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6 A practitioners guide for working with parents in sport (WWPS-Model).

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Abstract

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

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34 **KEYWORDS** Parents, sport, practice model, intervention, support

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

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

57

58 The aim of the present paper is to introduce a model that can be used as a framework
59 by practitioners to inform and guide their applied practice when they are working with
60 parents of elite junior athletes. The proposed model has been developed from our experiences

61 of working as applied practitioners within elite junior sporting environments across a range
62 of individual and team sports. We begin by describing the development of the model and
63 illustrate how our experiences in the field and theoretical analysis informed its formation. We
64 then present the practice model and discuss how it can be used by practitioners as a reference
65 point to guide their practice.

66 **Developing the WWPS-Model.**

67 Based upon our reflections, discussions and peer debriefing, which forms part of our
68 practice modus operandi (Andersen, 2005; Cropley, Hanton, Miles, & Niven, 2010) we began
69 to question how we as practitioners could develop a framework to guide our practice and that
70 of other practitioners who work in junior sport environments. Reflecting upon our personal
71 philosophies and our methods of practice it became evident that one of the central tenants
72 when we worked with parents was the focus on empowering them so they could positively
73 and proactively support their child/young athlete. These preliminary discussions led us to
74 share personal experiences of working in the field with parents, and in particular, aspects of
75 positive and negative parental behavior in sporting situations. It became obvious that many of
76 the scenarios we focused upon individually, and returned to in discussion, centred on the
77 associated problems arising from negative parental behavior. We then explored whether we
78 could link these observed behaviors and actions to specific attributes of the parent. This
79 resulted in the development of a flow diagram, where observations and potential problems
80 were linked to the pertinent areas of parental knowledge and involvement, as well as parental
81 emotional and behavioral management skills (Figure 1). Using this flow diagram as a
82 catalyst, we then explored each area in more depth. Consequently identifying negative
83 outcomes and examining how research could be used to explain and substantiate our personal
84 observations and analysis.

85 *****Insert figure 1 here*****

86 As we discussed the area of knowledge and understanding, it became clear that if this
87 was not enhanced and or updated in tandem with progression along talent development,
88 pathway problems were encountered (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). For example, we noted the
89 tendency for new parents to listen to and gain information from other parents who were
90 already inhabitants of the respective sporting environment, based sometimes on the premise
91 that length of time within the system equated to a higher level of knowledge and
92 understanding. Furthermore, we also discussed how there was a tendency for parents to listen
93 to others who were louder and/or arguably charismatic, and who adopted the persona of an
94 expert, with an over eagerness to instruct and inform from what could be considered a weak
95 and or superficial sport knowledge base. Both of these situations could lead to parents being
96 misinformed and rather than help progression could even hinder it (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005).

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

109 When we focused attention on issues surrounding emotional and behavioral
110 management skills we identified several examples of problematic parental behavior. We noted

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

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

131 When performance evaluations and attributions are combined with, and arise from,
132 poor emotional control and management; we often see problems within the parent group
133 through the adoption of a conspiracy outlook. The parents' emotional involvement has
134 increased to such a point that emotion drives and pervades all evaluation. They are unable to
135 review outcomes with respect to actual performance and believe that within the squad/team

136 culture they are an outsider and everyone is working against them. This situation can create
137 numerous problems for both the parent and performer. It may give rise to the parents being
138 identified as ‘problem parents’, it can also negatively impact upon their relationship with
139 other parents and could in extreme situations disrupt team /squad cohesion. If left unchecked
140 this may eventually lead to specific parents being identified as or referred to as, the cancer
141 within the team. A term used by Cope, Eys, Schinke, and Bosselut (2010) to describe athletes
142 ‘who expresses negative emotions that spread destructively through the team’ (p. 421), a
143 concept we feel is equally applicable to parents.

