Title: The Working with Parents in Sport Model (WWPS-model): A practical guide for practitioners working with parents of elite young performers

Date: 15 July 2014

Originally published in: Journal of Sport Psychology in Action


Version of item: Author's accepted manuscript

Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/10034/326342
A practitioners guide for working with parents in sport (WWPS-Model).
Abstract

In this paper we introduce the Working with Parents in Sport Model (WWPS-Model), which highlights key areas applied practitioners can use to inform their practice with regard to the development and implementation of support programmes for parents/guardians of elite junior athletes. The stage approach and nature of the model, which is accompanied by practical checklists, are all intended to serve as a valuable resource to both the experienced professional and the neophyte practitioner about to engage on the applied practice journey within an elite junior sporting environment.

KEYWORDS Parents, sport, practice model, intervention, support
For applied sport psychologists who work within an elite junior sporting environment one of the most significant challenges they face is working with parents in order to inform the positive and realistic expectations they have of their child’s sporting success (Smoll, Cumming, & Smith, 2011). This becomes crucial as sporting milestones such as transitions between teams, clubs and squads, selection trials, and for a select few, international team membership is experienced. Whilst many researchers advocate the need for positive working relationships between individuals within a young athletes’ support network (Visck, Harris, & Bloom, 2009), to-date there has been a tendency for research to focus on developing relationships between the parent and coach as well as the coach and performer (Felton & Jowett, 2012). Relatively little information and/or guidance has been provided on how the sport psychologist can work both directly and indirectly with parents to facilitate and develop the necessary positive behaviors required to support their child as they move along their respective sports’ development pathway.

This developmental journey may see the young athlete transition from local club through to elite squad and possibly team in a relatively short time frame. Quite often this means that parents do not have a chance to adjust to the demands placed on them in terms of investment and commitment (Côté, 1999). Ideally, parents need to remain at all times in what Brackenridge (2006) described as an active to proactive state, within which, there is full commitment to supporting the child and a willingness to develop their knowledge and understanding of the sport. However, there are few guiding papers or applied models relating specifically to working with parents in sport, which could be used to inform applied practice.

The aim of the present paper is to introduce a model that can be used as a framework by practitioners to inform and guide their applied practice when they are working with parents of elite junior athletes. The proposed model has been developed from our experiences
of working as applied practitioners within elite junior sporting environments across a range of individual and team sports. We begin by describing the development of the model and illustrate how our experiences in the field and theoretical analysis informed its formation. We then present the practice model and discuss how it can be used by practitioners as a reference point to guide their practice.

**Developing the WWPS-Model.**

Based upon our reflections, discussions and peer debriefing, which forms part of our practice modus operandi (Andersen, 2005; Cropley, Hanton, Miles, & Niven, 2010) we began to question how we as practitioners could develop a framework to guide our practice and that of other practitioners who work in junior sport environments. Reflecting upon our personal philosophies and our methods of practice it became evident that one of the central tenants when we worked with parents was the focus on empowering them so they could positively and proactively support their child/young athlete. These preliminary discussions led us to share personal experiences of working in the field with parents, and in particular, aspects of positive and negative parental behavior in sporting situations. It became obvious that many of the scenarios we focused upon individually, and returned to in discussion, centred on the associated problems arising from negative parental behavior. We then explored whether we could link these observed behaviors and actions to specific attributes of the parent. This resulted in the development of a flow diagram, where observations and potential problems were linked to the pertinent areas of parental knowledge and involvement, as well as parental emotional and behavioral management skills (Figure 1). Using this flow diagram as a catalyst, we then explored each area in more depth. Consequently identifying negative outcomes and examining how research could be used to explain and substantiate our personal observations and analysis.
As we discussed the area of knowledge and understanding, it became clear that if this was not enhanced and or updated in tandem with progression along talent development, pathway problems were encountered (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). For example, we noted the tendency for new parents to listen to and gain information from other parents who were already inhabitants of the respective sporting environment, based sometimes on the premise that length of time within the system equated to a higher level of knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, we also discussed how there was a tendency for parents to listen to others who were louder and/or arguably charismatic, and who adopted the persona of an expert, with an over eagerness to instruct and inform from what could be considered a weak and or superficial sport knowledge base. Both of these situations could lead to parents being misinformed and rather than help progression could even hinder it (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005).

Critically, if parents do not understand the system and/or their roles and responsibilities, then it is impossible for them to adequately and proactively support their son/daughter (Smoll et al., 2011). Whilst Brackenridge (2005) suggested that proactive parents seek out opportunities to learn about the sport and enhance their knowledge, in reality this can at times be difficult. Opportunities for knowledge development may not be available as part of the programme and even when they are, attendance may be difficult due to other family commitments. When information is not readily available some parents may feel uncomfortable actively seeking knowledge due to either a lack of confidence or, a fear of being perceived as pushy or over eager. Based on our observations and combined with the collective research findings and recommendations of Knight, Boden, and Holt (2010) and Martindale, Collins and Daubney (2005), we identified the need for any model to include educational components (sport and or role orientated).

