Let’s hear it from the kids! Examining the experiences, views and needs of highly committed children involved in youth sport.

Keywords: children, parents, wellbeing, support, passion
Abstract

Sport specialization and intensive training programs are becoming increasingly popular but there is an ongoing debate as to their value. This study explored how children experience arduous, specialized training and whether they find it enjoyable and meaningful. We also examined their perspective of what parental involvement they needed. 103 participants filled out an online questionnaire. Results demonstrated that the participants were almost without exception highly committed to their training. They acknowledged the documented downsides, such as long hours, pain, and repetition, but expressed resounding commitment, giving little indication that they looked for change. They admitted that they preferred their parents not to be involved with their coaching and disclosed that showing pride for them was their main wish. This study demonstrates that passion can engender powerful commitment and satisfaction from training that may be sometimes considered by others as too challenging for a young person to undertake.
Introduction

In the last two decades there has been a shift in parenting and child experiences. The traditional childhood activity of playing with friends in the streets and local woods has been replaced with activities that can be controlled, such as after school sports and clubs (Coakley, 2006; Fass and Grossberg, 2011). In 2019 for example, 56.1% of children aged between 6 and 17 reported that they took part in some sort of sporting activity after school or at the weekends (Youth Sports Facts: Participation Rates — The Aspen Institute Project Play, 2021). This sporting involvement is becoming progressively more intense, and what is known as ‘sport specialization’ is becoming popular, with young athletes increasingly focusing on just one sport and training year-round for long hours. Indeed, many children are being pushed harder and harder at an early age when previously they would have been blithely playing in the street and running around in the park. Twenty years since this shift in childhood experience became apparent, there is a growing body of research and parallel media messages expressing concern for the psychological and physical wellbeing of the children with the contention that after-school fun has been replaced with training programs that are deemed neither enjoyable or effective, and often not leading to adult success. Despite these negatives, however, participating in youth sport can offer huge benefits and research into Positive Youth Development (PYD) certainly champions youth sport involvement suggesting that “there may be something unique (but not magical!) about the sporting context that makes it stand out from other activities” (Holt, Deal, & Pankow, 2020,p.430). So, reflecting these contentions, research and sporting bodies must work to find the right balance to ensure that a child’s experience of sport is a positive and perhaps even a ‘magical’ one.

One of the negatives often expressed relates to the nature of the practice regime. It is argued that intense, specialized training programmes or deliberate practice (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993) are counter-productive and cause more harm than good.
Deliberate practice requires, by definition, repetitive and highly structured specialized training (Ericsson et al., 1993). When applied to children, there is a body of research that deems deliberate practice as counter-productive and studies have also suggested negative implications to early specialization including less enjoyment in sport, risk of dropout, injuries, and burnout (Bell, Post, Biese, Bay, & McLeod, 2018; Difiori et al., 2014; Jayanthi, Labella, Fischer, Pasulka, & Dugas, 2015; Verner-Filion, Vallerand, Amiot, & Mocanu, 2017 & Wall & Côté, 2007). It is also debated whether these specialized programs do actually lead to success (e.g. Güllich, Macnamara, & Hambrick, 2021 & Jayanthi et al., 2013). Notably, early specialization and intense training do not consistently result in world-class adult performance; “senior world-class athletes who began their main sport early and specialized are the exception, not the rule” (Güllich, Macnamara, & Hambrick, 2021, p.16) and therefore doubt is expressed as to the value of the training programs. In contrast, it is argued that that a child who participates in fun and enjoyable sporting activities will experience more positive outcomes (Côté, J., & Hay, 2002; Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007 & Strachan, Côté, & Deakin, 2009) and produced by Visek et al., (2015), developed a “FUN MAP” as a powerful blueprint for youth sport practice to follow where conceptualisation of fun might be an issue.

