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### Let's hear It from the kids! Examining the experiences, views, and needs of highly committed children involved in youth sport

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**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

16 **Abstract**

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

29

30

## 31 **Introduction**

32           In the last two decades there has been a shift in parenting and child experiences. The  
33 traditional childhood activity of playing with friends in the streets and local woods has been  
34 replaced with activities that can be controlled, such as after school sports and clubs (Coakley,  
35 2006; Fass and Grossberg, 2011). In 2019 for example, 56.1% of children aged between 6  
36 and 17 reported that they took part in some sort of sporting activity after school or at the  
37 weekends (Youth Sports Facts: Participation Rates — The Aspen Institute Project Play,  
38 2021). This sporting involvement is becoming progressively more intense, and what is known  
39 as ‘sport specialization’ is becoming popular, with young athletes increasingly focusing on  
40 just one sport and training year-round for long hours. Indeed, many children are being pushed  
41 harder and harder at an early age when previously they would have been blithely playing in  
42 the street and running around in the park. Twenty years since this shift in childhood  
43 experience became apparent, there is a growing body of research and parallel media messages  
44 expressing concern for the psychological and physical wellbeing of the children with the  
45 contention that after-school fun has been replaced with training programs that are deemed  
46 neither enjoyable or effective, and often not leading to adult success. Despite these negatives,  
47 however, participating in youth sport can offer huge benefits and research into Positive Youth  
48 Development (PYD) certainly champions youth sport involvement suggesting that “there may  
49 be something unique (but not magical!) about the sporting context that makes it stand out  
50 from other activities” (Holt, Deal, & Pankow, 2020,p.430). So, reflecting these contentions,  
51 research and sporting bodies must work to find the right balance to ensure that a child’s  
52 experience of sport is a positive and perhaps even a ‘magical’ one.

53           One of the negatives often expressed relates to the nature of the practice regime. It is  
54 argued that intense, specialized training programmes or deliberate practice (Ericsson,  
55 Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993) are counter-productive and cause more harm than good.

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

72         Against these negatives, however, there is an argument that early specialization and  
73 high commitment are things that children might enjoy, relish and indeed, *want* to do. There is  
74 more to sporting outcome than simply “adult success” and perhaps the term “enjoyment” is  
75 not as black and white as previous articles, or the popular media, have argued. For example,  
76 there is no doubt that deliberate practice is by nature “demanding, repetitive and not always  
77 inherently enjoyable” (Vallerand et al., 2007, p.512). However, it is suggested that such  
78 intense training is not always a bad thing and that athletes, including children, can gain a  
79 huge amount of satisfaction and psychological well-being from taking part in this sort of  
80 activity (Verner-Filion et al., 2017) together with the progress it often engenders.

81           The mental element required to be able to endure, or even enjoy, deliberate practise  
82 has been characterised as “passion” (Vallerand et al., 2007, 2008): defined as “a strong  
83 inclination toward an activity that people like, that they find important, and in which they  
84 invest time and energy” (Vallerand et al., 2003 p.756). Previous studies have confirmed that  
85 passion is a clear motivational force behind achievement in any form of performance; be that  
86 music (Bonneville-Roussy, Lavigne, & Vallerand, 2011), dancing (Rip, Fortin, & Vallerand,  
87 2006) or sport (Vallerand et al., 2008). “Passion leads athletes to actively pursue their quest  
88 to attain performance in sport, spending a great amount of time practicing in order to  
89 deliberately enhance their skills” (Verner-Filion et al., 2017, p.19) and is the key to  
90 energizing them and “allowing them to engage in their deliberate practice” (Verner-Filion et  
91 al., 2017, p.20).

92           In their dualistic model of passion, Vallerand et al., (2003) propose two distinct types  
93 of passion, Harmonious Passion (HP) and Obsessive Passion (OP). HP is the consequence of  
94 autonomous internalisation of the activity and is said to occupy “a significant but not  
95 overpowering space in the person’s identity and is in harmony with other aspects of the  
96 person’s life” (Vallerand et al., 2003, p757). OP is the opposite end of the scale as the  
97 feelings are derived from a controlled internalisation of the activity into the child’s identity.  
98 Children with OP may feel more controlled by their need to partake in the activity due to  
99 external desires such as striving for social acceptance or the need to build self-esteem.  
100 Although they do report enjoying the activity, they may become compelled to take part  
101 because of the external desires and pressures. In short, it is possibly passion that enables an  
102 athlete to find joy in intense training and makes the arduous journey not only bearable, but  
103 enjoyable. Notably, however, it may be that the *type* of passion acts to differentiate the  
104 impacts of such involvement.