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

152

153 **Explanation and Application of the WWPS-Model.**

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

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

159 **Stage 1 Information sharing**

160 *Overview*

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

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

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

182 *Implementation Stage 1*

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

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

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

198 **Stage 2 - Behavioral Management**

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

205 It is well documented that as a junior athlete moves along the performance
206 development pathway the level of parental investment increases in terms of time, financial

207 involvement, and life style change (Côté, 1999; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). This combined
208 with the parents' ability to manage effectively their own emotions with respect to success and
209 failure is critical in developing and maintaining a positive performance environment.

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

214 *Implementation Stage 2*

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

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

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

226 **Outcomes of the WWPS-Model.**

227 Addressing the key areas in stage 1 and 2 of the WWPS-model can help parents
228 develop effective support mechanisms and foster positive relationships with key personnel in
229 the sporting structure (Figure 2). We suggest that by helping parents to develop their own

230 emotional and behavioral management skills, along with positive methods of evaluating their
231 child's performance, sport psychologists can reduce the risk of problems, previously
232 identified in figure 1. Consequently, creating a positive sporting experience for the respective
233 young athletes, and which may ultimately enrich and foster more harmonious athlete parent
234 relationships.

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

242

243

Concluding comments.

244 The formation of the WWPS-model emerged from our personal experiences of
245 working within elite junior sporting environments, a journey where we have witnessed, at
246 times, the negative effects of parental involvement. We have endeavoured within this paper to
247 outline how a sport psychologist may use the WWPS--Model to guide their practice by
248 identifying what we consider to be the pertinent and key points to consider at both stages,
249 linking to key research to substantiate ideas. We do not include detail on how to deliver the
250 proposed sessions, as we are conscious that the actual methods of delivery will be driven by
251 the practitioner's personal philosophy and approach (Poczwadowski, Sherman, & Ravizza,
252 2004) and the specific sporting culture they reside in. Our aim was to provide and present a
253 foundation for practitioners working with parents in the field of junior sport and young
254 athlete development. We believe that, whilst there is an abundance of research relating to

255 parents in sport, the actual practice of working in collaboration with parents has received
256 little attention to date and the WWPS- Model presents a framework to fill this void.

