

**‘It’s alpha omega for succeeding and thriving’:  
Parents, children and sporting cultivation in Norway**

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## **Abstract**

It has become increasingly apparent, internationally, that childhood is a crucial life-stage in the formation of predispositions towards sports participation and that parents are increasingly investing in the sporting capital of their children via a process of ‘concerted cultivation’. It is surprising, therefore, that parents’ involvement in the development of their children’s sporting interests has received so little attention in Norway, given that sport is a significant pastime for Norwegians and participation has been steadily increasing – among youngsters, in particular – over the past several decades. Through a qualitative case study of a combined primary and secondary school in a small Norwegian city, this study sought to add to recent explorations of the role of parents in children’s sporting involvement in Norway. As expected, it was evident that sport becomes taken for granted and internalized very early on in Norwegian children’s lives. Less expected was the recognition that children’s nascent sporting interests were often generated by sports clubs via early years schooling and, therefore, that parents played only one (albeit very important) part in the formation of their youngsters’ early sporting habits. Thus, parents, sports clubs and early years schooling appeared to form something akin to a ‘sporting trinity’ in youngsters’ nascent sporting careers. These findings may have implications for policy-makers looking towards Norway for the ‘recipe’ for sports participation.

Keywords: parents, concerted cultivation, socialisation, sport

## Introduction

Amid the growing interest in the role of parents in sporting socialization (Haycock & Smith, 2014; Hayoz, Klostermann, Schmid, Schlesinger, & Nagel, 2017), little attention has been paid, until recently, to Scandinavian countries, such as Norway, in which sports participation is relatively high, particularly among young people, and much higher than beyond the Nordic region. Sport is a significant pastime for Norwegians and participation has been steadily increasing over several decades (Green, Thurston, Vaage, & Roberts, 2015; Seippel, Strandbu, & Sletten, 2011; Vaage, 2015). The relative dearth of interest<sup>1</sup> in the sports socialization process is all the more surprising in light of the increasing attention being paid to a country and region where health-related physical activity is commonplace and which is believed to offer ‘salutary lessons’ (Bairner, 2010) to those seeking to combat growing levels of sedentariness.

The high sports participation rates in Norway are likely to be, in part, an epiphenomenon of favourable socio-economic conditions (e.g. relatively high incomes, high levels of employment, good paternity as well as maternity leave, flexible working hours, subsidized childcare, and greater gender equality). Nevertheless, the evident strength and pervasiveness of the sporting culture or ‘way of life’ – what might be termed a Norwegian or Nordic ‘group habitus’ for sport – begs questions about the role of parents and families in transmitting crucial predispositions towards sports participation<sup>2</sup>.

While the role of parenting in generating and sustaining sporting cultures remains under-researched in Norway, two recent publications (Stefansen, Smette, &

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1 Studies in Sweden notwithstanding (see, for example, Eliasson, 2009; Karp, 2000).

2 ‘Sport’ is taken to include not only organised, competitive, and physically vigorous activities but also unorganised, so-called lifestyle sports and physical recreation more generally (Green, 2010).

Strandbu, 2016a, 2016b) have examined why Norwegian parents have become increasingly involved in their children's organized sports participation since the 1970s. The present study sets out to build upon the work of Stefansen et al. by exploring 'how' as well as 'why' Norwegian parents cultivate the sports participation and sporting habits of their children.

In the following section, we briefly summarise key aspects of the existing literature in relation to parenting and sports socialisation, parents' perceptions of the benefits of sports participation, the normalisation of 'good' parenting and parenting and sports participation in Norway.

### ***Parenting and sports socialisation***

#### *Parenting and 'concerted cultivation'*

One of the features of research on parenting, in general, over the past decade or more has been the focus upon the strategies and practices employed by parents and, more specifically, what has been termed 'concerted cultivation'. The concept of 'concerted cultivation' originated with Lareau's (2003) ethnographic research charting how middle-class parents had become more concerned about, and pro-active in, their children's development. Working-class parents, by contrast, were said to merely secure their children's basic needs. Lareau (2003) posited a 'cultural logic of child rearing' wherein middle-class parents strove to cultivate key aspects of their children's lives in a concerted manner. Thus, through 'essential assistance' and 'concerted cultivation' respectively, under-class and middle-class parents inculcate a variety of skills, dispositions and habits in areas such as sports participation.

