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

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## 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

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

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

42 Unfortunately, within current sport psychology research, the parent-athlete relationship  
43 is often not defined, which can make it difficult to integrate outcomes and find convergences  
44 between studies. Based on the actor-partner interdependence model, we define a parent-  
45 athlete relationship as an interdependent dyadic relationship that integrates the influences of  
46 the athlete (i.e., actor effect), the influences of the parent (i.e., partner effect), and a unique

47 interaction that is created between them (Kenny & Kashy, 2013). Parents and athletes are  
48 distinguishable members of dyads because one member of the dyad (e.g., the parent) cannot  
49 be replaced with the other (e.g., the athlete), and because their role processes and outcomes  
50 are different (Kenny & Kashy, 2013). Consequently, the parent and the athlete are considered  
51 to be interdependent, and measurement of their combined influence should be considered  
52 within research. Drawing on this definition of parent-athlete relationships, the purpose of this  
53 review is to critically examine theory and research pertaining to parent-athlete relationships  
54 in youth sport and provide suggestions regarding how to move this area of research forwards.

55 To address this purpose, review papers (i.e., meta-analysis, citation networks, position  
56 papers, narrative reviews etc) on parental involvement/parent-athlete relationships were  
57 identified through keyword and abstract search using the terms sport or athletic and words  
58 relating to parenting, such as parent, family, mother, father, parent-child, parent-athlete in  
59 Scopus and PsychInfo. The search, limited to papers in peer reviewed journals written in  
60 English, returned 262 articles in Scopus and 362 articles in PsychInfo. All article titles and  
61 abstract were reviewed, and unrelated articles were discarded, leaving 40 articles in Scopus,  
62 and 27 in Psychinfo. From these papers, we identified the theories and models that had been  
63 used to study or frame studies pertaining to parent-athlete relationships. These theories/  
64 models were: family system theory (Bowen, 1993; Minuchin, 1974); the bioecological model  
65 (Bronfenbrenner, 2005); motivational theories such as competence motivation theory (Harter,  
66 1978), expectancy-value theory (Eccles et al., 1983), self-determination theory (Ryan &  
67 Deci, 2017), and achievement goal theory (Nicholls, 1984); parenting styles (Baumrind,  
68 1971a), and; attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973, 1982, 1984, 1988). Subsequently, exemplar  
69 papers from each theory were purposefully chosen to enable a critical review of how the  
70 theory has facilitated understanding of parent-athlete relationships in youth sport, while also  
71 enabling the identification of gaps and commonalities across the theories and research.

## 72 **Family System Theory**

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

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

94 Hellstedt (1987) also incorporated triangulation, detailing specific strategies coaches  
95 should use to work with parents and athletes based on the types of interpersonal involvement  
96 in their relationship (Hellstedt, 1987). For instance, Hellstedt (1987) proposed that with

97 overinvolved parents, coaches should avoid open conflict and maintain a working alliance  
98 with parents in order to stay involved in the parent/athlete/coach triangle. With under-  
99 involved parents, Hellstedt (1987) proposed that coaches would benefit from engaging  
100 parents in meetings or inviting them to competitions to increase the involvement of parents  
101 within the coach-athlete relationship.

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

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

121 some parents may be highly involved in ways that work for their child and positively impact  
122 on their child's sporting development (Holt et al., 2009; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005).