Against these negatives, however, there is an argument that early specialization and high commitment are things that children might enjoy, relish and indeed, want to do. There is more to sporting outcome than simply “adult success” and perhaps the term “enjoyment” is not as black and white as previous articles, or the popular media, have argued. For example, there is no doubt that deliberate practice is by nature “demanding, repetitive and not always inherently enjoyable” (Vallerand et al., 2007, p.512). However, it is suggested that such intense training is not always a bad thing and that athletes, including children, can gain a huge amount of satisfaction and psychological well-being from taking part in this sort of activity (Verner-Filion et al., 2017) together with the progress it often engenders.
The mental element required to be able to endure, or even enjoy, deliberate practice has been characterised as “passion” (Vallerand et al., 2007, 2008): defined as “a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, that they find important, and in which they invest time and energy” (Vallerand et al., 2003 p.756). Previous studies have confirmed that passion is a clear motivational force behind achievement in any form of performance; be that music (Bonneville-Roussy, Lavigne, & Vallerand, 2011), dancing (Rip, Fortin, & Vallerand, 2006) or sport (Vallerand et al., 2008). “Passion leads athletes to actively pursue their quest to attain performance in sport, spending a great amount of time practicing in order to deliberately enhance their skills” (Verner-Filion et al., 2017, p.19) and is the key to energizing them and “allowing them to engage in their deliberate practice” (Verner-Filion et al., 2017, p.20).

In their dualistic model of passion, Vallerand et al., (2003) propose two distinct types of passion, Harmonious Passion (HP) and Obsessive Passion (OP). HP is the consequence of autonomous internalisation of the activity and is said to occupy “a significant but not overpowering space in the person’s identity and is in harmony with other aspects of the person’s life” (Vallerand et al., 2003, p757). OP is the opposite end of the scale as the feelings are derived from a controlled internalisation of the activity into the child’s identity. Children with OP may feel more controlled by their need to partake in the activity due to external desires such as striving for social acceptance or the need to build self-esteem. Although they do report enjoying the activity, they may become compelled to take part because of the external desires and pressures. In short, it is possibly passion that enables an athlete to find joy in intense training and makes the arduous journey not only bearable, but enjoyable. Notably, however, it may be that the type of passion acts to differentiate the impacts of such involvement.
There appear to be two camps with opposing views on the impact and desirability of high levels of involvement for young sports participants. Research may help to clarify this apparent dichotomy. Perhaps an assumption has been made as to the young athletes’ view of their training. For example, Güllich, Faß, Gies, & Wald, (2020) argue that the negative connotation surrounding deliberate practice training and the positive link to deliberate play are not underpinned by empirical measures. They questioned 208 young athletes and found no difference in the inherent enjoyment of deliberate practice and deliberate play, concluding that researchers “ascribed these attributes a priori to athletes’ involvement in the activities but did not empirically measure the ascribed attributes” (p.1). As such, the opinion that intense training is not enjoyed by children may not be entirely accurate; perhaps the children themselves have a different view and a different perspective that has not been considered.

Reflecting such contentions, there is a clear requirement to give highly committed children a voice and examine their view of their sport and how they feel about it. Furthermore, given the documented importance of parenting influence on their sporting experience (e.g Knight, Little, Harwood, & Goodger, 2016), it would be remiss not to examine the role that parents play and the children’s expectations and requirements of their parents. It is also important to make sure that parents have the correct advice and information regarding how they can best support their children. Furusa et al., (2020) recently investigated the needs of children involved in sport and set out four recommendations for parents on how to increase their child’s ‘enjoyment’ of sport. These were

“(a) show you care about your child’s sport by facilitating and prioritising participation.
(b) listen and learn from your child to ensure you can engage in informed conversations.
(c) understand and support your child’s pre, during, and post competition preferences; and

(d) support and recognise your child beyond their sport” (p.6)

The recommendations are broad ranging and offer excellent general guidelines for parents. However, the study was based on a wide variety of children involved in sport to all different levels and did not specifically focus on those involved in high level or deliberate practise type training. It may well be that such children may prefer a different parenting approach. Furthermore, Furusa et al., (2020) offer less detail about how their guidelines may best be achieved; also, an issue if high level commitment may modify how children perceive they are best supported and whether they have other priorities not specified. Consequently, and given the prevalence nowadays of elite sporting programs and the number of children partaking in them it is important to explore how best to support these highly involved children and ensure they too experience enjoyment on their journey.

