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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Understanding the role parents play in tennis success: a national survey of junior tennis coaches

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Objectives: To assess coaches' perceptions about the role of parents and their positive and negative behaviours in junior tennis.

Methods: A national survey of 132 United States junior tennis coaches was completed. The extent and seriousness/impact of parent-child interaction problems and positive behaviours were rated.

Results: Parents were perceived as very important for junior tennis success. Most parents (59%) that these coaches had worked with were seen as having a positive influence on their player's development. However, the respondents also felt that 36% of parents negatively influenced their child's development. Positive parental behaviours included providing logistical, financial, and social-emotional support, as well as tennis opportunities and unconditional love. Negative parent behaviours included overemphasising winning, holding unrealistic expectations, and criticising their child.

Conclusions: Findings are discussed relative to current sport parenting and athletic talent development research and theorising. The need to educate parents is emphasised.

The role that parents play in a young athletes' sport involvement is receiving much scrutiny today and reports of "problem" or over-involved parents are common. There are also concerns that parental push to compete at a high level, specialise in single sports, and engage in year round intense training at very young ages is leading to an increase in overuse injuries in young athletes.¹

These concerns also exist in tennis. High profile cases, such as the father who in the hope of gaining a competitive advantage drugged his child's competitors, have helped to label many tennis parents as problems that coaches and tennis administrators must manage. For example, a study of junior tennis players and their parents revealed that winning was very important for 33% of parents, and 29% of players and 20% of parents reported that inappropriate behaviours were exhibited by parents.² Yet, coaches also realise that many parents are positive sources of support for their children, even though negative parents often receive much of the attention.³ In fact, many top players are reported to have parents highly involved in their tennis experience who instil in them the critical values needed for tennis success (N Saviano, personal communication, 2001). In addition, parental involvement and support has been associated with a player's enjoyment, performance, and self esteem.^{4,5} Finally, Fredericks and Eccles⁶ have theorised that parents play two important roles in their child's sport involvement: as both providers of experiences and interpreters of those experiences—for example, they help them to define success. Recent evidence⁷ supports these contentions.

The role of parents in both junior tennis and youth sports at large then is paradoxical—on the one hand an issue of growing concern, whereas on the other hand essential for enhancing involvement and talent development. Recognising this, the United States Tennis Association (USTA) Sport Science Committee funded a three phase project designed to understand the parent's role in tennis talent development and success with an emphasis on gaining a broader view of positive and negative parental behaviours and actions. The second phase of this project is the focus of this paper: a national survey of junior tennis coaches and their perceptions of positive and negative parental behaviours.

METHOD

Participants in the 2003 USA Tennis Competition Training Center Coaches Workshop were asked to complete a questionnaire about parental issues in junior tennis. These 250 participants were judged to be excellent sources of information because of their involvement in coaching junior tennis in about 100 Tennis Competition Training Centers located throughout the United States. Hence these coaches represent all regions of the country and provide an excellent representative sample of junior coaches.

Procedures

Questionnaire on the role of parents in junior tennis success

Survey questions were formed on the basis of the focus group results derived from phase 1 of the study and a review of the youth sport parenting literature.⁸ The questionnaire was organised into nine distinct categories of questions and included over 200 individual items and informed consent documentation. (Complete survey results can be obtained by contacting the first author.) Items were pilot tested with a small sample of coaches to ensure item clarity and to eliminate overlap between questions. However, as this was an exploratory descriptive survey to be used on a single occasion (as opposed to a standardised assessment to be used repeatedly), detailed psychometric analyses were not conducted. Because of space limitations, only the coaches' perceptions of the role of parents in junior tennis development and the extent and seriousness/impact of both positive and negative parent-child interactions are presented.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequency counts) and response percentages were calculated, and the absolute values relative to question responses were interpreted. In addition, *t* tests were conducted to examine the

This research project was approved by the human subjects research review committee at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, when all the authors were affiliated with the Department of Exercise and Sport Science at that University.

