

## The Experience of Parent/Coaches in Youth Sport: A Qualitative Exploration of Junior Australian Football

Samuel K. Elliott

Murray Drummond

*Flinders University*

There has been increasing academic interest in understanding the nature of parental involvement in youth sport. Much scholarly focus has illuminated both positive and negative forms of sport parenting from the perspectives of coaches, parents and youth participants. One less understood aspect, however, surrounds the potentially conflicting role of parents who coach their own children in youth sport. This is surprising given that many parents demonstrate support by fulfilling essential roles such as team manager and team coach (Jeffery-Tosoni, Fraser-Thomas, & Baker, 2015). This paper draws on rich, descriptive qualitative data from 16 parent/coaches to highlight the contemporary experiences of parent/coaches who coach their own child. Three themes were identified including deliberate criticism, limited recognition, and behaviour justification, illustrating how parent/coaches intentionally demonstrate differential behaviour toward their child in contrast to the rest of the team. Examples of this include demonstrating deliberate criticism at training and matches and overlooking their child in awarding weekly encouragement awards after each match. Significantly, parent/coaches justify these behaviours in attempting to fulfil the dual role of parent and team coach to the best of their ability. Through the lens of social constructionism, we argue that this is not only problematic for parent and child relationships, but it may also have a reinforcing influence on how other parent/coaches negotiate the dual role. We argue that the reproduction of these behaviours can potentially preserve problematic aspects of parental involvement in youth sport, offering a unique perspective to the sport-parenting literature.

*I like to think of myself as a good coach. I am armed with knowledge, qualifications, an outgoing personality and a theoretical basis underpinned by an athlete centred approach.*

*However, throughout the three days of events I found myself in an invidious position. This is not unusual given that I have coached my son for the past eight years within the sport of surf life-saving. Over the*

*time I have coached my son we have been in situations and circumstances that have not been pleasant experiences for us both given the feedback required by a coach to progress an athlete forward. However, the perception of favouritism towards my son by the 'outside world' is a key concern that has been foremost in my thoughts in my role as a coach. While aspects of the sport of surf life saving are individually oriented, there are many team events. Similarly, given my role as a state coach I was entrusted to select the state representative team, in which my son was ultimately a member. Therefore, selection transparency was paramount. While it can be argued that providing, and adhering to, a strong set of criteria was important for the young athletes it can also be argued that transparency was required just as much for the parents as the athletes, such is the nature of contemporary youth sport. Problematically, I do feel that in certain circumstances my son has been 'dealt a more difficult hand' than other young athletes due to my role as coach. I am often the one to 'make an example' of him in front of other athletes because I think I know – occasionally incorrectly - his capacity for potential embarrassment. On occasions, I single out my son to demonstrate a skill in the water due to my acute awareness of his abilities. However, I also leave him out of certain relay teams despite his greater level of fitness and skills in order to give 'other kids a go.' Part of my rationale is no doubt sub-consciously based on how I might be seen by other parents. The positive aspect of all this is that I know this to be the case. I often reflect on my behaviours and I understand my own limitations as a coach and a father. The problem may be for other parent/coaches who do not have a level of introspection and self-reflection. This may be a*

*starting point to begin a discussion surrounding parents as coaches of their children.*

Over the past decade, there has been burgeoning interest in understanding the nature of parental involvement in youth sport. Much attention has arisen from concerns portrayed in the mainstream media surrounding negative parental behaviour (Lindstrom Bremer, 2012). To an extent, many studies qualify this perspective. For instance, several studies have revealed that parents often articulate negative and critical comments toward children during competition (Bowker et al., 2009; Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008; Shields, LaVoi, Bredemeier, & Power, 2007). Research has also found that parents continue to overemphasise winning, criticise and maintain unrealistic expectations for their child (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006; Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010). It is also purported that many parents demonstrate anger at youth sport events by walking away from events in annoyance, making offensive gestures and intimidating other spectators (Elliott & Drummond, 2015b; Goldstein & Iso-Ahola, 2008).

While such behaviours are clearly concerning, parents can also imbue a potentially negative impact through modes of well-intentioned involvement. In other words, parents can comprise a potential source of stress and anxiety for children through forms of involvement believed to be supportive and appropriate. For example, in some sport settings, parents regularly

provide advice to their child during the breaks of play and debrief after competition as a means of displaying support (Elliott & Drummond, 2016). Yet these interactions can unwittingly upset children and exacerbate feelings of stress and anxiety associated with participation (Elliott & Drummond, 2015a, 2016). Parents also have the capacity to embarrass children by displaying fanatical cheering and disruptive behaviours such as waving and calling out players' names (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2011). Furthermore, parents can confuse children if their verbal support during competition is not matched by their non-verbal behaviour (Knight, Neely, & Holt, 2011). These issues highlight the importance of further investigating taken-for-granted notions of parental involvement hidden under the guise of well-intentioned involvement. Failing to do so may inadvertently contribute to heightening stress and anxiety among youth participants, which has been associated with decreasing levels of enjoyment and motivation, and potentially drop out from sport (Bois, Lalanne, & Delforge, 2009). In contrast, generating an understanding in this regard could assist parents, coaches and administrators improve the broader youth sport experience and optimise the way that parents support children's sport.

