

PARENTING IN YOUTH SPORT. BUILDING FAMILY-SPORT EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

IL RUOLO DEI GENITORI NELLO SPORT GIOVANILE. COSTRUIRE ALLEANZE EDUCATIVE FAMIGLIA-SPORT

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Abstract

The construction of a positive and supportive environment for children's participation in sport is influenced by the role of adults, therefore by the support or pressure behavior of parents and the way in which they interact with coaches. The positivity of sport emerges precisely from the way in which adults carry out sports experience and lead it with specific educational intentions.

This article focuses on the construct of parental involvement in youth sport and aims to highlight the factors that can promote an effective coaches-parents partnership and to analyze some parent education programs.

Keywords

youth sport; parental involvement; family-sport partnership.

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1. The role of parents in children's sports experience

The educational quality of sport is strongly influenced by the way in which adults surrounding it act; parents and coaches can help make sports places and times two significant dimensions of their educational experience. Mantegazza (1999) raises the question of the educational centrality of adult participation, and underlines how the positivity of sport emerges precisely from the way in which adults carry out sports experience and lead it more or less wisely.

The scientific attention on parents' involvement in children's sport has increased in recent decades, thanks to the contribution of several studies that have investigated the forms and effects of parents' participation in sport, as well as possible ways to build a positive and supportive environment for children's participation. Parent involvement is a multidimensional construct that refers to the thoughts and emotions associated with children's activities, and can be manifested through parent support and pressure behaviors (Leff & Hoyle, 1995; Stein, Raedeke & Glenn, 1999). In the first case the behavior is aimed at facilitating children's participation in sport, and is linked to positive results for children, such as enjoyment (Hoyle & Leff, 1997; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986) and autonomy (Gagné, Ryan & Bargmann, 2003); in the second case the behavior is directive, controlling, conditioned by results that parents consider important and associated with negative effects on children (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes & Pennisi, 2008; Smith, Smoll & Passer, 2002).

When we talk about parents' involvement we refer to the way in which they influence their children's beliefs and participation in relation to sports activity, through three main dimensions: role models, beliefs, emotional support (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005); they can guide the parents' behavior by leading, on the one hand to parental pressure, if parents show excessive expectations, on the other hand we go to parental support, if parents provide encouragement.

However, according to the results of a cross-sectional survey carried out by Dorsch, Smith, and Dotterer (2016) it would seem that the distinction between parental pressuring and supportive behaviors is not so clear and linear in terms of positive or negative effects on children, but is rather related to the way in which parental behavior is perceived, and therefore to the various factors that can influence it. For example, it would seem that the timing of parental behavior and the context in which it occurs can change the perception and impact it has on children; parental behavior can be perceived differently if it occurs before, during or after the sports competition, or if it occurs in the family or sports context (Elliott & Drummond, 2017). Moreover, the way in which parental behavior is interpreted could be conditioned by some characteristics of parents and children, among which gender emerges, proving that male athletes seem to report higher levels of perceived parental pressure than female ones (Gustafsson, Hill, Stenling & Wagnsson, 2016), or by the quality of the parent-child relationship itself, which seems to positively affect the sports experience when it is centered on empathic dimensions (Burgess, Knight & Mellalieu, 2016). These studies show that the dynamism and complexity of the interaction between different factors in the perception of sport parenting need to be investigated, in order to build a positive sports environment (Knight, Berrow & Harwood, 2017).

In the literature, the analysis of the factors causing adequate or inadequate parenting in sport is complemented by the definition of theoretical models on parental involvement, which seek to outline its ways of expression. Among the first models on parental involvement emerges the one elaborated by Hellestedt (1987; 1990; 1995) called *Parental Involvement Continuum*, which defines parents as under-involved, involved and over-involved. According to the model, under-involvement refers to disinterested and misinformed parent, moderate involvement represents the comfort zone, while over-involvement refers to excitable and fanatical parent. By including parents' involvement on a continuum too, other authors define the involvement by placing the "direct" and "indirect" modalities (Wylleman, De Knop, Ewing & Cumming, 2000) at the two extremes, i.e. "supportive parenting" and "conspicuous parenting" (use-value of the child to show the parent as self-sacrifice) (Grenfell & Rinehart, 2003). In order to create an exhaustive model compared to those present in the literature, Brackenridge and colleagues (2004;

