Parent-athlete relationships: A central but underexamined consideration within sport psychology
Olivier Rouquette, Camilla Knight, Victoria Lovett, Jean-Philippe Heuzé

To cite this version:
Olivier Rouquette, Camilla Knight, Victoria Lovett, Jean-Philippe Heuzé. Parent-athlete relationships: A central but underexamined consideration within sport psychology. Sport and Exercise Psychology Review, Dr Chris Wagstaff, In press. hal-03085897

HAL Id: hal-03085897
https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03085897
Submitted on 22 Dec 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.
This is a pre-publication version of the following article:


Parent-athlete relationships: A central but underexamined consideration within sport psychology

Olivier Y. Rouquette a,b,*, Camilla J. Knight b, Victoria E. Lovett c, and Jean-Philippe Heuzé a

a Laboratoire Sport et Environment Social (SENS), Université Grenoble Alpes, Grenoble, France; b School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Swansea University, Swansea, United Kingdom, c Department of Psychology, Swansea University

Corresponding author:

Olivier Y. Rouquette
Swansea University Bay Campus
Engineering East
Crymlyn Burrows
Swansea
SA3 8EN

E-mail: olivier.rouquette@swansea.ac.uk

ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8088-4800

Twitter: @olivier_rqt
Abstract

Parent-athlete relationships are central to athletes’ optimal well-being and experiences in sport. Nonetheless, despite being considered within numerous theories and models, parent-athlete relationships are often only studied implicitly. Thus, the purpose of this review is to critically examine theory and research pertaining to parent-athlete relationships in youth sport and provide suggestions regarding how to move this area of research forwards. Specifically, a review of the family-systems theory, the bioecological model, competence motivation theory, expectancy-value theory, self-determination theory, achievement goal theory, parenting styles, and attachment theory is provided. Subsequently, arguments for the potential benefit of utilising Reis at al’s (2004) construct of responsiveness (i.e., how people in a relationship attend and support each other’s needs and goals) to improve understanding of parent-athlete relationships are presented. Finally, a model for studying parent-athlete relationships based on Feeney and Collins’ (2015) thriving through relationships is suggested. We believe that this model may be useful for integrating key elements of existing theories as they pertain to parent-athlete relationships while also provide fruitful avenues for more in-depth and explicit examinations of parent-athlete relationships within youth sport.

Key words: dyadic relationships; interdependence; perceived responsiveness; parent-child relationships; thriving
Parents support young athletes by introducing them to sport, committing time and money to enable participation, and providing emotional support at and beyond competitions (Baxter-Jones & Maffulli, 2003). It has been suggested that the provision of such support can positively influence young athletes’ motivation, enjoyment, and ongoing sport participation (Atkins et al., 2013; Baxter-Jones & Maffulli, 2003). In contrast, if parents over-emphasise winning, hold unrealistic expectations, or criticise their child’s performances, it can lead to feelings of pressure and stress (Lauer et al., 2010), which can result in parent-child conflict, negative affect, a lack of enjoyment, and/or increased anxiety (O’Rourke et al., 2013).

However, although certain parental behaviours appear to be related with child outcomes, the association between these is complex and warrants further examination (Knight, Berrow, et al., 2017). Specifically, the factors that may influence how or why certain parental behaviours result in different child outcomes would benefit from greater consideration (Chan et al., 2019). One such factor is the relationship that exists between a parent and their child (Brown et al., 2018; Clarke et al., 2016; Dorsch et al., 2016). Research suggests that the quality of the parent-athlete relationship, (a) might underpin perceptions of parental support (Dorsch et al., 2016); (b) is central to athletes’ well-being and sporting development (Knight, Harwood, et al., 2017), and; (c) directly influence’s athletes’ experiences (Brown et al., 2018; Carr, 2013; Clarke et al., 2016; Dorsch et al., 2016). Thus, to develop a better understanding of how parents influence children’s sporting experiences and psychosocial development, examining the parent-child relationship is pertinent.

Unfortunately, within current sport psychology research, the parent-athlete relationship is often not defined, which can make it difficult to integrate outcomes and find convergences between studies. Based on the actor–partner interdependence model, we define a parent-athlete relationship as an interdependent dyadic relationship that integrates the influences of the athlete (i.e., actor effect), the influences of the parent (i.e., partner effect), and a unique
interaction that is created between them (Kenny & Kashy, 2013). Parents and athletes are
distinguishable members of dyads because one member of the dyad (e.g., the parent) cannot
be replaced with the other (e.g., the athlete), and because their role processes and outcomes
are different (Kenny & Kashy, 2013). Consequently, the parent and the athlete are considered
to be interdependent, and measurement of their combined influence should be considered
within research. Drawing on this definition of parent-athlete relationships, the purpose of this
review is to critically examine theory and research pertaining to parent-athlete relationships
in youth sport and provide suggestions regarding how to move this area of research forwards.