One less understood aspect of well-intentioned parental involvement surrounds that of parents who coach their own children. The coaching role represents a conduit through which parents may believe

they can make a positive and substantial contribution to their child's sport. As suggested in the opening vignette, however, the dual role of parent/coach can be challenging for the parent and child. This line of inquiry is worth exploring further given that coaches are a key determinant in the enjoyment and motivation of youth participants (Atkins, Johnson, Force, & Petrie, 2014; Keegan, Harwood, Spray, & Lavallee, 2009; Keegan, Spray, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2010). To date however, limited attention has been afforded to this aspect of parental involvement in youth sport.

From the literature that is available, studies have indicated that relationships between parent/coaches and child/athletes are not always positively experienced by parents and children, resulting from highly complex and challenging relationships (Jowett, 2008; Jowett, Timson-Katchis, & Adams, 2007; Schmid, Bernstein, Shannon, Rishell, & Griffith, 2015; Weiss & Fretwell, 2005). Weiss and Fretwell (2005) suggest that while benefits include spending time together and sharing positive social interactions, parent/coach-child/athlete relationships can also be contentious and conflict-laden, and lead to rebellious behaviours among children. Jowett et al. (2007) claim the dual role parent/coach-child/athlete relationship has the potential to 'spill over', whereby coach-athlete conflict extends beyond sport and into the parent-child relationship, and vice-versa (i.e. coach-athlete). More recently, Schmid et al. (2015) interviewed seven female tennis

players and found that conflicts between parent/coaches and child/athletes can have negative impacts on the family unit, and in some cases, be characterised by abusive parental behaviours and practices. They also the ‘blurred boundaries’ child-athletes experience including receiving criticism from their father/coach without feeling put down and having an incapacity to complain to their parents about coaching issues.

Although these studies present some insight, one limitation is that they largely emerge from individual pursuits such as tennis, track and field athletics and swimming. With exception to Weiss and Fretwell’s work, there remains a need to examine wider sport settings including parent/coaches involved in team sports. Furthermore, these studies give inadequate voice to parents in understanding their experience of fulfilling dual roles. This oversight is noteworthy given the importance of understanding more about parents *own experiences* in youth sport (Holt & Knight, 2014). Noteworthy, knowledge surrounding the nature and influence of parent/coaches in youth sport reflects only the US and UK context. An examination of this role from underrepresented settings can offer the literature a unique and much needed contribution in pursuit of advancing the knowledge base about parent/coaches. For these reasons, there remain fundamental methodological and conceptual gaps within the extant literature that the current paper will seek to address. This is significant given that a vast majority of

parents are involved in youth sport as team coach at some point in their child’s sport development as it comprises a meaningful and culturally significant role in the lives of their own children (Coakley, 2006).

### **A sociocultural perspective**

Although studies on sport-parenting largely emerge from a sport psychology perspective (for instance, Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009; Keegan et al., 2010; Knight, Little, Harwood, & Goodger, 2016; Lauer et al., 2010), more diverse sociological approaches have been adopted recently and made important contributions to the literature (Burgess, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2016; Elliott & Drummond, 2015b; Stefansen, Smette, & Strandbu, 2016). Elliott & Drummond (2015a) argue that sociological approaches toward understanding sport parenting issues is particularly valuable because it progresses research beyond a focus on *what parents do*. Rather, it encourages one to consider wider factors, which serve to explain why sport parenting manifests in particular ways. For instance, social constructionism is useful for interpreting sport parenting research given that meaning is influenced by shared interactions between family, peers, history and culture (Elliott & Drummond, 2015b). This can include political, historical, social and cultural imperatives, which reinforce and maintain forms of parental involvement in youth sport. An example surrounds the socially constructed measures of ‘good parenting’ which, at present, include

children's participation and achievement in sport (Coakley, 2006; Trussell & Shaw, 2012). Under these conditions, parents may be influenced to involve themselves in youth sport in ways that respond to broader societal constructions, which for many parents can include fulfilling the role of team coach (Coakley, 2006).

Social constructionism therefore draws attention to the way in which meaning is constructed historically, culturally and linguistically (Burr, 2003). This includes a critical stance towards taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world; cultural and historical specificity; meaning and knowledge sustained by social processes, and; daily interactions and knowledge and social action which invites a different kind of action from human beings (Burr, 2003). Understanding parental involvement may therefore benefit from interrogating taken-for-granted aspects of youth sport such as parents in the coaching role. By considering this phenomenon in the context of cultural and historical specificity, and in association with social processes, which reinforce a particular kind of parental involvement, new understanding is possible. Such an approach, therefore, offers the literature a nuanced focus on exploring how and why parental involvement emerges as it does within the context of organised youth sport.

This paper emerges from a larger qualitative exploration of parental involvement in a junior Australian football setting (Australian football is colloquially known as Australian Rules football, and

refers to Australia's national football sporting code. Australian football is a contact sport possessing similar play patterns to Gaelic Football and Rugby; see *Method* for more details). In addressing the aforementioned gap in the sport parenting literature, the aim of this paper is to explore the perceptions and experiences of parents who coach their own child in junior Australian football. Thus, in framing the paper, two research questions are posed: (1) What is the nature of the sport parenting through the role of team coach? and (2) How do parent/coaches negotiate the relationship with their child as the team coach?

