

Optimal Sport Parent Push

DANIEL GOULD, PHD
 INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF YOUTH SPORTS
 MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY



My Sport Parent Experience

- What are the best things about being a sport parent?
- What are the most challenging things about being a sport parent?

What Do I Want My Child to Get Out of Sport?



What Does My Child Want to Get Out of Sport?



The Paradox of Sport Parenting

- Research shows that parents can have major positive and negative effects on children and youths' sport involvement, experiences and physical and psychological outcomes.



Positive Sport Parent Effects

- Allow children to engage in a healthy activity
- Increase their child's motivation to be active
- Help instill valuable life lessons like working hard, learning how to win and lose and behaving morally
- Create a positive emotional climate that allows youth to have choices and make appropriate decisions, increase their feelings of competence and be with their friends and make new friends
- Help their child to become independent

Negative Sport Parent Effects

- Thwart children's motivation
- Cause stress and burnout in young athletes
- Create toxic emotional climates
- Instill inappropriate moral behaviors
- Help their child become dependent and entitled

The Paradox of Sport Parenting

Sport parenting is difficult because:

- *Children do not come with instruction manuals and no two children are alike*
- *They are developing and change over time*
- *Parents receive little formal parental training*
- *Coaches receive little formal training on how to work with parents*
- *In many societies sport is a highly valued emotionally-laden activity*

Optimal Parent Push: Athlete Interview Research

(Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010a; 2010b)



What Is Optimal Parent Push?

- **Optimal parent push** is the ability to read one's child's and one's own emotional needs, consider the overall goals of sport participation and overall development, and then know when to provide an appropriate balance of structure and expectations while providing age appropriate independence and autonomy.
- **Optimal parent push** involves holding one's player accountable and stressing core values like hard work, discipline and sportsmanship, while placing little importance on rankings and winning.

Key Sport Parenting Conclusions Optimal Parent Push

- **Non optimal push** involves placing winning and rankings above player development and engaging in controlling, negative and critical parental behaviors.
- **Non optimal push** can also be characterized by too little involvement in the child's sport experience where inadequate support is provided.

US Tennis Association Parents Study

(Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010a; 2010b)

- **Purpose:** To examine parental influence on talent development and the parent-child relationship
- **Method:** In depth retrospective interviews conducted with:
 - 9 professional tennis
 - 8 parents of players
 - 8 coaches were retrospectively interviewed about
- **Data Analysis:** Examined parenting practices as players progressed through stages of talent development.

Parent-Child Reactions Across Stages of Talent Development

- *Smooth Pathway Aggregate Observations*
- *Difficult Pathway Aggregate Observations*
- *Turbulent Pathway Aggregate Observations*

Smooth Pathway Aggregate Observations

- Unconditional love and support
- Child allowed to make more decisions as he or she matured
- Avoided placing too much stress on the child

Smooth Pathway Aggregate Observations

- Did not magnify child's feelings of parent investment
- Were not pushy tennis parents
- Held goals that did not change drastically, (unlike some parents in the difficult and turbulent cases) - a consistent, positive, balanced environment was created for the child

Smooth Pathway Aggregate Observations

- Balanced pushing the child to strive for excellence and also having a balanced life
- Intentional efforts to maintain balance in the child's life despite the pressures to specialize early and push for outcomes (i.e., ranking points, wins)

Smooth Pathway Aggregate Observations

- Were emotionally intelligent in their interactions with their child-athlete (read the emotional state of their child, monitored their own state, and communicated in a manner to maintain a positive, motivating climate)

Smooth Pathway Aggregate Observations

- Very good at knowing when to approach the child and what to communicate (plan their conversations with their child to limit stress and yet provide support)
- Were able to minimize the perceived importance of tennis (talking about topics other than tennis right after the match, in the car ride home or even as a rule at the dinner table)

Smooth Pathway Aggregate Observations

- Showed interest in other aspects of the child's life and making these seem just as important as tennis
- Did not react to losses or mistakes on court - minimized children's perceived pressure
- Kept perspective about the sport and attempted to maintain balance in the child's life

Smooth Pathway Aggregate Observations

- Intentionally attempted to take tennis experiences and relate them to life in the hopes of building life skills and character
- Took time at tournaments to visit the city hosting the tournament or emphasized that the child has other pursuits, including other sports even in the elite years

Smooth Pathway Aggregate Observations

- Did not objectify the child's involvement
- Also made academics a priority and required that their children attend and do well in school



Turbulent Pathway Aggregate Observations

- Similar to the smooth and difficult pathways, turbulent paths had positive parent-child interactions in the early years.
- Yet in these years there were early signs that tennis was starting to become very important and all-encompassing.