To address this purpose, review papers (i.e., meta-analysis, citation networks, position
papers, narrative reviews etc) on parental involvement/parent-athlete relationships were
identified through keyword and abstract search using the terms sport or athletic and words
relating to parenting, such as parent, family, mother, father, parent-child, parent-athlete in
Scopus and PsychInfo. The search, limited to papers in peer reviewed journals written in
English, returned 262 articles in Scopus and 362 articles in PsychInfo. All article titles and
abstract were reviewed, and unrelated articles were discarded, leaving 40 articles in Scopus,
and 27 in Psychinfo. From these papers, we identified the theories and models that had been
used to study or frame studies pertaining to parent-athlete relationships. These theories/
models were: family system theory (Bowen, 1993; Minuchin, 1974); the bioecological model
(Bronfenbrenner, 2005); motivational theories such as competence motivation theory (Harter,
1978), expectancy-value theory (Eccles et al., 1983), self-determination theory (Ryan &
Deci, 2017), and achievement goal theory (Nicholls, 1984); parenting styles (Baumrind,
1971a), and; attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973, 1982, 1984, 1988). Subsequently, exemplar
papers from each theory were purposefully chosen to enable a critical review of how the
theory has facilitated understanding of parent-athlete relationships in youth sport, while also
enabling the identification of gaps and commonalities across the theories and research.
Family System Theory

Early interest into parent-athlete relationships in youth sport was situated within family system theory (Hellstedt, 1987). In family system theory, parent-athlete relationships can be considered based on the concept of boundaries (Minuchin, 1974). A boundary is described as an area of emotional and behavioural individuation between family members that goes from enmeshment (i.e., little psychological separation between two people) to disengagement (i.e., emotional and psychological connections are distant; Minuchin, 1974). Additionally, family system theory considers the construct of triangulation, which refers to the idea that triangles are the smallest stable relationship units, and that a two-person interpersonal system is untenable if there is a conflict or confusion between them (Bowen, 1993). In such cases, a third person (e.g., another parent or coach) will be involved to stabilise the system.

Examples of research in sport. Considered one of the influential papers regarding youth sport parents, Hellstedt (1987) proposed a typology of parental influence in youth sport based on family system theory. In this perspective, Hellstedt’s boundaries in parent-athlete relationships are presented as a model of under-involved (i.e., lack of emotional, financial, or functional investment from parents in their children’s activities), moderately involved (i.e., firm parental direction but with flexibility to allow the athlete to take part in the decision-making process), and overinvolved (i.e., excessive amount of parental involvement in the athletic career of their children) relationships (Hellstedt, 1987). Based on a non-linear “Ω” association, under-involved and overinvolved parents are considered as more dysfunctional, while moderately involved parents are perceived to produce more functional outcomes with regards to their child’s sport participation and development.

Hellstedt (1987) also incorporated triangulation, detailing specific strategies coaches should use to work with parents and athletes based on the types of interpersonal involvement in their relationship (Hellstedt, 1987). For instance, Hellstedt (1987) proposed that with
overinvolved parents, coaches should avoid open conflict and maintain a working alliance with parents in order to stay involved in the parent/athlete/coach triangle. With under-involved parents, Hellstedt (1987) proposed that coaches would benefit from engaging parents in meetings or inviting them to competitions to increase the involvement of parents within the coach-athlete relationship.

Using family system theory to understand parent-athlete relationships. Family system psychology can be a useful approach to draw on when conducting research with athletes to learn more about their family and relationships or when working with young athletes and their parents (Dorsch, 2017). For instance, the application of family system theory underpinned the development of an integrated youth sport system which considers athletes a part of a family subsystem (i.e., athlete, parents, siblings), team subsystem (i.e., peers and coaches), and environmental subsystem (i.e. club, community, society) that are reciprocally interconnected and mutually influence each other (Dorsch et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the constructs in family system psychology are a general heuristic that, due to a lack of clear operationalisation, can be difficult to implement into research (Clarke et al., 2016). Particularly, it may be difficult to uncover some of the nuances within parent-athlete relationships that may influence children’s psychosocial and sporting development (Holt & Knight, 2014). For instance, Hellstedt’s work drew attention to a continuum accounting for the amount of parental involvement that may be appropriate within parent-athlete relationships. However, in recent years, it has been argued that rather than focusing on the amount of parental involvement (e.g., over or under involved parents), it is actually the type of involvement that is of greater importance (Holt & Knight, 2014; Stein et al., 1999). This is based on an understanding that perceptions of parental involvement depend upon the unique relationship between parents and their children (Knight, Berrow, et al., 2017) and thus
some parents may be highly involved in ways that work for their child and positively impact on their child’s sporting development (Holt et al., 2009; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005).

Nevertheless, family system psychology has been, and continues to be, very useful to remind researchers of the need to consider the influence of parents within the broader family unit (Holt & Knight, 2014). Moreover, it places an important emphasis upon considering family and sport issues as permeable entities influencing each other (Dorsch, 2017; Dorsch et al., 2020). Consequently, as Hellstedt (2005) suggested, families, and especially parents, should not be side-lined by sport organisations as they are an indispensable source of support for young athletes. Rather, there is a need to consider how the family unit and youth sport environment interaction. Overall, family system psychology adds to our understanding of parent-athlete relationships by highlighting the complexity and central role of relationships within and beyond the family unit in influencing athletes’ experiences and development (Dorsch, 2017; Hellstedt, 2005).

**Bioecological Model**

The bioecological model proposes that human development, especially in early life, takes place through processes of progressively more complex and bi-directional interactions between the evolving human (e.g., young athlete) and the persons (e.g., parents), objects, and symbols of their immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model considers the ecological environment in which the evolving human progresses as a set of nested structures comprising the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The microsystem includes the direct and face-to-face interaction of the developing person with their immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). It is within the microsystem (e.g., family) that the proximal processes (i.e., continuous form of interactions between parents and athletes) take place to produce and sustain development. The
mesosystem accounts for the links and processes between two or more settings containing the evolving human (e.g., the relations between home and the sports club). The exosystems comprises the links and processes between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the evolving human (e.g., relations between the sports club and the federation). Finally, the macrosystem is the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystem characteristics (e.g., culture, material resources, belief system), and the chronosystem refers to the changes and consistencies over time in the characteristics of the person and in the environment in which that person lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Together, the structures of the bioecological model are operationalised as the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model, which facilitates the simultaneous investigation of various environmental levels within research (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). In the PPCT model, the processes are considered as progressively more complex interactions within the immediate environment (i.e., microsystem), as well as interrelationships between levels; the persons are the biopsychosocial characteristics of individuals; the contexts are the sets of micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro- nested structures; and time is the chronosystem that influences the development at the individual level, and the historical events that occur during an individual’s life course (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Darling, 2007).

