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# The Role of Sport in the Development of Parent-Child Relationships

Olivier Y. Rouquette<sup>1,2</sup>, Rachael A. Newport<sup>1</sup>  
and Camilla J. Knight<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Swansea University

<sup>2</sup>Université Grenoble Alpes – Laboratoire Sport et Environnement Social (SENS)

Olivier Rouquette, Swansea University Bay Campus, Engineering East, Crymlyn Burrows, Swansea, SA3 8EN  
E-mail: 919267@swansea.ac.uk

Sport plays an important role in the lives of children and adolescents, and can have a profound effect on family life (Côté, 1999). For instance, parents and children often spend large amounts of time together traveling to and from training, attending competitions, and discussing performances (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Knight, Little, Harwood, & Goodger, 2016). As a result of spending such time together and sharing these activities, it is likely that sport impacts on the parent-child relationship (cf. Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). The aim of this paper is to examine how sport may influence the development of parent-child relationships, considering both the positive and negative consequences.

## The Parent-child Relationship

In a parent-child relationship, the parent and the child can be considered not only at an individual level but also as a dyadic interaction (Kenny, 1996). Within this dyad, the parent influence, the child influence, and the unique parent-child interaction produce the parent-child relationship (Cook & Kenny, 2005). The development of the parent-child relationship can be understood through attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1982, 1973, 1984). Attachment theory assumes that newborns are biologically predisposed to enter into social interaction and form selective bonds with their proximal caring figures (e.g., parents). This process of interaction gradually develops in response to children's attachment behaviors to build an attachment relationship (Bowlby, 1982). Children's attachment behaviors (such as seeking proximity or attracting the caregiver's attention with smiles or cries) are especially triggered when the child is tired, hungry, separated from the attachment figure, or confronted with an environmental novelty/strangeness (Bowlby, 1982). Such attachment behaviors are more pronounced and easily triggered during infancy, however; and they can be present whenever adolescents and adults are anxious or under stress (Bowlby, 1988).

When the attachment figure displays functions such as proximity-maintenance (a desire to be close to the attachment

figure), safe-haven (the attachment figure is seen as protective from threats), and secure base (the attachment figure is considered as a base from where exploration can start) in response to a child's attachment behaviors, a secure attachment is gradually developed (Bowlby, 1988). Specifically, a secure attachment is provided when the attachment figure provides sensitivity, availability, and responsiveness to the child. This secure attachment allows the child to judge their self-worth and assess the attachment figure as a source of comfort that is available in situations of distress (Bowlby, 1988). Children with a secure attachment are more prone to develop a positive model of the self and others, to explore and investigate new environments, experiment with new opportunities without fear of failure, and develop mastery-oriented goals (Bowlby, 1988; Carr, 2009, 2011; Duchesne & Larose, 2007). Conversely, when the attachment figure is unresponsive or inconsistent in meeting the child's needs, a child is more prone to develop a negative representation of the self and others, withdraw from or avoid exploring new environments, and have a fear of failing (Bowlby, 1973; Duchesne & Larose, 2007).

## The Parent-child Relationship in Sport

Sport participation provides children with numerous opportunities to develop themselves, in addition to discovering new places and environments. It allows youth athletes to experience tiredness and fatigue, to be hungry or thirsty, and to experiment with a large array of emotions and affects. As such, sport participation provides multiple opportunities to trigger attachment behaviors from youth athletes (Carr, 2009, 2011) and influence the relationship that develops between parents and children.

Throughout involvement in sport, particularly until around the ages of 14-15 years, parents have the largest influence on youth athletes' lives (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). However, the ways in which parents are involved, and the influence they have, will change over time (Côté, 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002). For instance, when children first start playing sport, parents' main role is providing transportation and opportunities for engagement (Côté, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). The interactions between parents and children are generally positive, with fun being the main focus (Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). As children progress, parents usually increase their interest, time, and financial commitment to their child's sport participation (e.g., Knight & Holt, 2014; Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010) and the importance of sport increases for both parents and athletes (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). As the importance of sport increases, conflict or turbulence can arise in the parent-child relationship (Lauer

et al., 2010), particularly as both parents and children encounter more stressors (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b; Tamminen & Holt, 2012). Finally, as children invest in a chosen sport and progress to more elite levels, the coach often takes over much of the parental role. This shift in roles can be challenging for parents, particularly as they often remain their child's main source of emotional and financial support (Côté, 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002).