105           There appear to be two camps with opposing views on the impact and desirability of  
106 high levels of involvement for young sports participants. Research may help to clarify this  
107 apparent dichotomy. Perhaps an assumption has been made as to the young athletes' view of  
108 their training. For example, Güllich, Faß, Gies, & Wald, (2020) argue that the negative  
109 connotation surrounding deliberate practice training and the positive link to deliberate play  
110 are not underpinned by empirical measures. They questioned 208 young athletes and found  
111 no difference in the inherent enjoyment of deliberate practice and deliberate play, concluding  
112 that researchers "ascribed these attributes a priori to athletes' involvement in the activities but  
113 did not empirically measure the ascribed attributes" (p.1). As such, the opinion that intense  
114 training is not enjoyed by children may not be entirely accurate; perhaps the children  
115 themselves have a different view and a different perspective that has not been considered.

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

125           *"(a) show you care about your child's sport by facilitating and prioritising*  
126 *participation.*

127           *(b) listen and learn from your child to ensure you can engage in informed*  
128 *conversations.*

129           (c) *understand and support your child’s pre, during, and post competition*

130 *preferences; and*

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

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

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

152   **Method**



153 ***Participants***

154 Purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) was used to recruit children who were  
155 highly involved in sport and could therefore offer an insight into what it is like being  
156 involved in an intense training program. Once approval was obtained from the University  
157 ethics, parents were contacted through sporting groups and club pages on social media.  
158 Coaches were asked to help recruit suitable participants and posts were made in Facebook  
159 groups for high level youth sport clubs. A group of 103 participants (67 F and 36 M) took  
160 part. Ages ranged from 10 to 16 (Mean (SD) = 12.3 (1.75)) with participants training for an  
161 average of 11.5 hours per week (SD = 0.9). Indeed, almost a third were training more than 15  
162 hours per week. All had been training intensively for at least two years (mean (SD) = 3.4  
163 (1.0)). Finally, participants were asked to identify their main sport and the highest level of  
164 performance they had attained (see tables 1 and 2). A wide age range was accepted to reflect  
165 the different sporting contexts in which high levels of commitment may emerge. For  
166 example, a 10-year-old gymnast may reflect a sporting commitment and history identical to  
167 that of a 16-year-old Karateka. This approach also ensured that the views of both children and  
168 adolescents were represented within the sample.

169 There are serious ethical issues surrounding research with children and it is important  
170 that these were considered and addressed. Graham, Powell and Taylor (2015) urge this  
171 research must benefit the child and they should only be involved if necessary. Involving  
172 children in research should not be undertaken without serious consideration, “there is a desire  
173 for children to benefit from the progress that scientific research can bring, but at the same  
174 time avoid placing any individual children at risk of being harmed by such research” (Dixon-  
175 Woods, Young, & Ross, 2006, p.166). For this study to be valuable it was vital that the  
176 children were given a voice and their views heard. Without hearing their thoughts, it would  
177 be very difficult to build a true picture of their views and needs.

178           The most frequent issues associated with working with children that are pinpointed in  
179 research are: informed consent, protection of children, privacy and confidentiality, payment,  
180 and power dynamics (Powell et al., 2012). Addressing each of these points individually the  
181 ones that were of most concern for this study were informed consent and power dynamics.