**Examples of research in sport.** Recognising that parents and athletes are influenced by various relational, personal, and sport-specific factors, numerous studies have drawn on the bioecological model, specifically the PPCT configuration (Dorsch et al., 2015, 2016; Holt et al., 2008). Dorsch and colleagues (2015) followed four families during the first fifteen months of their child’s sport participation to understand the processes of parents’ socialisation into youth sport. Drawing on the PPCT model, Dorsch et al. (2015) documented the increasingly complex interactions that parents experience in youth sport. For instance, involvement in sport provided opportunities for parent and children to spend quality time
together and share experiences, which in turn positively influenced the parent-athlete relationship. Nevertheless, in line with other research (Knight & Holt, 2013), the authors highlighted the need to further examine the processes that underscore the formation and maintenance of parent-child relationships in youth sport.

Dorsch et al. (2016) again drew on the PPCT model to examine the individual (i.e., positive and negative emotions), relationship (i.e., warmth and conflict), and context factors (i.e., motivational climate) associated with parent involvement (i.e., support and pressure) in youth sport. Specifically, this study portrayed parent-athlete relationships as proximal processes of continuous interactions that induce subjective and simultaneous perceptions of warmth and conflict. Based on Darling and Steinberg (1993) work, Dorsch et al. (2016) described warmth as the tendency to be supportive, affectionate, and sensitive in the relationships; while conflict is the struggle with power and agency in the relationship. Data analysis indicated that athletes’ reports of warmth, positive affect, and perception of a mastery climate were positively associated with their perception of support from parents, while their perception of conflict, negative affect, and perception of an ego climate were positively associated with perception of pressure. Further, aligned with previous research highlighting the differences in parents and athletes perceptions of parental behaviours (Babkes & Weiss, 1999), Dorsch et al. found a modest correspondence among mothers’, fathers’, and athletes’ agreements on warmth and conflict in the parent-athlete relationships.

**Using the biocological model to understand parent-athlete relationships.** A core feature of the PPCT model is that the persons are at its centre, with a specific focus on the proximal and developmental processes influencing the persons (Darling, 2007). Studies using the PPCT model can account for the proximal processes at stake within parent-athlete relationships, and show how they are influenced both by the context and the developing individuals (Darling, 2007; Tudge et al., 2009). Thus, the PPCT model enhances our
understanding of the processes within parent-athlete relationships because it ensures that they are considered at various levels of understanding such as the person, the context (i.e., sport clubs, parent job, social and cultural ideologies), and their development over time.

To date, Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) PPCT model has been mostly used to understand the Microsystems within parent-athlete relationships with less consideration for the contextual influences of the meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (Harwood et al., 2019). One of the reasons for this restricted use is that due to its complexity, it can be challenging to effectively utilise or consider all levels of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) PPCT model in research (Tudge et al., 2009). Nevertheless, available research provides evidence that parents’ attitudes and behaviours are influenced by specific circumstances within the Microsystems as well the wider sporting and social context (Holt et al., 2008).

Recently, however, it has been suggested that greater consideration of factors within the macrosystem would be beneficial within studies of parental involvement (Harwood et al., 2019). In this direction, Dorsch et al. (2020) developed a heuristic model aimed at facilitating an integrated understanding of the youth sport system. This model provides a useful means through which to consider how the specifics of different sport environments may influence the processes within the parent-athlete relationship (Dorsch et al., 2020). Nevertheless, further research drawing on the PPCT model examining the different environments and subsequent responses across individuals is required. Particularly, an examination of the resources available within and across environments is needed because, the greatest effects of promotive processes are expected in environments with greater resources and among individuals with the ability to take advantage of those resources (Darling, 2007).

Overall, studies using the PPCT framework show that sport can be a context that helps to develop the relationships through proximal process interactions. The PPCT model
facilitates insights into the complex and bi-directional interactions that take place between parents and their children in the context of organised youth sport.

**Motivational Theories**

Parents have numerous opportunities to communicate beliefs and expectations to their children, and thus impact upon various psychosocial outcomes, particularly children’s motivation (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Brustad, 1992). Consequently, parents’ influences on young athletes are considered in numerous motivation-related theories (e.g., competence motivation theory (Harter, 1978), expectancy-value theory (Eccles et al., 1983), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), achievement-goal theory (Nicholls, 1984). While each of these theories has a specific hypothesis and focus, when examining parents’ influences a number of theories are often integrated within one study (Atkins et al., 2013; Babkes & Weiss, 1999; O’Rourke et al., 2013). Thus, while each theory is described individually below to highlight the unique insights they provide to aid understanding of parent-athlete relationships, research drawing on these theories is examined together.

**Competence motivation theory.** Harter’s competence motivation theory suggests that children who receive continuous feedback from significant others (e.g., parents) for their attempts and progress in an achievement domain (e.g., sport) will gradually internalise a self-reward system, and build their self-perception of competence in this domain (Harter, 1978, 1981). Subsequently, children who perceive themselves as competent and having control in a particular domain (i.e., sport) will be more intrinsically motivated to pursue optimal challenges (Harter, 1978, 1981). In sum, Harter’s competence motivation theory proposes that parents, through their continuous interactions with their child, can have a significant influence on athletes’ perception of competence, intrinsic motivation, and persistence.