Turbulent Pathway Aggregate Observations

- Positive relationships that existed in the early years were strained with the mounting pressure to perform and gain rankings in the middle and elite years.
- Coupled with a child's basic need to strive for self-determination and the parents' desire to control the tennis experience, it is no surprise that conflicts occurred frequently.

Turbulent Pathway Aggregate Observations

- Healthy perspective was lost at times in lieu of developing an elite tennis player.
- Problems that developed in the middle years continued to exist in the elite years
- Player made it to professional tennis but at the cost of a positive relationship with a parent.

Turbulent Pathway Aggregate Observations

- Parents were not uneducated or abusive. (In fact, they had good intentions). They wanted the best for their child and were positive in many ways.
- Negatives did outweigh the positives in the perception of the players; they felt tennis had become most important to their parents.

Turbulent Pathway Aggregate Observations

- Turbulent (and difficult) pathway parents often and unintentionally made their love and support conditional upon success (i.e., winning, development).
- Players often perceived this love and support as conditional even if the parent was doing his or her best not to make it conditional! The players understood the parents' investment in their tennis and wanted badly to give their parents results.

Turbulent Pathway Aggregate Observations

- When parents were reacting to missed shots, the child often experienced pressure because he or she would perceive that the parents were upset.
- Conditional support created strained relationships that continued into the elite years where it was a struggle for the parent to become less involved and just be emotionally supportive.

Turbulent Pathway Aggregate Observations

- Conflicts were often unresolved and had detrimental consequences for the parent-child relationship.
- These players were more likely to leave the professional tour than their smooth pathway counterparts.

Degree and Quality of Parental Involvement

Refuting of a Tennis Myth

- **Myth:** To develop a great player you have to have an over involved and overbearing parent to push the child to the limits needed to develop expertise.
- **Myth:** Coaches have posited that great players all had at least one parent that was highly involved and supportive to the point of being pushy.

Degree and Quality of Parental Involvement

- **Finding:** A parent can be a positive, "by the book" parent and still have their child develop into a professional tennis player.
- **Finding:** There are multiple paths to expertise, including being pushy and demanding; however, the degree of pushing over time is damaging to child-parent relations.

Optimal Parent Push: Degree and Quality of Parental Involvement

- Creating a positive or mastery-oriented climate seems to be an optimal approach for balancing player satisfaction, reducing anxiety and facilitating talent development (Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2007).

Optimal Parent Push: Degree and Quality of Parental Involvement

- Do not assume that smooth pathway parents avoided pushing or motivating their children. They also believed that the pursuit of excellence was worthwhile.
- They pushed their children to excel but less frequently and for different reasons than turbulent pathway parents; they seemed to display more emotional intelligence regarding the child's reactions to their push.

Degree and Quality of Parental Involvement

- It seems to be a fine line where parents attempt to push the child to excel but have to be careful that they are doing it for the right reasons and making it clear to the child.
- Finding this line is the "art" of sport parenting

Optimal Parent Push: Balancing Support & Challenge

- Smooth pathway parents seemed to find a good balance between support and challenge of their children.
- Difficult pathway parents seemed to struggle with the balance but in the end resolved it.
- Turbulent pathway parents never seemed to find the right balance between support and challenge after the early years and this ended in strained relationships.

Optimal Parent Push: Degree and Quality of Parental Involvement

- Inappropriate parenting pushed for the goals of winning, leading to feelings of pressure to appease the parents.



Optimal Parent Push Evidence: Achievement by Proxy



Degree and Quality of Parental Involvement

Achievement by Proxy Tofler, Knapp, and Drell (1998)

- A condition where the child becomes a pawn in the adult's game plan for directing the child's experiences so they are successful.
- Involvement can be healthy if the parent takes pride and satisfaction in the child's achievements but does not allow the achievement domain to have deleterious effects on the child's development as a whole.

Achievement by Proxy

Tofler, Knapp, and Drell (1998)

- **Stage 1:** is of "risky sacrifice"; the adult has a mild loss of the ability to differentiate their own needs for success from their child's needs and goals (e.g., "living through the child")
- **Stage 2:** "objectification"; the inability to differentiate between parent and child needs and goals becomes more severe. In this situation, the child is the means to achieve the goals. The parent believes they know what is best for the child and they are very controlling of the experience.