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

#### 134 **Bioecological Model**

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

142 The microsystem includes the direct and face-to-face interaction of the developing  
143 person with their immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). It is within the  
144 microsystem (e.g., family) that the proximal processes (i.e., continuous form of interactions  
145 between parents and athletes) take place to produce and sustain development. The



146 mesosystem accounts for the links and processes between two or more settings containing the  
147 evolving human (e.g., the relations between home and the sports club). The exosystems  
148 comprises the links and processes between two or more settings, at least one of which does  
149 not contain the evolving human (e.g., relations between the sports club and the federation).  
150 Finally, the macrosystem is the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystem  
151 characteristics (e.g., culture, material resources, belief system), and the chronosystem refers  
152 to the changes and consistencies over time in the characteristics of the person and in the  
153 environment in which that person lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

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

163 **Examples of research in sport.** Recognising that parents and athletes are influenced  
164 by various relational, personal, and sport-specific factors, numerous studies have drawn on  
165 the bioecological model, specifically the PPCT configuration (Dorsch et al., 2015, 2016; Holt  
166 et al., 2008). Dorsch and colleagues (2015) followed four families during the first fifteen  
167 months of their child's sport participation to understand the processes of parents'  
168 socialisation into youth sport. Drawing on the PPCT model, Dorsch et al. (2015) documented  
169 the increasingly complex interactions that parents experience in youth sport. For instance,  
170 involvement in sport provided opportunities for parent and children to spend quality time

171 together and share experiences, which in turn positively influenced the parent-athlete  
172 relationship. Nevertheless, in line with other research (Knight & Holt, 2013), the authors  
173 highlighted the need to further examine the processes that underscore the formation and  
174 maintenance of parent-child relationships in youth sport.

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

190 **Using the bioecological model to understand parent-athlete relationships.** A core  
191 feature of the PPCT model is that the persons are at its centre, with a specific focus on the  
192 proximal and developmental processes influencing the persons (Darling, 2007). Studies using  
193 the PPCT model can account for the proximal processes at stake within parent-athlete  
194 relationships, and show how they are influenced both by the context and the developing  
195 individuals (Darling, 2007; Tudge et al., 2009). Thus, the PPCT model enhances our

196 understanding of the processes within parent-athlete relationships because it ensures that they  
197 are considered at various levels of understanding such as the person, the context (i.e., sport  
198 clubs, parent job, social and cultural ideologies), and their development over time.

199 To date, Bronfenbrenner's (2005) PPCT model has been mostly used to understand the  
200 microsystems within parent-athlete relationships with less consideration for the contextual  
201 influences of the meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (Harwood et al., 2019). One of the reasons  
202 for this restricted use is that due to its complexity, it can be challenging to effectively utilise  
203 or consider all levels of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) PPCT model in research (Tudge et al.,  
204 2009). Nevertheless, available research provides evidence that parents' attitudes and  
205 behaviours are influenced by specific circumstances within the microsystems as well the  
206 wider sporting and social context (Holt et al., 2008).

207 Recently, however, it has been suggested that greater consideration of factors within the  
208 macrosystem would be beneficial within studies of parental involvement (Harwood et al.,  
209 2019). In this direction, Dorsch et al. (2020) developed a heuristic model aimed at facilitating  
210 an integrated understanding of the youth sport system. This model provides a useful means  
211 through which to consider how the specifics of different sport environments may influence  
212 the processes within the parent-athlete relationship (Dorsch et al., 2020). Nevertheless,  
213 further research drawing on the PPCT model examining the different environments and  
214 subsequent responses across individuals is required. Particularly, an examination of the  
215 resources available within and across environments is needed because, the greatest effects of  
216 promotive processes are expected in environments with greater resources and among  
217 individuals with the ability to take advantage of those resources.(Darling, 2007).

218 Overall, studies using the PPCT framework show that sport can be a context that helps  
219 to develop the relationships through proximal process interactions. The PPCT model

220 facilitates insights into the complex and bi-directional interactions that take place between  
221 parents and their children in the context of organised youth sport.

## 222 **Motivational Theories**

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

234 **Competence motivation theory.** Harter's competence motivation theory suggests that  
235 children who receive continuous feedback from significant others (e.g., parents) for their  
236 attempts and progress in an achievement domain (e.g., sport) will gradually internalise a self-  
237 reward system, and build their self-perception of competence in this domain (Harter, 1978,  
238 1981). Subsequently, children who perceive themselves as competent and having control in a  
239 particular domain (i.e., sport) will be more intrinsically motivated to pursue optimal  
240 challenges (Harter, 1978, 1981). In sum, Harter's competence motivation theory proposes  
241 that parents, through their continuous interactions with their child, can have a significant  
242 influence on athletes' perception of competence, intrinsic motivation, and persistence.