### **Method**

The data presented within this paper are drawn from a larger doctoral study, which investigated the nature of parental influence in junior Australian football. The original study design was based on a multiple case study methodology in which the bounded systems were defined by three demographic locations to explore the social phenomenon of sport parenting in junior Australian football in South Australia. As Sparkes and Smith (2014) contend, case studies can be jointly extended to several cases in order to investigate a phenomenon, population or general condition. In the original study, the phenomenon, which sought to be understood, surrounded parental influence in the understudied sport setting of junior Australian football. From the extensive data collected, two unintended findings were

revealed including parental influence on dietary patterns relating to children's sport (see Elliott, Velardo, Drummond, & Drummond, 2016) and the experiences of the contemporary parent/coach. The latter represents an opportunistic, yet pertinent by-product of the qualitative inquiry on an understudied aspect of sport parenting, leading to the conceptualization of this paper.

Within the current paper, then, the basis of the research is underpinned by a broader sociocultural exploration and analysis of the unintended findings surrounding the experiences of the contemporary parent/coach in junior Australian football. This paper draws on data derived from interviews with 16 parent/coaches from the larger study. The participants reflect a homogenous cohort based on (a) gender (male only), (b) age group coached (under 12s or under 14s), (c) competition level (local community), and (d) the age of their children involved in sport (12-13 years; Under 12s or Under 14s refers to the age range of the players in the competition. These grades are commonly referred to as 'juniors'). However, they represented a range of experiences and backgrounds in Australian football as former players and coaches at various levels of adult and youth competitions. For instance, while all parent/coaches had played Australian football previously, four coaches had less than one season (year) of coaching experience in junior Australian football. In contrast, the most experienced

parent/coach in the sample had coached juniors for five seasons. Institutional ethics approval was attained from a social and behavioural ethics committee at an Australian university.

### **Procedure**

With support from the South Australian National Football League (SANFL), various Australian football clubs from across South Australia were identified to recruit participants. This included clubs that fielded junior teams at the time of the study. The football clubs were contacted to assist the recruitment process by making available letters of interest and information sheets relating to the study. Individuals interested in becoming involved in the study emailed the first author to register their contact details and preferred availability. Once sufficient interest was obtained, a schedule for individual interviews was developed and communicated to potential participants via phone or email for consideration. Parent/coaches who were available to be involved in the study were asked to read and sign a consent form to take part in the study.

Individual interviews were used for data collection. One advantage of using individual interviews is that they allow the participant to lead the direction and pace of the discussion (Smith & Caddick, 2012), leading to the development of many significant, and potentially unexpected themes. Individual interviews are also an inexpensive method for gathering rich,

descriptive, cumulative and elaborate data (Lambert & Loisel, 2008). Importantly, and consistent with the epistemological roots of social constructionism, interviews enable participants greater opportunity to reveal much more about the meanings they attach to their experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The individual interviews took place in a variety of settings including the sporting teams' clubrooms or administration offices. The individual interviews were audio-recorded and lasted up to 90 minutes (*mean* = 70 minutes; *range* = 45-90 minutes).

The interview questions (see Appendix A) were based on common themes from the literature and from semi-structured questioning guides used in previous sport parenting research (see Knight et al., 2011; Weiss & Fretwell, 2005). This assisted in conceptualising a preliminary interview guide which was subsequently used to assist the researcher adopt a particular line of inquiry (Patton, 2002). The strength of using an interview guide is that the researcher is not constrained to ask questions in exactly the same way to each participant (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Questions were adjusted or reorganised to compliment the nature of the interview (i.e. simplifying words as necessary), allowing both the researcher to collect important information around the topic of interest and the participant the opportunity to report on their own thoughts and feelings. This approach elicited open discussions about the topic of parental influence in the junior Australian football experience, but did not

necessarily limit participants from discussing other topics. If a topic emerged and was deemed relevant to the overall research, it was discussed until participants felt that they had adequately addressed the issue, in conjunction with the researcher's belief that probing and follow-up techniques were no longer necessary (Patton, 2002).

The audio-recorded data were transcribed verbatim by the lead author and thematically analysed following the steps described by Smith and Caddick (2012) as immersion, code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme labelling and definition and reporting of themes. The lead researcher completed repeat readings of each transcript for familiarisation purposes before undertaking a process of indexing as part of an open coding process. A second stage of code interpretation was then undertaken to produce analytically stronger categories and potential sub-themes. Finally, the codes from all transcripts were examined collectively to enhance the analytical strength of the emergent themes from within the case study (Yin, 2003). This process involved comparing and contrasting codes leading to the consolidation of highly elaborate and rich themes relating to parental involvement in youth sport. Pseudonyms were used to conceal participants' identity, and the identity of their affiliated football team and league, respectively.