**Expectancy-value theory.** Expectancy-value theory proposes that achievement-related choices, performance, and persistence are directly influenced by expectations of success and
task value (i.e., interest, importance, utility, and cost; Eccles et al., 1983). Expectancies and
values are, in turn, influenced by task-specific beliefs such as perception of competence,
perception of difficulty, individuals’ goals, and self-schemas (Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles &
Wigfield, 2002), which are influenced by individuals’ (e.g., young athletes) perception of
other people’s (e.g., parents) attitudes and expectations for them, affective memories, and by
their own interpretation of events (Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). This means
athletes’ perceptions of parental beliefs and behaviours can influence the value they place on
a task/activity, as well as their anticipated success in this task/activity. Such expectations will
directly influence the child’s achievement-related choices and performances.

Self-determination theory. Self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017)
assumes that individuals are active organisms with an innate tendency for growth, to master
new challenges, and integrate new experiences into a coherent sense of the self. These natural
developmental tendencies do not operate automatically but need to be socially nurtured and
supported. As such, the social and contextual environment (including parents) are considered
to be key influences in facilitating (or thwarting) the development and maintenance of
activities that foster psychological growth. SDT also advances that three basics psychological
needs are essential for optimal functioning. These basic needs are autonomy (i.e., behaviours
are perceived as self-governed), competence (i.e., perceived mastery of behaviours), and
relatedness (i.e., perceived sense of belonging). The satisfaction of the basics needs (e.g., by
parents) influences the extent to which individual behaviours and actions are internalised and
perceived as self-determined, consequently influencing individuals’ development and
wellness. Thus, by nurturing or thwarting athletes’ basics psychological needs of
competence, autonomy, and relatedness, parents influence the quality of athletes’ motivation.

Achievement goal theory. Achievement goal theory (AGT; Nicholls, 1984, 1989)
proposes that in achievement situations (e.g., sport) individuals are motivated to demonstrate
their competences or to avoid demonstrating lack of competence. AGT primarily
distinguishes between; task/mastery goals, when individuals seek to demonstrate their
competences through personal improvement, enjoyment, effort, and learning from mistakes
in a self-referenced manner, and: ego goals, when individuals seek to demonstrate their
competences through winning, being better than others, and avoiding mistakes relative to
others (Elliot & Hulleman, 2018; Nicholls, 1984).

Subsequently it was suggested these two meanings of competence (task/mastery or ego)
can be applied at different levels of analysis: dispositional (i.e., goal orientation), situational
(i.e., the motivational climate), and the state level (i.e., goal involvement) (Ames, 1992). An
environment (e.g., initiated by parents) that focuses upon self-referenced improvement,
effort, and considers mistakes as valuable experiences for learning is a task-involving climate
and encourages the adoption of task goals. In contrast, an environment that values winning
and social comparison is labelled as an ego-involving climate and encourages the adoption of
ego goals (Ames, 1992; Elliot & Hulleman, 2018). AGT proposes that the interaction
between athletes’ goal orientation and parent-initiated motivational climate could influence
athletes’ goal involvement, and subsequent psychosocial outcomes (Harwood et al., 2015).

Examples of research in sport. Motivational theories have been widely used to
examine parental behaviours and athletes’ motivational and psychological outcomes. For
instance, Babkes and Weiss (1999) identified that young athletes who perceived their
mothers’ and fathers’ attitudes and behaviours as more supportive, had a higher perception of
competence, intrinsic motivation, and sport enjoyment. But they also showed a non-
significant association between parents’ self-reported attitudes and behaviours and athletes’
motivation, enjoyment, and perceived competence. Thus, the authors concluded that
children’s perception of parents’ attitudes and behaviours are more important contributors to
their self-perceptions, affects, and motivation than parent-reported attitudes and behaviours (Babkes & Weiss, 1999).

Likewise, Ullrich-French and Smith (2006) assessed the links between athletes’ perception of their relationship with parents (the relationship here being considered as the provision of multiple types of social support) and motivational outcomes. The results showed that more positive athlete perceptions of their relationships with parents was associated with more positive motivational outcomes such as enjoyment, perceived competence, and self-determined motivation as well as lower stress (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006). This study also provided evidence of the additive and cumulative impact of the perception of social relationships, with a higher enjoyment and perceived competence for multiple positive perception of relationships. Subsequently, Ullrich-French and Smith (2009) identified that athletes’ perception of their relationships with close-others (e.g., parents) predicted their sport continuation regardless of the strength of motivational variables (i.e., affect, perceived competence, and self-determined motivation).

Other examples drawing on achievement goal theory come, for instance, from O’Rourke et al. (2013). These authors identified that athletes’ perception of a parent-initiated task-involving climate predicted positive effects on young athletes’ motivation by fostering autonomous regulation and thus intrinsic motivation. Similarly, Atkins et al. (2013) showed that athletes’ perception of parental task-involving motivational climate positively influenced their sport competence, self-esteem, sport enjoyment, and intention to continue with sport. Further, Atkins et al. (2015) showed that athletes’ perception of a parent-initiated task-climate influenced athletes’ task orientation, which in turn influenced athletes’ perceived competence, self-esteem, and enjoyment.