Table 1 Parent-child interaction problems in junior tennis: extent and seriousness

Interaction problem	Extent		Seriousness	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Overemphasises winning	3.54	0.83	3.79	1.04
Expectations unrealistic	3.50	0.88	3.59	0.95
Coaches child	3.45	0.99	3.37	1.06
Criticises child	3.43	0.78	3.77	0.98
Pampers child too much	3.41	0.96	3.46	1.04
Pushes child to play tennis	3.32	0.76	3.29	0.98
Tells child not to lose against less skilled opponent	3.22	0.94	3.45	1.05
Communication problems with child	3.20	0.70	3.34	0.96
Parent's ego determined by child's performance	3.18	0.91	3.67	1.11
Doesn't allow child to make decisions	3.12	0.78	3.29	1.07
Lacks emotional control	3.11	0.83	3.71	1.03
Misperceives child's needs and motives	3.01	0.84	3.32	1.06
Lack of communication with child	2.93	0.85	3.23	1.02
Pressures child in practice by sitting on-court and making comments	2.91	0.94	3.57	1.12
Pressures child by repeatedly reminding how much tennis costs	2.77	0.97	3.37	1.25
Not supportive if immediate success not achieved	2.68	0.86	3.26	1.15
Does not positively support child	2.63	0.86	3.53	1.32
Reacts to mistakes by yelling at child	2.47	0.81	3.55	1.39
Enters child in too many tournaments	2.44	0.91	2.84	1.21
Doesn't allow child to be involved in other sports/activities	2.35	1.00	2.93	1.24
Uninvolved in child's tennis	2.22	0.84	2.53	1.24
Frequently argues with officials	2.21	0.81	3.18	1.45
Doesn't allow child to play in doubles	2.18	1.03	2.64	1.32
Involved in confrontations with other parents	2.15	0.77	3.34	1.45
Unconcerned with the child's development	2.12	0.86	2.85	1.34
Withholds love when child performs below expectations	2.05	0.85	3.36	1.62

An extent rating of 1 = not at all, 2 = infrequently, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, and 5 = all the time. A seriousness rating of 1 = not serious, 2 = slightly, 3 = somewhat, 4 = serious, 5 = extremely.

relation between question responses and variables such as coach age, sex, and years of experience. These series of *t* tests (with conservative significance procedures used to prevent type 1 error) revealed very few mean differences and therefore are not reported.

RESULTS

Characteristics and backgrounds of survey respondents

Of the 250 coaches attending the workshop, 132 completed the survey, which is a return rate of 52.8%; 125 were male and seven were female. The average age of the male coaches was 40.5 years, and the female coaches averaged 39 years of age. The sample was not diverse, as 108 were white, nine were African-American, four were Asian, and four were Hispanic; three coaches listed "other", and four did not complete the item. Overall the coaches were very experienced, as evidenced by their 17.3 mean years of experience coaching junior tennis players (range 1–50 years) ($n = 131$, one coach did not complete the item).

Importance and role of parents in the development of a junior player

Coaches rated how important they felt parents are in junior tennis success (1 = not important, 3 = somewhat, 5 = extremely), reporting that parents are very important (mean (SD) 4.56 (0.61)). In addition, coaches were asked what percentage of parents hurt and facilitate their child's development as a player (relative to all junior players they coach personally). They felt that 35.9% of parents hurt their child's tennis development, whereas 58.6% are a positive influence.

Perceptions of parent behaviours in tennis

Coaches were asked to rate on Likert-type scales a series of statements about the extent of specific problems or positive parent behaviours, and the seriousness/impact of these behaviours on junior players.

Parent-child interaction problem behaviours

Extent

Coaches were asked to rate 26 items based on the extent of the perceived problem (1 = not at all, 2 = infrequently, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, and 5 = all the time). Table 1 shows means and standard deviations for all items.

Most items were rated as "sometimes" a problem. The most common problems were parents overemphasising winning (3.54), unrealistic parental expectations (3.50), coaching their own child (3.45), criticising their child (3.43), and pampering their child too much (3.41). Conversely, coaches felt that parents infrequently withheld their love when their child performed below expectations (2.05), were unconcerned with the development of their child (2.12), and were involved in confrontations with other parents (2.15).

Seriousness

Coaches were then asked to rate the seriousness of the same 26 parent problem behaviour items (1 = not serious, 2 = slightly, 3 = somewhat, 4 = very, 5 = extremely; table 1). There was little variability across the items; most of the means ranged around 3.0, indicating that the problem is "somewhat" serious. Three items, parents overemphasising winning (3.79), criticising their child (3.77), and lacking emotional control (3.71), approached very serious problem ratings. Coaches considered the least serious problems with parents in junior tennis to be under-involvement (2.53), not allowing the child to play doubles (2.64), entering too many tournaments (2.84), and being unconcerned with the child's development (2.85).

Positive parental behaviours in interactions with their child

Coach perceptions of extent and impact of 32 positive parent-child interactions were rated on Likert scales (1 = not at all/no impact, 2 = infrequently/little impact, 3 = sometimes/some impact, 4 = frequently/much impact, and 5 = all the time/extreme impact).