In judging the quality and excellence of this qualitative study, the authors adopted a number of means, practices and methods as

suggested by Tracy (2010) including the appropriate and complex use of theoretical constructs as well as data and time in the field, reflexivity and resonance. The lead researcher spent three months in the field collecting data across various junior Australian football contexts and with purposefully selected samples, avoiding what Tracy (2010) describes as convenience, opportunism, and 'the easy way out'. Excellence was also practiced by employing care in collecting and analysing data. More traditional techniques were adopted in this regard including member checking, but utilised in a way to assist the lead researcher in the process of co-constructing meaning. All participants received the original transcript and final findings in textual form and invited to clarify or walk back data by contacting the lead author. Throughout this process, no changes were required according to the 16 parent/coaches. However, the member checking process promoted an additional opportunity for the lead author to re-engage the data and in doing so, enhance the interpretive process in keeping with a constructionist epistemology. Reflexivity was practiced as 'intersubjective reflection' (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) throughout the research process including question design, data coding and data analysis. The second author (who was depicted in the opening vignette) fulfilled a vital role a critical friend throughout the research process to promote intersubjective reflection by acting as a sounding board and provoking the lead researcher to question

their own position and presence in the research. They also played an important role in critical debriefing with the lead author during data collection. Finally, resonance in the research findings is self-evident in its (at times) evocative representation to influence and move the reader/s. Combined, these criteria characterised the hallmarks of methodological rigour or 'excellence' for the current study.

## Results

From the outset, and similar to the work of Schmid et al. (2015), the authors seek to remind readers that it was not their intention to negatively portray the ensuing results about the experiences of being a parent in the coaching role. Although previous studies have illuminated both positive and negative aspects of the dual parent/coach experience (i.e. Weiss & Fretwell, 2005), and despite the researcher's best efforts during data collection, there were clearly substantive views among all parent/coaches in the current study which gravitated toward the negative and often difficult nature of being the coach of a team sport that involved their children.

Within each interview, all parent/coaches described enjoyment with being involved in junior Australian football and a desire to continue coaching into the future. While it reaffirmed a favourite pastime for parent/coaches, it also provided a meaningful opportunity to pursue a hobby that benefits so many children. As one participant noted, 'it's just magic seeing the



kids, willing to learn'. However, and similar to the opening vignette, the main discussion point for parents in the coaching role revolved around the troubling experiences of coaching a team that included their own child. Figure 1 portrays the difficult and often confronting aspects perceived by parents in their role as team coach, leading to the conceptualization of three main themes including (1) deliberate criticism, (2) limited recognition, and (3) justifications for behaviour. These themes elucidate the 'fine line' parent/coaches navigate in youth sport.

### **Deliberate criticism**

A prominent challenge for all parent/coaches was negotiating external perceptions of favouritism. In cultivating the image of a 'fair' coach, most (14) participants discussed the need to intentionally provide their child with 'harsher' feedback during the season in contrast to other children. They claimed that in doing so during training and in games, external perceptions of favouritism could be visibly and, audibly, addressed. While recognising that this was not necessarily a supportive parenting practice in junior Australian football, it was regarded as important in order to allay others' perceptions of nepotism between the child and coach. As one parent/coach explains:

Brian: I've had the conversation with my son before I started coaching and it was like 'look I am going to be harder on you this year than any other kid because I'd prefer another kid's parents come up to me

and say that I am being a bit hard on you than say that I am favouring you' sort of thing. I had the comment made by my grandmother after he'd been around for a visit and it was like 'I had a chat with Brandon about his footy and he said about you being harder on him than the rest of the team'. She said 'I couldn't believe he went down that path' but I am glad I did because it wasn't something that I could really change! I had that idea right off the bat, how I'd have to do it [coach] to at least, sort of look like I was being fair sort of thing.

During the season, most parent/coaches demonstrated deliberate criticism in the context of training. They noted that some children do not cope well with being 'singled out' at training. However, their responsibility to develop players' skill and game understanding meant that on occasions, there was a need to make an example out of players. Under these conditions, parent/coaches often resorted to highlighting mistakes and errors made by their own child for the benefit of others. This drew a clear contrast in the way that parent/coaches treated other children.

Billy: We've got one kid who cannot kick for nuts but he will get one right every so often so you praise him up on the ones he gets right. You don't bag him for the ones he messes up, but I do with my own son. I am tough on him, I don't know why; I am just tough on Paul.

These comments are noteworthy because they seemingly contradict coaches' endeavour to treat all children fairly.

However, as one parent/coach noted, being 'harder' on their own child was often balanced by opportunities at home to clarify and explain deliberate criticisms communicated at training. Subsequently, parent/coaches regularly synthesised critical comments made during training into more encouraging feedback after training.

Chris: Yeah, I can be negative. I'll pull him aside and tell him why I did it, you know. I'll give him a hard time in front of everyone but the reason I gave him a hard time, I'll tell him after, sort of thing, and often he'll agree and then like tonight, he's jumping all over me again.

Most parent/coaches stated that their children understood the complexity of being a parent in the coaching role because they had experienced this relationship in past junior Australian football seasons. For one parent/coach however, a recent conversation with his son suggests that children perceive deliberate forms of criticism in different ways than parent/coaches.

Frank: I did get picked up by my young fella when I was driving him home the other week. He said 'why do you always pick out me every time something goes wrong? I'll drop the mark and you will have a go at me,' and I said 'I've just got high expectations for you, but you know I've said that to others.' And he said 'No, you've said that more to me!'