Using motivational theories to understand parent-athlete relationships.
Motivational theories aid our understanding of parent-athlete relationships by differentiating the influences of numerous features of the relationship on athletes’ self-perceptions, enjoyment, and motivation in sport. Such features include, for instance, parents’ beliefs about their children’s competence, parents’ expectations of their children’s sporting successes, parents’ reports of their own behaviours (e.g., what they say they do), and parents’ actual behaviours (e.g., what they actually do). Motivational theories also provide suitable frameworks to compare actual and perceived parental behaviours and the subsequent impact athletes’ perceptions have on resultant psychosocial outcomes (e.g., motivation). For instance, research provides evidence that parents’ reports of their encouragement (Brustad, 1993) and athletes’ perceptions of their parents’ encouragement (Brustad, 1996) were both related with athletes’ perceived physical competence. Meanwhile mothers’ perception of their child’s physical ability was influenced by both their child’s actual physical ability and their child’s perceived physical competence (Bois et al., 2002). Subsequently, mothers’ perception of their child’s ability and the child’s perception of their physical competence influenced their perceived competence one year later (Bois et al., 2002).

Together, studies on parent-athlete relationships underpinned by motivational theories show a lack of association between parents’ reported behaviours and athletes’ perceptions of such behaviours (Babkes & Weiss, 1999). These studies also show a lack of association between athletes’ perceptions of their own physical competence and their parents’ perception of their physical competence (Bois et al., 2002). Nevertheless, despite a lack of associations, each of the aforementioned elements contribute to athletes’ motivation and self-perceptions. Thus, as Keegan and colleagues (2014) concluded, it is almost impossible to establish any direct correspondence between the behaviours of social agents (e.g., parents) and athletes’ motivation. Rather, the association between social agents’ behaviours and motivation is moderated by numerous contextual, intrapersonal, and interpersonal factors.
Despite difficulties identifying direct correspondence between parents’ behaviours and athletes’ motivation, it has been proposed that parents’ positivity is the only consistent theme linked with increases in athletes’ motivation (Keegan et al., 2010). Such positivity includes positive feedback, positive affect, encouragement, or collaboration/support. Consequently, motivational theories and related studies increase our understanding of parent-athlete relationships by highlighting that high parental beliefs about their children’s competences and high expectations for sporting success, together with positive support and attitudes, may influence athletes’ self-perceptions, motivation, and enjoyment in sport.

**Parenting Styles**

Parenting styles reflect parents’ global attitudes and values. The most well-known typology of parenting styles was developed by Baumrind (1971a, 1971b), who differentiated parenting styles based on a parent’s degree of control or authority over their child. In this typology, three types of parenting style are specified: authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative. An authoritarian parenting style places value on obedience, seeks to keep their child in a subordinate role, and restricts autonomy (Baumrind, 1971a). A parent adopting a permissive style accepts their child’s wishes but is not an active agent in shaping their child’s future behaviour (Baumrind, 1971a). A parent adopting an authoritative style places value on autonomy and self-will of the child but can exert firm control when necessary (Baumrind, 1971b). This typology was subsequently extended into a bi-dimensional construct based on demandingness (parental control) and responsiveness, which takes into account the continuous changes required by parents to adapt to their child’s capacities and current states (Baumrind, 1991; Maccoby, 1992). Four parenting styles resulted from this bi-directional typology namely: authoritarian (i.e., demanding and unresponsive), authoritative (i.e., demanding and responsive), indulgent (i.e., not demanding and responsive), and rejecting/neglecting (i.e., not demanding and not responsive).
More recently, Grolnick (2003) proposed a three-dimensional construct of parenting styles based upon self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and Darling and Steinberg’s (1993) definition of parenting style as, “a constellation of attitudes toward the child that are communicated to the child and that, taken together, create an emotional climate in which the parent’s behaviors are expressed” (p. 488). The three dimensions of parenting styles proposed by Grolnick (2003) are autonomy-support, involvement, and structure.

Autonomy-support values a child’s active participation and independent problem solving; involvement is the extent to which the parent is interested and takes an active part in their child’s life; structure is the extent to which parents provide clear and consistent guidelines, expectations, and rules for their child’s behaviours (Grolnick, 2003).

**Examples of research in sport.** Baumrind’s typology has been examined in few studies in sport (Holt et al., 2009; Juntumaa et al., 2005; Sapieja et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2019). For example, a study in ice hockey showed that players from authoritative families had a higher level of mastery-orientation and satisfaction in playing (Juntumaa et al., 2005). In contrast, players from parents with authoritarian parenting styles showed norm breaking behaviours in ice hockey. In another study involving male youth football players (Sapieja et al., 2011), so called “healthy” perfectionist (i.e., high performance standards with low concern about failing to reach these standards) and non-perfectionist players had significantly higher perception of maternal and paternal authoritativeness than unhealthy perfectionists (i.e., high performance standards with high concern about failing to reach these standards). Together, these studies indicate that, when compared to authoritarian parents, authoritative parents positively influence young athletes’ psychological outcomes and behaviours.

Meanwhile, Grolnick’s (2003) parenting styles have been qualitatively studied in the youth-sport context. For instance, Holt et al. (2009) examined parenting styles and associated parenting practices during a whole season in youth soccer. Autonomy-supportive parents
were more likely to read their child’s moods (e.g., understand what the child wants and feels), engage in bi-directional open communication, demonstrated reciprocal influences between children and parents, and showed higher consistency between parental practices. In contrast, controlling parents engaged in controlling practices (e.g., forcing the child to train), were not able to read their child’s mood (e.g., do not understand what their child feels or wants), had closed unidirectional communication with their child (e.g. parents telling and explaining without considering their child’s input), and no reciprocal influences between parents and children. Holt et al. also encountered a third parenting style showing high involvement, presence of autonomy-support, and control. The authors defined this as a mixed parenting style, characterised by inconsistencies between parenting practices and across situations.