Extent

Table 2 depicts the means and standard deviations of the extent of perceived positive parental behaviours in junior tennis. Compared with parent problem items, greater variability existed in the extent of positive behaviours (mean of 4.43–2.89). Most of the items fell in the area of “sometimes” to “frequent”, thus coaches perceived that parents do often exhibit these positive behaviours.

The most often perceived positive behaviour exhibited by parents was providing financial support (4.43). Coaches also responded that parents often provided logistical, support such as transportation and scheduling of matches and practices (4.32), tennis opportunities (3.81), socio-emotional support (3.79), and unconditional love and support (3.72). The coaches also felt that parents often make sacrifices so their child can succeed (3.65) and emphasise hard work (3.64) and a positive attitude (3.60). The least common positive behaviours observed by coaches were parents showing an understanding of the sport (2.89), using motivational techniques (2.90), pushing the child in a positive way (2.97), and exerting little pressure to win (2.99). All of these were in the “sometimes” frequency range.

Impact

All 32 positive parental behaviours were viewed by coaches as having much impact or at least some impact (mean range 4.54–3.38; table 2). The behaviour that coaches rated as having the most impact on the child was providing unconditional love and support (4.54). Other parental behaviours perceived as having much impact were providing logistical support (4.36), holding the child accountable for on-court behaviour (4.33), providing financial support (4.28), emphasising a positive attitude (4.20), modelling values

(4.18), and providing appropriate discipline for poor sports-personship (4.13). Parental behaviours rated as having less impact on the child were using motivational techniques (3.38), probably because the coaches considered this more their role, and showing an understanding of the sport (3.42).

DISCUSSION

The national survey findings of 132 experienced junior tennis coaches revealed that parents were perceived to play an important role in player development. This parallels previous research illustrating the critical role that parents play in both the general youth sports experience^{6–9,10} and the development of athletic talent in particular.¹¹ Therefore it was encouraging that coaches perceived almost 60% of parents to have a positive influence on their child’s tennis success. Specifically, coaches felt the most extensive parental behaviours were support ranging from providing tennis opportunities and needed logistical and financial services to serving as a source of unconditional love and social-emotional support. These findings are consistent with the theorising of Eccles and her colleagues,^{6,12,13} who indicate that the primary way in which parents influence children’s sport involvement is by serving as “providers” of experiences. The findings are also consistent with the talent development literature, which has shown that talented youth do not turn their potential into accomplishments without a support system of significant adults.^{11,14–16}

In addition to providing and supporting their child’s tennis involvement, the second cluster of coach ratings of positive parental behaviours focused on developing key core values such as emphasising the importance of hard work, having a positive attitude, and keeping success in perspective. These findings are consistent with the research of Gould *et al*¹⁷ and

Table 2 Positive parental behaviours in junior tennis: extent and impact

Positive parental behaviour	Extent		Impact	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Provides financial support	4.43	0.64	4.28	0.80
Provides logistical support	4.32	0.65	4.36	0.77
Provides tennis opportunities	3.81	0.73	4.12	0.77
Provides socio-emotional support	3.79	0.77	3.75	0.90
Provides unconditional love and support	3.72	0.74	4.54	0.74
Makes sacrifices so child can succeed	3.65	0.78	3.91	0.76
Emphasises hard work	3.64	0.83	4.12	0.83
Emphasises positive attitude	3.60	0.74	4.20	0.82
Provides considerable encouragement	3.59	0.73	4.08	0.85
Exposes child to different sports	3.46	0.79	3.67	0.83
Models values	3.43	0.78	4.18	0.77
Emphasises commitment to tennis	3.39	0.79	3.91	0.81
Emphasises if you are going to play tennis, do it right	3.37	0.81	3.86	0.89
Keeps success in perspective	3.33	0.64	3.94	0.76
Has high and reasonable expectations and standards	3.33	0.76	3.89	0.74
Displays an optimistic/positive style	3.31	0.70	4.02	0.85
Models an active lifestyle	3.27	0.85	3.68	0.92
Keeps tennis in perspective, doesn't allow tennis to dominate child's life	3.27	0.85	4.05	0.78
Creates a positive achievement environment	3.20	0.71	4.01	0.78
Holds child accountable for behaviour on-court	3.20	0.88	4.33	0.81
Motivates the child through challenges	3.13	0.81	3.47	0.88
Tells opposing players that they did a good job	3.12	0.85	3.70	0.80
Provides structure and set limits on tennis involvement	3.11	0.82	3.82	0.78
Encourages child to seek out new challenges and opportunities	3.06	0.73	3.70	0.79
Appropriately pushes child when child doesn't know best	3.05	0.71	3.83	0.77
Uses good humour	3.05	0.77	3.63	0.95
Provides appropriate discipline for poor sports-personship	3.01	0.90	4.13	0.89
Provides positive feedback after matches	3.00	0.73	3.89	0.92
Exerts little pressure to win	2.99	0.77	3.82	0.85
Pushes child in a positive way	2.97	0.79	3.94	0.80
Uses motivational techniques	2.90	0.79	3.38	0.90
Shows an understanding of the sport	2.89	0.74	3.42	0.88

An extent rating of 1 = not at all, 2 = infrequently, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, and 5 = all the time. An impact rating of 1 = no impact, 2 = little impact, 3 = some impact, 4 = much impact, 5 = extreme impact.