Therefore, the purpose of this investigation was to examine the perceptions and preferences of children who seem committed to their sport and are involved in high level intense training. Specifically, and against concerns raised in the literature, we were interested in their perceptions of experiencing arduous, repetitive, and specialized training. In short, were these features of involvement seen as negatives, albeit inevitable ones, or demotivators. (objective 1). We also wanted to examine the children’s perceptions of their parental involvement; what pitfalls parents should avoid and what support the children feel they needed (objective 2). Within each objective we were focused on the needs of children who displayed high level of either harmonious or obsessive passion, seeing the extent to which these constructs might act to differentiate children’s perceptions of their sport experience.

Method
Purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) was used to recruit children who were highly involved in sport and could therefore offer an insight into what it is like being involved in an intense training program. Once approval was obtained from the University ethics, parents were contacted through sporting groups and club pages on social media. Coaches were asked to help recruit suitable participants and posts were made in Facebook groups for high level youth sport clubs. A group of 103 participants (67 F and 36 M) took part. Ages ranged from 10 to 16 (Mean (SD) = 12.3 (1.75)) with participants training for an average of 11.5 hours per week (SD = 0.9). Indeed, almost a third were training more than 15 hours per week. All had been training intensively for at least two years (mean (SD) = 3.4 (1.0)). Finally, participants were asked to identify their main sport and the highest level of performance they had attained (see tables 1 and 2). A wide age range was accepted to reflect the different sporting contexts in which high levels of commitment may emerge. For example, a 10-year-old gymnast may reflect a sporting commitment and history identical to that of a 16-year-old Karateka. This approach also ensured that the views of both children and adolescents were represented within the sample.

There are serious ethical issues surrounding research with children and it is important that these were considered and addressed. Graham, Powell and Taylor (2015) urge this research must benefit the child and they should only be involved if necessary. Involving children in research should not be undertaken without serious consideration, “there is a desire for children to benefit from the progress that scientific research can bring, but at the same time avoid placing any individual children at risk of being harmed by such research” (Dixon-Woods, Young, & Ross, 2006, p.166). For this study to be valuable it was vital that the children were given a voice and their views heard. Without hearing their thoughts, it would be very difficult to build a true picture of their views and needs.
The most frequent issues associated with working with children that are pinpointed in research are: informed consent, protection of children, privacy and confidentiality, payment, and power dynamics (Powell et al., 2012). Addressing each of these points individually the ones that were of most concern for this study were informed consent and power dynamics.

Gallagher (2009) identified four core principles to obtaining informed consent from children; there must be a verbal or written agreement, participants must understand the research, there cannot be any coercion and the children must be allowed to withdraw at any time. These principles were adhered to. Participants were asked to read and sign a form that was simply and clearly written, using appropriate language that let them know the full nature of the research and what they needed to do. It was made clear that they do not have to take part and could withdraw at any time. To minimise any power dynamic issues the consent form made it clear to the participants that they should fill the survey out in their own words and only ask their parents for help with understanding.

**Design and measures.**

Sport (and even more so youth sport) is a particularly complex area to research and qualitative methods are recommended to delve into this multifaceted arena (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The approach adopted a pragmatist perspective of “what works” (Yanchar & Williams, 2006) and the view that a person’s knowledge is shaped and given meaning by their actions and interactions (Dewey, 1922). As our research questions were both confirmatory and exploratory in this context, a mixed methods design was employed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Our intention was that by integrating the two methods it would be possible to gain a deeper insight into what the children feel about their sport, their experiences of it and what they need from their parents. This was achieved by not only measuring their passion levels and views of the need for support but also being able to allow them to explain their feelings and experiences. The quantitative element offered some
generalisable data about the passion levels, perceptions, and preferences of this focused
sample. Qualitative elements ensured that participants could use their own words to describe
their feelings about their sporting experience – to legitimately give them a voice and make
sure no assumptions are made about their views.