### **Limited recognition**

To further address concerns around favouritism, parent/coaches limited formal displays of encouragement and recognition by overlooking their child when determining weekly best player awards. Selecting a recipient for the weekly best player award represented a conduit through which parent/coaches argued their credibility as a 'fair' coach was being tested in the eyes of other parents and children. Consequently, choosing an award winner for best player typically involved overlooking their own child's performance regardless of how they played.

Ray: I have to be very careful that I don't favour him you know, giving out best players and stuff. You have got to be aware of that. You tend to be harder on them than the rest of the boys sometimes. It's a hard boundary there where you can be too tough on your own kids because you're the coach and parent as well, it's sort of hard to draw the line. You are probably harder on your own kids than the other kids, especially with giving out best players and stuff like that!

The decision to deliberately limit the amount of formal recognition their child received was predicated by a need to encourage all players throughout the regular season as part of a broader developmental responsibility. The weekly awards were described as 'a really important part' of encouraging players to persist with sport, especially novice and under-age players. However, this was especially difficult for parent/coaches who perceived their child to

be a consistently high performing player across the season. For them, the decision to deliberately overlook their child often resulted in temporary feelings of guilt.

Daniel: We (parent/coaches) are harder on our own kids as a coach than you are on other kids... but you sort of feel a bit guilty that the best player is not getting an award.

Two parent/coaches who described their children as 'gun' players particularly struggled with the awards process. They discussed times when they wanted to recognise their child with an award because they deserved it, but did not want to fuel external perceptions of father-son favouritism. Consequently, a surreptitious rotational system was adopted whereby all players received the best player award across the course of the season as a way of managing perceptions. Other encouragement awards such as 'most courageous' and 'most improved' were subsequently used to reward the players who were adjudged as the better performers, independent from the rotation system. Dale, a parent/coach describes:

Dale: A lot of the time, generally when I pick the best players, I try and rotate best players first then the last few spots, try and fill with some fellas who had good games you know. Like I said before, we're probably harder on our own kids as a coaching aspect than you are on other kids, you're trying to encourage them to keep going, you sort of probably lean away a bit from the better kids, even your own kid, which makes it hard giving out best player. I

don't know, I've never had any feedback from anybody to say they're disgruntled or anything, but yeah.

One exception to this perspective came from a parent/coach who regularly gave their child the weekly best player award based on the perception that they were 'by far and away' the best player in the team.

Toby: I have seen other coaches that are extremely hard on their own kids but I don't think I am too bad when it comes to giving out the best player awards because he (my son) is just about the best player in the side so it is quite often you handing him best player. You do get a bit of jealousy though - it can be an issue.

Encouragement awards therefore comprised an important conduit for parent/coaches to demonstrate differential treatment toward their child in youth sport. Although the scope of this paper does not illuminate children's perceptions and experiences of this form of parental influence through the coaching role, it does highlight a potentially conflicting proposition for parents.

### **Justifying behaviour**

The other pertinent theme that emerged in the analysis surrounded parent/coach justifications for deliberate criticism and limited encouragement toward their child. Although they acknowledged that, 'it's not over the top or nothing', a key reason for maintaining this behaviour related to concerns about how they might be perceived by other parents and children.

Most parent/coaches had previously encountered instances of conflict with other parents about playing time, which for parent/coaches, was interpreted as an accusation of favouritism.

Barry: I have had a few pop into me about why isn't their boy on the ground. It's very difficult to give them all a go but during this one game, she sort of came up to me and confronted me and said 'Why isn't he on the field? I am going to take him to another club!' Yelling at me sort of – you do get a bit of that sort of thing.

In more serious cases, some parent/coaches had even discovered being criticised on social media.

Paulo: Well I had a mother last month getting on Facebook and bagging me. She was getting on Facebook and saying that I was a bad influence by not teaching the kids how to lose and that was bit hard to take on board for me. A friend of my wife's actually rang up and said 'do you know this is going on?' and I said 'No, I have got no idea.' It went on for a few days. Her and her partner had a child in my team, a young lad. What did I do? I finished up, I stewed over it, I was pretty gutted, and like I said earlier, I was angry. I was more disappointed you know, I felt like I had done the wrong thing and you start to second-guess yourself. It sort of gutted me a bit.

Subsequently, displaying differential treatment toward their own child played an important role in alleviating concerns around favouritism for parent/coaches. Parent/coaches claimed that this had the

potential to communicate to other parents their intentions to avoid favouritism and in doing so, reduce potential confrontations with parents in the future. As one father stated, 'that's the way it has to be! [You] would rather be a bit harder on your own kid than having a parent have a go at ya'. Another expressed 'I treat him the same as any other kid, maybe a little harder. There's no favouritism there whatsoever. It doesn't matter that he's my son'. However, it also had the potential to send a message to players about discipline. Most parent/coaches claimed that children at this age (12 years) were prone to 'messing around', rendering many parent/coaches feeling reduced to a 'glorified babysitter' role instead of team coach. As a result, it was sometimes considered necessary to discipline the team and individuals to control children's behaviour and maximise the benefits of a structured training session. Yet, disciplining young footballers was also perceived as a difficult proposition because it had the potential to provoke further conflict with parents. Therefore, to address this, many (nine) coaches 'made an example' of their own child at the start of the season to 'set the tone' for others.