### *Parenting strategies and practices*

Concerted cultivation can be said to manifest itself in two broad ways: strategies and practices. In sociological terms, strategizing involves rational calculation and planning in pursuit of short, medium and long-term objectives. Parenting strategies involve parents' thinking about how best to achieve specific goals: how, for instance, to get their children into specific sports and keep them involved. One such strategy involves 'sampling' – parents deliberately and strategically introducing their children to several different types of sports in order that they acquire diverse experiences, with all the associated benefits believed to accrue (Wheeler & Green, 2012). Parenting practices, on the other hand, refer to what parents actually do in order to effect the aforementioned strategies. In relation to sports participation, this includes different types of logistical and emotional support in order to facilitate children's participation: for example, transporting youngsters to and from activities, helping them get ready by preparing equipment, paying for equipment and membership fees, and spectating, as well as encouraging and providing advice (Wheeler, 2011). Practices such as these are likely to be particularly significant in the Norwegian context, given the centrality of parents as volunteers in the well-established voluntary sports club sector (Stefansen et al., 2016a; Støckel, Strandbu, Solenes, Jørgensen, & Fransson, 2010).

### *Parents' perceptions of the benefits of sports participation*

In terms of *why* parents socialize their children into sport, there is a well-established literature. Alongside the seemingly self-evident intrinsic benefits gleaned from sports participation – such as the experience of mastery and the associated enjoyment, akin to what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls 'flow' – a wealth of research reveals that parents particularly value the supposed extrinsic benefits, such as health promotion and social development (Coakley, 2006). In Sweden, for example, Eliasson's (2009) work in the

field of child socialization in the context of sports revealed differing ‘behavioural logics’ among parents and children in relation to participation in football – while parents tended to value what they saw as the cultivational aspects of sports, their children tended to highlight the social aspects.

Sports participation has also been said to deliver benefits for parents, themselves, not least in the form of opportunities for social bonding (Bach, 2014; Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2015). Moreover, sport is often presented as an arena for parents to ‘prove their worth’ as parents (Trussell & Shaw, 2012). In the context of the current study, it is worth saying a little more about this.

#### *The normalisation of ‘good’ parenting*

Parenting in sport is an especially public act, observed and judged by others (Trussell & Shaw, 2012), wherein discourses of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ parenting are continually produced and reproduced by parents themselves (Perrier, 2013; Wheeler & Green, 2012). Thus, the context of parenting – sports clubs, schools and neighbourhood networks, for example – can have a profound influence on parents’ perception of appropriate parenting strategies and practices (Bach, 2014; Wheeler, 2011). Several studies have demonstrated a growing expectation for parents – and fathers, in particular (Kay, 2009a, 2009b) – to be involved in their children’s leisure activities (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016).

With norms for ‘good parenting’ in mind, attention has been drawn to a moral discourse surrounding cultural expectations vis-à-vis the ‘physically literate’ child; in other words, the supposedly essential skills and qualities children should be given the opportunity to acquire, by their parents (Vincent & Ball, 2007; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). In short, those who possess the necessary economic and socio-cultural resources (typically, the middle-classes) appear increasingly likely to invest in a variety of recreational activities for their children (Evans & Davies, 2010; Lareau, 2003; Vincent

& Ball, 2007; Vincent, Braun, & Ball, 2008) in what amounts to a form of concerted *sporting* cultivation.

Having said something about parenting and sports socialization, generally, we now want to focus upon parenting and sports participation in Norway, more specifically.

### ***Parenting and sports participation in Norway***

The growing literature on the role of parents in sports socialisation notwithstanding, there has, until recently, been little or nothing on Norway. Nonetheless, a recent study by Stefansen et al. (2016a, 2016b) explored the drivers for Norwegian parents' involvement in the sporting socialisation of their children; more specifically, why parents invested so much of their own and their children's time in the organized sporting arena. Stefansen et al. (2016b) found that parents regarded involvement in their children's sports participation as a 'natural' part of being a responsible parent and further concluded that the evident increase in parental involvement was a consequence of the parents' own enhanced sporting capital, resulting from the increased availability of sports when they were young.

Similar to international findings, Stefansen et al.'s (2016a, 2016b) parents anticipated both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits from sports participation for their children. All-in-all, their study told us a good deal about how parenting in Norway is framed by cultural ideals vis-à-vis sport alongside expectations of 'good' parenting which make sport an almost ideal arena for parents to prove their worth. The study did not, however, delve very far into just *how* Norwegian parents cultivate their youngsters' sporting involvement: in other words, the particular strategies and practices they employ and their significance or otherwise – the focus of this paper.

