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Item Type	Article (Version of Record)
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Full Citation	Tagliarini, Mattia and Thomas, Gavin (2022) Case study findings of parents' perceived behaviour from a category 5 male youth football academy. The Sport and Exercise Scientist, 72. pp. 12-32. ISSN 1754-3444
DOI/ISBN/ISSN	ISSN: 1754-3444
Journal/Publisher	The Sport and Exercise Scientist CASES
Rights/Publisher Set Statement	First published in The Sport and Exercise Scientist, #72 2022 [6 June 2022]. Published by the Chartered Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences - www.cases.org.uk Permission to post VoR provided via enquiries@cases.org.uk 04/06/26
License	n/a
Link	https://www.cases.org.uk/spage-resources-the_sport_and_exercise_scientist.html



Case study findings of parents' perceived behaviour from a category 5 male youth football academy

Mattia Tagliarini and Gavin Thomas discuss the supports and pressures parents can have on their child's athletic development and reflect on some findings from a male English football academy.

Introduction

There are more than 2 million people playing football in the UK, making it one of the most practiced sports. A large part of those 2 million is made of male youth footballers involved in the academy system, grassroots clubs, or school football. Academy football is the pinnacle of youth football. In England, after the introduction of the Elite Performance Plan (EPPP), a long-term strategy aimed to develop better homegrown players, there are 5 main types of football academies. Category 1 are the top and tend to be former, or current Premier League clubs. They receive millions of pounds in funding, and they have first-class facilities. Category 2 is somewhat like category 1 academies, and they are usually former or current teams competing in the Championship. Category 3 and 4 academies receive much less funding, and they usually share community facilities and have fewer coaches but have partnerships with schools and universities. Category 5 are non-league football academies from teams competing in the National League and usually former Football League teams, most of the time they are self-funded by the clubs, and they act as feeder-clubs for. Categories 1 and 2 academies, meaning that the best players from category 5 academies have a clear path to category 1 and 2 academies, and players released from those (1 & 2) academies will have the opportunity to join category 5 academies. In every academy, the development process of each player follows a path made of 3 phases. The foundation phase takes place between eight and eleven years old, where the focus is on learning to play the game by having fun in a safe environment. The youth development phase takes place between the age of twelve and the age of sixteen years old, where it starts to become competitive. Lastly, the professional development phase takes place from the age of seventeen until the age of twenty-one and/or twenty-three years old (depending on the academy set-up). The article will begin by briefly reviewing previous research surrounding parental support and pressure within youth sport, with a focus on football. We will then reflect on our findings from a category 5 youth football academy in the UK, with the emphasis on perceptions of parents' behaviours.

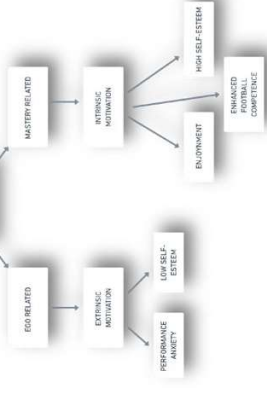
Parental Support

In many families, sport plays a pivotal role in parent-child relationships, interactions, and family time together. After visiting any playing field or gymnasium in the country, it is easy to see the impact that parents have on their children's sporting experience. Without parents' support and encouragement, children will not be able to participate in any kind of sport (Knight *et al.*, 2021). Parents invest a lot of time, money, and emotional support for their children to play football. The emotional support that parents provide on the side-lines, in the car on the way home, and at home after and/or during matches has the largest implications in how children perceive their athletic competence (Trahan, 2019). Parents are the most significant, influential, and easily accessible social support for children involved in youth sports (Burke *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, social/emotional support can be defined as an interaction between the support recipient experiencing a strain (child engages in challenging football academy) and the supporting donor, who provides support (parents). Social support is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct involving emotional (e.g., comfort after a defeat), instrumental (e.g., parents cleaning the team's jersey), and informational support (e.g., parents communicating with the coach and contributing to solving issues). Parents have the capacity and power to create a climate that is strongly affected by their attitudes and values (Figure 1), which are transmitted through their words and actions (Schwabel, Smith & Smoll, 2016). Furthermore, parents actively contribute to their children's process of acquisition of precious life skills through sport, such as leadership, goal setting, and emotional skills.

