

Types of Parental Support Systems in Youth Sports: a Literature Review and Future Perspectives

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Abstract

The participation of youth in sports is pivotal for their holistic development, influencing physical health, mental well-being, and social skills. Parents play an indispensable role in this process by providing the necessary financial resources and emotional backing. Their involvement ensures that young people could engage in sports. The aim of the research is to comparatively analyse different parental support systems in youth sport and to establish aims of future research. Research methods: analysis of scientific articles (electronic scientific databases Web of Science Core Collection, Scopus), search keywords – “sport*” OR “youth-sport*” OR “young athlete*” AND “support*” OR “psychological need*” AND “family *” OR “parent*” OR “father*” OR “mother*”. The period covered by the research is from 1990 to 2022 and abstracts, conference proceedings, dissertations, book chapters, and articles published in non-peer-reviewed journals were excluded from the search. Main results of the research: the role of parents is considered very important in the athletic development of children and youth, providing emotional, financial, and social support. The research demonstrates that inadequate support from the state/community, coaches and society can hamper parents’ ability to effectively support their children and youth in sports.

Keywords: parental support, youth sport, parental support system

Introduction

The importance of sport in the lives of youth is indisputable, and it provides a significant contribution to their psychosocial development. The role of parents in this process is crucial, as the importance of both financial and emotional support is often emphasized,

since it ensures that young people have the opportunity to participate in sports activities and develop their physical abilities (Kromerova, 2017; Dorsch et al., 2017; Dorsch et al., 2016; Coakley, 2006). Parental support has been defined as shaping their children's (Kovács et al., 2022) sports careers. When supporting their child-athlete, parents typically offer six distinct forms of assistance: emotional support, financial assistance, organizational aid, practical help, reflective guidance, and technical expertise (McIlmoyle et al., 2024). Research, such as the analysis by Kolayış, Sari and Çelik (2017), highlight the motivational climate (Harwood et al., 2019; Dweck, 1986; Gagné, 2003) created by parents as an essential factor contributing to the development of youth's self-determined motivation in sport.

According to the Achievement Goal Theory (AGT) and the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), parental behaviour and the influence of the created microclimate on the athletic growth of youth are spotlighted as fundamentally important. AGT emphasizes that having significant persons in young people's lives can influence their needs, expectations, and rewards, fostering a mastery orientation and promoting pro-social behaviour and moral judgement (Kromerova, 2017). In turn, SDT focuses on natural, innate psychological needs – relatedness, competence and autonomy – which, when satisfied, contribute to turning extrinsic motivation into intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Kromerova, 2017).

Furthermore, research also point out the importance of a parent-initiated motivational climate, finding that the perceived learning and enjoyment climate, as well as the worry-conducive climate and the success-without-effort climate that youth perceive from both parents are significantly related to their level of self-determined motivation (Kolayış et al., 2017). It is also emphasized that parental participation and support not only provide youth with material and practical help, but also emotional and psychological support, which is fundamentally important to promote youth involvement in sports and encourage their motivation.

Based on AGT and SDT, it is clear that the motivational climate and support created by parents are crucial in building and maintaining young people's self-determined motivation in sports. The positive involvement of parents, which promotes mastery orientation and supports autonomy, can significantly influence the psychosocial well-being of youth, and encourage a positive attitude towards sports. Future research would be valuable in deepening the understanding of optimal forms of parental involvement that support youth engagement and development through sport.

Parental support in youth sports can be conceptualized using a variety of psychological theories, but an overarching understanding is often drawn from the Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). This theoretical framework provides a nuanced view of how parental support functions within the wider context of child development in sport. This theory is applied as follows:

Parental support in youth sports refers to parental behaviours and actions that promote children's development, enjoyment, and participation in sports activities. This support can be emotional, informational, logistical, or tangible, and it plays a significant role in influencing a child's sporting experience and development.

Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) believes that human development is influenced by different types of environmental systems that interact with each other. These systems range

from the immediate surroundings such as family and school (a microsystem) to the wider societal and cultural context (a macrosystem). Application of parental support in youth sports:

The microsystem: This level includes the immediate environments with which the child interacts, for example, home and sports teams. Parental support in this context includes direct participation in children's sports activities by providing transport, attending competitions and games, providing support and feedback on performance.

The mesosystem: Interactions between various microsystems, for instance, communication between parents and coaches, or between parents and sports organizations. An effective parental support in these environments ensures a child's athletic experience by guaranteeing consistency and positive support across contexts.

The exosystem: Includes settings that indirectly affect a child, for example, parents' workplaces or the sports policy of the community. Parental support here may include advocating for youth sports programmes or balancing work responsibilities to encourage children's participation in sport.

The macrosystem: The wider cultural, societal, and economic influences that shape attitudes and ideologies regarding sports. Parental support at this level can include challenging stereotypes, promoting positive sport values, and supporting inclusive and equal access to sport for all children.

The role of parental support: it promotes participation and enjoyment, reduces competitive anxiety, and helps children cope with success and failure in sport (Bonavolontà et al., 2021). It also provides necessary resources, for example, equipment and opportunities to participate in sports activities. Furthermore, it incorporates guiding children in their athletic development, including skill advancement, sportsmanship awareness, and personal growth.

When viewed through the lens of the Ecological Systems Theory (1979), the parental support in youth sports is a multifaceted and dynamic process that includes various levels of influence, from direct family interactions to broader societal norms. Effective parental support is characterized by active, positive involvement in children's sport experiences, as well as being adapted to the child's needs, and aware of the wider ecological context in which these sporting activities take place. This comprehensive approach ensures that children get the most out of their participation in sport, promoting their physical, psychological, and social development. The purpose of this research is to comparatively analyze different parental support systems in youth sport and to establish aims of future research.

Materials and methods

The literature search was performed in four internationally recognized databases: Web of Science, Scopus. These databases have gained academic credibility and have been used in previous systematic reviews of sport and sport psychology. The literature search was conducted in 2023 and 2024. Abstracts, conference proceedings, dissertations, book chapters, and articles published in non-peer-reviewed journals were excluded from the search. The period covered by the research is from 1990 to 2022. The search level for each database included the title, abstract, and keywords.

The following combination of keywords and Boolean operators was formulated: “sport*” OR “youth-sport*” OR “young athlete*” AND “support*” OR “psychological need*” AND “family*” OR “parent*” OR “father*” OR “mother*”.

Inclusion/exclusion criteria

The question raised in this study is related to the forms/types of parental involvement in youth sports. Therefore, the eligibility criteria include the following: (a) the type of parental support in youth sports (yes/no b) sports teams; c) the study should use quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods (not reviews) and should be able to provide information on the form/type of parental involvement. The subjects of this review are young athletes, while the included studies should mainly involve adolescent athletes (aged 10–16) to highlight the involvement of parents in young athletes’ adolescence.

Upon obtaining literature during the initial search, duplicates were identified, and selection was made based on titles and abstracts. Next, the full texts of the remaining studies were retrieved and assessed for eligibility. The initial search yielded 48507 published articles, and 4156 articles remained after duplicates were removed. Of the remaining 4156 works 4146 were further excluded due to unavailability of full text. As a result, 10 articles were included in this review.

Results

This study of literature review analysed various types of parental support provided to children and youth involved in sports. The types of support were classified into three main groups: emotional, financial, and social. Each category is detailed below with specific examples from the literature review (see Table 1).

The emotional support of parents is essential to promote a positive sports experience for children and youth. This includes encouragement, moral support, and psychological help. For example, Mwanga et al. (2017) stressed that parents provide encouragement and moral support to Kenyan athletes, thus significantly influencing their performance. Similarly, Knight et al. (2015) highlighted the need to manage pressure and provide positive emotional support in order to prevent burnout in children and youth sports. In the reviewed studies, emotional support was consistently recognized as an important factor in promoting children and youth’s motivation and involvement in sport.