## Methods

The paper draws upon a study of parents whose ‘sporty’ children attended a combined primary and secondary school in the east of Norway. Data were collected from interviews with 10 families (11 parents) of 6<sup>th</sup> (11-12 years old) and 7<sup>th</sup> (12-13 years old) grade youngsters in order to explore how and why parents intervened in their children’s sporting socialisation. The school was purposively selected (Bryman, 2015) on the grounds that its proximity and familiarity to the researchers might facilitate access and recruitment. The recruitment of parents<sup>3</sup> was also undertaken purposively in the form of a criterion-based sample, where the criterion was parents of ‘sporty’ children – ‘sporty’ being defined as those active four times a week or more, based on data from Statistics Norway where ‘regular participation’ was defined as three to four times a week (Vaage, 2009).

It is worth acknowledging, at this point, that asking teachers to identify ‘sporty’ children is not straightforward, being prone to one particular weakness – the necessity of relying upon teachers’ impressions. Such data is problematic for two main reasons. First, there is the difficulty of ‘recall’ in all studies that rely upon any form of recall data. Setting the threshold at four or more times per week had two clear methodological advantages in terms of ameliorating the recall issue. On the one hand, defining ‘sporty’ as those active four times a week or more gave the teachers a relatively clear threshold with which to work (and one which locates those identified as ‘sporty’ firmly in what Statistics Norway would have called ‘regular’ participants). On the other hand, such a threshold was consistent with proxy definitions of ‘sporty’ utilised in other studies (see, for example, Vaage, 2009).

The second issue is the risk of *social desirability* (that is, the tendency for people

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3 Nine of the 10 families in the study constituted the ‘traditional’ two-parent families. The remaining family was headed by a single-mother sharing custody of her two children.

to over-estimate involvement in activities likely to be viewed positively by wider society – such as sports participation – and under-report behaviours that may be viewed negatively – such as sedentariness). We took the view that this would not be a significant problem in our study, given that the teachers (i) were being asked to identify others rather than themselves, and (ii) teachers would be unlikely to construe the measure being used ('sportiness' beyond school) as in any way a proxy measure for their own effectiveness.

The age of the children (11-13 years – i.e. the final years of primary school) was chosen on the grounds that across the developed world this is the period when sports participation levels tend to begin a slow and steady decline, not least because the influence of parents begins to give way to peers (Kirby, Levin, & Inchley, 2011; Ning, Gao, & Lodewyk, 2012). Ethical approval was obtained from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data and, in accordance with guidelines provided by The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees (2016), participants were provided with information about the project through an information sheet delivered via the school.

Ten families responded immediately. Nine interviews were undertaken with one parent, while one included both parents. Similar to the occupational classification of Stefansen et al. (2016b), those in 'professional occupations' typically had higher education and included consultants, higher-level teachers, company directors and so on, while 'semi-professionals' consisted of nurses, physiotherapists and social workers, for instance (Stefansen et al., 2016b). Class categorization was established based on family annual income and occupation classification, dividing into a binary middle-class (n=8) and working class (n=2).

Analysis of the data was based upon Braun and Clarke's (2006) and Charmaz's (2014) guidelines for thematic and grounded theory analysis respectively. Coding was

undertaken both deductively – using the specific research question(s) (focusing upon the *how* and *why*) (Patton, 2015) in order to confirm or challenge earlier research findings in the area – and inductively, as several emerging themes were identified.

The initial coding involved extracting raw ‘meaning units’ from the interviews. A ‘condensed code’ was then assigned to the meaning units. Following Charmaz (2014), ‘focused codes’ were developed consisting of a categorization of the condensed code(s). From the focused codes, a ‘thematic code’, comprising several of the focused codes (Charmaz, 2014) was then developed. After reviewing the themes and sub-themes, several themes were merged into overarching themes. Internal homogeneity PA (coherence between the meaning units within a theme) and external heterogeneity (clear distinction between the themes) (Patton, 2015) were ensured by going back and forth between the original dataset and the coding schemes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

## **Findings**

In the first instance, we present findings that highlight the centrality of sport in the lives of the families in the study. This is followed by an analysis of the key themes to emerge regarding the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of participation. The various sub-themes in the data include references to the proportion of respondents represented. The terms used are ‘few’ (equating to 1-2 participants), ‘some’ (3-5), most (6-7), ‘very many’ (8-9) and ‘all’ (10).