**Using parenting styles to understand parent-athlete relationships.** Parenting style accounts for the overall emotional climate that parents create, and it is within this climate that parent-athlete relationships exist. Thus, the very nature of parenting style research is to consider the broader context of parenting rather than the intricacies of parent-athlete relationships. This research has provided some important insights into sport parenting, notably, that the quality of parental support (such as being responsive to the children’s needs) and the generation of an understanding emotional climate can help explain why and how provided parental support could be individually and contextually perceived by athletes either as positive or negative (Knight & Holt, 2014). Further, the consistency of parenting styles across time and situations emerge as a potential factor that might impact the quality of parent-athlete relationships (Holt et al., 2009).

Overall, research on parenting styles and practices in youth sport align with and further inform the theme of *positivity* developed by Keegan et al. (2010) by showing that parent-athlete relationships characterised by autonomy-support and responsive support, along with parents that strive to understand their child are the most likely to lead to positive outcomes
for their children in sport. Nonetheless, one notable limitation of research on parenting styles in sport is that they have mostly considered the direct influence of parenting style on athletes’ outcomes with limited consideration of the interaction with their related parenting practices. This is important because parenting styles are considered as a context within which parenting practices are displayed and consequently alters associated outcomes (Darling & Steinberg, 2003). Research on parental influence has provided support for this suggestion, demonstrating that parents with a high degree of involvement in their children’s activities could be associated with either higher or lower levels of self-concept for children depending on categorisation of parents as either authoritative versus authoritarian (Lee et al., 2006).

**Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973, 1982) proposes that individuals are biologically predisposed to form selective bonds and enter in social interaction with proximal caring figures such as parents. From birth, this process of social interaction gradually develops in response to children’s attachment behaviours, such as seeking proximity or attracting attention with smiles or cries to gradually build an attachment relationship between the child and the caregiver. A secure attachment is built when an attachment figure (e.g., mother or father) reflects functions such as proximity-maintenance (i.e., a desire to be close to the attachment figure), safe-haven (i.e., the attachment figure is seen as protective from threats), and secure base (i.e., the attachment figure is considered as a base from where exploration can start; (Bowlby, 1988; Carr, 2013). The proximity maintenance with the caregiver is essential for the maintenance and restoration of safety; it includes the patterns of cognition, affect, and behaviour prompted from caregivers’ responsiveness and sensitivity to the innate child desire for proximity (Bowlby, 1973).

When the attachment bonds between a parent and a child are secure, the parent provides sensitivity, responsiveness, and availability to their children’s needs (Bowlby,
Repeated experiences of care and attachment during childhood and adolescence gradually develop a system of cognition, affect, and behaviour known as the internal working model (Carr, 2009a; Duchesne & Larose, 2007). A secure internal working model allows children to judge their self-worth and to assess the attachment figure as a source of comfort that is available in case of distress (Carr, 2009a; Duchesne & Larose, 2007). This secure attachment in turn promotes basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Carr, 2013; La Guardia et al., 2000).

In contrast, an insecure attachment is characterised by unresponsive care, inconsistent responses, or lack of availability from proximal caring figures (Bowlby, 1973). Insecure attachment can lead to differences in attachment behaviours known as anxious-ambivalent (i.e., the child demonstrate a strong desire for proximity even in non-distressing situation) or avoidant attachment (i.e., the child demonstrate little distress and display few attempts at maintaining contact in stressful situations) styles (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). An insecure attachment (avoidant and anxious-ambivalent) can result in an insecure internal working model such as the young person developing a negative representation of themselves and the world, and estimate that the attachment figure will reject them or provide inconsistent responses (Duchesne & Larose, 2007).

**Research examples in sport.** Attachment characteristics between parents and athletes have been studied by Felton and Jowett (2013) who examined how attachment security with parents, mediated by basic psychological need satisfaction, influenced athletes’ performance self-concept, and psychological and subjective well-being. Their results showed that insecure attachment styles were negatively related to basic need satisfaction with parents. These results support the idea that the quality of attachment relationships not only influence athletes’ motivation and performance, but also athlete’s well-being (Felton & Jowett, 2013). Subsequently, in a longitudinal study, Felton and Jowett (2017) assessed how changes in an
athlete’s perception of attachment characteristics could influence their basic psychological needs, performance self-concept, and well-being (i.e., self-esteem, negative affect, and vitality). The results show that increases in insecure attachment styles negatively predicted vitality and self-esteem, and positively predicted negative affect. Similarly, increases in insecure attachment styles predicted reduced psychological need satisfaction with parents.

Another study on attachment relationships in sport demonstrated that a secure attachment with parents could, in the long run, help athletes develop a secure internal working model (Carr, 2009b). This model, in turn, helped athletes consider their social relationships with, for instance, peers, as more available and positive compared to athletes who have a less secure internal working model (Carr, 2009a). Meanwhile, a further study assessed how parental social support (considered here as the “quantity” of the support) and attachment characteristics (considered here as the “quality” of the support) contributed to the construction of athletes’ self-esteem (Kang et al., 2015). The results showed that perceived parental social support and parental attachment had a positive direct effect on athletes’ self-esteem. But further analysis revealed that parental attachment fully mediated the relationship between perceived parental support and athletes’ self-esteem (Kang et al., 2015).