2005), through the use of qualitative data, developed the *Activation States Model* that classifies the forms of parental involvement, describing the voices/discourses (what parents say), knowledge and experience (what parents know), feelings (what parents feel) and actions (what parents do/have done) which interact and are associated with different states of activation towards a subject – in this case children’s sport. Born in the field of child protection in youth football, the model identifies the following states of activation: inactive, reactive, active, proactive, opposed and hyperactive, are associated with parent’s engagement in children sport through the *Parent’s Optimum Zone (POZ)* (Fig. 1). According to the model, the Optimum Zone represents the area in which the child athlete’s satisfaction and parental engagement meet in a positive way. The evolution of the models shows that the initial scientific interest was aimed at the classification/definition of the different strategies of parental involvement and the identification of the positive and negative involvement; the attention to the theoretical dimension has been supplanted by the attention to the dimensions that could be acted from the practical point of view and in agreement with this we have tried to identify the ways in which parental involvement is realized through language, thought, emotions and actions of parents.

A relevant aspect, though left unexplored until the end of the 90’s, is the relationship between coach, athlete and parent (Brackenridge, 1998) from a systemic perspective, which has as its cardinal principles building around the sport of networks and educational alliances. According to Mantegazza “sport is not an educational agency in itself: the educational goals are heteronomic with respect to the sports logic in itself; the first task of sport is not to educate [...], the task of the male/female coach is to collaborate with parents who cannot obviously be excluded from discussions and comparisons on the work in the field or in the gym” (1999, p. 15 and 41). The issue of the collaboration between coaches and parents still remains a critical dimension of practices; it unequivocally refers to some firm points that concern first and foremost the need to identify strategies which are functional to the involvement of parents in sports decisions, to making them proactive rather than reactive and sensitive to their children’s learning outcomes. These aspects are included in the skills of the coach in order to recognize the positive contribution that the parent can make, to support empowerment and to build a relationship based on trust. From a communicative point of view this refers to interactions that foster the exchange of ideas, rather than linear and instructive ways that contribute to the establishment of relational barriers; just like when referring to the parent as a person in need of advice and with reduced expertise, or when trying to differentiate the educational responsibilities and clearly distinguishing between behaviors adopted at home, and those adopted in the sports context. In line with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (1979), the family system and the sports system are characteristic life contexts for the education of children and adolescents, in view of which they are encouraged to interact and adapt themselves. The space between them, called mesosystem, is to be understood as a relational space in which to build the plot of a possible educational co-responsibility. The co-education project in which the family and sport are involved requires to be investigated more thoroughly, especially in view of the identification of educational strategies.