### **The centrality of sport**

#### *Childhood sports participation as normative*

Most parents viewed their children’s involvement in sport as ‘normal’ or to be expected: “It’s part of the culture at school and in the area – [that] you [children] should be active” (mother, family 2). Football, handball and gymnastics, in particular, were viewed as

central to the local sporting culture, for both boys and girls: “It is how it has been in [the city] for a long time, pretty much everyone starts playing football right before starting at school [i.e. at kindergarten]” (father, family 7). In this manner, very many of the parents highlighted the pervasiveness of sport in local children’s lives:

I remember when we first came here, it was almost like a 17th May [National Day] celebration: a lot of people rushing towards the sports hall, and I didn’t understand what it was. And it was ‘children’s gymnastics’. I have the impression that all children in [the city] have been there. Everyone we know has been there. (mother, family 5)

### *The centrality of sport in family life*

It was clear that sport played a central part in all of the families’ lives in the study. Most had several children attending several sports, several times each week, making their family schedules very busy and disrupting daily lives: “We support what we can and we set aside dinner-time to get the children to practice” (father, family 9). The fact that many parents (typically fathers) held some sort of official role at one or more of their children’s sports clubs further illustrated the centrality of sport in the families’ lives. This centrality, even pre-eminence, of sport was epitomised by a mother who spoke of her frustration with other parents in her child’s class where only half of the invited children attended her child’s birthday celebration because there was a football match arranged that day:

They said I should understand that they could not withdraw their children from a football match. That I as a parent had to go into the website and check their schedule. I just said “there you see how strong the football is. (mother, family 1)

### *Parental involvement as normative*

Parental involvement – in one capacity or another – in children’s sport was also viewed as an orthodoxy to be noted and commented upon in its absence: “It is the same parents

who are there and who are not there. Every time [...] It's how it is. And it's like that for voluntary work as well" (mother, family 4). Whether discussing and commenting upon degrees of parental involvement in sports clubs (for example, in the form of car-pooling or voluntary roles), perceived deviant behaviour (such as yelling rude or overly critical comments towards their children) and so forth, the parents in this study appeared acutely aware of the norms for good parenting in relation to their own roles in the sporting communities of their children.

Only a few of the parents were not currently participating in sport themselves, even at a recreational level. Whether involved or not, most of the parents conceded that they were not doing much at the moment, not least because they were prioritising their children's participation: "It isn't good to sit down at the office the whole day and just drive the children around, not doing much yourself. But I think it is important to create a good foundation for the children" (father, family 9).

### ***The 'how' of parental involvement***

There were two aspects to the ways in which parents enabled and encouraged their children's sports participation: parenting *strategies* and parenting *practices*.

#### *Parenting strategies*

Within parenting strategies, three sub-themes were identified: parental expectations; the recruitment process, and 'sport-life balance'.

*Parental expectations.* It was clear that, as far as very many of the parents were concerned, their children were not allowed to be sedentary: "They know that the alternative to doing something organized is to find something on their own, because sitting still is not an alternative. Not every day, the whole week. It won't happen." (mother, family 2).

*The recruitment process.* This sub-theme related to how the children were first enrolled in sports, particularly in the early years. While a few parents indicated that they had actively and intentionally introduced specific activities to their children early on, this usually applied to those enrolling their children into sports other than the ‘mainstream’ sports (specifically, football, handball and gymnastics). Otherwise, most parents claimed not to have done much to get their children interested in these sports in the early years: “I have not been the impetus, so it’s not like it’s me they got it from (laughs)” (father, family 10). Rather, the children’s initial interest often appeared to have been sparked by the (mainstream) sports clubs themselves reaching out to the children, as early as kindergarten. This initial contact often took the form of what amounted to adverts – typically, in the form of general announcement letters sent home with the children: “They got a note from the football club at kindergarten, and from handball at school, and they wanted to do that” (mother, family 2).

While most of the parents did not appear to play a major role in initiating the sporting interests of their children in the mainstream sports, some, nevertheless, consciously and intentionally sought to influence their off-spring, especially those parents who had specific and deep-seated sporting biographies on which to draw. In such cases, the parents appeared to have pointed their children in the direction of their own sports: “She has handball in her DNA, since I’ve been active myself” (father, family 7).

*The sport–life balance.* Despite the parents’ aforementioned aversion to sedentariness on the part of their children, they sought at the same time to ensure a “balance” between active leisure – in the form of sports participation – and the rest of their children’s lives: “We have a rule of a maximum of two different activities. They can’t do too much, because the total workload would be too big” (mother, family 2).

Thus, as important as sport was perceived to be by parents, it was not seen as more important than other aspects of their children's lives including, most notably, education. In fact, all of the parents prioritized homework over sport: "It is homework before practice. School is important. If it takes all the time, it becomes a problem. He gets to keep on doing it as long as he can balance his sports and schoolwork" (father, family 3).

### *Parenting Practices*

Parenting practices involve the specific actions of parents to support and facilitate their children's sports participation. Here, two sub-themes were developed: emotional support and instrumental support.