The survey (available from the 1st author) was made up of several elements: firstly, a
measure of passion for the chosen activity. The Passion Scale (Marsh et al., 2013) consists of
two six-item subscales, one assessing harmonious passion and the other measuring obsessive
passion towards the activity. Four additional questions were developed to measure overall
passion (example question such as “I like this activity” and “this activity is important to me”).
The ‘passion score’ was used to confirm the participants level of commitment and the
subscales were used to assess their level of passion and whether they were considered as
having high harmonious or obsessive passion. Before distribution, the instrument was piloted
with a sample of 5 young performers aged 10-14 who fitted the target profile. Some of the
language of the passion scale was found to be rather jargonistic and substitutions of more
anglicised language were tested then made; for example, the text “This activity is the only
thing that really turns me on” was substituted with “This activity is the only thing I am really
excited about.”. Reliability of the newly worded scales were tested, and all showed good
internal consistency and were deemed reliable. The Cronbach’s alphas were .84 for the newly
worded harmonious passion subscale and .86 for the newly worded obsessive passion
subscale (compared to Marsh et al., (2013) where reliability scores of .83 (HP) and .86 (OP)
were recorded).

A second section assessed sport enjoyment and acceptance (e.g., “what do you not
enjoy about your training” (qualitative) and “Do you accept that training isn't always
enjoyable?” (yes / no answer - quantitative) and a third section assessed parental involvement
(e.g., “do your parents sometimes say the wrong thing about your activity”). Lastly, a final
quantitative section used a 7-point Likert Scale (1 (not agree at all) to 7 (strongly agree))
asking participants to rate what support they felt they most needed from their parents, (e.g.,
“It is important to me that my parents: are informed about my sport and know technical
details about it”).

**Procedure and analysis**

The survey was completed and submitted online; the approach deemed most
appropriate for gathering information as we would be able to recruit larger numbers of
children and their parents could be present when they filled out the survey. Data were
analysed both quantitatively using SPSS and qualitatively using thematic analysis. Answers
to open ended questions were analysed by identifying, coding, and reporting themes (or
patterns) across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The responses were studied, and several
codes were identified; these were used to group the responses together for the initial analysis.
Next, the codes themselves were analysed and consolidated into themes that provided the
structure for the analysis (see tables 3 & 4). For example, some participants reported pain
resulting from injuries while others described pain following a tough training session.
Accordingly, these two codes formed the theme “pain during or after training, or injuries”.
These themes and corresponding data were combined in figure 1 to show acceptance of
negative experience.

**Results**

We firstly checked that our selection criteria had recruited an appropriate sample.
Scores for the group (M=6.32, SD=.822) evidenced high levels of passion, suggesting that
our criterion had been met. There was a strong indication of Harmonious passion (M=5.65,
SD= .905) and a slightly lower tendency towards obsessive passion (M=4.1, SD =1.286).
Comparing results from parallel research that also utilized the Passion scale (Marsh et al.,
2013) their participants demonstrated slightly higher HP (M=6.04, SD=0.77) and similar OP
The participants were older teenagers with a mean age of 14.61 (SD = 1.63 years) suggesting that perhaps higher levels of HP can come with age, but OP can develop at a younger age. As over 75% of the children competed at a regional level or higher, there seemed to be a clear connection between level of sport involvement and high passion.

To address our question pertaining to high levels of Harmonious and Obsessive passion, we created subsets of the data based on a selection of the top 30% of the sample, in each of the two variables. Subsequent sections consider these as high HP and OP.