When we focused attention on issues surrounding emotional and behavioral management skills we identified several examples of problematic parental behavior. We noted
instances where parents had become so focused upon their child’s achievements that they had lost sight of how these results related to the National Governing Body key performance indicators. They seemed to enter a state of performance blindness where immersion in the final goal (e.g. international team selection) became so dominant to the parent that they lost perspective of their child’s ability and performance with respect to their peers. We also identified, through reflecting on our experiences in the field, situations where parents’ emotional investment in wanting their child to succeed created a situation whereby parents lost sight of the performance development journey. They failed to see the bigger picture of long term athlete development and become obsessed with social comparisons between their child and other athletes. When parents are unable to control and manage their emotions in light of success and failure (Van Yperen, 1998) and or their level of emotional involvement exceeds that required by their child, problems can be encountered in terms of positive parental support (Leff & Hoyle, 1995; Brustad, 1996).

We also noted how, when listening to parents who were struggling with emotional control / behavioral management, they often explained performance in terms of external attributes such as, the referee made the wrong decisions, your performance suffered because; your team mates didn’t play well, the judge doesn’t like you, you haven’t made the team because the coach/selector doesn’t know what they are doing. These types of attributions are often used as a protection mechanism but do not necessarily facilitate positive growth for the young performer (Graham, Kowalski, & Crocker, 2002).

When performance evaluations and attributions are combined with, and arise from, poor emotional control and management; we often see problems within the parent group through the adoption of a conspiracy outlook. The parents’ emotional involvement has increased to such a point that emotion drives and pervades all evaluation. They are unable to review outcomes with respect to actual performance and believe that within the squad/team
culture they are an outsider and everyone is working against them. This situation can create numerous problems for both the parent and performer. It may give rise to the parents being identified as ‘problem parents’, it can also negatively impact upon their relationship with other parents and could in extreme situations disrupt team/squad cohesion. If left unchecked this may eventually lead to specific parents being identified as or referred to as, the cancer within the team. A term used by Cope, Eys, Schinke, and Bosselut (2010) to describe athletes ‘who expresses negative emotions that spread destructively through the team’ (p. 421), a concept we feel is equally applicable to parents.

Reflecting upon our initial diagram and through discussion with other sport psychologists it became evident that each of these areas presented a point where intervention could facilitate positive parental development and a failure to address aspects could give rise to potential problems. However, for us to develop a model that could be used to inform and guide practice we needed to simplify our thoughts into a workable and practical framework. Hence our decision to present a two-stage ‘Working with Parents in Sport Model (WWPS-Model), which encapsulates our initial ideas and can be used to guide practice for those sport psychologists, practitioners and coaches working with parents of elite junior athletes.

Explanation and Application of the WWPS-Model.

The proposed practice model is shown in Figure 2 and focuses on a two-stage approach, which we have termed information sharing (stage 1) and behavior management (stage 2). In the following sections we review both of these stages presenting basic guidelines and pointers for practitioners wishing to utilise this approach.

***************Insert figure 2 here***************

Stage 1 Information sharing
Overview

The first stage of the WWPS-model focuses on helping parents to develop knowledge and understanding of the following four key areas; the sport, sporting procedures, relationships and roles.

Critically however, the sharing of information to enhance parents’ understanding of the sport, their roles and responsibilities, represents only one component of the first stage of the WWPS-Model. There is also the need to ensure that parents understand the roles of all those working within the sporting structure and the often complex relationships between these parties. For example, at national squad level where young athletes may be striving for international selection, they may not only be working with a national team coach but also with a home coach. In this instance it is imperative that parents support and aid the formation of a positive alliance between these two parties, and that the coaches also work positively together, in order for the technical aspects of performance identified and worked upon during training camps to be included within their home training regime. If there is incongruence between the squad coach and a local/home coach then this may hinder the performance of the young athlete. The young athlete could also become confused and frustrated, which could impact upon motivation, enjoyment and self-confidence (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009).

Young athletes and their parents will also come into contact with sport science and medicine specialists (SSMS), along with team management official’s including, selectors and at times other personnel from the sport national governing body. It is important for parents to understand the support structure, the relationships between all those involved, how information will be disseminated, and critically the expectations of them.

Implementation Stage 1
Whether stage 1 is delivered through one or two workshops is dependent upon the sport and the complexity of the sporting environment. We suggest that practitioners may find it helpful to use Table 1 as a framework for structuring the sessions and may also want to insert a third column outlining where or from whom key information can be accessed and also the key personnel involved in delivery or information sharing.