*Emotional support.* This sub-theme involved parents sharing sporting experiences with their children and, in the process, providing emotional support, of which two types were identified. The first involved simply 'being there'. In cases where the parents did not have a role in the club or sporting activity *per se*, very many of them still attended the different events (e.g. games and practices), even though they often viewed it as boring:

I like skiing and cycling, but I will be there for them nonetheless. I've been sitting in the swimming hall, and that is not the most exciting thing I do. But I have done it a lot, because both of them have been doing swimming classes. (mother, family 4)

A few of the parents also saw 'being there' as something more than just being in attendance – they felt they had a 'support role' to play:

It's part of the game. It's important that I'm there and watch over things, make sure she has what she needs at every time and that everything works [...] I have to prepare some skis the night before so that's ready, and make sure that everything is in place. It is a lot of stuff to remember, much different equipment. (father, family 6)

The second aspect of emotional support was feedback. All of the parents indicated that they offered comments about what they had observed, to encourage but also to reinforce commitment: “You know, he is 11 so they mess around a bit, but if he isn’t going to pay attention [to the trainer] we may as well stay home” (father, family 3). At the same time, these parents also claimed never to comment during the activities (unless they were coaches or had specific roles). Rather, they waited until the car drive afterwards or when at home. Furthermore, while all parents claimed to ensure they praised more than criticised, they admitted providing tips and advice:

We do give some critique as well, but she tolerates it less from us than from the coach. The ‘spikes’ are out at once. We try to say that “we do this to help you”, but it isn’t easy to understand. So, there is some door slamming every now and then (laughs). (father, family 9)<sup>4</sup>

*Instrumental support.* This sub-theme of ‘parenting practices’ amounted to parents ensuring that their children could take part or attend the sports. All of the parents reported driving their children to and from practice/matches as well as purchasing the necessary equipment and memberships. There were differences in how much the sports demanded in terms of financial support, but all of the parents said they viewed this as a good investment:

We buy what they need, but it is not that much. It is the competitions that cost most, with overnight trips and flying and all that. It just means that we may have to skip that extra trip to [nearby skiing resort] during the Easter, and things like that. (father, family 9)

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4 It is worth noting that the focus of the study was not on the unintended and undesirable consequences that can follow from intense parental involvement in children’s sports participation (see, for instance, Augustsson, 2007), even though several parents hinted at such issues.

Some parents appeared keenly aware, however, that their commitment to providing their children with appropriate equipment could result in the child being, in effect, ‘spoiled’:

He has a lot of stuff. I feel sort of embarrassed over saying it. It doesn’t have to be the most expensive skis or shoes, it’s not about that, but he certainly has what he needs. He has a racer, a bicycle roller, every hockey equipment. He has it all, in plenty. I mean, he doesn’t need that roller, there’s no sense in it because we have a spinning bike. No, he is spoiled at this, simply spoiled. (mother, family 8)

### ***The ‘why’ of parental involvement***

In investigating *why* the parents spent so much time and resources on their children’s sports participation, two main themes emerged: parents’ views regarding the benefits of sports participation and what we are calling the ‘latent benefits for parents’.

#### *Parents’ views of the benefits of sports participation*

The parents had expectations that their children would receive both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits from sports participation.

*Intrinsic benefits.* The intrinsic benefits focused on enjoyment and the development and performance of physical skills. Very many parents saw sports as something that brought enjoyment for their children. Indeed, it was often the first thing the parents spoke about when asked about why they saw sports participation as an important pastime. Competence and the resultant satisfaction were also reported as an important consequence of sports participation: “Because of mastery – they need that” (father, family 5). Very many parents spoke of the intrinsic benefits of getting outside and being active:

Father: They are happier when they are doing activities.

Mother: Yeah, fresh air.

Father: To be out of the house, get active. They have a tendency to be grumpy when they sit in all day. (family 5)

The assumed intrinsic benefits notwithstanding, it was noteworthy the extent to which the parents focused upon the extrinsic benefits for their children of sports participating, particular in terms of cultivating transferable skills and capitals. Thus, even when talking about the supposed intrinsic benefits of simply playing sport, many parents' perceptions turned quite quickly from the intrinsic towards the extrinsic.

*Extrinsic benefits: cultivating transferable skills.* Most parents viewed sports as an arena for acquiring skills transferable to other arenas of their children's lives primarily contemporaneously but also in an anticipated future. A few, for example, viewed sport as helping to make their children more independent, not least because "that's life" (mother, family 2): "It teaches them responsibilities and independencies. I value that, as I don't want them to be helpless. The world is tough" (mother, family 1). Perhaps as an aspect of independence, some parents spoke in terms of sport providing their children with confidence: "It is important for her confidence. I see other children who are clumsy, and I see how that influences their confidence" (mother, family 1), and making them mentally stronger "She is a bit too careful [...] hopefully, this season will change things a bit" (father, family 10). In addition, most parents viewed sport as a means of making their children more physically adept, thereby enabling them to fit into a society where sports participation was considered normative and characteristically Norwegian:

I see many examples of those who have not done much sports growing up ... You see through it pretty early, there has been little physical activity [growing up], little versatility [...] And I think that after all, there is a 99.9% chance they will end up as a normal mortal person in the street, then they will benefit from being a bit versatile. (father, family 6)

The theme of ‘fitting in’ included the alleged benefits of learning to be part of a team: “Team sports promote personal development – to co-operate with people you don’t really like because you are a part of a team” (mother, family 2). To this end, sports participation was also viewed as a means of avoiding something viewed as the *bete noire* of growing up: i.e. social isolation or even exclusion. Parents spoke specifically about the risk of their children becoming socially isolated if they were not a part of one or other of the popular organized sports networks: “Those who keep on with football become a group: it is [becomes] those who do football and those who do not” (father, family 3). Indeed, parents appeared to view social isolation/exclusion at school and during leisure as a likely corollary of exclusion from sport, and mainstream (team) sports especially. For most, this was of concern to both the children and the parents:

We felt that in short periods, when [child’s name] had decided to quit. One night he started crying, asking “if I quit football now, do I lose my friends?” So he had thought about it as well. And that is something the parents of children who do not do handball or football have talked about as well. Just a couple of weeks ago I got a phone call from a mother who asked me why [child] never had time to hang out with her son. So they were invited to an ‘overnighting’ one weekend. And I know why they do it, to help him get some friends. You get vulnerable really, when you don’t do anything. (mother, family 8)

Another parent also reported similar incidents with her children who was sports-active, but not involved in the popular organized/mainstream sports:

That is the challenge with this city, if you don’t do handball or football you will be a bit on the outside [...] I see it in the class. It isn’t many who do [unorganized sporting activity], and they are a bit on the outside both of them.

[Researcher]: In terms of what?

Friends and inclusion in the social groupings. It [may not] bother [one child], but [another may have] a hard time with it. It’s always been like this in [the city] I feel. (mother, family 1).

While most parents viewed sports as a way to become involved with peer and friendship networks, some were seen as more socially desirable than others:

The alternative is to just do homework and hang out with friends. All of a sudden, all your time is spent down in the city centre. I see those who have dropped out of the football, how they hang around the shopping mall all day, I recognize them. And we know that starts to happen around 15 year of age. (father, family 9)

Indeed, half of the parents explicitly spoke of sports as a safe environment from which their children would be less likely to be drawn into what they viewed as unhealthy networks: “I don’t know how it is in the football or handball community, but I don’t think there is much alcohol drinking in the horse milieu” (mother, family 1).

Alongside the ostensible social benefits of sports participation from an early age, involvement in sport was also valued for the physical benefits that could accrue. In this regard, gymnastics was valued particularly highly in terms of physical development, strength, and coordination. Indeed, motor skills were seen as an important benefit of sports such as gymnastics that were transferable to other arenas: “It is fantastically good exercise for learning motor skills, it is important for so many other things” (father, family 5). It was more likely, however, that mention of health would be in negative rather than positive terms, insofar as parents tended to reveal concerns about avoiding particular health hazards, such as becoming overweight: “It is also about avoiding getting too fat. I see how it is inhibiting to be fat. None of mine are that, but I hope they understand that all movement is better than nothing” (mother, family 1). What is more, very many parents spoke about what amounted to sedentariness, in the form of prolonged sitting, as a consequence of ‘screen-time’:

Most of their social life happens within these screens. We see that for [son], he disconnects from his gaming world when he does organized activities. Because,

when he's at home, he is just as distant as his sister, sitting in front of the screen.  
(father, family 3)

Moreover, getting control over their children's screen-time was seen as a big challenge among very many of the parents:

I don't want to be too pushy, so I sit and wait for him to take the initiative to do something. When I ask if he wants to go to the hall and play [handball], he says yes. But we don't always get there because he is so slow, he sits on his I-Pad and such. Then it gets too late. (father, family 5)

### *Latent benefits for parents*

While parents spoke, for the most part, about the benefits for their children when explaining their investment in their sports, it was clear that they recognised one particular indirect and latent benefit of their children's sports participation for themselves: friendships and what amounted to support networks. Very many parents spoke of how the sporting arena had led to connections with other parents, including those from their children's school class:

I think the other parents feels the same, that if our children should get mixed up in something, that they make the phone call. It is easier with those parents you know and talk a lot to. It's really worth a lot. It's an important aspect of the sports.  
(mother, family 8)

Interestingly, this family felt sufficiently bonded to other parents that they continued to attend even after their son had quit: "It was really sad when he had decided that he wanted to quit. It happened that we kept on going to the matches even though he was not on the team" (mother, family 8).