243 **Expectancy-value theory.** Expectancy-value theory proposes that achievement-related  
244 choices, performance, and persistence are directly influenced by expectations of success and

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

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

268 **Achievement goal theory.** Achievement goal theory (AGT; Nicholls, 1984, 1989)  
269 proposes that in achievement situations (e.g., sport) individuals are motivated to demonstrate

270 their competences or to avoid demonstrating lack of competence. AGT primarily  
271 distinguishes between; task/mastery goals, when individuals seek to demonstrate their  
272 competences through personal improvement, enjoyment, effort, and learning from mistakes  
273 in a self-referenced manner, and: ego goals, when individuals seek to demonstrate their  
274 competences through winning, being better than others, and avoiding mistakes relative to  
275 others (Elliot & Hulleman, 2018; Nicholls, 1984).

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

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

294 their self-perceptions, affects, and motivation than parent-reported attitudes and behaviours  
295 (Babkes & Weiss, 1999).

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

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

317 **Using motivational theories to understand parent-athlete relationships.**

318 Motivational theories aid our understanding of parent-athlete relationships by  
319 differentiating the influences of numerous features of the relationship on athletes' self-  
320 perceptions, enjoyment, and motivation in sport. Such features include, for instance, parents'  
321 beliefs about their children's competence, parents' expectations of their children's sporting  
322 successes, parents' reports of their own behaviours (e.g., what they say they do), and parents'  
323 actual behaviours (e.g., what they actually do). Motivational theories also provide suitable  
324 frameworks to compare actual and perceived parental behaviours and the subsequent impact  
325 athletes' perceptions have on resultant psychosocial outcomes (e.g., motivation). For  
326 instance, research provides evidence that parents' reports of their encouragement (Brustad,  
327 1993) and athletes' perceptions of their parents' encouragement (Brustad, 1996) were both  
328 related with athletes' perceived physical competence. Meanwhile mothers' perception of their  
329 child's physical ability was influenced by both their child's actual physical ability and their  
330 child's perceived physical competence (Bois et al., 2002). Subsequently, mothers' perception  
331 of their child's ability and the child's perception of their physical competence influenced  
332 their perceived competence one year later (Bois et al., 2002).

333 Together, studies on parent-athlete relationships underpinned by motivational theories  
334 show a lack of association between parents' reported behaviours and athletes' perceptions of  
335 such behaviours (Babkes & Weiss, 1999). These studies also show a lack of association  
336 between athletes' perceptions of their own physical competence and their parents' perception  
337 of their physical competence (Bois et al., 2002). Nevertheless, despite a lack of associations,  
338 each of the aforementioned elements contribute to athletes' motivation and self-perceptions.  
339 Thus, as Keegan and colleagues (2014) concluded, it is almost impossible to establish any  
340 direct correspondence between the behaviours of social agents (e.g., parents) and athletes'  
341 motivation. Rather, the association between social agents' behaviours and motivation is  
342 moderated by numerous contextual, intrapersonal, and interpersonal factors.



343 Despite difficulties identifying direct correspondence between parents' behaviours and  
344 athletes' motivation, it has been proposed that parents' positivity is the only consistent theme  
345 linked with increases in athletes' motivation (Keegan et al., 2010). Such positivity includes  
346 positive feedback, positive affect, encouragement, or collaboration/support. Consequently,  
347 motivational theories and related studies increase our understanding of parent-athlete  
348 relationships by highlighting that high parental beliefs about their children's competences and  
349 high expectations for sporting success, together with positive support and attitudes, may  
350 influence athletes' self-perceptions, motivation, and enjoyment in sport.