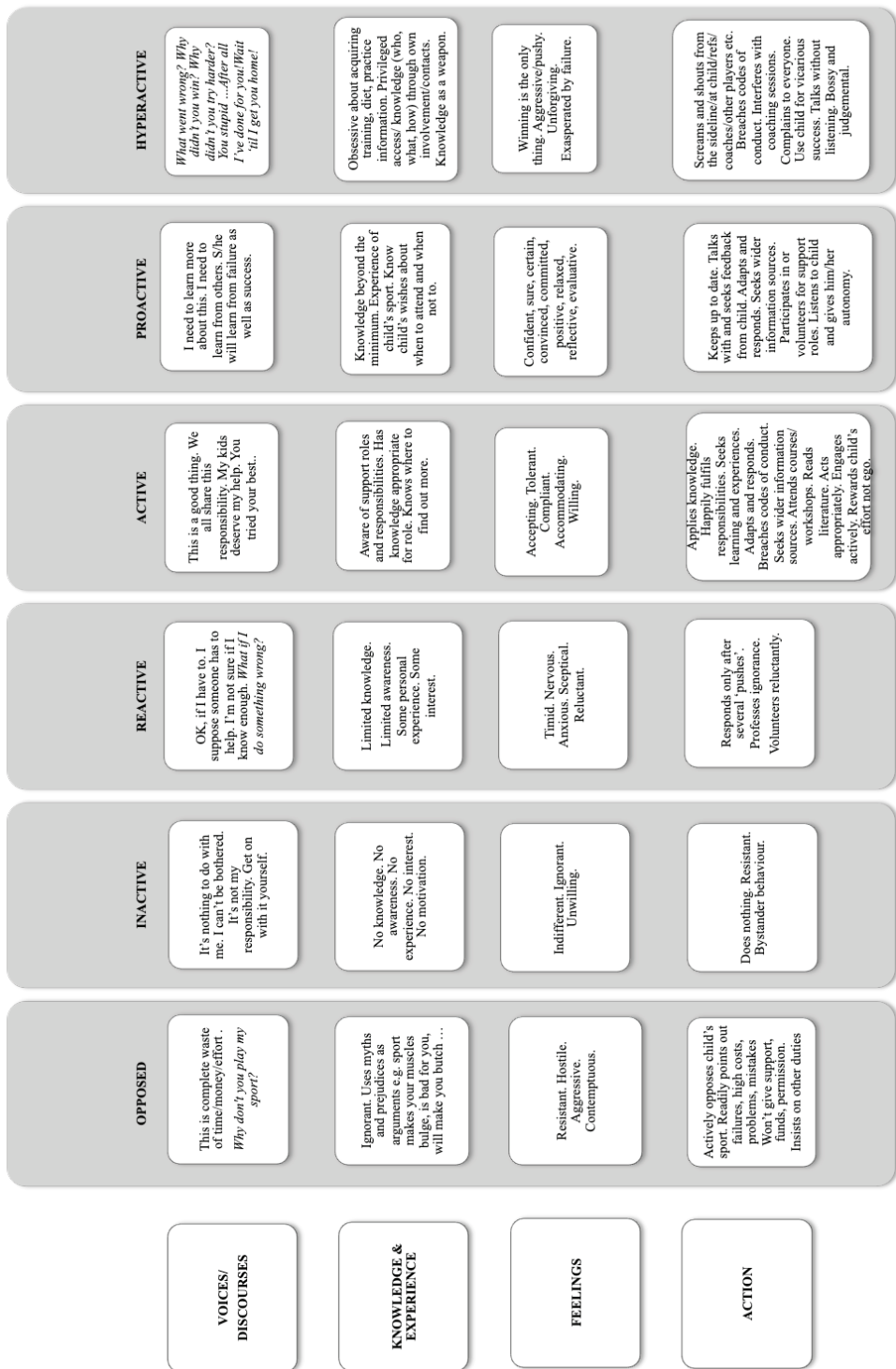


Fig. 1 Parent's Optimum Zone (POZ)

2. Parent education programs

There is a lack of empirical evidence in parent education programs, and we more often rely on practical suggestions (Dorch *et al.*, 2016); the same applies to the link between parent involvement behavior and parent-child relationship. Although the influence between parent-child relationship quality and young athletes' sport enjoyment has been demonstrated (Horn & Horn, 2007; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006), the impact of support or pressure behavior in sport on the parent-child relationship is not yet clear. To address this gap, some parent education programs have been tested, with the assumption that parents who follow a targeted learning program may change the quality of their involvement, and consequently, it impacts on the sports participation of their children. Starting from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory, Dorch and colleagues (2016) have developed a program that could enhance children's motivation to continue participation in youth sport, reduce the perception of stress, have positive outcomes, health and well-being in children and adolescents. Through a pilot study, they implemented an evidence-based education program that includes a Sport Parent Guide and a Sport Parent Seminar, both based on a framework made up of seven categories (sections):

- *youth sport participation*: it focused parents' attention on the reasons children participate in sports and the reasons they drop out of sports;
- *developmental model*: it focused on the developmental processes that children go through as they ascend through the various levels of youth sport;
- *participation rates*: the aims were to highlight *participation rates* in sport and to underscore the unlikelihood of children participating in various sports in high school, college, and/or professionally
- *communication*: it offered parents strategies for communicating with their children, other parents, and coaches in organized youth sport;
- *working with coaches*: it offered parents tips from athletes and coaches on how and when to communicate and offer feedback;
- *sport parent behavior*: it provided parents with tools for becoming effectively involved in their children's sport experiences; specifically, it outlined a range of parent verbal sideline behaviors and their potential consequences and highlighted what children report wanting and not wanting from parents before, during, and after competitions ;
- *positive sport parenting*: it focused on supportive parenting strategies, meeting the emotional demands of sport, forging healthy relationships, and choosing appropriate sport settings for children.

According to the model developed by Lafferty and Triggs (2014), i.e. the *Working With Parents in Sport Model* (WWPS-model), the goal of working with parents is to increase their empowerment so that they can proactively support their child athletes. Through their studies, the researchers have come to outline the connection between parental behavior, especially negative parental behavior, and the potential problems, by analyzing it across 3 areas of relevance: parent knowledge and understanding, emotional involvement, emotional control/management and behavioral management. The observations of parental behavior in the first area of parental knowledge indicate that, when it is weak or superficial, it leads to two specific potential problems:

- inability to understand performance evaluation;
- become an expert quickly.