Finally at this initial stage, we completed checks to see if there were any systematic influences of age, type of sport or gender; notably, there were a high percentage of gymnasts and female respondents together with a wide range of ages. To check the mitigating factors of type of sport (gymnastics (n=51 and other sports n=52), age (10-12 n=61 and 13-16 n=42) and gender (67 F and 36 M) we examined the passion scores and parental preferences for each subsection. No notable differences were found for parental preferences and none of the passion scores were significantly different (see figures 2 & 3). Accordingly, all subsequent analyses considered the total sample.

**Objective 1 – Participant perceptions of arduous, repetitive, and specialized training and the mediating impacts of high HP and OP**

Figure 1 shows the combination of the qualitative responses arranged into six themes with the quantitative acceptance levels. Participants mostly acknowledged that there was some element of their training that they do not enjoy, with only 16.5% stating that they always enjoy training. Results show that participants’ main reason for not enjoying their sport were the long hours of commitment and second most chosen downside was not feeling good enough. Only a small percentage of the group raised pain and injury as a downside to their training whilst the least chosen downside was stopping them from doing something else.

Looking at acceptance levels for the group, the unfavourable elements of bullying and bad
coaching were the least acceptable downside, with only a 50% acceptance rate whereas all other negative aspects had over a 72% acceptance. Finally, ‘stopping them from doing something else’ achieved the highest level of acceptance at 90%. In short, our participants didn’t want to pursue other activities outside their training.

The subsets of highly passionate participants mirrored these responses, but there was a notable increase in their worries of not feeling good enough. Examining their acceptance levels for the downsides to training, participants demonstrating high HP give 100% acceptance levels for all the downsides reported. In contrast, participants demonstrating high OP indicated low acceptance for personal training issues and not feeling good enough.

**Objective 2 - Parenting Pitfalls, desirable Support and the mediating impacts of high HP and OP**

Delving into where parents go wrong, participants were asked whether their parents ever said anything incorrect to them regarding their sport and what sort of things they didn’t like to hear. As with all aspects of parenting, raising a child involved with competitive sport is no easy task; there are lots of pitfalls and it is easy for parents to go wrong, even a simple question about training can be deemed as negative; for example:

“Question: “What sort of things do your parents say that you don’t like?”

*Answer: “How was gymnastics today?”*

Pushing too hard, coaching, and giving technical advice were by far the most prevalent parenting mistakes. Another negative raised was hearing complaints about personal family commitments. The final, very small negative theme to emerge was a lack of appreciation of how important their sport was to them. It was only a small number of participants who raised this as a concern, but it is worth noting that nearly half of those demonstrated high levels of OP.
When asked what involvement and support participants most wanted from their parents the most favoured support was “showing pride” and the least wanted was “helping them miss training.” Full results of the rankings are shown in Table 5.

The requirements for the harmonious and obsessively passionate are not dissimilar to the rest of the groups. Most notable is that both groups put “respect their love of sport” as their first and foremost requirement.

Discussion

Objective 1 – Participant perceptions of arduous, repetitive, and specialized training and the mediating impacts of high HP and OP

The primary purpose of this study was to empirically examine the views of young performers involved in high level sport. Looking at their passion levels and their views of the downsides to their training as well as finding out what they need in terms of support from their parents. Our expectation was that participants would acknowledge elements to their training that were inherently unenjoyable, but that they were prepared to accept this in the pursuit of something they were highly passionate about and committed to. The results support this. Only a handful stated that they always enjoyed training; the downsides that are highlighted in the research (e.g., McCarthy & Jones, 2007) such as long arduous hours, painful training and keeping them from other activities were all listed, as well as personal issues and not feeling good enough. Importantly, however, participants’ high level of acceptance of these negative aspects to their training raises the question of whether ‘enjoyment’ is the crucial component needed for them to gain a positive experience from their training. Indeed, whether there is more to the term ‘enjoyment’ than some commonly expressed perceptions of fun. For example, pain and injury have been identified as a downside to high level, intense training regimes (Verner-Filion, Vallerand, Amiot, & Mocanu, 2017) but when asked, only a handful of the participants identified it as a downside.
to their training. In this regard, it has been shown that if the training load is managed appropriately then injury can indeed be avoided and the physical benefits and long-term health implications of high-level sport remain the major focus (McKay, Cumming, & Blake, 2019). Perhaps the challenges of injury and pain are not as widespread within specialized youth sport as has been suggested? Our results suggest that most participants, like anyone involved in a tough training/work program (dance, academic, music or sport), accept this aspect of their training. Data suggests that they understood the reasons behind their sometimes-painful training and see it as a necessary challenge.