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

### 191 *Design and measures.*

192           Sport (and even more so youth sport) is a particularly complex area to research and  
193 qualitative methods are recommended to delve into this multifaceted arena (Sparkes & Smith,  
194 2013). The approach adopted a pragmatist perspective of “what works” (Yanchar &  
195 Williams, 2006) and the view that a person’s knowledge is shaped and given meaning by  
196 their actions and interactions (Dewey, 1922). As our research questions were both  
197 confirmatory and exploratory in this context, a mixed methods design was employed  
198 (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Our intention was that by integrating the two methods it  
199 would be possible to gain a deeper insight into what the children feel about their sport, their  
200 experiences of it and what they need from their parents. This was achieved by not only  
201 measuring their passion levels and views of the need for support but also being able to allow  
202 them to explain their feelings and experiences. The quantitative element offered some

203 generalisable data about the passion levels, perceptions, and preferences of this focused  
204 sample. Qualitative elements ensured that participants could use their own words to describe  
205 their feelings about their sporting experience – to legitimately give them a voice and make  
206 sure no assumptions are made about their views.

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

224         A second section assessed sport enjoyment and acceptance (e.g., “what do you not  
225 enjoy about your training” (qualitative) and “Do you accept that training isn't always  
226 enjoyable?” (yes / no answer - quantitative) and a third section assessed parental involvement  
227 (e.g., “do your parents sometimes say the wrong thing about your activity”). Lastly, a final

228 quantitative section used a 7-point Likert Scale (1 (not agree at all) to 7 (strongly agree))  
229 asking participants to rate what support they felt they most needed from their parents, (e.g.,  
230 “It is important to me that my parents: are informed about my sport and know technical  
231 details about it”).

### 232 *Procedure and analysis*

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

### 246 **Results**

247 We firstly checked that our selection criteria had recruited an appropriate sample.  
248 Scores for the group (M=6.32, SD=.822) evidenced high levels of passion, suggesting that  
249 our criterion had been met. There was a strong indication of Harmonious passion (M=5.65,  
250 SD= .905) and a slightly lower tendency towards obsessive passion (M=4.1, SD =1.286).  
251 Comparing results from parallel research that also utilized the Passion scale (Marsh et al.,  
252 2013) their participants demonstrated slightly higher HP (M=6.04, SD=0.77) and similar OP

253 (M=4.24, SD=1.43). The participants were older teenagers with a mean age of 14.61 (SD =  
254 1.63 years) suggesting that perhaps higher levels of HP can come with age, but OP can  
255 develop at a younger age. As over 75% of the children competed at a regional level or higher,  
256 there seemed to be a clear connection between level of sport involvement and high passion.

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

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

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

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

278 coaching were the least acceptable downside, with only a 50% acceptance rate whereas all  
279 other negative aspects had over a 72% acceptance. Finally, ‘stopping them from doing  
280 something else’ achieved the highest level of acceptance at 90%. In short, our participants  
281 didn’t want to pursue other activities outside their training.

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

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

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

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

295 *Answer: “How was gymnastics today?””*

296         Pushing too hard, coaching, and giving technical advice were by far the most  
297 prevalent parenting mistakes. Another negative raised was hearing complaints about personal  
298 family commitments. The final, very small negative theme to emerge was a lack of  
299 appreciation of how important their sport was to them. It was only a small number of  
300 participants who raised this as a concern, but it is worth noting that nearly half of those  
301 demonstrated high levels of OP.

302           When asked what involvement and support participants most wanted from their  
303 parents the most favoured support was “showing pride” and the least wanted was “helping  
304 them miss training.” Full results of the rankings are shown in Table 5.

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

## 308 **Discussion**

### 309 ***Objective 1 – Participant perceptions of arduous, repetitive, and specialized training and*** 310 ***the mediating impacts of high HP and OP***

311           The primary purpose of this study was to empirically examine the views of young  
312 performers involved in high level sport. Looking at their passion levels and their views of the  
313 downsides to their training as well as finding out what they need in terms of support from  
314 their parents. Our expectation was that participants would acknowledge elements to their  
315 training that were inherently unenjoyable, but that they were prepared to accept this in the  
316 pursuit of something they were highly passionate about and committed to. The results support  
317 this. Only a handful stated that they always enjoyed training; the downsides that are  
318 highlighted in the research (e.g., McCarthy & Jones, 2007) such as long arduous hours,  
319 painful training and keeping them from other activities were all listed, as well as personal  
320 issues and not feeling good enough. Importantly, however, participants’ high level of  
321 acceptance of these negative aspects to their training raises the question of whether  
322 ‘enjoyment’ is the crucial component needed for them to gain a positive experience from  
323 their training. Indeed, whether there is more to the term ‘enjoyment’ than some commonly  
324 expressed perceptions of fun. For example, pain and injury have been identified as a  
325 downside to high level, intense training regimes (Verner-Filion, Vallerand, Amiot, &  
326 Mocanu, 2017) but when asked, only a handful of the participants identified it as a downside

