

Lessons from the Field. Development of a group intervention to promote need-supportive sport parenting

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Abstract

Objective: This Lesson from the Field describes the development of a need-supportive parenting intervention aimed at enhancing motivation and preventing burnout in youth athletes.

Background: Self-determination theory posits that basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness) are essential for optimal motivation and performance in any context. However, research has shown that parents, a critical social agent, may thwart rather than support their children's psychological needs in competitive contexts such as sport. The development and implementation of need-supportive sport parenting interventions are warranted.

Method: We reviewed and analyzed the components, including the content, frequency, and duration, of need-supportive sport coaching interventions and parenting interventions in other domains (e.g., education). Based on the analysis, we constructed our intervention with a workbook to educate parents on (a) reducing athlete pressure, (b) providing choices within limits, (c) focusing on individual improvement, and (d) enhancing parent–child communication. We used gymnastics examples to illustrate these strategies.

Conclusion: This article provides parent educators with a theoretically and empirically informed intervention to work with sport parents. The proposed benefits of the program may extend beyond athlete motivation and burnout prevention to better parent–child relationships and psychological need satisfaction of both the parent and the child.

KEYWORDS

athlete, basic psychological needs, burnout, child, parent, self-determination theory

Athletes typically experience biological growth and maturation alongside increased training and competitive stress during early adolescence, which may elevate the risk for burnout symptoms (Gustafsson et al., 2007). Athlete burnout can be characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion, reduced accomplishment, and sport devaluation (Raedeke, 1997), and is partly attributed to maladaptive motivation influenced by negative parenting (Bremer, 2012; Chu & Zhang, 2019; Felber Charbonneau & Camiré, 2020; Lienhart et al., 2020). Thus, sport parents need education on how to support their child athletes for optimal motivation and burnout prevention. Unfortunately, studies of sport parenting intervention are limited and mostly focus on parental involvement without a family perspective (Knight et al., 2017). Therefore, using scientist-practitioner and family systems approaches, we developed an evidence-based sport parenting program that parent educators and other relevant practitioners (e.g., sport psychology consultants) might use to intervene with parents to support their child athletes.

OBJECTIVE

Guided by self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985), our need-supportive parenting intervention, targeting parents of athletes aged 9–13, during which parental influence is pivotal, has four main goals of educating parents to

1. decrease parental pressure by practicing a moderate amount of involvement, explaining the reasoning behind rules, and accepting athlete mistakes as part of learning.
2. offer athletes choices within limits by offering adequate options for athletes' maturity level, allowing them to make decisions and solve problems, and guiding without controlling them.
3. focus on individual improvement, as opposed to social comparison, by encouraging and praising athletes for skill improvement, helping athletes set goals, and practicing unconditional support.
4. enhance parent–child communication by sharing their reasoning behind sport participation rules, demonstrating active listening, and participating in physical activity with athletes.

BACKGROUND

Self-determination theory is a motivation theory that explains optimal motivation (i.e., self-determined motivation) and human functioning through satisfying three basic psychological needs—autonomy (a sense of volition), competence (a sense of ability to complete a task), and relatedness (a sense of connection and belonging; Deci & Ryan, 1985). To support these psychological needs in sport, for example, parents can encourage athletes to take responsibility for their own practice and sporting choices, provide positive and constructive feedback for athletes, and show unconditional positive regard—being supportive or proud regardless of the athlete's performance (Chu & Zhang, 2019). At the same time, athletes' attitude and behavior also influence the support they receive from their parents.

Family systems theory (Bowen, 1966) indicates the family as an emotional unit with a goal to facilitate an adequate amount of closeness—neither emotionally too close nor too distant from each other. When applying family systems theory to youth sport parenting, parental involvement can be described as underinvolved, moderately involved, or overinvolved

(see Bremer, 2012). Researchers have concluded that a moderate amount of parental involvement most positively predicts competence satisfaction in athletes across gender (Gaudreau et al., 2016; Lienhart et al., 2020). Therefore, the current intervention program emphasizes parents' role to be autonomy-supportive (not too emotionally close) while also being relatedness-supportive (not too emotionally distant) to optimize parental involvement (Bremer, 2012). Family systems theory and SDT work in tandem in our intervention program to emphasize an athlete as a representation of their family system, in which parents influence children's psychological needs and motivation and vice versa (Bremer, 2012; Moè et al., 2020).