Conversely, feelings of inadequacy were far more prevalent within the group, and are the second least accepted, especially those with high levels of OP and HP. In a high-pressure environment, it is little wonder that these young participants would suffer from a lack of confidence and feel inadequate. Parental pressure has been shown to prompt feelings of inadequacy in a child if they feel they cannot live up to the expectations set for them (Horn & Horn, 2007). Such feelings of inadequacy could stem from parenting or coaching style but also from the child’s own passions and desires. Passion, particularly obsessive passion (Vallerand et al., 2003) can facilitate feelings of inadequacy purely because the child will have such high expectations for themselves (Vallerand, 2010). These results indicate a need for extra support for passionate young performers to help them combat feelings of inadequacy and ensure they are proud of their achievements, no matter what the outcome.

The sample of high OP and HP participants is modest; however, whilst there is a clear need for further research to better understand their needs. This issue notwithstanding, the present data offer some important caveats to currently available advice.

Participants showed support for the view that intense training is demanding (Vallerand et al., 2007) with boring, repetitive or time consuming training being the most common theme identified as the least enjoyable element to their sport. Previous research has
notably made the assumption that young performers involved in high level training would *not* enjoy the long hours involved (e.g., Wall & Côté, 2007). Importantly, however, despite participants pinpointing the hours as being a downside, the vast majority confirmed acceptance. It seems that passion is the “key in the process of energizing athletes, allowing them to engage in their deliberate practice activities” (Verner-Filion et al., 2017, p.20). So, even though performers acknowledge and are fully aware that they may not enjoy the process, they accept it and seemingly would not want to change it.

Taking part in a high intensity training program will almost always lead to ‘early specialization’ (Hill, 1993) and the exclusion of other activities, playing other sports and even spending time with friends. These concerns have led to the general view that this is not the optimal approach for youth sport to take (Goodway & Robinson, 2015; Jayanthi et al., 2015 & LaPrade et al., 2016). Indeed, Côté and Hay, (2002) championed the concept of ‘deliberate play’ and argued against early specialization with the contention that children would gain more enjoyment from a diverse range of options, including different sports and social activities. When asked directly, however, this group of passionate participants do not confirm this theory. In fact, “stopping them from doing something else” was the least endorsed negative outcome for their sport training. Only a small percentage felt that they wanted to do something else, and this theme recorded the highest acceptance level with almost all (90%) acknowledging that this was a ‘necessary evil’ in the pursuit of their passion. These results are important as they support the view that early specialization may well be acceptable to the passionate participant and that it is “critical to move beyond a simplified narrative of ‘specialization is bad,’” (DiSanti & Erickson, 2019, p. 2094). We live in a world where child sport and specialization are becoming more and more prevalent. Instead of universally championing against early specialization, it may be more expedient to examine how this
training can be best experienced by young performers with improved education and advice for parents.

With that in mind, the final theme that came to light as a perceived negative were personal training issues. Participants mentioned bullying by team members or coaches as well as unprepared and inadequate coaches. It was not a significantly high number who cited this as their least enjoyable element, but it was the least accepted element with half of the participants expressing the view that they want this element to be changed. Contrary to the popular view, social issues and coaching troubles are far more of a problem for performers than the challenges of their training. This is in keeping with THE FUNMAP which place high significance on team friendships/rituals and positive coaching (Visek et al., 2015).