327 to their training . In this regard, it has been shown that if the training load is managed  
328 appropriately then injury can indeed be avoided and the physical benefits and long-term  
329 health implications of high-level sport remain the major focus (McKay, Cumming, & Blake,  
330 2019). Perhaps the challenges of injury and pain are not as widespread within specialized  
331 youth sport as has been suggested? Our results suggest that most participants, like anyone  
332 involved in a tough training/work program (dance, academic, music or sport), accept this  
333 aspect of their training. Data suggests that they understood the reasons behind their  
334 sometimes-painful training and see it as a necessary challenge.

335         Conversely, feelings of inadequacy were far more prevalent within the group, and are  
336 the second least accepted, especially those with high levels of OP and HP. In a high-pressure  
337 environment, it is little wonder that these young participants would suffer from a lack of  
338 confidence and feel inadequate. Parental pressure has been shown to prompt feelings of  
339 inadequacy in a child if they feel they cannot live up to the expectations set for them (Horn &  
340 Horn, 2007). Such feelings of inadequacy could stem from parenting or coaching style but  
341 also from the child's own passions and desires. Passion, particularly obsessive passion  
342 (Vallerand et al., 2003) can facilitate feelings of inadequacy purely because the child will  
343 have such high expectations for themselves (Vallerand, 2010). These results indicate a need  
344 for extra support for passionate young performers to help them combat feelings of  
345 inadequacy and ensure they are proud of their achievements, no matter what the outcome.  
346 The sample of high OP and HP participants is modest; however, whilst there is a clear need  
347 for further research to better understand their needs. This issue notwithstanding, the present  
348 data offer some important caveats to currently available advice.

349         Participants showed support for the view that intense training is demanding  
350 (Vallerand et al., 2007) with boring, repetitive or time consuming training being the most  
351 common theme identified as the least enjoyable element to their sport. Previous research has



352 notably made the assumption that young performers involved in high level training would *not*  
353 enjoy the long hours involved (e.g., Wall & Côté, 2007). Importantly, however, despite  
354 participants pinpointing the hours as being a downside, the vast majority confirmed  
355 acceptance. It seems that passion is the “key in the process of energizing athletes, allowing  
356 them to engage in their deliberate practice activities” (Verner-Filion et al., 2017, p.20). So,  
357 even though performers acknowledge and are fully aware that they may not enjoy the  
358 process, they accept it and seemingly would not want to change it.

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

376 training can be best experienced by young performers with improved education and advice  
377 for parents.

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

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

388 Results demonstrate the complicated path that parents of these young performers tread  
389 and their need for further support and education. The foremost parental pitfall identified was  
390 attempting to coach outside of training and this aspect has previously been raised as the  
391 central mistake that parents make (Knight et al., 2016). Feedback from the participants in this  
392 study also reflects this and reinforces how important it is for parents to remain separate from  
393 the sport and focus on support rather than coaching (Knight & Holt, 2014). This is a pitfall  
394 that has been raised many times and it is important to note that even those involved in high  
395 level training who are extremely passionate about their sport do not want their parents to  
396 coach them outside of training. Any parental education program must highlight this important  
397 point. Parents need in-depth advice which should be clear, specific and consider the needs of  
398 the performer. It is important to note that the participants confirmed that their second least  
399 favourite parental behaviour was 'asking technical questions about training.' Tamminen,  
400 Poucher, & Povilaitis, (2017) received similar feedback, so the advice for parents is that their

401 children do indeed want them to be informed about their sport, but they do not want to be  
402 questioned about it. *“Listen and learn from your child to ensure you can engage in informed*  
403 *conversations”* (Furusa et al., 2020, p.9) is excellent advice, but this present study shows that  
404 a little more guidance is required as the words might be misinterpreted to result in lots of  
405 questioning after training. For example, this might be supplemented by an additional  
406 suggestion which highlights a more active role for the child, such as *“allow them to lead the*  
407 *conversation about their sport.”*