Another parent spoke at length about how welcoming the sporting group had been when he and his daughter attended for the first time, making them both feel like they belonged at once:

I knew a couple of the parents from before, but that was pretty much it. After that gathering, we felt like a part of the group at once ... Both me and my daughter agreed about how well we had been taken in.

[Researcher]: How important do you think that is?

Its alpha omega for succeeding and thriving. I didn't really have any interest in biathlon, but got a lot of input from the other parents [...] You do commit to something, sure. But I think it is fun, and that is probably why I bother doing it.  
(father, family 6)

This particular father went on to speak about how he had gained a good friend in the trainer at the club, as he himself had an official role with certain responsibilities:

We only had parent meetings together. But that's not really the place to meet, so we did not have much contact. But now we talk a lot, back and forth, so now it is like, we actually spend a lot of time together. (father, family 6)

Having presented the key findings from the study, in what follows we seek to relate the findings to the extant literature on the role of parents in sporting socialisation, with specific reference to the emerging knowledge regarding Norway.

## **Discussion**

In Norway, the normalisation of parental involvement in children's sports participation (among both the working- and middle-classes) appears as an aspect of the well-established norm for children to be sports active (Stefansen et al., 2016a, 2016b). High levels of sports participation in Norway provide the context in which parents are inclined to subscribe to the 'cultural logic' of sports involvement among their children. That families tend to play a particularly important role in the formation of sporting

habits among children (Haycock, 2015; Pot, Verbeek, van der Zwan, & van Hilvoorde, 2014; Stuij, 2015) is nowadays axiomatic. For that reason it was interesting to find parents in the present study volunteering the view that they had little to do with generating their children's initial interests in the mainstream sports (football, handball, and turn [gymnastics]). Contrary to our initial expectations, the parents were not necessarily the drivers in initiating enrolment. Rather, the proactive marketing strategies of local sporting clubs often provided the initial impetus for sporting enrolment in the early years – reaching out to the children and, by extension, their parents, to recruit through kindergarten and elementary schools. The initial interest was, subsequently, facilitated by parents whose concerted cultivation helped construct the foundations for ongoing participation, irrespective of the source of initial interest. This challenges the orthodoxy that parents are inevitably the main drivers for sports enrolment. It also suggests that the diminishing numbers of young people engaging in organized sports and sports clubs (see Vaage, 2015) should not be taken to indicate that the significance of sports clubs in children's nascent sporting repertoires is itself diminishing.

In adding nuance to the picture of sports socialization in Norway – in the form of both the interdependence of families and sports clubs in the initiation and development of children's sporting interests and habits but also the kindergarten and elementary school in the marketing (awareness raising) of sporting opportunities – it seems plausible to posit the existence of something akin to a sporting trinity (Green et al., 2015) at work in Norway – between parents, the voluntary sports club sector and the early years school system. In this regard, it is worthy of note that, in Sweden, Eliasson (2009) has utilised the notion of a 'sporting triangle' (Byrne, 1993) to conceptualise the potential significance in youngsters' sporting socialization of the relationship between

children, parents and coaches, and the ways in which changes in the relationship between any two of these will affect the third.

Also noteworthy was the extent to which most parents focused upon the cultivation of extrinsic benefits as a *raison d'être* for sports participation. In this regard, the parents appeared concerned with what Bourdieu (1993) would have called the cultivation of their children's cultural and social capital. However, this was not as strategic, concerted and future-oriented as we anticipated. Consistent with the claims of Irwin and Elley (2011), rather than being practices grounded in future anxiety, most of the parents simply took advantage of opportunities provided by their children's sports participation as a consequence of the clubs attracting them. If anything, parental anxiety about the future took second-place to a type of anxiety revolving around the 'here-and-now' – the current and near future of their children's lives – in the form of potential physical and mental health detriments associated with exclusion from peer and friendship networks, excessive screen-time and so forth – as well as the relevance of these to the broader educational and developmental abilities of their children.

The issue of children's potential isolation, even 'exclusion', warrants particular attention. While earlier studies have shown parents to value the extrinsic benefits of increasing social networks through sports (Wheeler, 2011), the findings from the present study suggest that, once again, our understanding needs to be more nuanced. The normalisation of participation in youth sports captured here is not only about participation but also the *type* of participation. Indeed, those youngsters not involved with one of the mainstream sports were viewed by their parents as being at particular risk of social marginalization, even stigmatization, not just within sports but at school and in their leisure-time also. It may be, therefore, that the strength and pervasiveness of the sporting culture in Norway has at least one unintended and unforeseen consequence

inasmuch as it may well exacerbate the social significance of being marginalised in and from sport.