Bloom,¹¹ who through studies of highly successful athletes found that parents helped to instil critical achievement of core values, habits, and dispositions that prepared their children for long term athletic success.

Although most parents were perceived to have a positive effect on their children, an alarming number (almost 36%) were felt to have hurt their development as players. This is disconcerting and certainly parallels reports in the tennis community. Unlike previous research, this study provided specific extent and seriousness ratings of parental behaviours perceived to negatively influence player development. Coaches perceived that some parents over-emphasise winning, hold unrealistic expectations, criticise the child, and push the child to play. Given the previous findings of DeFrancesco and Johnson² showing that 33% of parents rated winning as very important, the present findings suggest that many of these parents may have difficulty keeping winning in the proper perspective and in turn criticise, pressure, or push their child in inappropriate ways. Ironically, the actions of these parents are probably aimed to motivate their child, but, according to these highly experienced coaches, result in inhibited player development.

Interestingly, Frederick and Eccles⁶ theorise that parents are not only critical "providers" of sport opportunities for their children but also serve an equally important role in terms of influencing their child's interpretation of the sport experience. Parents who over-emphasise outcome goals, lose perspective, and/or focus on a return on their investment in their child's tennis often create stress, uncertainty, psychological problems, and a lack of motivation, supporting previous work by Brustad¹⁸ and Yusuff.¹⁹ Negative parental actions have also been repeatedly linked to player stress levels.^{20, 21}

Also revealing were the coaches' views that parents should hold children accountable for poor on-court conduct and provide appropriate discipline for poor sportspersonship because it can have a positive impact on development. However, they also reported that parents infrequently hold children accountable or discipline them for poor conduct. Junior tennis coaches participating in focus groups in the first phase of this study felt strongly that positive parental interactions with the child include appropriate discipline for behaviour problems on-court.⁸ Hence it would seem that, in reality, parents may need to provide more discipline, especially based on these findings that positive parental actions include instilling core values.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

With respect to study strengths, a nationwide sample was obtained, providing generalisable information on coaches' perceptions of the actions of junior tennis parents. Secondly, the coaches were very experienced, on average having 17 years of involvement, and had a good deal of coaching education. We can be assured therefore that they had considerable experience of interacting with numerous players and their parents, as well as some degree of professional training to assist in their knowledge of what is needed to develop junior players. Thirdly, the return rate of over 50% in this investigation is considered to be solid. Fourthly, no study

What is already known on this topic

- Parents play an important role in the development of talent in tennis, and other sports, through support
- Some parents create problems for coaches and players, which are often cited in the media

What this study adds

- Unlike previous research, this study provides specific extent and seriousness ratings of parental behaviours perceived to positively and negatively influence player development
- The survey included coaches, who are rarely studied relative to parental behaviour, and involved a broader, more general sample of coaches throughout the United States than previously studied

to our knowledge has examined to this extent the specific parental behaviours perceived to be occurring.

There are several limitations of the survey study. Firstly, how non-respondents (118 in this case) would have responded is always an issue in survey research. Secondly, the survey did not require that coaches respond to an extensive set of open ended questions, thus they were not always allowed to derive their own problems, roadblocks, positive parent behaviours, or strategies and provide depth.

CONCLUSION

The results of this investigation reveal the critical role that parents play in the development of junior tennis players. Moreover, although many parents do an excellent job in this regard and contribute positively to their child's development, the experienced coaches we studied also felt that a significant number of parents unknowingly interfere with their child's development. This is not surprising given the fact that sport parents receive little or no training about how to help their child to develop and are exposed to a youth sports environment that is increasingly professional.²² This highlights the need for sports science and sports medicine professionals to begin to educate tennis parents.

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Competing interests: DG is serving as vice chair of the United States Tennis association (USTA) Sport Science Committee and has been reimbursed by the USTA for attending some of their annual conferences. He has also received an honorarium for conducting staff workshops for USTA coaches.

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