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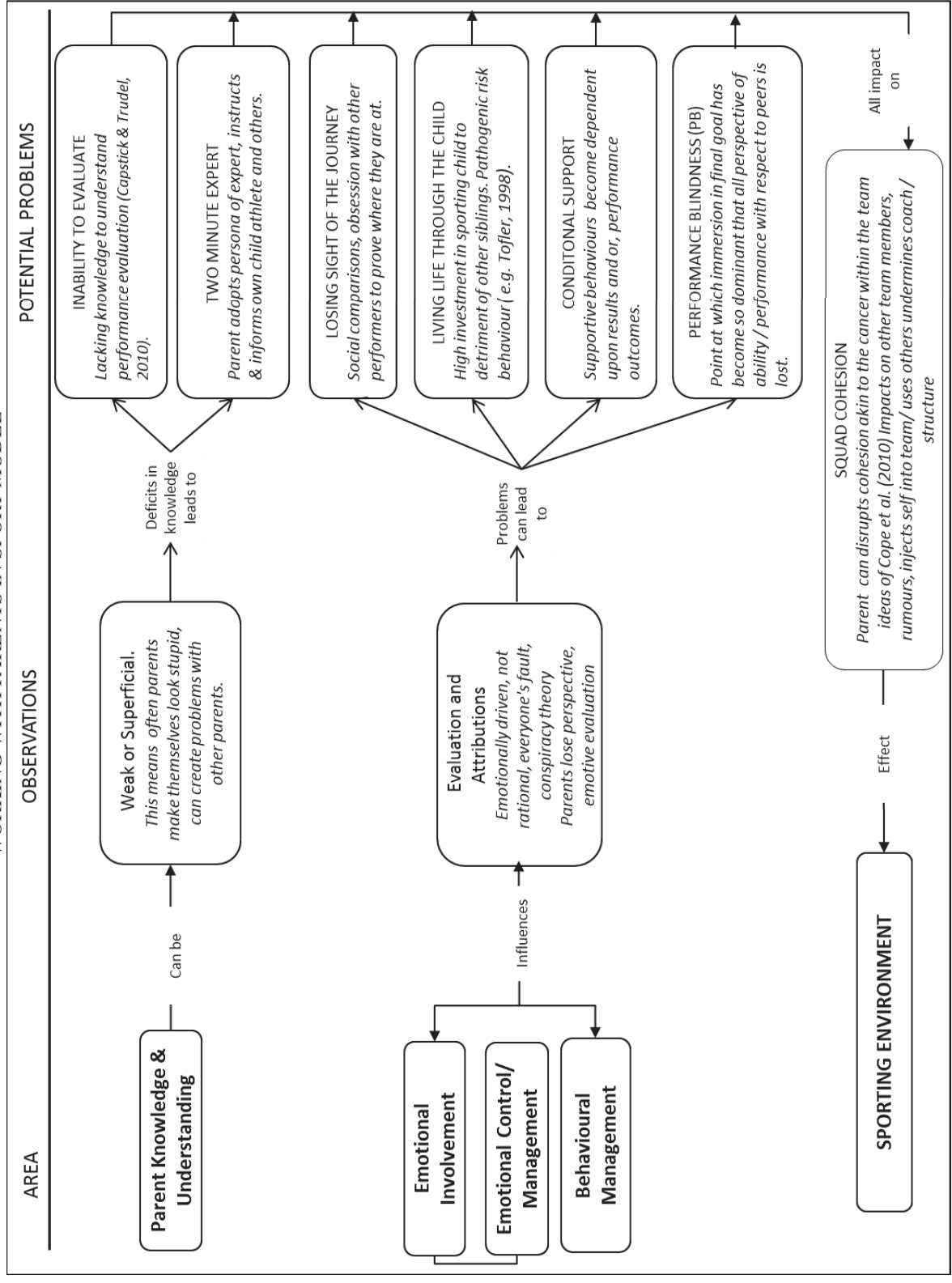
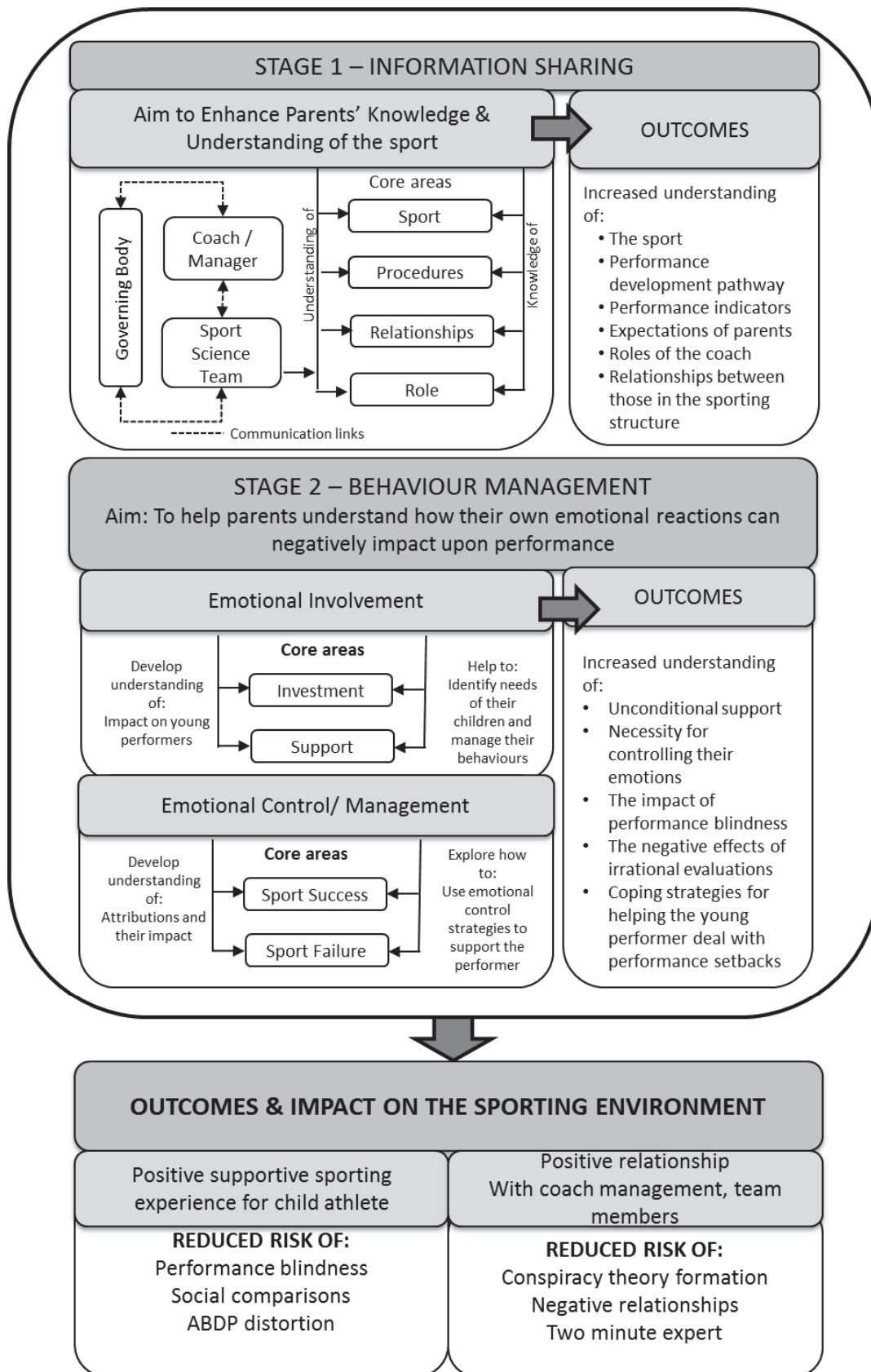