Achievement by Proxy

Tofler, Knapp, and Drell (1998)

- **Stage 3:** "potential abuse", is the most severe where no regard is given to the short and long-term health consequences in the pursuit of the goal. Examples of potential abuse could be overtraining the child, providing performance enhancing substances, and forcing to play while burned out or injured.

Achievement by Proxy: Key Lessons

- Parents moved through increasing stages of achievement by proxy
- **Solution:** Self and other-monitoring of parent behavior
- **Solution:** Recognize the signs of achievement by proxy

Optimal Parent Push: Emotional Intelligence Research

Salovey, Peter; Mayer, John; Caruso, David (2004)

- **Emotional intelligence (EI)** is the ability to monitor one's own and other people's emotions, to discriminate between different emotions and label them appropriately, and to use emotional information to guide thinking and behavior.
- **Key:** Optimal sport parenting is facilitated by one or both parents being emotionally intelligent.

Components of Emotional Intelligence

- **Perceiving Emotions:** Accurately assess emotions by understanding nonverbal signals such as body language and facial expressions.
- **Reasoning With Emotions:** Use emotions to promote thinking and cognitive activity. Emotions help prioritize what we pay attention and react to; we respond emotionally to things that garner our attention.
- **Understanding Emotions:** The emotions that we perceive can carry a wide variety of meanings. We must understand our emotions.
- **Managing Emotions:** Regulating emotions, responding appropriately and responding to the emotions of others are all important aspects of emotional management.

To Optimally Push Requires High Emotional Intelligence

- Read and understand your own emotions
- Control your own emotions
- Detect and understand your child's emotions
- Help your child learn to cope and regulate their emotions

Helping Young Athletes Learn to Cope

Tamminen & Holt (2012)

- Listen and provide a supportive context
- Use specific strategies to facilitate learning
 - *Questioning and reminding*
 - *Providing perspective*
 - *Sharing experiences*
 - *Dosing stress experiences*
 - *Initiating informal conversations*
 - *Creating learning opportunities*
 - *Provide direct instruction*

Evidence for Optimal Parent Push: Parenting Styles Research

- **Parenting styles** can best be thought of as the constellation of attitudes and behaviors created by parents that are communicated to the child versus specific parenting behaviors that are usually context-specific (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009).
- A number of parenting styles have been identified (e.g., authoritarian, permissive, authoritative).
- However, most are thought to be comprised of key dimensions that influence child development.

Parenting Styles Research: Examples of What Parenting Styles Influence

- Perception of competence
 - School grades
 - Intrinsic motivation
 - Perfectionism
- Pomerantz et al. (2005)

Structure of Parenting Styles: An Example

- Grolnick's (2003) three dimensions of parenting styles:
 - *Autonomy supporting versus controlling,*
 - *Degree of structure provided, and*
 - *Parental involvement*

Structure of Parenting Styles: An Example

- **Prediction:** When an autonomy supporting is used, where the child is given choices, are not pressured to act and are let to solve their own problems, the more children are intrinsically motivated and mentally healthy.
- **Prediction:** Parental styles characterized by psychological control, where children are pressured to behave in certain ways, the less they will be intrinsically motivated and exhibit enhanced well-being.

Structure of Parenting Styles: An Example

- **Prediction:** Children develop optimally when they are provided with structure – clear and consistent expectations and guidelines.
- **Prediction:** The extent to which parents demonstrate interest and involvement in the child's life is generally seen as being positively related to intrinsic motivation and optimal well-being. However, controlling parents can be over-involved in their child's life, so involvement can sometimes be associated with negative outcomes.

Key Point: Parent Control

Barber, Stolz, and Olsen (2005)

- **Psychological control** that involves invalidation of feelings, induction of guilt, and withdrawing love is associated with negative child development.
- High degrees of parental psychological control are associated with such outcomes as depression and anti-social behavior, while parental support and behavioral control are associated with more positive outcomes.