### 351 **Parenting Styles**

352 Parenting styles reflect parents' global attitudes and values. The most well-known  
353 typology of parenting styles was developed by Baumrind (1971a, 1971b), who differentiated  
354 parenting styles based on a parent's degree of control or authority over their child. In this  
355 typology, three types of parenting style are specified: authoritarian, permissive, and  
356 authoritative. An authoritarian parenting style places value on obedience, seeks to keep their  
357 child in a subordinate role, and restricts autonomy (Baumrind, 1971a). A parent adopting a  
358 permissive style accepts their child's wishes but is not an active agent in shaping their child's  
359 future behaviour (Baumrind, 1971a). A parent adopting an authoritative style places value on  
360 autonomy and self-will of their child but can exert firm control when necessary (Baumrind,  
361 1971b). This typology was subsequently extended into a bi-dimensional construct based on  
362 demandingness (parental control) and responsiveness, which takes into account the  
363 continuous changes required by parents to adapt to their child's capacities and current states  
364 (Baumrind, 1991; Maccoby, 1992). Four parenting styles resulted from this bi-directional  
365 typology namely: authoritarian (i.e., demanding and unresponsive), authoritative (i.e.,  
366 demanding and responsive), indulgent (i.e., not demanding and responsive), and rejecting/  
367 neglecting (i.e., not demanding and not responsive).

368 More recently, Grolnick (2003) proposed a three-dimensional construct of parenting  
369 styles based upon self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and Darling and  
370 Steinberg's (1993) definition of parenting style as, "a constellation of attitudes toward the  
371 child that are communicated to the child and that, taken together, create an emotional climate  
372 in which the parent's behaviors are expressed" (p. 488). The three dimensions of parenting  
373 styles proposed by Grolnick (2003) are autonomy-support, involvement, and structure.  
374 Autonomy-support values a child's active participation and independent problem solving;  
375 involvement is the extent to which the parent is interested and takes an active part in their  
376 child's life; structure is the extent to which parents provide clear and consistent guidelines,  
377 expectations, and rules for their child's behaviours (Grolnick, 2003).

378 **Examples of research in sport.** Baumrind's typology has been examined in few  
379 studies in sport (Holt et al., 2009; Juntumaa et al., 2005; Sapieja et al., 2011; Wright et al.,  
380 2019). For example, a study in ice hockey showed that players from authoritative families  
381 had a higher level of mastery-orientation and satisfaction in playing (Juntumaa et al., 2005).  
382 In contrast, players from parents with authoritarian parenting styles showed norm breaking  
383 behaviours in ice hockey. In another study involving male youth football players (Sapieja et  
384 al., 2011), so called "healthy" perfectionist (i.e., high performance standards with low  
385 concern about failing to reach these standards) and non-perfectionist players had significantly  
386 higher perception of maternal and paternal authoritativeness than unhealthy perfectionists  
387 (i.e., high performance standards with high concern about failing to reach these standards).  
388 Together, these studies indicate that, when compared to authoritarian parents, authoritative  
389 parents positively influence young athletes' psychological outcomes and behaviours.

390 Meanwhile, Grolnick's (2003) parenting styles have been qualitatively studied in the  
391 youth-sport context. For instance, Holt et al. (2009) examined parenting styles and associated  
392 parenting practices during a whole season in youth soccer. Autonomy-supportive parents

393 were more likely to read their child's moods (e.g., understand what the child wants and feels),  
394 engage in bi-directional open communication, demonstrated reciprocal influences between  
395 children and parents, and showed higher consistency between parental practices. In contrast,  
396 controlling parents engaged in controlling practices (e.g., forcing the child to train), were not  
397 able to read their child's mood (e.g., do not understand what their child feels or wants), had  
398 closed unidirectional communication with their child (e.g. parents telling and explaining  
399 without considering their child's input), and no reciprocal influences between parents and  
400 children. Holt et al. also encountered a third parenting style showing high involvement,  
401 presence of autonomy-support, and control. The authors defined this as a mixed parenting  
402 style, characterised by inconsistencies between parenting practices and across situations.