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

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

424 Turning to the quantitative results, participants clearly confirm that they do not want  
425 their parents to give them technical advice about their training (ranked 8<sup>th</sup>) and, in contrast to

426 the findings of Furusa et al., (2020) do not put much importance on their parents knowing  
427 technical details about their sport (ranked 7<sup>th</sup>). In keeping with Furusa et al., (2020) they put  
428 “right support at competitions” (2<sup>nd</sup>), “respecting their love of the sport” (3<sup>rd</sup>), “prioritising  
429 participation” (4<sup>th</sup>) and “recognising them beyond their sport” (6<sup>th</sup>) as high in their  
430 preferences. The most significant finding and the guidance missing from previous research is  
431 the element “show how proud they are” which is ranked first. The most important action  
432 children wanted from their parents was to show that they are proud of them – an important  
433 finding.

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

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

449 Parents need to tread the fine line of making sure they are knowledgeable about the  
450 sport without being overbearing or over-involved with training. Again, supporting the view

451 that arduous training is something the passionate child *wants* to take part in, parents should  
452 note that “encouraging training at all times” is a key piece of support required by the children  
453 who are involved in a challenging training program and ask for encouragement to attend their  
454 sessions. The component “helping them miss training” was added in to test their commitment  
455 to their training schedule; with the idea that if the child was not committed and enjoying their  
456 sport, they would want their parents to help them miss training from time to time. This was  
457 not the case; wanting help with missing training was given by far the lowest score. This  
458 suggests that these passionate participants are indeed happy to attend their training and, even  
459 when given the option, do not want excuses to get out of it. Once again, this contradicts the  
460 common-held view that children do not enjoy hard high level training (McCarthy & Jones,  
461 2007; McCarthy, Jones, & Clark-Carter, 2008, Mossman et al., 2019) and shows that the  
462 participants were committed and passionate about their sport.

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

### 469 **Limitations and Conclusion**

470 It is important to acknowledge the limitations in our study and keep these in mind when  
471 considering the recommendations. Firstly, despite the open nature of the recruitment process,  
472 almost half the sample took part in some form of gymnastics, a sport renowned for early  
473 specialization, long hours, and arduous training. This was potentially exacerbated by the  
474 predominance of young females in the study. Although initial checks did not demonstrate any  
475 significant differences between this subgroup and the rest of the sample, it is recommended

476 that further research is conducted with a focus on other sports. Secondly, artefactual, or  
477 pressured data may have resulted from parental influence. As much as it was made clear that  
478 the children should fill this out alone, we cannot know if the parents intervened. Finally, we  
479 must acknowledge the modest numbers in the sample, a particular concern with the subsets  
480 for OP and HP children. Once again, further research is indicated.

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

495         Around 20 years ago society saw a shift in childhood experience and today  
496 researchers are expressing concern that after school play has been replaced with tough  
497 arduous training programs that are neither enjoyable nor successful (e.g. Crane & Temple,  
498 2015 & Güllich, Macnamara, & Hambrick, 2021). Concern however has been raised that  
499 assumptions have been made concerning the experience of a child athlete, assumptions that  
500 are not underpinned by empirical measures (Güllich, Faß, Gies, & Wald, 2020). This study

501 has listened to the voice of the young athletes and has established that a passionate child is  
502 able to find enjoyment in arduous training programs and can accept the negative aspects of  
503 early specialization and deliberate practice. The participants demonstrated great passion and  
504 commitment for their sport; they showed resilience in the face of challenge and did not want  
505 to hide behind their parents to help them take the easy route. ‘Success’ can take many forms  
506 and there is more to childhood experience than just sporting success in adulthood. Regardless  
507 of the ultimate outcome of their sporting journey, showing such great commitment and  
508 powerful resilience should not be seen as a negative experience. ‘Enjoyment’ can also take  
509 many forms; not only pleasure in taking part in an activity, but satisfaction at completing a  
510 challenging training session, pride from mastering a skill or the powerful feeling comradeship  
511 of being part a team. As such, perhaps a wider understanding of enjoyment, or even fun,  
512 might be appropriate.

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