The literature reveals a plethora of detrimental parental behaviors that fail to support athletes' basic psychological needs (Azimi & Tamminen, 2022; Felber Charbonneau & Camiré, 2020; Keegan et al., 2009), demonstrating a need for parenting interventions, of which very few currently exist. The most commonly reported negative parental behavior was conditional support, a type of parental pressure that thwarts athlete autonomy and competence (Lienhart et al., 2020). In contrast, parental unconditional support—expressing being proud of the athlete regardless of their performance—predicts greater feelings of warmth and relatedness satisfaction in athletes (Bremer, 2012). Another typical aspect lacking between parents and athletes is open communication that supports relatedness (Azimi & Tamminen, 2022; Felber Charbonneau & Camiré, 2020; Keegan et al., 2009; Vincent & Christensen, 2015). Although need-supportive parenting has been shown to lead to more positive sport environments and self-determined motivation, few relevant intervention programs exist for real-world application (Vincent & Christensen, 2015). Therefore, we developed a need-supportive parenting intervention program for parent educators to implement with sport parents.

EXPERIENCE

Both the first and second authors are coaches, in gymnastics and table tennis, respectively. Throughout their coaching, they have seen numerous cases of athletes who lack enjoyment and self-determined motivation for their sport, largely because of negative parental influences. This often stems from the fact that many parents live vicariously through their child (Dorsch et al., 2019). If parents were former athletes, they often exert too much pressure on their child to perform well and fail to allow them to make decisions. In contrast, parents who did not play sports have too little involvement in their child's sport. Gymnasts often report to the first author that their parents buy them treats after a competition if they achieved certain results, demonstrating conditional support and focus on uncontrollable winning instead of controllable individual skill development. On the other hand, the second author often recognizes parents' negative verbal and nonverbal reactions at competitions, such as yelling or rolling their eyes in front of the child when the child loses or does not "meet expectations" (Azimi & Tamminen, 2022; Felber Charbonneau & Camiré, 2020). As a Self-Determination Theory International Scholar and Certified Mental Performance Consultant, the second author had applied need-supportive coaching in research and practice with effectiveness. Having observed how negative parenting hurts youth sport experience, the first and second authors developed this need-supportive sport parenting intervention together due to mutual interests and the lack of theory-driven sport parenting programs.

Developing the intervention program and workbook

After reviewing family systems theory and the SDT literature on parental factors in youth athlete motivation, coupled with our coaching experiences, we created a need-supportive sport parenting intervention workbook (available upon request). The workbook was designed for parent

educators to educate sport parents on how to support athletes' basic psychological needs for self-determined motivation. First, we identified the four main parenting problems based on the reviewed literature and our observations of inappropriate parenting behavior and involvement. Next, we created a goal with need-supportive behavior to address each parenting problem. The first two intervention goals apply autonomy-supportive behavior to address the issue of parents exerting too much pressure and failing to give athletes choices; we decided to create these two goals with the aim of improving autonomy-supportive parenting. The third intervention goal applies competence-supportive behavior to mitigate social comparison and the focus on winning. The fourth intervention goal applies relatedness-supportive behavior to address the lack of emotional connection and positive communication between the parent and the child.

Assessment

To implement the intervention using a personalized approach, we assess preintervention parental behaviors consistent with the four intervention goals. The assessment packet, informed by SDT and a youth sport context, includes the Perceptions of Parents Scale (POPS; Grolnick et al., 1991), the Perceived Parental Autonomy Support Scale (P-PASS; Mageau et al., 2015), and the Perceived Social Influence in Sport Scale-2 (PSISS-2; Chan et al., 2019). In addition to these Likert-scale measures of parental support, pressure, autonomy support, and communication with athletes, we also included four open-ended questions to assess parent perceptions of their behavior corresponding to the four goals. Parents anonymously complete this assessment during the introduction meeting; each of the following sessions begins with a discussion on the positive and negative aspects of parent responses to the assessment questions.

Intervention setting and outline

The intervention takes place in a group setting to allow for discussions, with 6–10 athletes' parents in each group formed according to athletes' age and competitive level. We use gymnastics as an example to illustrate the program. The program takes place in a separate room during practice for parent convenience because they typically drive athletes to practice and are already present. The program starts before the competitive season starts, the beginning of fall practice for gymnastics. This timeline allows the parent educator enough time to complete the program before competitions start, during which need-supportive parental behaviors are most important. Similar to other parenting intervention programs (e.g., Moè et al., 2020; Vincent & Christensen, 2015), our intervention consists of four sessions (after an introduction meeting) that lasts 4 weeks. The 1-week period between sessions allows participants time to complete homework and incorporate what they learned to interact with athletes. Each session lasts 1 hour, which is short enough to keep parents engaged while providing sufficient time to present information and interact with parents (Moè et al., 2020). We created a workbook for the parent educator to read the intervention preparation information, the preassessment document, intervention delivery scripts, and an appendix of activities to use when conducting the intervention.

Prior to the 4-week intervention program, the parent educator holds a short (20–25 min) introduction meeting to explain the structure and purpose of the program. Interested parents complete the aforementioned preintervention assessment. Ideally, the parent educator works with the stakeholder, such as the program director or head coach, to schedule this meeting at the end of a parent meeting to prevent parents from having to attend a separate meeting. At the end of the introduction meeting, the parent educator asks parents to complete the preassessment, laid out in the workbook.