Objective 2 - Parenting Pitfalls, desirable Support and the mediating impacts of high HP and OP.

Results demonstrate the complicated path that parents of these young performers tread and their need for further support and education. The foremost parental pitfall identified was attempting to coach outside of training and this aspect has previously been raised as the central mistake that parents make (Knight et al., 2016). Feedback from the participants in this study also reflects this and reinforces how important it is for parents to remain separate from the sport and focus on support rather than coaching (Knight & Holt, 2014). This is a pitfall that has been raised many times and it is important to note that even those involved in high level training who are extremely passionate about their sport do not want their parents to coach them outside of training. Any parental education program must highlight this important point. Parents need in-depth advice which should be clear, specific and consider the needs of the performer. It is important to note that the participants confirmed that their second least favourite parental behaviour was ‘asking technical questions about training.’ Tamminen, Poucher, & Povilaitis, (2017) received similar feedback, so the advice for parents is that their
children do indeed want them to be informed about their sport, but they do not want to be questioned about it. “Listen and learn from your child to ensure you can engage in informed conversations” (Furusa et al., 2020, p.9) is excellent advice, but this present study shows that a little more guidance is required as the words might be misinterpreted to result in lots of questioning after training. For example, this might be supplemented by an additional suggestion which highlights a more active role for the child, such as “allow them to lead the conversation about their sport.”

Another negative raised was hearing complaints about personal family commitments. This reflects the research that notes personal investment and financial impact as two of the main stressors experienced by parents in elite sport contexts (Lienhart, Nicaise, Knight, & Guillet-Descas, 2019). It is important to highlight that it was only a small percentage of participants that made this observation. Indeed, it was encouraging to see what a positive relationship most families had towards their child’s sport despite the personal and financial commitment that it undoubtedly requires. It is important to note that, although measures were taken to ensure that the participants felt comfortable reporting negative parental behaviour; readers need to take a measured view of these results and acknowledge the challenges of trying to ascertain an accurate picture of family life from a child.

Another important finding is the dissatisfaction of the obsessively passionate participants who seemed more likely to feel that their parents do not share their passion for their sport. Obsessive passion can lead to compulsive and unhealthy attitudes towards sport (Vallerand et al., 2003) but it may well be that parents do not share those feelings. If so, this could lead to a discrepancy in view of the sacrifice required by both parties. Further research is needed here to help parents identify and manage their children’s passion.

Turning to the quantitative results, participants clearly confirm that they do not want their parents to give them technical advice about their training (ranked 8th) and, in contrast to
the findings of Furusa et al., (2020) do not put much importance on their parents knowing technical details about their sport (ranked 7th). In keeping with Furusa et al., (2020) they put “right support at competitions” (2nd), “respecting their love of the sport” (3rd), “prioritising participation” (4th) and “recognising them beyond their sport” (6th) as high in their preferences. The most significant finding and the guidance missing from previous research is the element “show how proud they are” which is ranked first. The most important action children wanted from their parents was to show that they are proud of them – an important finding.

Over the last few years there have been many studies designed to advise parents of the right way to support and communicate with their child (e.g., Dorsch, King, Dunn, & Osai & Sarah Tulane, 2017 & Thrower, Harwood, & Spray, 2017) but the expression of pride is not something that has been specifically listed as a suggestion for parents. It is interesting that, as mentioned, youth sport is heavily criticised for being too arduous, too painful and too intense for children (e.g., McCarthy & Jones, 2007). But when asked, our participants seem more concerned about letting their parents down and seeking their approval through the expression of pride than they are about taking on the challenge of an intense training program.

It is also important for parents to respect their child’s sport; even more so if their child displays very high levels of passion. Participants displaying high levels of OP and HP both put “respect their love of sport” as their first and foremost requirement from their parents. Despite the sample being modest, this is a notable difference, and the needs of highly passionate children should be explored further; both from the perspective of helping parents support them as well as helping them manage their passion levels to ensure a healthy and happy experience.