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

414       Overall, research on parenting styles and practices in youth sport align with and further  
415 inform the theme of *positivity* developed by Keegan et al. (2010) by showing that parent-  
416 athlete relationships characterised by autonomy-support and responsive support, along with  
417 parents that strive to understand their child are the most likely to lead to positive outcomes

418 for their children in sport. Nonetheless, one notable limitation of research on parenting styles  
419 in sport is that they have mostly considered the direct influence of parenting style on athletes'  
420 outcomes with limited consideration of the interaction with their related parenting practices.  
421 This is important because parenting styles are considered as a context within which parenting  
422 practices are displayed and consequently alters associated outcomes (Darling & Steinberg,  
423 2003). Research on parental influence has provided support for this suggestion,  
424 demonstrating that parents with a high degree of involvement in their children's activities  
425 could be associated with *either* higher or lower levels of self-concept for children depending  
426 on categorisation of parents as either authoritative versus authoritarian (Lee et al., 2006).

### 427 **Attachment Theory**

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

441 When the attachment bonds between a parent and a child are secure, the parent  
442 provides sensitivity, responsiveness, and availability to their children's needs (Bowlby,

443 1988). Repeated experiences of care and attachment during childhood and adolescence  
444 gradually develop a system of cognition, affect, and behaviour known as the internal working  
445 model (Carr, 2009a; Duchesne & Larose, 2007). A secure internal working model allows  
446 children to judge their self-worth and to assess the attachment figure as a source of comfort  
447 that is available in case of distress (Carr, 2009a; Duchesne & Larose, 2007). This secure  
448 attachment in turn promotes basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and  
449 relatedness (Carr, 2013; La Guardia et al., 2000).

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

460 **Research examples in sport.** Attachment characteristics between parents and athletes  
461 have been studied by Felton and Jowett (2013) who examined how attachment security with  
462 parents, mediated by basic psychological need satisfaction, influenced athletes' performance  
463 self-concept, and psychological and subjective well-being. Their results showed that insecure  
464 attachment styles were negatively related to basic need satisfaction with parents. These  
465 results support the idea that the quality of attachment relationships not only influence  
466 athletes' motivation and performance, but also athlete's well-being (Felton & Jowett, 2013).  
467 Subsequently, in a longitudinal study, Felton and Jowett (2017) assessed how changes in an

468 athlete's perception of attachment characteristics could influence their basic psychological  
469 needs, performance self-concept, and well-being (i.e., self-esteem, negative affect, and  
470 vitality). The results show that increases in insecure attachment styles negatively predicted  
471 vitality and self-esteem, and positively predicted negative affect. Similarly, increases in  
472 insecure attachment styles predicted reduced psychological need satisfaction with parents.

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

484 **Using attachment theory to understand parent-athlete relationships.** Securely  
485 attached relationships work like a cycle of exploration and retreat, with the provision of a  
486 secure base that encourages athletes to engage in opportunity, explore and develop. Providing  
487 a secure base includes parents supporting their child's exploration and discoveries, and  
488 fostering their autonomy, but also being available, responsive, and providing assistance when  
489 necessary (Bowlby, 1988; Feeney, 2004). In sport, the provision of a secure base is of  
490 particular interest for athletes facing opportunities for positive development (e.g., being  
491 selected for a competition or playing at higher level).