Using attachment theory to understand parent-athlete relationships. Securely attached relationships work like a cycle of exploration and retreat, with the provision of a secure base that encourages athletes to engage in opportunity, explore and develop. Providing a secure base includes parents supporting their child’s exploration and discoveries, and fostering their autonomy, but also being available, responsive, and providing assistance when necessary (Bowlby, 1988; Feeney, 2004). In sport, the provision of a secure base is of particular interest for athletes facing opportunities for positive development (e.g., being selected for a competition or playing at higher level).
Engaging in exploration, however, can subsequently lead to situations that young athletes cannot cope with, and thus, the provision of a safe haven is important to further provide comfort, nurturance, and reassurance when they retreat. A safe haven might also be sought to facilitate problem resolution, alleviate distress, and restore security (Bowlby, 1988; Feeney, 2004). Thus, within sport, the provision of a safe haven might also be important for young athletes facing failures, losses, or simply when they are tired or hungry after training. When restored and appeased, athletes will start exploring again and, through experience, will internalise that their caregiver is available and effective in providing comfort and reassurance (i.e., a safe haven) when necessary (Bowlby, 1988; Feeney, 2004).

Consequently, Bowlby’s attachment theory increases our understanding of parent-athlete relationships by explaining a cycle of exploration and retreat, and showing how, through their interactions with their parents, athletes may build an internal working model that will subsequently influence how they perceive themselves and others. Nonetheless, using attachment theory to understand parent-athlete relationships is not without challenges. This is because attachment relationships are influenced by experiences in early childhood with primary caregivers, but also continuously develop throughout the lifespan (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1988; Feeney, 2004; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; La Guardia et al., 2000). Thus, sufficiently considering all the potential influences from attachment relationships requires advanced research design such as longitudinal studies, hierarchical multilevel modelling, or network analysis (Dizdari & Seiler, 2020; Felton & Jowett, 2017; Lai & Carr, 2019).

**Moving the Field Forward**

There are numerous convergences between the aforementioned theories and models that may help to improve the understanding of parent-athlete relationships. Specifically, one consideration that may be particularly useful is an understanding of parental responsiveness.
Responsiveness. Responsiveness is a broad construct that describes how people in a relationship (e.g., parent and athlete) attend to and support each other’s needs and goals (Reis et al., 2004). It comprises three key components: understanding, which refers to comprehending the partner’s (e.g., athlete) core self (e.g., needs, desire, weaknesses); validation, which accounts for respect for or valuing the partner’s view of the self; and caring for, which is associated with expressing affection, warmth, and concern for the partner’s well-being (Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Gable, 2015). Importantly, Reis and Gable (2015) model considers that the relationship between the provided support and the related outcomes is mediated by the support recipient’s perception of the responsiveness of the support. Consequently, when support is responsively provided by the support provider (e.g., parent) and perceived as responsive by the support recipient (e.g., athlete), it contributes to the well-being of both individuals and their relationship (Reis & Gable, 2015). The positive influence of perceived responsiveness (i.e., being validated, understood, and cared for) is a central component in many modern relationship theories (Dooley et al., 2018; Selcuk et al., 2016).

For instance, illustrating the value of responsive support in the youth sport context, Clarke et al. (2016) explored the dyadic interaction between parents and young elite footballers. In this study, young players praised parents who valued and supported their progress and efforts, provided feedback to help them to adjust and tune up, and motivated them to persevere and continue pursuing their goals. Although Clarke et al. (2016) did not explicitly refer to responsiveness, their results align with that positive outcomes arose when players’ perceived their parents understand them as a person, care for them, and validate their person and choices, which are the three components of responsiveness (Reis & Gable, 2015). In another study, Stupica (2016) instructed parents to be either responsive and available (i.e., monitor their child’s activities turned to their child and respond appropriately as they would normally do) or unavailable and unresponsive (i.e., do not respond to any of their child’s
attempts to initiate interaction). The results showed that children ran faster when parents were available and responsive compared to when parents were unavailable and unresponsive. This clearly illustrates the importance of accounting for parental responsiveness when considering young athletes’ performances, as well as demonstrating that parent availability and responsiveness can be modified through experimental manipulation (Stupica, 2016).

We believe that the construct of responsiveness could help to link and integrate findings from across the aforementioned theories and research. For instance, responsiveness is a core component of securely attached relationships (Bowlby, 1988) and present in the bi-dimensional parenting style (Baumrind, 1991; Maccoby, 1992). Further, the idea of responsiveness can also be indirectly related to studies in youth sport that emphasise the importance of support quality, rather than quantity (Dorsch, 2017; Dorsch et al., 2016) and the development of an understanding emotional climate, deemed critical for optimal parental involvement in sport (Knight and Holt, 2014). However, despite its inclusion in relationship research outside of sport, as well as its potential to help explain previous study findings and link ideas across theories, responsiveness has yet to be fully integrated within parent-athlete relationship research. One way in which responsiveness may be explicitly considered within parent-athlete relationship research could be through Feeney and Collins’ (2015) thriving through relationships model.

Thriving Through Relationships Model. Developed based on their extensive work on romantic couples (Feeney, 2004, 2007; Feeney & Van Vleet, 2010), Feeney and Collins (2015) proposed the thriving through relationships model. This model primarily relies on attachment theory (building a safe haven and secure base support) (Bowlby, 1988), but also links with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and other motivation-related theories (Harter, 1978; Ntoumanis, 2001), and includes the construct of responsiveness (Reis & Gable, 2015) as a central component. Thus, this
model draws together many of the ideas that have been considered in relation to parent-athlete relationships, while providing two explicit pathways through which to examine parent-athlete relationship. Moreover, the emphasis upon thriving aligns with recent calls to enhance and understanding wellbeing in sport (Brown et al., 2018).