Although less mentioned, financial support still plays a vital role in providing children and young people with the opportunity to participate in sports. This support includes covering expenses for sports equipment, training, and competitions. For instance, Dunn et al. (2016) discussed how a higher financial investment from the family in children and youth sport may increase the perceived parental pressure, which could reduce children and youth’s enjoyment and commitment. Furthermore, in the study by Mwanga et al. (2017), parents provided financial support for essential needs such as equipment and training, highlighting the financial challenges faced by families in supporting young athletes.

Table 1

Content of the Parental Support					
Authors/ Year	Title	Main conclusion	Emotional Support	Financial Support	Social Support
Mwanga et al., (2017)	Family and its Influence on Kenyan Athletes' Performance: The Role of Social Environment	Parental love, involvement, and participation in sports play a critical role in introducing children to and fostering their engagement in sports, often leading them to follow similar career trajectories. Parents can sometimes play a role in the decline and eventual exit of athletes from their sports careers.	Parents provide encouragement, moral, spiritual support, and psychological support.	Parents provide financial support for equipment, training, food, and rent.	Parents act as role models, instill discipline, and provide community support.
DiSanti et al., (2021)	Exploring Parent-Athlete Dyads' Perceptions of Sports Specialization and Sport Experiences	Parents and athletes generally possess similar attitudes towards sport specialization; athletes may perceive their sport experience as more specialized and demanding than parents.	Parents offer psychological support and encouragement.	Not explicitly mentioned.	Parents understand athletes' experiences and maintain open communication.
Harwood and Knight, (2015)	Parenting in Youth Sport: A Position Paper on Parenting Expertise	Effective parental involvement enhances children's sport experience; balancing support and pressure is crucial.	Parents provide emotional feedback, warmth, and responsiveness.	High financial and time demands placed on parents.	Parents support at competitions and maintain high-quality parent-child relationships.
Knight et al., (2017).	Parenting in Sport	Parental involvement in sports is a complex dynamic, with diverse consequences, varied motivations for different types of participation, and the necessity for multifaceted strategies to provide adequate support. Parental support is vital but must be balanced to avoid inducing stress and burnout.	Parents manage pressure and provide positive emotional support.	There is a connection between the financial investment parents put into their children's sports and the resulting feelings of pressure, enjoyment, and commitment to the sport.	Sport parenting is a complex social experience (for example a need to protect their children from harm), influenced by a whole host of factors and variables.

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Table 1 (continued)

Authors/ Year	Title	Main conclusion	Emotional Support	Financial Support	Social Support
Ullrich-French and Smith, (2006)	Perceptions of Relationships with Parents and Peers in Youth Sport: Independent and Combined Prediction of Motivational Outcomes	Parents significantly influence children's motivation and involvement in sports.	Parents provide motivation and emotional support.	Not explicitly mentioned.	Parents and peers offer social integration and enhance self-worth.
Holt et al., (2008)	Parental involvement in competitive youth sport settings	Parental involvement varies and is influenced by multiple factors including individual and environmental influences.	Parents offer emotional involvement and encouragement.	Not explicitly mentioned.	Parental involvement at competitions and various environmental influences.
Gould et al., (2002)	Psychological Characteristics and Their Development in Olympic Champions.	Parental support is crucial for developing psychological characteristics essential for Olympic success.	Parents help manage expectations and provide psychological support.	Not explicitly mentioned.	Family provides social and emotional support, helping develop psychological traits.
Dunn et al., (2016)	The Impact of Family Financial Investment on Perceived Parent Pressure and Child Enjoyment and Commitment in Organized Youth Sport	Higher family financial investment in sports can increase perceived parental pressure, which may reduce children's enjoyment and commitment to sports.	Parents provide encouragement despite high financial investments.	High financial investment in youth sports, covering costs such as equipment and training.	Community and peer support helps manage stress and expectations from financial investments.
Turman, (2007)	Parental Sport Involvement: Parental Influence to Encourage Young Athlete Continued Sport Participation	Parental support and pressure play significant roles in youth sport participation; the type and amount of support or pressure can influence children's enjoyment, anxiety, and retention in sports.	Mothers' support increases athlete enjoyment more than fathers' support.	Not explicitly mentioned.	Parental involvement fosters children's athletic involvement; both male and female parents contribute to children's sport participation.
Côté, (1999)	The Influence of the Family in the Development of Talent in Sport	Family support through different stages is essential for talent development.	Parents support athletes through different stages of development.	Parents make a financial and time commitment to their child athlete.	Family support through different developmental stages.