492 Engaging in exploration, however, can subsequently lead to situations that young  
493 athletes cannot cope with, and thus, the provision of a safe haven is important to further  
494 provide comfort, nurturance, and reassurance when they retreat. A safe haven might also be  
495 sought to facilitate problem resolution, alleviate distress, and restore security (Bowlby, 1988;  
496 Feeney, 2004). Thus, within sport, the provision of a safe haven might also be important for  
497 young athletes facing failures, losses, or simply when they are tired or hungry after training.  
498 When restored and appeased, athletes will start exploring again and, through experience, will  
499 internalise that their caregiver is available and effective in providing comfort and reassurance  
500 (i.e., a safe haven) when necessary (Bowlby, 1988; Feeney, 2004).

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

### 512 **Moving the Field Forward**

513 There are numerous convergences between the aforementioned theories and models  
514 that may help to improve the understanding of parent-athlete relationships. Specifically, one  
515 consideration that may be particularly useful is an understanding of parental responsiveness.

516           **Responsiveness.** Responsiveness is a broad construct that describes how people in a  
517 relationship (e.g., parent and athlete) attend to and support each other's needs and goals (Reis  
518 et al., 2004). It comprises three key components: understanding, which refers to  
519 comprehending the partner's (e.g., athlete) core self (e.g., needs, desire, weaknesses);  
520 validation, which accounts for respect for or valuing the partner's view of the self; and caring  
521 for, which is associated with expressing affection, warmth, and concern for the partner's  
522 well-being (Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Gable, 2015). Importantly, Reis and Gable (2015)  
523 model considers that the relationship between the provided support and the related outcomes  
524 is mediated by the support recipient's perception of the responsiveness of the support.  
525 Consequently, when support is responsively provided by the support provider (e.g., parent)  
526 and perceived as responsive by the support recipient (e.g., athlete), it contributes to the well-  
527 being of both individuals and their relationship (Reis & Gable, 2015). The positive influence  
528 of perceived responsiveness (i.e., being validated, understood, and cared for) is a central  
529 component in many modern relationship theories (Dooley et al., 2018; Selcuk et al., 2016).

530           For instance, illustrating the value of responsive support in the youth sport context,  
531 Clarke et al. (2016) explored the dyadic interaction between parents and young elite  
532 footballers. In this study, young players praised parents who valued and supported their  
533 progress and efforts, provided feedback to help them to adjust and tune up, and motivated  
534 them to persevere and continue pursuing their goals. Although Clarke et al. (2016) did not  
535 explicitly refer to responsiveness, their results align with that positive outcomes arose when  
536 players' perceived their parents understand them as a person, care for them, and validate their  
537 person and choices, which are the three components of responsiveness (Reis & Gable, 2015).  
538 In another study, Stupica (2016) instructed parents to be either responsive and available (i.e.,  
539 monitor their child's activities turned to their child and respond appropriately as they would  
540 normally do) or unavailable and unresponsive (i.e., do not respond to any of their child's



541 attempts to initiate interaction). The results showed that children ran faster when parents were  
542 available and responsive compared to when parents were unavailable and unresponsive. This  
543 clearly illustrates the importance of accounting for parental responsiveness when considering  
544 young athletes' performances, as well as demonstrating that parent availability and  
545 responsiveness can be modified through experimental manipulation (Stupica, 2016).

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

559 **Thriving Through Relationships Model.** Developed based on their extensive  
560 work on romantic couples (Feeney, 2004, 2007; Feeney & Van Vleet, 2010), Feeney  
561 and Collins (2015) proposed the thriving through relationships model. This model  
562 primarily relies on attachment theory (building a safe haven and secure base support)  
563 (Bowlby, 1988), but also links with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and  
564 other motivation-related theories (Harter, 1978; Ntoumanis, 2001), and includes the  
565 construct of responsiveness (Reis & Gable, 2015) as a central component. Thus, this

566 model draws together many of the ideas that have been considered in relation to parent-  
567 athlete relationships, while providing two explicit pathways through which to examine  
568 parent-athlete relationship. Moreover, the emphasis upon thriving aligns with recent  
569 calls to enhance and understanding wellbeing in sport (Brown et al., 2018).

