn (2007), parental beliefs and values represent a fundamental influence on the behaviour towards their children. This behaviour is multifaceted in its influence, as it subsequently shapes the beliefs and values of young athletes. Consequently, the positive parental involvement can reinforce both the motivation of children to participate and their enjoyment of the experience. It is encouraging to note that enjoyment is experienced through participation in athletics (Frederic & Eccles, 2005; Sanchez-Miguel et al., 2013; Tenenbaum & Eklund, 2007).

The social support system in sport, as defined by Dorsch et al. (2020), encompasses a network of individuals, including coaches, parents, siblings, teammates, and sport administrators. Among these, parents are considered the most significant and influential members, as they serve as the primary source of support for young athletes (Burke et al., 2021; Dorsch et al., 2017).

Parents exert a significant influence on their young athletes at this age. Young athletes primarily learn about themselves through comparison with their peers. Research indicates that parents' beliefs and values shape their behaviour towards their children. This behaviour has a multiplier effect, as it subsequently shapes the beliefs and values of young athletes. A growing body of research confirms that participation in organised sport by children and adolescents does not necessarily lead to positive developmental outcomes. This is due to early specialisation, a focus on 'producing elite athletes' and the pressures placed on young athletes by significant others (Holt et al., 2017). The nature of parental involvement can influence both children's motivation to participate and their enjoyment of sport. This can either enhance or weaken the climate for positive development within sport. The role of parents in sport participation and retention has been well documented through the above theories (Dorsch & Vierimma, 2017; Elliott & Drummond, 2017). Deci and Ryan (Self-Determination Theory, 1984) assert that the extent to which a young athlete's environment supports their growth and development will determine the quality of their sporting experience. It is evident that the manner in which young people construct knowledge through their experiences is significantly influenced by the narrow or broader social context in which they reside (Dorsch et al., 2020). Parents must cultivate the knowledge and capacity to utilise a range of intrapersonal, interpersonal and organisational skills to support their child. They must also develop self-management skills to function effectively in their children's wider sporting environment.

The quality of parental involvement in their children's sporting experiences can be enhanced by a gradual increase in autonomy, supportive relationships and acceptance. The value expectancy model (Eccles, 2004) is a widely used theoretical framework to explain adults' decisions to involve their children in various activities, including sport. This model posits that there are three predisposing factors for their choice. The expectation of performance, the value placed on the activity itself and the expectation of successful participation (Eccles, 2004; Frederic & Eccles, 2005; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) have a profound impact on young athletes, influencing their motivation through the attitudes and beliefs of their parents (Atkinson, 1957; Eccles et al. 1983; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000, 2001).

The Positive Youth Development (PYD) model, which forms the basis of our research, identifies four key pillars of personal development: (a) connecting with significant others, (b) self-confidence, (c) competence, and (d) character formation. These four pillars of personal development led to positive developmental outcomes through organised sports.

It can be observed that parental involvement is related to the creation of a positive climate for development within the micro-framework of sport participation (team) and to each pillar separately. The term "climate" in this theory does not refer to the crisis of motivation and achievement as presented through Nicholls' theory of achievement goals (1984, 1989). Instead, it primarily refers to the characteristics of social structures within the context of organised sports. The characteristics of this coaching climate are determined by the relationships between athletes and significant adults, such as coaches, teammates and parents (Holt et al., 2017). It is defined through the development and evolution of relationships within the team in order to achieve the developmental goals set. Therefore, the study of climate will be an exploration

of the conditions conducive to creating not only competent athletes but also individuals who will thrive on a personal and social level.

The age group of 10-12 years, which is the focus of the research, is considered to be an important age in the developmental process as the dynamic muscle development and neuromuscular balance of the young athlete begins (Berk, 2019; Fieldman, 2011). The acquisition of complex motor skills is coupled with social awareness skills to understand complex issues and take responsibility. Young athletes at this age find enjoyment in competitive play and understand the concept of personal improvement. (Fieldman, 2001; Higgs et al, 2019, Vierimaa et al 2012). According to Côté (1999), coaching programmes at this age introduce sport specificity. However, the concept of intense competition has not been established in the minds of young athletes and they still use the game for pleasure (Côté, 1999; Frazer-Thomas et al, 2005). This is the reason why, according to Frazer-Thomas et al, (2005) intensive specialisation at this age is blamed for injuries due to high training volume and abandonment of the sport due to high pressure and competition. The proposed training and competition rules for team sports at this age are being modified by the federations to ensure equal participation of all players (ESKA, OHE, EPO 2022-2023). The influence of parents and coaches at this age is also crucial, as young athletes begin to compare themselves to their peers and need to feel safe with the involvement of trusted adults (Fieldman, 2011).