Rick: As much as you want kids to enjoy it, there's not a lot of point playing chasey for an hour if they just want enjoyment. There has got to be some footy aspect to it and there has got to be some discipline involved and it has got to start with my kid, like when the coach talks, you have got to listen. For example, if they are

not doing the right thing and I give it to him, send him to do a lap, yell at him or whatever... make an example!

In summary, parent/coaches frequently limit recognition of their own child and make attempts to criticise their own child as the team coach. Parent/coaches also justify their behaviour in pursuit of avoiding negative perceptions that revolve around favouritism. This notion was aptly summarised by an experienced parent/coach: 'It doesn't matter that he's my son, that's behind us'.

### **Discussion**

The aim of this paper was to explore the perceptions and experiences of parents who coach their own child in junior Australian football. Specifically, the paper sought to (a) understand the nature of the sport parenting role through the role of team coach and (b) explore how parent/coaches negotiate the relationship with coaching their child in a team sport.

The findings of the current study offer an important insight into the experience of being a parent/coach in contemporary youth sport. Specifically, they reveal a tendency for parent/coaches to overlook their own child when determining best player awards and display deliberate and targeted criticism toward them during training and games. Weiss and Fretwell (2005) also reported that parent/coaches can demonstrate differential attention to their own children, however, the current findings also reveal reasons why differential

treatment is a sustained practice for parents who coach their own child. In particular, the notion of favouritism appears to be an influential factor confronting parent/coaches involved in youth sport. Their desire to avoid being perceived as a parent/coach who demonstrates favour offered the strongest justification for sustaining critical and discouraging parental behaviours in the coaching role. Subsequently, the findings extend previous studies which have highlighted the complex and challenging aspects of the dual parent/coach role for parents and children (Jowett, 2008; Jowett et al., 2007) by illuminating how parent/coaches rationalize their behaviour under the guise of team coach.

From a sport parenting perspective, the findings add weight to the literature suggesting that well-intentioned parental involvement in youth sport can be problematic (Elliott & Drummond, 2016; Knight et al., 2011). Although pressuring, abusive and violent behaviour are widely regarded as negative aspects of involvement, parents can also exert a negative influence in less obtrusive ways (Elliott & Drummond, 2015a). For instance, fulfilling the coaching role is a prominent way for parents to become positively involved in their child's sport (Jeffery-Tosoni et al., 2015). However, the findings indicate that involvement as parent/coach can often result in deliberate criticism and limited forms of support for their children. Given that children struggle to accept criticism from parents in coaching

roles without feeling put down (Schmid et al., 2015), being a parent/coach clearly has the potential to cause conflict, which appears counterintuitive in seeking to enhance and optimize parental involvement in youth sport (Holt & Knight, 2014; Knight & Holt, 2014).

From a social constructionist standpoint, it is possible to explore what might be leading to parents' involvement in this way. For instance, it is arguable that deliberate criticism and limited encouragement manifest from previous observations and interactions with parent/coaches. After all, social constructionists acknowledge that social meaning is influenced by interactions with the surrounding world (Burr, 2003). Parents may therefore rearticulate behaviours and experiences observed from their own childhood and/or perpetuate practices observed from other parents fulfilling the coaching role in contemporary youth sport. One consequence is that parent/coaches not only learn to espouse behaviours, which adhere to socially constructed ideals of being a parent/coach, they also learn to defend such behaviour. This is a dangerous notion because it can normalize parenting practices that have the potential to disadvantage their own child in youth sport via limiting recognition and increasing criticism. This may explain why instances of undesirable parenting practices continue to pervade the youth sport setting, evident through the dual role of parent/coach.

While the findings offer an important contribution to the literature, they should be interpreted with some caution. Indeed, the findings reflect the voices of an entire cohort of male participants within a specific, yet understudied, sport setting in junior Australian football. This is perhaps reflective of Australian football as a hyper-masculinized sport setting whereby fathers feel more comfortable engaging in child rearing practices. Nonetheless, mothers who identify as parent/coaches remain virtually unrepresented in the literature, and yet may offer a critically important dimension to discussions about the dual parent/coach role in youth sport. The other noteworthy limitation is that the findings may not offer applicability to other team sport settings. Parent/coaches involved in pre-elite and talent development settings may experience heightened pressure and scrutiny from other parents and intensify the nature of their interactions with their child as a result. Similarly, the experiences of being a parent/coach may differ according to the age group they coach. Therefore, while the findings illustrate the experience of being a parent/coach, more academic attention is certainly warranted.

