



Optimal Parental Involvement in Youth Sport

Executive Statement: A substantive grounded theory of optimal parental involvement in competitive youth tennis was developed that illustrates fundamental concepts parents can adhere to throughout the course of their child's involvement in youth sport.

Introduction: Parental involvement can either enhance or hinder children's sporting participation and performance. Youth have reported preferences for specific parental behavior throughout competitions and parenting styles have been examined in relation to children's sport experiences. This study examines the interaction of both parenting styles, and practices and how they come together to optimize parental involvement in sport.

Methods: A grounded theory methodology was used to develop a substantive sport-specific theory of optimal parental involvement in youth sport. The sport of tennis was selected due to the substantial financial and time demands that often lead to high degrees of parental involvement. Individual semi-structured interviews with completed with 72 participants including: youth players, older players, ex-youth players, parents, and coaches. Three focus groups were then conducted with 18 participants including: current players, older players, and coaches). This supplemented the interview data and was used to evaluate the emerging theory.

Results: Based on participant responses, optimal parental involvement was defined as involvement that enhanced children's enjoyment *and* performance. A theory was developed that suggests that optimal parental involvement is a process that occurs over an extended time, is individualized to different children, and is dependent upon parents understanding of their child's experience and seeking to be involved in ways to enhance it. The theory was constructed around the core category of 'understanding and enhancing your child's tennis journey.' Three underpinning categories were developed: (1) Share and communicate goals; (2) Develop an understanding emotional climate; and, (3) Engage in enhancing parenting practices at competitions. Goals are influenced by demographic factors, as well as sport experience and transitions. An understanding emotion climate is one that acknowledges the challenges of competing, intricacies of sport development, influence of external factors, and first within the child's life. Strategies for this include: maintain strong parent-coach relationships, engage in independent learning, keep tennis in perspective, and focus on the multiple benefits of sport participation. Enhanced parenting practices include: attend to the child's competition needs, teach skills to cope with competition, and manage your own emotions. Strategies for this include: communicate regarding needs, understand perceptions of parental behaviours, read and react to situations, foster independence, hold children accountable for behaviour, and enjoy the experience.

Conclusion: The theory developed by this study illustrates how parenting practices, goals, and emotional climate are related and influence each other to optimize parental involvement in sport.

Recommendations: This theory highlights the importance of: parents spending time reflecting on their reasons for encouraging their child to participate in sport and whether those reason align with their



child's, consultants or coaches educating parents on the importance of paying attention to the environment they create and specific behaviors they display within it, and parents tailoring their involvement to their child.

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