### **Material & methods**

The present study is informed by the scientific paradigm of Interpretive Phenomenology and will be based on a similar qualitative research design. The aim is to gain a deep understanding of how parents of young athletes experience their involvement and participation in their children's sporting activities (Gunawan, 2015; Isari & Pourkos, 2015; Iosifidis, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1988). The use of hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodological and epistemological paradigm will inform each stage of the design of this study.

The data were generated through focus groups with a semi-structured interview guide. The aim was to capture the participants' views on their parental role, as well as their views on sport and their children's participation in football. The interview guide was piloted with a group of parents of similar characteristics, and then it was adapted accordingly.

The review of theory revealed that focus groups are employed extensively in the creation of educational programs or interventions. These include interventions to identify needs or explore the current situation, the evaluation of interventions or education programs, and finally, to explore attitudes and opinions due to their suitability to multiply different perspectives. This is in accordance with the findings of Elliott et al. (2021), Farnsworth & Boon (2010), and Gray (2004). Focus groups are regarded as an appropriate instrument for the assessment of social knowledge and experience within a group, particularly in relation to a real-life group setting (Morgan, 1997).

To ensure the confidentiality of the study, the COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research) tool was employed as a 32-item checklist for research designs utilising interviews and focus groups (Tong et al., 2007). This checklist encompasses sections on the research team (study baseline) and study reflexivity, research design, analysis and results, creating conditions for assessing criteria, transferability, confirmability and trustworthiness. Furthermore, the researcher's prolonged involvement in the field of coaching, both as an athlete and as a mother of athletes, and her extensive experience and familiarity with the subject matter, likely contribute to the credibility of the research (Isari & Pourkos, 2015; Loh, 2013). The research has been approved by the bioethics committee of the School of Physical Education and Sports Science of the University of Athens.

### *Participants/ Procedure*

All participants were drawn from a single football club, representing the youth sections of both boys' and girls' football clubs. The participants were parents of players aged between 10 and 12 years. The medium criterion feasibility sampling method was employed to ensure that participants did not exhibit extreme forms or behaviors of parental involvement and demonstrated a willingness to actively participate. The purpose of the selection was to obtain rich and dense information from the study of participant characteristics. For this reason, an interview with the club's administrator and one of the coaches was conducted beforehand. In accordance with the selection criteria, the club that was selected was as follows:

Local club with almost 40 young footballers at this age.

Coaches: Experienced, University level (Sport science), UEFA training.

Training: 3 times /week in half (special training for goalkeepers)

Field: In half football field which usually it is divided in three sections

Match: At least once a week for every athlete

Parents were approached after being invited to participate in the study and informed by the researcher about the purpose and process of the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the process of the research, and the use of the research findings. Written information was provided and written consent was obtained for participation in the research. They were informed that they were free to withdraw at any time if they so wished without being asked for an explanation. Fourteen parents (male=9, female=5) of K13 athletes aged 10-12 of the same sport club participated in the study. One focus group was established with 14 participants out of the 17 parents who had expressed an interest in participating. Two focus group interviews were conducted, lasting one hour and 45 minutes each, during their children training. All participants shared their beliefs and perceptions concerning the factors that influence the coaching climate in youth sport. Data saturation was achieved.

An interview guides were created based on the literature and the interview guides of other researchers (Knight & Holt ,2013a, 2013b). This strategy is accepted and recommended for focus group interviews (Chiva-Bartoll et al., 2021; Clohessy et al., 2021; Coulter, et al., 2020; Fairbrother et al., 2020; Verloigne, et al., 2017).

A pilot study was conducted with a group of parents of a girls' soccer team. This was used to reformulate and finalise the interview guide (Caillaud & Flick, 2017; Dahl et al., 2019). Demographic data was collected prior to the group interview. Thirteen parents participated in each group interview, with one absent parent. The researcher had taken the role of the facilitator with an experienced assistant were present during the interview. The researcher as a facilitator, sets the context for the discussion and provides the focus for the data that emerges from the group interaction (Gratton & Jonnes, 2004; Isari & Pourkos, 2015; Morgan, 1988).

#### *Data collection and analysis*

The interview was transcribed verbatim in real time and provided to the participants for confirmation and additions to what was reported. Data was organised using NVivo and analyzed using thematic analysis. Two researchers proceed to an independed analysis of the data and then following a comparison of the subthemes and final themes, a consensus was reached. The analytical processes that describe this organised material made use of quotations that, according to the analysts, capture the main ideas expressed and support the analyst's conclusions. The material was grouped in categories, and researched for tendencies and formulate tentative conclusions about the connections among topics. The data analysis began with a reduction of textual data, which was then synthesised into categories according to the thematic resemblance. The codification and subsequent retrieval of the codified units was conducted with the assistance of both the researchers/analysts. The codification process employed an open and inductive approach. The category system was not pre-established but derived from the data itself. The objective was to transcend the individual content units and comprehend the global meaning of the whole. At the same time, analysts intention was to connect some elements with others by notifying tendencies or relationships suggested by the data.