During the first session, the parent educator conducts a short background presentation to inform parents of the intervention's theoretical framework (i.e., SDT) that has ample research support, followed by discussing the session goals. Each successive session also addresses a specific goal that matches the corresponding basic psychological need (see Table 1), starting with a discussion of responses on the preassessment questions. Further, the parent educator invites parents to share experiences regarding homework from the past week. Then, the parent educator presents past research and practical strategies on how to support the specific need, as well as leads a hands-on activity to help parents practice and internalize the strategies. Lastly, the parent educator explains a homework assignment related to the session's goal for parents to continue their practice through the upcoming week.

Intervention sessions and contents

Autonomy appears to be the psychological need that parents support the least, especially in gymnastics, although it has been shown to be the most important need for youth athletes to receive parental support (Amorose et al., 2016; Gaudreau et al., 2016; Lienhart et al., 2020; Vincent & Christensen, 2015). Thus, we designed two sessions to focus on improving autonomy-supportive parenting. The first session aims to help decrease parental pressure. During the presentation, the parent educator explains the definition of autonomy and highlights the importance of maintaining moderate parental involvement, explaining sport-related decisions, and accepting athlete mistakes. Then, parents individually complete a hands-on activity in which they answer open-ended questions to explore potential differences between the views of their child and themselves regarding the preferred level of parental involvement and goals of gymnastics participation. Afterward, the parent educator facilitates a group discussion for parents to express their thoughts on the activity, with a goal to discourage parental

TABLE 1 Need-supportive parenting intervention sessions and contents

Session	Goal	Target need	Key concepts	Hands-on activity	Homework
1	Decrease parental pressure	Autonomy	Foster moderate parenting involvement from athlete perspectives	Brainstorm differences between parent and athlete views of the sport and find a way to match expectations	Avoid vicarious involvement to live through athlete experience
2	Offer choices within limits	Autonomy	Promote parental autonomy in conflict resolution	Open-ended autonomy supportive/thwarting questions from Project Play "Parent Checklist"	Let athletes "fight their own battles"
3	Focus on individual improvement	Competence	Avoid destructive criticism and comparison; practice unconditional positive regard	Create a process goal, a performance goal, and an outcome goal with an optimal level of challenge for athletes to achieve	Praise athletes' skill and personal development instead of praising winning
4	Enhance parent-child communication	Relatedness	Explore ways to empathize and be emotionally involved without judgment	Provide scenarios for parents to answer how they would respond to best support athlete relatedness	Engage in active listening and daily discussions with athletes after practice

overinvolvement. The homework of the week is to enhance self-awareness regarding any thoughts and behaviors that might suggest vicarious involvement in their child's sporting experiences.

The second session educates parents to provide choices within certain limits. The parent educator presents on the importance of providing autonomy in sport selection and offering the proper amount of choices, or at least rationales, based on the child's maturity level. The parent educator then distributes the "Parent Checklist," focused on parental understanding and acceptance of their child's opinions in the sport context (e.g., "Have I asked my child why they want to play sports?"). Parents discuss their responses to the checklist in small groups and eventually the large group to learn the importance of accepting their child's opinions and encouraging their decision-making and problem-solving. The homework for this session is to let athletes "fight their own battles," meaning that parents provide perspective and resources to guide athletes in their decision-making while allowing their child to make the final decision.

The third session aims to promote competence-supportive parenting by increasing parental focus on individual improvement, as opposed to social comparison. The parent educator presents on how to encourage and praise athletes for skill improvement, avoid criticism, tolerate mistakes, practice unconditional support, and help athletes set goals. For the hands-on activity, parents are guided to emphasize self-referenced improvement by creating at least one process goal and one performance goal beyond outcome goals not only for, but also with, their child. During the small group as well as large group discussion, the parent educator explains the research support on targeting process and performance goals instead of outcome goals for athletes to feel competent and motivated (Weinberg, 2010). This session's homework is to focus on and praise athletes' skill and personal development instead of winning.

The fourth and final session aims to facilitate relatedness-supportive parenting by enhancing positive parent-child communication. The parent educator presents on the importance of sharing reasoning behind attending practices and competitions, using active listening, and participating in sport activities with athletes. Parents are given three possible strategies—unconditional support, sharing expectations, and active listening—and asked how they could apply them to support athlete relatedness. After small group discussions of each question, the large group comes together to share ideas, followed by the parent educator sharing the most effective methods based on research and sport examples. The homework for this session is to have nonjudgmental daily discussions with their child in and outside sport, demonstrating active listening and care.