Figure 1 – Parents in the junior sporting environment, problems and issues.



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Figure 2 – The Working with Parents in Sport Model (WWPS- Model).

310

Table 1 - Core components and key questions for stage 1 information sharing.

Area of knowledge & understanding	Key points to consider, questions which could inform content
The sport	<p>What (if any) are the specific rules and regulations at this level of performance?</p> <p>What is the long term athlete development pathway?</p> <p>What is expected of and from me by the sport?</p> <p>How do they work together to ensure my son/daughter develops as both an athlete and person?</p>
Procedures	<p>What are the key policies relevant to athlete confidentiality?</p> <p>What ethical principles guide practice and the sharing of information?</p> <p>What channels of communication are used to convey information?</p> <p>How is young athlete development monitored?</p> <p>What are the key performance indicators?</p> <p>What is the selection process?</p> <p>What is the appeals procedure?</p> <p>What support mechanisms are in place to support the athlete during stage transitions (successful and unsuccessful?)</p>
Roles	<p>As a parent what are the roles and responsibilities at this level?</p> <p>Whose is involved in providing support for the young athlete's development?</p> <p>What is the role of the squad coach/coaches?</p> <p>How will they work and liaise with the athlete's home coach or club?</p> <p>What is the role of the team manager?</p>
Relationships	<p>What are the channels of communication between those in the support network?</p> <p>How will these groups work with parents?</p> <p>Who is the first line of communication for parents?</p> <p>How will information be shared?</p> <p>What is the relationship between the squad and the home team/coach?</p>

311

312

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

	Key points and questions which could inform content
Emotional Involvement	What is meant by emotional involvement?

	<p>How do we explain the relationship between emotional involvement and positive parenting</p> <p>What is the impact of emotional involvement upon performance in this sport</p> <p>How does emotional involvement influence performance evaluation</p> <p>How does emotional investment change with time and what may be the outcomes of this?</p> <p>What is considered positive emotional involvement?</p> <p>What is emotional support?</p> <p>What are key ways of providing positive emotional support for the young performer?</p>
<p>Emotional Control and Management</p>	<p>Emotional involvement and strategies for developing emotional control</p> <p>Strategies for evaluating performance</p> <p>Managing emotions when analysing performance</p> <p>Emotions and the formulation of attributions</p>

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