Social support includes parental participation in competitions, promotion of a sense of belonging, and improvement of the social integration of athletes. Holt et al. (2008) noted that parental participation in competitions and other sporting events has a positive effect on children and youth's sport experience. In addition, Côté (1999) emphasized the importance of family support at different stages of talent development. This social support not only contributes to the development of psychological characteristics, but also strengthens the relationship between parents and children, contributing to their overall well-being and success.

Discussion

All authors in this research as in similar research (Dunn & Tamminen, 2022; Hurtel & Lacassagne, 2011; Rodis, 2013; Rowland, 2007; Taylor & Collins, 2015) agree on the critical role of emotional support provided by parents in fostering athletes' motivation, resilience, and performance: Mwanga et al. (2017) emphasize encouragement and psychological support, Harwood and Knight (2015) highlight warmth and responsiveness, Gould et al. (2002) and Ullrich-French and Smith (2006) stress emotional support as essential for motivational and psychological outcomes. Knight et al. (2017) and Dunn et al. (2016) examine the negative consequences of excessive involvement, such as stress or burnout. In contrast, studies like Mwanga et al. (2017) concentrate more on positive contributions without deeper criticism. Parental support in sports is multifaceted, with overlapping yet distinct focus areas across studies. Understanding and optimizing parental support systems is essential for fostering positive youth sports experiences and development. This analysis highlights the multifaceted nature of parental involvement in youth sports and promotes areas for further exploration to enhance athlete experiences and outcomes: examine how cultural and socio-economic factors influence parental roles in youth sports across the team and individual sports; find out strategies for balancing support and avoiding burnout (parent-education programs); investigate long-term impacts of parental involvement at different athletes developmental stages; explore the influence of technology on parent-athlete interactions in parental support.

Conclusions

A summary of key findings from the articles on parental support in youth sport:

1. The role of parents is considered very important in the athletic development of children and youth, providing emotional, financial, and social support.
2. The emotional support provided by parents acts as motivation and encouragement, which significantly affects the sport experience and achievements of children and youth.
3. Parents invest significant financial resources in children and youth sport activities by paying for training, equipment, and competitions.
4. Social support, such as parents' participation in competitions, provides transport and creates a positive environment for the development of children and youth.

Main issues and limitations:

1. Excessive parental pressure can cause stress, reduce children and youth's enjoyment of sports, and contribute to their burnout.
2. Parents feel the financial burden associated with children and youth sports activities, which can put a lot of pressure on both parents and children/youth.
3. Inadequate support from the state/community, coaches and society can hamper parents' ability to effectively support their children and youth in sports.

Aims and objectives of future research:

1. To investigate what is the optimal level of parental support to promote positive sport experiences and achievements of children and youth without excessive stress and pressure.
2. To explore and improve the state/community/club and coaching support systems in order to promote a positive sport environment for children and youth and ease the burden on parents.
3. To conduct an empirical study and analyse the effectiveness and impact of different types of parental support on children and youth's athletic development and emotional well-being.
4. To develop and distribute educational materials for parents on effective support without excessive pressure and stress in order to promote a positive attitude of children and youth towards sports.
5. To promote cooperation and communication between parents and coaches to ensure coordinated and effective support for children and youth in sports.

These aims and objectives will help to create a more balanced and supportive environment for the development of children and youth sports, ensuring that they get the most out of sports activities without undue pressure and stress.

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