Parents need to tread the fine line of making sure they are knowledgeable about the sport without being overbearing or over-involved with training. Again, supporting the view
that arduous training is something the passionate child wants to take part in, parents should note that “encouraging training at all times” is a key piece of support required by the children who are involved in a challenging training program and ask for encouragement to attend their sessions. The component “helping them miss training” was added in to test their commitment to their training schedule; with the idea that if the child was not committed and enjoying their sport, they would want their parents to help them miss training from time to time. This was not the case; wanting help with missing training was given by far the lowest score. This suggests that these passionate participants are indeed happy to attend their training and, even when given the option, do not want excuses to get out of it. Once again, this contradicts the common-held view that children do not enjoy hard high level training (McCarthy & Jones, 2007; McCarthy, Jones, & Clark-Carter, 2008, Mossman et al., 2019) and shows that the participants were committed and passionate about their sport.

In summary, this study demonstrates that passionate children enjoy the challenge of an intense training program and show great resilience and commitment to their sport. Although being recognised beyond their sport is important to them, they still want their parents to encourage them on this journey and make all the necessary sacrifices, so they can attend their training and achieve their goals. First and foremost, in addition to previous advice, they want their parents to show they are proud of them.

Limitations and Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge the limitations in our study and keep these in mind when considering the recommendations. Firstly, despite the open nature of the recruitment process, almost half the sample took part in some form of gymnastics, a sport renowned for early specialization, long hours, and arduous training. This was potentially exacerbated by the predominance of young females in the study. Although initial checks did not demonstrate any significant differences between this subgroup and the rest of the sample, it is recommended
that further research is conducted with a focus on other sports. Secondly, artefactual, or pressured data may have resulted from parental influence. As much as it was made clear that the children should fill this out alone, we cannot know if the parents intervened. Finally, we must acknowledge the modest numbers in the sample, a particular concern with the subsets for OP and HP children. Once again, further research is indicated.

These limitations notwithstanding, several results are worthy of consideration as they offer qualification or even contradiction to other work. Child sport has fallen under the researchers’ microscopes far more than other childhood pursuits such as dance or music. Many activities have been widely criticised as unenjoyable and even damaging to the children. Importantly, however, our results suggest that, when the children themselves are given a voice, they do not support this view. Despite these children acknowledging downsides to their training, even when given the choice very few of them opted for change. Furthermore, there is no indication that this sample of children are struggling with their training. When given the option they do not wish to get out of it and are far more concerned about making their parents proud. Our study suggests a great need for parental education on supporting a children involved in youth sport. Parental approach can have a significant influence on the child’s experience and several pitfalls have been highlighted. Noting the different needs of the highly passionate children; parents must recognise their children’s level of passion for their sport and support it accordingly.

Around 20 years ago society saw a shift in childhood experience and today researchers are expressing concern that after school play has been replaced with tough arduous training programs that are neither enjoyable nor successful (e.g. Crane & Temple, 2015 & Güllich, Macnamara, & Hambrick, 2021). Concern however has been raised that assumptions have been made concerning the experience of a child athlete, assumptions that are not underpinned by empirical measures (Güllich, Faß, Gies, & Wald, 2020). This study
has listened to the voice of the young athletes and has established that a passionate child is able to find enjoyment in arduous training programs and can accept the negative aspects of early specialization and deliberate practice. The participants demonstrated great passion and commitment for their sport; they showed resilience in the face of challenge and did not want to hide behind their parents to help them take the easy route. ‘Success’ can take many forms and there is more to childhood experience than just sporting success in adulthood. Regardless of the ultimate outcome of their sporting journey, showing such great commitment and powerful resilience should not been seen as a negative experience. ‘Enjoyment’ can also take many forms; not only pleasure in taking part in an activity, but satisfaction at completing a challenging training session, pride from mastering a skill or the powerful feeling comradeship of being part a team. As such, perhaps a wider understanding of enjoyment, or even fun, might be appropriate.
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