Interview with a coach and a parent

After completing the workbook, the first author interviewed one coach and one sport parent in the target age category to obtain feedback to improve the intervention program. Although it may be informative to interview more individuals, we were only able to interview two individuals due to restrictions amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and the interviews were conducted to make potential modifications in the program to enhance its effectiveness and practicality.

The first interviewee had been a gymnastics coach for 8 years and had seen many instances of need-supportive or thwarting parenting. She noted that about half of her athletes' experiences with parents tended to be positive, and the other half to be negative. Her positive experiences included encouraging parents who gave verbal encouragement and wanted their child gymnasts to work hard and have fun; negative experiences included "pushy and overbearing" parents who caused negative occurrences by pressuring their child to take actions that they did not want to do, demonstrating a need for a need-supportive sport parenting intervention.

The second interviewee had been a gymnastics parent for 15 years and was relatively need-supportive. She mentioned often witnessing parents who tried to coach their child from the

audience. The first author was able to hear a parent's viewpoint on competition: The sport parent explained that it was difficult to see her child be judged based on the child's skills rather than her effort and results. Perhaps this is why some parents attempt to be controlling and need-thwarting—to see better scores at competitions, rather than improved performance and individual skill development.

The first author began each interview with an explanation of the goals and structure of the workbook. During the interviews, she asked each interviewee questions about how effective this intervention may be for increasing need-supportive parental behaviors, such as “How effectively do you think this intervention explains how parents can accomplish each of the four goals?” and “How comfortable do you think the parents would feel to openly discuss their ideas in the program?”

The coach commented that those who could truly benefit from the program might get defensive about their controlling parenting behaviors. Thus, we added a suggestion for the parent educator to begin the introduction session and Session 1 by developing rapport and encouraging parents to share their thoughts. We also emphasized to parents the overall goal of this program to focus on “building the child” instead of “fixing the parent.” Based on the parent interview, we changed the start of the program from the beginning of the competitive season to the beginning of fall practice for gymnastics so that parents can implement need-supportive behaviors before their child begins competing. We also added the aforementioned short introduction meeting to allow the parent educator more time to introduce themselves and to allow parents more time to thoroughly decide to commit to the program and complete the pre-assessments, which would have originally taken place during Session 1.

CONCLUSION

Ample research has shown the importance of how parents influence child and early adolescent athletes' basic psychological needs and motivational outcomes, both positively and negatively, demonstrating a need for parenting interventions (Azimi & Tamminen, 2022; Felber Charbonneau & Camiré, 2020; Keegan et al., 2009). Yet, few theoretically rigorous and empirically supported sport parenting programs have been developed (Vincent & Christensen, 2015).

This Lesson from the Field describes the development of a need-supportive parenting intervention program with a workbook that provides parent educators with the information necessary to implement the program with parents of athletes aged 9–13. The intervention program and assessments contribute to the sport parenting literature and practice by applying a scientist-practitioner model grounded in SDT. Past SDT-based parenting intervention programs, similar to ours, have been shown to be effective for decreasing stress in education (Moè et al., 2020). However, parent educators, along with coaches, should continue to evaluate the effectiveness of this program in different sports and parents of different demographics.

IMPLICATIONS

This Lesson from the Field translates theory into practice for enhancing need-supportive parenting and athlete motivation, guided by SDT and family systems theory. Upon completion of this program, parents will successfully support their child's autonomy, competence, and relatedness to increase their self-determined motivation and reduce burnout symptoms, aligned with our intervention goals.

Through family systems theory, an individual can be seen as a representation of their family system and relationships with family members, especially parents (Bowen, 1966). Specifically, parental involvement, pressure, and support, concepts that we target in the intervention, all

shape athletes' sporting experiences. This intervention does not only promote more positive outcomes in youth athletes, but also facilitates better motivation and well-being in sport parents due to a healthy family system. Such an intervention may be particularly beneficial to implement when athletes progress through their developmental stages and increase their investment in sport, which might result in greater exhaustion and sport devaluation (Chu et al., 2022).

When developing this intervention, we aimed to educate parents on how to be more need-supportive by decreasing pressure, providing athletes with choices, focusing on individual improvement, and improving parent–athlete communication. However, we acknowledge that this intervention is not a one-size-fits-all approach due to variations in athletes' and parents' athletic goals and cultural backgrounds. To apply a true scientist-practitioner model, we encourage parent educators to use the core contents of our empirically informed interventions while modifying the content delivery and specific parenting strategies based on the athlete and parent populations with which they work. One limitation of this article is that the program has not yet been implemented to determine its actual effectiveness. Thus, we encourage researchers to work with coaches to implement the intervention and use multiple data sources, such as parental reflections, and the changes between pre- and postintervention need-supportive parenting behaviors perceived by the parent, coach, and athlete, to determine its efficacy and validity (or lack thereof) for utility or further improvement of the program.

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