*************Insert Table 1 here*************

We also advocate when following this outline that practitioners include an icebreaker activity. For example, dividing the parents into smaller groups and allowing them 10 minutes to identify any personal key questions. The use of this approach has two benefits for the practitioner. Firstly, it ensures that not only is the key information covered, but also any concerns and queries raised by parents can be addressed. Quite often this list can be used when summarising the session to check that any pre-session concerns have been allayed. Secondly, inviting parents to share any concerns they have relating to knowledge and understanding helps develop a collaborative ethos avoiding a didactic scenario where parents are talked at and may suffer from information overload.

Stage 2 - Behavioral Management

The second stage of the model focuses on working with parents to develop skills that will create a positive performance environment for their young performer. Ultimately, support should be unconditional (Power & Woolger, 1994) however, unless parents are educated in the areas of emotional involvement and personal control/management, we often encounter situations where their emotions impact upon practical evaluation and subsequent attributions (Figure 2).

It is well documented that as a junior athlete moves along the performance development pathway the level of parental investment increases in terms of time, financial
involvement, and life style change (Côté, 1999; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). This combined
with the parents’ ability to manage effectively their own emotions with respect to success and
failure is critical in developing and maintaining a positive performance environment.

Therefore, the aim of the second stage is to educate parents about emotional
involvement and where necessary implement interventions to help parents develop their
emotional control and thus be able to support the emotional development and control of their
child/ young athlete.

**Implementation Stage 2**

Whilst we believe that several people may be instrumental in the delivery of stage 1
(for example, the coach or manager), stage 2 involves the parents working closely with the
sport psychologist. The number of sessions involved in the delivery of this stage we again
suggest is malleable and the sport psychologist needs to be guided by their professional
philosophy, the working environment, sport demands, and situation.

We suggest that this stage is delivered through a series of workshops with all the
parents, followed up as necessary with private or small group sessions. In Table 2 we present
the core areas of stage 2 of the WWPS- Model and identify key points /questions and
pertinent theoretical factors, which offer guidance to the practitioner in developing content
which is appropriate to their target parent audience.

***************Insert Table 2 here***************

**Outcomes of the WWPS-Model.**

Addressing the key areas in stage 1 and 2 of the WWPS-model can help parents
develop effective support mechanisms and foster positive relationships with key personnel in
the sporting structure (Figure 2). We suggest that by helping parents to develop their own
emotional and behavioral management skills, along with positive methods of evaluating their
child’s performance, sport psychologists can reduce the risk of problems, previously
identified in figure 1. Consequently, creating a positive sporting experience for the respective
young athletes, and which may ultimately enrich and foster more harmonious athlete parent
relationships.

Enhancing parents’ knowledge and understanding of the sport and the policies and
procedures within the athlete development pathway can enhance communication and aid in
the development of effective relationships with; coaches, trainers and management personnel.
Increasing parents’ knowledge and understanding can also help to promote and foster positive
relationships between parents. Parents are integral to junior sport and developing
relationships between parents can provide a positive yet informal social support network that
could contribute to the development of a positive sporting experience for all.

Concluding comments.

The formation of the WWPS-model emerged from our personal experiences of
working within elite junior sporting environments, a journey where we have witnessed, at
times, the negative effects of parental involvement. We have endeavoured within this paper to
outline how a sport psychologist may use the WWPS–Model to guide their practice by
identifying what we consider to be the pertinent and key points to consider at both stages,
linking to key research to substantiate ideas. We do not include detail on how to deliver the
proposed sessions, as we are conscious that the actual methods of delivery will be driven by
the practitioner’s personal philosophy and approach (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza,
2004) and the specific sporting culture they reside in. Our aim was to provide and present a
foundation for practitioners working with parents in the field of junior sport and young
athlete development. We believe that, whilst there is an abundance of research relating to
parents in sport, the actual practice of working in collaboration with parents has received little attention to date and the WWPS- Model presents a framework to fill this void.
References


Figure 1 – Parents in the junior sporting environment, problems and issues.
Figure 2 – The Working with Parents in Sport Model (WWPS- Model).

Table 1 - Core components and key questions for stage 1 information sharing.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of knowledge &amp; understanding</th>
<th>Key points to consider, questions which could inform content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 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 of 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 the athlete during stage transitions (successful and unsuccessful?) |
| Roles                             | As a parent what are 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 or 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? |

Table 2 - Core components and key questions for stage 2 behavior management.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key points and questions which could inform content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Involvement</td>
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</table>
| Emotional Control and Management | Emotional involvement and strategies for developing emotional control  
Strategies for evaluating performance  
Managing emotions when analysing performance  
Emotions and the formulation of attributions |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| How do we explain the relationship between emotional involvement and positive parenting  
What is the impact of emotional involvement upon 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? |