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

585 According to Feeney and Collins (2015), responsive support can be beneficial both  
586 when individuals encounter life opportunities (e.g., an athlete being selected for a major  
587 competition) but also when they encounter life adversity (e.g., an athlete being injured). With  
588 regards to life opportunities, it is suggested that the responsive support provided by the  
589 support provider (e.g., a parent), combined (directly or indirectly) with the recipient's (e.g.,  
590 an athlete) perception of the responsiveness of the support can lead to various immediate

591 outcomes (e.g., perceived capability, or self-efficacy; Feeney, 2004, 2007). Over time, the  
592 immediate outcomes resulting from responsive interactions gradually accumulate and build  
593 long-term thriving (Tomlinson et al., 2016). Meanwhile, when individuals encounter  
594 adversity, the responsive support provided by the support provider (e.g., a parent), combined  
595 (directly or indirectly) with the recipient's (e.g. an athlete) perception of the responsiveness  
596 of the support will also lead to immediate outcomes (e.g., reduced anxiety, or decrease in  
597 negative outcomes). In the long-term, these immediate outcomes will not only restore the  
598 support recipient's well-being, but also lead to positive outcomes and thriving.

### 599 **Using Thriving Through Relationships Model to Examine Parent-Athlete**

#### 600 **Relationships**

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

609 Research focussing on specific interactions, accounting simultaneously for the provided  
610 and the perceived responsive support as detailed in the thriving through relationships model  
611 (Feeney & Collins, 2015) can help to address questions driven, for instance, by motivational  
612 theories, and clarify the mechanisms through which parents influence athletes' motivation,  
613 emotions, perceived capability, self-esteem, self-worth, and anxiety (Jowett & Cramer, 2010;  
614 Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006, 2009). Moreover, as parent-athlete interactions take place  
615 within specific locations, times, contexts, and within specific cultures, the thriving through

616 relationship model could also integrates perspectives from Bronfenbrenner's (2005) PPCT  
617 model and system theory to consider the permeability between family and other sport  
618 influences (Dorsch et al., 2020; Hellstedt, 2005). Additionally, by building on the theme of  
619 *positivity* from motivational theories and parenting style, studies drawing on the thriving  
620 through relationships model could further highlight the pathway through which athletes'  
621 general perception of the world and themselves may be related to the specific interactions  
622 that athletes continuously have with their parents (Felton & Jowett, 2017; Keegan et al.,  
623 2010, 2014; Knight & Holt, 2014). Finally, longitudinal studies including developmental  
624 considerations can also be carried out using this model because it accounts for the  
625 accumulation of immediate outcomes that eventually build to encourage long-term thriving  
626 and broader perceptions of social support availability. This idea aligns with, and can  
627 integrate, both Bronfenbrenner's (2005) proximal processes of gradually more complex  
628 interactions, Harter's (1978) idea of a gradual internalisation of the influences of significant  
629 others, and Bowlby's (1973) internal working model. Feeney and Collins (2015) model can  
630 also be linked with recent developments assuming that thriving and well-being in sport are a  
631 platform for sustained high level performances (Brown et al., 2018).

### 632 **Conclusion**

633 Parent-athlete relationships are dyadic relationships that are central to athletes'  
634 experiences in sport and well-being. The study of such relationships can be illuminated by  
635 focusing on their responsiveness (Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Gable, 2015). For doing so, a  
636 theoretical and integrative framework such as the thriving through relationships model  
637 (Feeney & Collins, 2015) can help researchers to purposefully address parent-athlete  
638 relationships. This model can help researchers to account for the responsiveness within  
639 parent-athlete relationships. This model integrates predictions and findings from various  
640 theories and models to understand parent-athletes relationships, and can move forward the

641 understanding of features of such relationships aiming to increase and develop inclusive,  
642 sustainable, and enjoyable participation for young athletes (Bergeron et al., 2015).

643

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