Based on the conceptual ideas and findings presented within this paper, a number of important implications are offered. One consideration is for sport organisations to consider that while parent/coaches may be influenced by a range of social, cultural and linguistic interactions, they too comprise a reinforcing

influence for others seeking to negotiate the dual role in the future. Therefore, and even if children are undeterred by parent/coaches' behaviour (a concept beyond the scope of this study worthy of pursuing), there remains a need to continue to support parents to optimise their involvement in youth sport (Knight & Holt, 2014). This is especially important given that there are very few coaching options available in many junior Australian football settings, and we suspect across other sporting domains too. Additional support and strategies might include the development of programs and training designed to improve parent/coaches communicative and pedagogical skills with their own child in team sport. Sporting organisations could also support parent/coaches develop skills to manage how they cope with their fears about external perceptions of favouritism by encouraging more frequent 'meet and greet' training sessions for parents and children. Such an approach has been recommended previously (see Omli & LaVoi, 2012) as a strategy to reduce parental anger at youth sport events, but it may also provide parent/coaches a valuable opportunity to work with more experienced coaches in leading a brief seminar with other parents to enhance the relationship between parents and coaches (Smoll, Cumming, & Smith, 2011). Furthermore, sporting organisations could develop their own strategies to positively influence the way that all coaches (including parent/coaches) are perceived via

social media, weekly newsletters and email. By supporting parent/coaches in this regard, they may feel more adequate in their capacity to coach and worry less about disadvantaging their child to enhance their image as a fair coach. Finally, and from a research perspective, scholars are encouraged to continue investigating not only aspects of youth sport parenting which are ostensibly problematic, but also the taken-for-granted aspects, which are 'hidden' under the guise of 'encouraging' and 'supportive' involvement. Following the lead of the current study, there may be great value in exploring other roles that parents fulfil such as official, team manager and even elite sport settings where the parent/coach and child-athlete relationship may conceivably intensify.

This study highlights the experience of parents who coach their own children in junior Australian football. The findings reveal the ways through which parent/coaches exert differential treatment toward their child as a mechanism for negotiating how others perceive them. From a sport parenting perspective, this is significant because it underlines another aspect of well-intentioned parental involvement whereby parents have a high capacity to demonstrate potentially undesirable behaviours toward children. However, improving these interactions are somewhat contingent upon challenging notions of favouritism and the way in which parent/coaches are socially constructed. Importantly, this paper highlights a growing

need for sport parenting research to investigate all aspects of parental involvement in youth sport – those that are clearly problematic as well as those, which are deemed supportive and constructed as well-intentioned forms of sport parenting. In pursuit of enhancing the youth sport experience and the vital roles parents fulfil, this cannot be understated.

---



## References

- Atkins, M. R., Johnson, D. M., Force, E. C., & Petrie, T. A. (2014). Peers, Parents, and Coaches, Oh My! The Relation of the Motivational Climate to Boys' Intention to Continue in Sport. *Psychology of sport and exercise*. doi:DOI: 10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.10.008
- Bois, J. E., Lalanne, J., & Delforge, C. (2009). The influence of parenting practices and parental presence on children's and adolescents' pre-competitive anxiety. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 27(10), 995-1005. doi:10.1080/02640410903062001
- Bowker, A., Boekhoven, B., Nolan, A., Bauhaus, S., Glover, P., Powell, T., & Taylor, S. (2009). Naturalistic observations of spectator behaviour at youth hockey games. *The Sport Psychologist*, 23(3), 301-316. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1123/tsp.23.3.301
- Burgess, N. S., Knight, C. J., & Mellalieu, S. D. (2016). Parental stress and coping in elite youth gymnastics: an interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 1-20. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2015.1134633
- Burr, V. (2003). *Social Constructionism* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Coakley, J. (2006). The good father: Parental expectations and youth sports. *Leisure Studies*, 25(2), 153-163. doi:10.1080/02614360500467735
- Dorsch, T., Smith, A. L., & McDonough, M. H. (2009). Parents' perceptions of child-to-parent socialisation in organised youth sport. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology* 31(4), 444-468. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1123/jsep.31.4.444
- Elliott, S., & Drummond, M. (2015a). Parents in youth sport: what happens after the game? *Sport, Education and Society*, 22(3), 1-16. doi:10.1080/13573322.2015.1036233
- Elliott, S., & Drummond, M. (2015b). The (limited) impact of sport policy on parental behaviour in youth sport: a qualitative inquiry in junior Australian football. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 7(4), 519-530. . doi:10.1080/19406940.2014.971850
- Elliott, S., & Drummond, M. (2016). During play, the break, and the drive home: the meaning of parental verbal behaviour in youth sport. *Leisure Studies*, 1-12. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2016.1250804
- Elliott, S., Velardo, S., Drummond, M., & Drummond, C. (2016). Sport and children's nutrition: what can we learn from the junior Australian football setting? *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education*, 7(1), 91-104. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/18377122.2016.1145427
- Goldstein, J. D., & Iso-Ahola, S. E. (2008). Determinants of parents' sideline-