An additional noteworthy finding from this exploratory study was the way in which their children's sport was seen as an important social arena for the parents, where bonds of different types could be and were formed and established. There is little existing research discussing 'sociability' and other latent functions for the parents as a potential factor for their involvement in their children's leisure sports involvement.

## **Conclusion**

In Norway, where sports participation – especially among the young – tends to be considerably higher than anywhere else beyond the Nordic region, parents, voluntary sports clubs, and elementary schools appear to form a kind of 'sporting trinity' (Green et al., 2015) – not least because of the active role of many parents in both sports clubs and schools (especially at the kindergarten and elementary levels) (Støckel et al., 2010) – which provides a catalyst for the kinds of sporting trajectories evident in the national data on participation. In short, the sporting dyad – between young sports participants and their parents – observed by Stefansen et al. (2016a, 2016b), is conceptualised herein as a tetrad – between children, early years schooling, sports clubs and parents – within which the key driver is the sporting trinity of sports clubs, schools and parents. The 'sporting trinity', as we have referred to it, of sports clubs, schools and parents amounts, in sociological terms, to a network of interdependencies or figuration (Elias, 2001) that generates opportunities, not only for the development of the sporting habits that will come to form the youngsters' cultural capital, but also for the genesis of bonding and bridging capital (Putnam, 2000) between parents, as well as the youngsters themselves.

Young Norwegians have been described as 'the quintessential sporting omnivores' (Green et al., 2015). The fact that sport is a central aspect of many parent–

child relationships in Norway is, in no small measure, likely to be a consequence of the normalization of sports participation in recent decades (Stefansen et al., 2016b) and indicative of a “marked generational change in the relationship between organized sports and the practice of parenthood” (Stefansen et al., 2016b, p. 1). Whether or not the initial spark of interest is generated beyond the family, as a fortuitous aspect of propitious conditions, initial interest is clearly cultivated by many parents in conjunction with sports clubs and the early years school system, and viewed as normative among their peers and, for that matter, in Norwegian culture more generally.

The study sought to begin to pin down how Norwegian families ‘do’ their children’s sporting lives and, in doing so, make a contribution to understanding the particular conditions that drive the relatively high rates of enduring sports participation in one Nordic countries. In this regard, the study reflected Morgan’s concept of ‘family practices’ and the fundamentally social nature of the ‘doing’ of family life (as cited in McCarthy & Edwards, 2011, p. 143). It also hinted at just how parents transmit Norwegian sporting culture (at times, indirectly as well as directly and unintentionally as well as intentionally) – with its roots in the voluntary sports club sector – inasmuch as sports participation becomes taken-for-granted and internalized very early on in children’s leisure lives.

When placed alongside Stefansen et al.’s (2016a, 2016b) study, the present study adds weight to the view that parenting is in the process of changing from a relationship to a set of tasks or practices (McCarthy & Edwards, 2011). It also lends support to claims of the ‘responsibilization’ of parents (McCarthy & Edwards, 2011, p. 143) – making parents feel accountable for their children’s (sporting and leisure) life-chances and outcomes. This, in turn, raises expectations regarding what constitutes ‘good parenting’ in Norway and ‘increased the scope for moral evaluation of parents’ in tune

with the alleged ‘moral discourse of parenting obligations’ (McCarthy & Edwards, 2011, p. 143), at least in relation to the sports socialization of children.

We chose, in this study, to focus upon what might be viewed as being a *very* ‘sporty’ – four times a week or more – in order to gain an insight into the role of parents with sporty children. In any future study, it would be interesting to explore if the hypotheses developed here are equally applicable to the families of children who are ordinarily sport (for example, once or twice a week) – more in keeping with levels of participation among youngsters beyond the Nordic region.

Finally, it is important to note the inevitable limitations to an exploratory study such as this. The number of interviews means it is unlikely that theoretical saturation has been achieved (Bryman, 2015). Nor, given the nature of qualitative work, can the findings be understood as generalizable to the entire field of parenting in youth sports. Finally, because the sample included only two working-class families, we were unable to explore differences between social classes in any great depth. All that said, to the extent that it represents a study of what might be quite typical families (particularly in middle-class circles), then the findings regarding, in particular, the interdependencies between sports clubs, schools and families may well have implications for policy-makers looking towards Norway for a ‘recipe’ for sports participation.

### **Acknowledgement**

We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their detailed feedback on the original draft of this paper. Their comments were immensely helpful, as well as constructive and supportive. We would also like to thank Professor Miranda Thurston for her invaluable comments on the various iterations of the paper.

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