The confirmation of the validity of the material to be analysed by the participants and the independent organisation and processing of the data by different researchers is related to the levels of credibility of the research, which corresponds to the concept of internal validity in a quantitative design (Deenihan & MacPhail, 2017). That is, it attributes confidence in the truth of the data (Gunawan, 2015; Isari & Pourkos, 2015).

The study adhered to the COREQ criteria to ensure data trustworthiness, encompassing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, thus enhancing the rigor of the research process (Booth et al., 2014).

#### **Results**

According to demographic data participants have the following characteristics

Age: 40-46 35% 47-55 65%

Experience of sport 93%.

Level of education: Secondary 57% University 28% Masters 14%

Have you ever changed clubs? Yes 42% No 58%

They accompany their child to training 100% to matches 93%

At the first level of analysis the researchers grouped the material to eight categories regarding the parents' beliefs in general. These categories included their children personal and social growth, sports in general, soccer in specific, coaches, referees, tournaments, parents' beliefs about their role.

In details

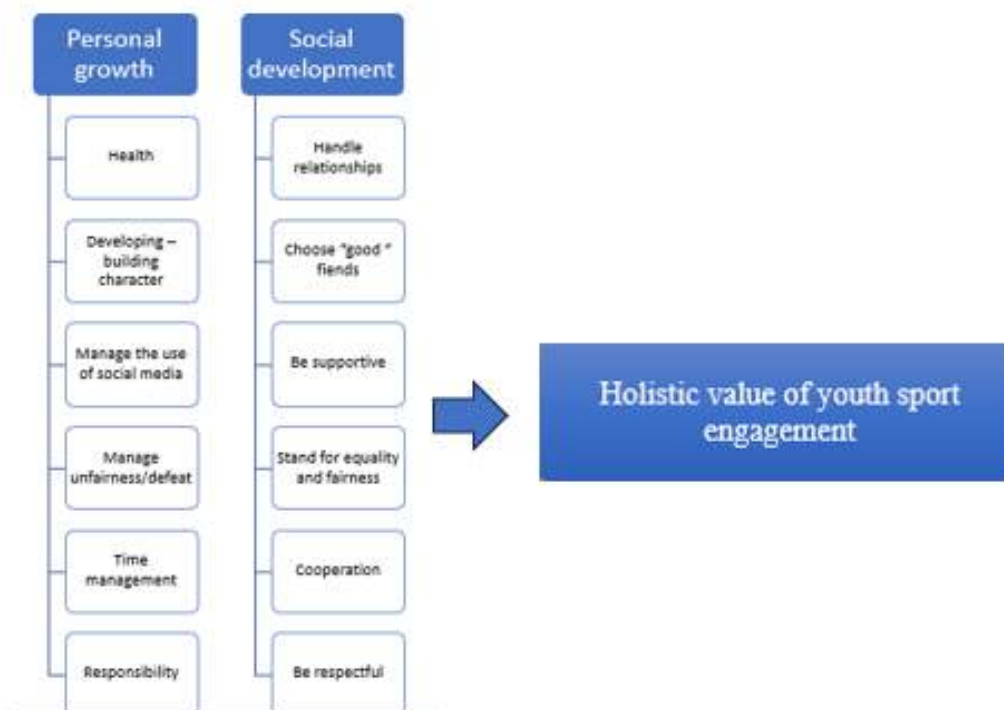


Fig 1

Parent 4: sport is the first and most important thing

Parent 9: Socialization is the key factor in the story and the teamwork part

Parent 7: ...football is a team sport so you learn to be in a society a small one

Following the same strategy analysis, four main themes were produced from data:

1. Holistic value of youth sport engagement
2. Information regulation and management
3. Socially determined sport club choices
4. Adult influence on the creation of the sport coaching climate

### Discussion

Parents underscored the significance of sport involvement in the overall development of their children.

At the same time, they express concerns in regard to the pace and the vast volume of information that is accessible to young athletes through the internet. They suggest more interaction between their coaches and time for tactical training outside the football field.

Parents tended to choose their children's sports club based on their beliefs about fostering proper personal and social development. They do not hesitate to change clubs and they value coached academic background.

Finally, they attributed the creation and maintenance of a positive coaching climate to adult role models in sport, (e.g., coaches, referees, tournament organizers and soccer federations). As a result, they propose that soccer federation and Universities should cooperate to make organizational changes and place more emphasis in training coaches for young athletes.

### Conclusions

Parents clearly recognize their supportive and formative roles in their children's sporting experiences. They associate their own and their children's satisfaction with the creation of a positive youth development climate, emphasizing the cultivation of individual and social skills such as managing defeat, promoting equal participation, and fostering fairness, equality, and respect. However, concerns remain regarding the value of youth tournaments as well as the unilateral focus placed by sport coaches and clubs on sport-as-competition. The above issues, highlight areas for future improvement within the youth sports ecosystem.

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