- rage emotions and behaviours at youth soccer games. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 38(6), 1442-1462. doi:10.1111/j.1559-1816.2008.00355.x
- Gould, D., Lauer, L., Rolo, C., Jannes, C., & Pennisi, N. (2006). Understanding the role parents play in tennis success: a national survey of junior tennis coaches. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 40(7), 632-636. doi:10.1136/bjism.2005.024927
- Holt, N. L., & Knight, C. J. (2014). *Parenting in youth sport: From research to practice*. Routledge.
- Holt, N. L., Tamminen, K. A., Black, D. E., Sehn, Z. L., & Wall, M. P. (2008). Parental involvement in competitive youth sport settings. *Psychology of sport and exercise*, 9(5), 663-685. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2007.08.001
- Jeffery-Tosoni, S., Fraser-Thomas, J., & Baker, J. (2015). Parent Involvement in Canadian Youth Hockey: Experiences and Perspectives of Pee wee Players. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 38(1), 3-25.
- Jowett, S. (2008). Outgrowing the familial coach-athlete relationship. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 39(1), 20-40.
- Jowett, S., Timson-Katchis, M., & Adams, R. (2007). Too close for comfort? *International Journal of Coaching Science*, 1(1), 59-78.
- Keegan, R. J., Harwood, C. G., Spray, C. M., & Lavalley, D. E. (2009). A qualitative investigation exploring the motivational climate in early career sport participants: coach, parent and peer influences on sport motivation. *Psychology of sport and exercise*, 10(3), 361-372. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2008.12.003
- Keegan, R. J., Spray, C., Harwood, C., & Lavalley, D. (2010). The motivational atmosphere in youth sport: coach, parent and peer influences on motivation in specialising sport participants. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 22(1), 87-105. doi:10.1080/10413200903421267
- Knight, C. J., & Holt, N. (2014). Parenting in youth tennis: Understanding and enhancing children's experiences. *Psychology of sport and exercise*, 15(2), 155-164. doi:http://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2013.10.010
- Knight, C. J., Little, G. C., Harwood, C. G., & Goodger, K. (2016). Parental Involvement in Elite Junior Slalom Canoeing. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 28(2), 234-256. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2015.1111273
- Knight, C. J., Neely, K. C., & Holt, N. L. (2011). Parental behaviours in team sports: how do female athletes want parents to behave? *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 23(1), 76-92. doi:10.1080/10413200.2010.525589
- Lambert, S. D., & Loiselle, C. G. (2008). Combining individual interviews and

- focus groups to enhance data richness. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 62(2), 228-237. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04559.x
- Lauer, L., Gould, D., Roman, N., & Pierce, M. (2010). Parental behaviors that affect junior tennis player development. *Psychology of sport and exercise*, 11(6), 487-496. doi:http://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2010.06.008
- Lindstrom Bremer, K. (2012). Parental Involvement, Pressure, and Support in Youth Sport: A Narrative Literature Review. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 4(3), 235-248. doi:10.1111/j.1756-2589.2012.00129.x
- Omlil, J., & LaVoi, N. M. (2012). Emotional experiences of youth sport parents I: Anger. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 24(1), 10-25. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2011.578102
- Omlil, J., & Wiese-Bjornstal, D. M. (2011). Kids Speak: Preferred Parental Behavior at Youth Sport Events. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 82(4), 702-711. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2011.10599807
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Schmid, O. N., Bernstein, M., Shannon, V. R., Rishell, C., & Griffith, C. (2015). "It's Not Just Your Dad, It's Not Just Your Coach..." The Dual-Relationship in Female Tennis Players. *The Sport Psychologist*, 29(3), 224-236. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2014-0049
- Shields, D. L., LaVoi, N. M., Bredemeier, B. L., & Power, F. C. (2007). Predictors of poor sportpersonship in youth sports: Personal attitudes and social influences. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 29(6), 747-762. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1123/jsep.29.6.747
- Smith, B., & Caddick, N. (2012). Qualitative methods in sport: a concise overview for guiding social scientific sport research. *Asia Pacific journal of sport and social science*, 1(1), 60-73. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21640599.2012.701373
- Smoll, F. L., Cumming, S. P., & Smith, R. E. (2011). Enhancing coach-parent relationships in youth sports: Increasing harmony and minimizing hassle. *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, 6(1), 13-26. doi:https://doi.org/10.1260/1747-9541.6.1.13
- Sparkes, A., & Smith, B. (2014). *Qualitative research methods in sport, exercise and health: From process to product*. Routledge.
- Stefansen, K., Smette, I., & Strandbu, Å. (2016). Understanding the increase in parents' involvement in organized youth sports. *Sport, Education and*

*Society*, 1-11.

doi:10.1080/13573322.2016.1150834

Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851. doi:  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>

Trussell, D., & Shaw, S. (2012). Organized Youth Sport and Parenting in Public and Private Spaces. *Leisure Sciences*, 34(5), 377-394.

doi:10.1080/01490400.2012.714699

Weiss, M. R., & Fretwell, S. D. (2005). The parent-coach/child-athlete relationship in youth sport: cordial, contentious or conundrum? *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 76(3), 286-305.

doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2005.10599300>

Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research. Design and methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

## Tables

Table 1

*Participant Information*

Name	Gender	Grade coached	Experience	Age of child
Arthur	Male	Under 12	One	12
Barry	Male	Under 12	One	12
Brian	Male	Under 12/Under 14	Four	13
Billy	Male	Under 12	Two	12
Chris	Male	Under 12	One	12
Dale	Male	Under 14	Two	13
Daniel	Male	Under 12/Under 14	Three	13
Danny	Male	Under 12	Two	12
Frank	Male	Under 14	Three	13
Paulo	Male	Under 12	One	12
Rick	Male	Under 12	Two	12
Ray	Male	Under 14	Five	12
Toby	Male	Under 14	Two	13
Tom	Male	Under 12	Two	12
Wes	Male	Under 12	Three	12
Zoran	Male	Under 12	One	12

## Figures

Figure 1

*A coding tree leading to the construction of three main themes surrounding the experience of parents in the coaching role.*