A Working Model of Optimal Sport Parent Involvement

(Knight & Holt, 2014)

- **Step 1: Share and Communicate Goals** (while understanding factors which influence goals)
 - Demographic factors (experience, age)
 - Sport experiences and transitions
- **Step 2: Develop and Understanding Emotional Climate**
 - Challenges of competing
 - Intricacies of sport development
 - Influence of external factors
 - Fit within the child's life

Strategies for Developing an Understanding Emotional Climate

(Knight & Holt, 2014)

- Maintain strong parent-coach relationships
- Engage in independent learning
- Keep sport in perspective
- Focus on the multiple benefits of sport participation

A Working Model of Optimal Sport Parent Involvement

(Knight & Holt, 2014)

- **Step 3: Engage in Enhancing Parenting Practices at Competitions**
 - Attend to child's competitive needs
 - Teach skills to cope with competition
 - Manage your own emotions

Strategies for Engaging and Enhancing Parenting Practices at Competitions

(Knight & Holt, 2014)

- Communicate regarding needs
- Understand perceptions of parental behaviors
- Read and react to situations
- Foster independence
- Hold child accountable for behavior
- Enjoy the experience

So What?
Implications for Sport Parenting

- How can the information presented help you more effectively work with sport parents or improve your sport parenting?
- What are 3 key points for you to remember as a sport parent?



Sport Parent Recommendations

- Hold a yearly or seasonal re-enlist session - athlete with parents and with parents and coach
- Enlist a critical friend to monitor your attitudes and behaviors and give him or her permission to hold you accountable
- Improve your communication skills: Use the GROW model

Building Trusting Relationships

**PEOPLE DON'T CARE
WHAT YOU KNOW
UNTIL THEY KNOW
THAT YOU CARE!**

Why Is Asking Questions Important?



**Basic Coaching Skills:
Asking Questions**

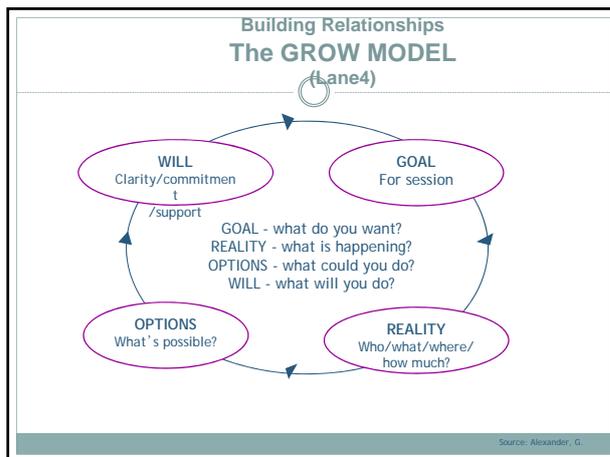
Tell me and I forget. Ask me and I remember because I understand!

**Basic Coaching Skills:
Asking Questions Versus Always Telling**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask about the desired outcome • Ask what is happening now 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask about different options • Ask about what the player will do
--	--

The GROW Model for Asking Questions (Whitmore, 2009)

- G** – goal questions
- R** – reality questions
- O** – options questions
- W** – will questions



Sport Parent Recommendations

- Parents consider sport an investment and are looking for a return
- The problem is that we only give them one metric to evaluate progress - winning
- Find ways to provide feedback beyond winning and losing

Better Delineate the Benefits of Youth Sports Beyond the Scoreboard: Develop a Report Card?

Potential Young Athlete Report Card Grading Areas

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offensive Skills • Defensive Skills • Strength • Endurance • Agility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation • Concentration • Sportsmanship • Teamwork • Leadership
--	--

Epilogue: Positive Youth Development Mentoring Research

Larson's (2011) Key Points for Understanding Positive Youth Development

- Adolescents are active “producers of their development.”
- An individual's positive development is supported by processes across multiple (e.g., family, peers, school) systems.

Larson (2011) Key Points for Understanding and Studying PYD

- We cannot understand adolescents' development without recognizing disorder any more than you can have physics without recognizing friction and entropy or biology without recognizing diversity and competition.
- Positive adolescent development requires knowledge and skills for navigating/dealing with/integrating/balancing heterogeneity and disorder.

The Contraction of Helping Youth

Larson (2006)

- The mentors (parents) role in the process of positive youth development is more difficult than their old role of shaping or molding youth
- Action no longer moves from adult to youth but is an interactive process
- The mentors (parents) dilemma is how to keep ownership in the hands of youth while challenging them and protecting them from making critical mistakes

Critical Sport Parent Questions

- When to set firm boundaries and when to be flexible?
- When to support a youth's goals and when to challenge them?
- How to grant youth choice and autonomy without putting them at risk?
- When to listen and be empathic and when to give one's own point of view?
- When to let youth learn from mistakes?

Summary

- Sport parenting is complex.
- There are no magic formulas for sport parenting.
- There are multiple styles and approaches that are both successful and unsuccessful.
- However, there are evidence-based principles that can guide parenting efforts.

THANK YOU