Feeney and Collins’ (2015) model proposes that proximal interactions between the support provider (i.e., a parent) and the support recipient (i.e., a child) produce various immediate and specific effects. Due to their continuing interactions, these immediate effects gradually accumulate through time and build long-term thriving. According to Feeney and Collins (2015), responsive relationships can help people thrive by promoting engagement in opportunities that enable them to enhance their positive well-being by broadening and building resources. Responsive support is provided through a constellation of support behaviours (e.g., emotional, esteem, informational or tangible support) that can be used depending on the needs of the recipients. The support behaviours needed to promote thriving are simple to enact including strategies such as communicating availability, listening, providing encouragement, not unnecessarily interfering, and communicating about life opportunities. However, the quality of these behaviours is also important. Specifically, aligned with Reis and Gabel’s (2015) construct of responsiveness, Feeney and Collins (2015) posit that it is not just whether support is provided but if it is perceived as responsive that determines the subsequent outcome.

According to Feeney and Collins (2015), responsive support can be beneficial both when individuals encounter life opportunities (e.g., an athlete being selected for a major competition) but also when they encounter life adversity (e.g., an athlete being injured). With regards to life opportunities, it is suggested that the responsive support provided by the support provider (e.g., a parent), combined (directly or indirectly) with the recipient’s (e.g., an athlete) perception of the responsiveness of the support can lead to various immediate
outcomes (e.g., perceived capability, or self-efficacy; Feeney, 2004, 2007). Over time, the immediate outcomes resulting from responsive interactions gradually accumulate and build long-term thriving (Tomlinson et al., 2016). Meanwhile, when individuals encounter adversity, the responsive support provided by the support provider (e.g., a parent), combined (directly or indirectly) with the recipient’s (e.g. an athlete) perception of the responsiveness of the support will also lead to immediate outcomes (e.g., reduced anxiety, or decrease in negative outcomes). In the long-term, these immediate outcomes will not only restore the support recipient’s well-being, but also lead to positive outcomes and thriving.

Using Thriving Through Relationships Model to Examine Parent-Athlete Relationships

Overall, Feeney and Collins’ (2015) model may be useful for understanding parent-athlete relationships because; (a) it accounts for the positive influences that responsive support can have in the context of life opportunities and during adversity; (b) it specifies the responsive support behaviours that promote optimal well-being (i.e., thriving) in such contexts; (c) it details pathways through which the quality and the responsiveness of interactions can lead to various immediate and specific psychosocial outcomes and; (d) the model depicts how the immediate and specific outcomes can accumulate over time and eventually help individuals to experience optimal well-being (Feeney & Collins, 2015).

Research focussing on specific interactions, accounting simultaneously for the provided and the perceived responsive support as detailed in the thriving through relationships model (Feeney & Collins, 2015) can help to address questions driven, for instance, by motivational theories, and clarify the mechanisms through which parents influence athletes’ motivation, emotions, perceived capability, self-esteem, self-worth, and anxiety (Jowett & Cramer, 2010; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006, 2009). Moreover, as parent-athlete interactions take place within specific locations, times, contexts, and within specific cultures, the thriving through
relationship model could also integrates perspectives from Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) PPCT model and system theory to consider the permeability between family and other sport influences (Dorsch et al., 2020; Hellstedt, 2005). Additionally, by building on the theme of positivity from motivational theories and parenting style, studies drawing on the thriving through relationships model could further highlight the pathway through which athletes’ general perception of the world and themselves may be related to the specific interactions that athletes continuously have with their parents (Felton & Jowett, 2017; Keegan et al., 2010, 2014; Knight & Holt, 2014). Finally, longitudinal studies including developmental considerations can also be carried out using this model because it accounts for the accumulation of immediate outcomes that eventually build to encourage long-term thriving and broader perceptions of social support availability. This idea aligns with, and can integrate, both Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) proximal processes of gradually more complex interactions, Harter’s (1978) idea of a gradual internalisation of the influences of significant others, and Bowlby’s (1973) internal working model. Feeney and Collins (2015) model can also be linked with recent developments assuming that thriving and well-being in sport are a platform for sustained high level performances (Brown et al., 2018).

**Conclusion**

Parent-athlete relationships are dyadic relationships that are central to athletes’ experiences in sport and well-being. The study of such relationships can be illuminated by focusing on their responsiveness (Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Gable, 2015). For doing so, a theoretical and integrative framework such as the thriving through relationships model (Feeney & Collins, 2015) can help researchers to purposefully address parent-athlete relationships. This model can help researchers to account for the responsiveness within parent-athlete relationships. This model integrates predictions and findings from various theories and models to understand parent-athletes relationships, and can move forward the
understanding of features of such relationships aiming to increase and develop inclusive, sustainable, and enjoyable participation for young athletes (Bergeron et al., 2015).
References


https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.44.4.709


https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.10.008


https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431691111004

Bergeron, M. F., Mountjoy, M., Armstrong, N., Chia, M., Côté, J., Emery, C. A.,
Faigenbaum, A., Hall, G., Kriemler, S., Léglise, M., Malina, R. M., Pensgaard, A. M.,
Sanchez, A., Soligard, T., Sundgot-Borgen, J., van Mechelen, W., Weissensteiner, J.
https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2015-094962

extpectancies and young adolescents’ perceived physical competence: A yearlong
https://doi.org/10.1177/027243102237189


Books.


Basic Books.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1974). Developmental research, public policy, and the ecology of

on human development*. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Brown, D. J., Arnold, R., Reid, T., & Roberts, G. (2018). A qualitative exploration of
https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2017.1354339


https://doi.org/10.4172/2375-4494.1000109