The changing roles, demands, and responsibilities parents experience as their children progress in sport, can have varying impacts on the relationship they develop with their child (Lauer et al., 2010). For instance, some parents and children can successfully navigate the demands associated with elite sport development and benefit from a smooth and healthy relationship. These smooth parent-child relationships are developed in well-adjusted and supportive mastery-oriented environments in which sport is kept in perspective, athletes are provided unconditional love, and parents and children engage in open and bi-directional communication (Lauer et al., 2010). For others, involvement in sport can result in a more turbulent relationship. For example, children may experience parental pressure when parents only intend to show love and support, or when sport becomes more important than other aspects of family life. Such pressure can subsequently lead to a challenging relationship between parents and children (Lauer et al., 2010).

There are likely many explanations for why some parent-child relationships develop smoothly through sport and others are more challenging. One explanation is the stress that parents can experience when supporting their children in sport (Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017; Knight, Holt, & Tamminen, 2009). Parents recalled a range of stressors associated with children's sporting involvement, such as organizational issues (e.g., finance, time, coaching, and the organizing body), competitive demands (e.g., behaviors, performance, and morality), and developmental considerations (e.g., educational issues, transitions, and future decisions) (Harwood & Knight, 2009a). If parents are unable to effectively manage such stressors it may result in parents' engaging in pressuring or punitive behaviors creating conflict between the parents and child, which could subsequently damage the relationship between parent and child (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009; Knight et al., 2009).

However, as Lauer and colleagues (2010) noted, sport participation does not always result in negative parent-child relationships. In fact, sport participation can be advantageous for the parent-child relationship by helping to bring the family together, and can contribute towards increasing the closeness of the relationship (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Clarke, Harwood, & Cushion, 2016). For fathers, sport provides the opportunity to be involved with the family and nurture the relationship with their child without challenging their dominant gender identity (Coakley, 2006). Sport can also help mothers to feel closer to their children (Clarke et al., 2016). Sport participation can provide parents and youth athletes the opportunity to engage in bi-directional and open communication (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009; Knight & Holt, 2014).

For instance, parents in a study of youth gymnastics reported benefits from sport such as pride, enjoyment, and feeling good about their child's achievement. In addition, they perceived that parenting was made easier because

sport contributed to children being more self-regulated and goal oriented (Weiss & Hayashi, 1995). Similarly, children have indicated that involvement in sport improves their relationship with their parents (Dorsch et al., 2009; Knight & Holt, 2014; Weiss & Hayashi, 1995). Youth gymnasts have averred that they value their parents' interest in their sport and the encouragement the parents provide (Weiss & Hayashi, 1995). In comparison, youth swimmers have explained that swimming provides an opportunity to develop and strengthen a "special" relationship with their parents (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). The strengthening of relationships likely arises because parents and children spend time together on the road traveling to competitions and consistently share the emotional highs and lows associated with competition (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Clarke et al., 2016; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009).

Considering the aforementioned studies, it appears that sport can positively impact on the parent-child relationship when parents provide a secure attachment such as demonstrating sensitivity, availability, and responsiveness. This suggestion is, to some degree, supported by data from a recent study of 1,348 adolescents, which showed that those who participated in competitive sport scored significantly higher on parent attachment than non-athletes. Higher scores were recorded in trust and communication, but also alienation from their parents (Sukys, Lisinkiene, & Tilidienne, 2015). Despite a low explained variance ( $\Delta r^2 = 0.5-0.13$ ), this study confirms that sport involvement could be a factor relating to the quality of the parent-athlete relationship. Furthermore, a longitudinal study among US adolescents showed that when youth athletes perceive their parents to care about them, are satisfied with the communication, and have a strong relationship it positively impacts on their sport participation in young adulthood (Lee, Park, & Yoo, 2016). Together these studies suggest that sport participation can influence the parent-child attachment, communication, and relationship.

## Conclusion

In sum, numerous studies from a variety of theoretical backgrounds have illustrated that sport participation can have an impact on the parent-child relationship. The parent-child relationship is part of a developmental process, with multiple changes and transitions that occur over time and require continuous adaptations (Côté, 1999; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Sport participation can negatively impact the parent-athlete relationship (Harwood & Knight, 2009a; Knight et al., 2009; Lauer et al., 2010), but sport participation can also offer an opportunity to develop and strengthen the parent-athlete relationship. For example, when parents are sensitive, available, and responsive, and strive to communicate, understand, care and value their child there is great potential for sport to enhance the relationship children have with parents (e.g., Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Clarke et al., 2016; Coakley, 2006; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Lee et al., 2016; Sukys et al., 2015; Weiss & Hayashi, 1995). Attachment theory appears to be a useful lens through which these studies can be interpreted and integrated, and future research in this area may help to develop a better understanding of how sport participation influences the parent-child relationship.



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