As for other areas - emotional involvement, emotional control/management and behavioral management - the observations show that these aspects can influence evaluation and attributions, especially when the parent is non-rational, emotionally driven and conditioned by the conspiracy theory. Such a condition could lead to problems related to:

- losing sight of the path, due to the continuous social comparison and the obsession with other performers;
- living life through the child, often associated with high investment in sporting child and

- expectations of success;
- conditional support, meaning that parental supportive behavior is conditioned by the child's result and outcomes;
- performance blindness, occurring when the concentration is all on the final goal and the perspective of the performance with respect to peers is lost.

Each of these areas represents a dimension on which to activate the training work and facilitate positive parental behavior. For this reason, the theoretical model has been articulated by the authors from a practical point of view, according to a two-stage approach that provides guidelines for sport practitioners (Tab. 1). The first stage, *information sharing*, aims to enhance parents' knowledge about sport, sports procedures, relationships and roles and the outcomes concern the increase in understanding regarding performance development pathway, roles of the coach, and expectations of parents. The second stage, *behavior management*, aims to work on parents' skills to create a positive sporting environment and to help parents understand how their own emotional reactions can negatively impact upon performance. This stage is divided into two sections; one is dedicated to emotional involvement, which focuses on investment and support to help parents to identify needs of their children and manage their behavior; the other is dedicated to emotional control/management, articulated into sport success and sport failure, and on how to use emotional regulation strategies to support children. The expected outcomes of this second stage are: unconditional support, emotional regulation, understanding the negative effects to irrational evaluation, and implementing coping strategies to support children's difficulties in sport.

STAGE	AREA	CORE COMPONENT AND KEY QUESTIONS
<p style="text-align: center;">1 INFORMATION SHARING (Knowledge & Understanding of the sport)</p>	The sport	What (if any) are the specific rules and regulations at this level of performance? What is the long term athlete development pathway? What is expected of and from me by the sport? How do they work together to ensure my son/daughter develops as both an athlete and person?
	Procedures	What are the key policies relevant to athlete confidentiality? What ethical principles guide practice and the sharing information? What channels of communication are used to convey information? How is young athlete development monitored? What are the key performance indicators? What is the selection process? What is the appeals procedure? What support mechanisms are in place to support athlete during stage transition (successful and unsuccessful)?
	Roles	As a parent what the roles and responsibilities at this level? Whose is involved in providing support for the young athlete's development? What is the role of the squad coach/coaches? How will they work and liaise with the athlete's home coach of club? What is the role of the team manager?
	Relationships	What are the channels of communication between those in the support network? How will these groups work with parents? Who is the first line of communication for parents? How will information be shared? What is the relationship between the squad and the home team/coach?

2 BEHAVIOR MANA- GEMENT (Emotional reaction)	Emotional Involvement	What is meant by emotional involvement? How do we explain the relationship between emotional involvement and positive parenting? What is the impact of emotional involvement upon the performance in this sport? How does emotional involvement influence performance evaluation? How does emotional investment change with time and what may be the outcomes of this? What is considered positive emotional involvement? What is emotional support? What are key ways of providing positive emotional support for the young performer?
	Emotional Control and Manage- ment	Emotional involvement and strategies for developing emotional control Strategies for evaluating performance Managing emotions when analyzing performance Emotions and the formulation of attributions

Tab. 1 Core component and key questions for stage 1 and 2 of WWPS-model (Lafferty & Triggs, 2014)

The aspects that unite the programs presented and that we can identify as key dimensions at the base of the construction of an effective sport-family partnership are: the area of communication-relationship, of emotional management and motor-sports performance. They represent three transversal instances of the family and sports context and essential points from which to plan training interventions, both with coaches and with parents. The informations, thoughts and emotions that the family builds around the children's sports experience shape sport on a daily basis. The role of parents is a value that influences sports participation and for this reason the relationships that sport builds with the "outside", in terms of educational co-responsibilities, are aspects to be clarified and placed at the center of coaching training. The space between sport and family is a space of possible widening of the educational potential through the forms of containment between the educational specificities of the two areas of life of the children. The programs described clarify the scope of the contribution that sport and the family give to the project of co-education, although there are different educational ways and goals expressed by the family and sport and, at times, still opposed.

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