Parental Pressure

On the other hand, parents' behaviours can also bring negative outcomes. Recent studies have concluded that parental involvement may be a source of pressure among their children. Examples of negative parents' behaviours reported in the literature are overemphasizing winning, having unrealistic expectations, and criticizing their children (Burke *et al.*, 2021). Hence, it has been

Figure 1. Mastery vs Ego Related Standards as perceived by youth football academy players



established that the same parental conduct can lead to different outcomes with different children. That is because it is fundamental to recognize that not all parents and their children are the same. For this reason, it appears that rather than "good" or "bad" parental behaviour, it is more of a matter of which parental involvement matches their children's preferences (Knight *et al.*, 2021). In this regard, young athletes seem to favour parental participation made by praise and understanding. Furthermore, recent studies have underlined how parents tend to display positive behaviours (e.g., supportive, emotionally intelligent discussion) in the early years, while from the middle stage, negative and critical behaviours emerge (e.g., excessive pressure, overemphasis on winning). For these reasons, studying parental pressure in football academy players is warranted.

Reflections from a category 5 football academy

Preliminary evaluation our results indicate that the climate created by players' parents was heavily connected to mastery standard items. This means the environment perceived by the youth players

Table 1. Summary of supportive and unsupportive parental behaviour

Supportive Parental behaviour	Unsupportive Parental behaviour
Support the Coach	Argue with the coach, opposition parents and players
Let their child make decisions	Constantly shouts instruction
Encourages their child	Criticise their children
Let their child have fun	Over pressures their child
Praises their child and cheers for everyone	Compares their child to other players
Is a role model	Demonstrate negative behaviours
Respects officials and the opposition	Is abusive toward officials
Gives their child autonomy	Tell their child how to play
Wants their child to learn lessons from sport	Want their child to win at all costs

was characterized by supportive behaviours from their parents rather than unsupported (see Table 1). Indeed, we can arrive to the conclusion that the parents of the players created a positive environment by focusing on and reinforcing the importance of effort and personal improvements. In the long term, this kind of environment will eventually lead to their children's enhanced level of sports competence, self-esteem, enjoyment, and engagement in sport (Knight *et al.*, 2021). These parental behaviours could be

important as mastery standard environments contribute to lower levels of performance anxiety and increased self-esteem (Schwabel, Smith & Smoll, 2016). It is apparent that male youth football players on the verge of signing a professional contract perceived their parents to be more supportive parents rather than pressuring. It is well documented that supportive behaviour, such as focusing on individual improvement and effort, providing tangible support (e.g., time), and the provision of praise is related to positive psychosocial outcomes, such as enhanced self-esteem, sport competence and better attitude towards hard work (Knight *et al.*, 2021). When discussing parental behaviour and optimal parenting style in youth sports it is not possible to generalize because not all parents and their children are the same.

Conclusion and recommendations

Our reflections from within this category 5 football academy reinforce the idea that positive parental behaviour in the form of praise, support, understanding, and valuing effort more than success is positively related to athletes' enjoyment, engagement in sport, and development of important life skills. From the first author experience, youth academy clubs do not sufficiently engage with parents. We recommend clubs and organisations can do more to acknowledge the importance of parents in youth football, and to engage with them on a regular basis. Such engagement is of fundamental importance to ensure that all the stakeholders (club, parents, coaches, and children) are on the same page regarding the child's development within the given sport as well as expectations of each other. Furthermore, parents should aim to establish a positive and supportive environment where parental communication consists of acknowledging their children's efforts. This kind of behaviour will ultimately lead to enhancing self-esteem and autonomy in youth athletes enrolled on an academy programme. Many football associations are working closely with clubs and parents to create a positive environment (mastery related) where any child, regardless of skill level, can grow and thrive within football. The Scottish FA is actively acknowledging the importance that parents have in creating opportunities, encouraging, and supporting the right to participate and to have fun in youth football. Future research projects should aim to recruit both female and male participants in greater numbers from different professional football academies throughout the UK. ■



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