

# Parents' perspectives and young athletes' perceptions of social support

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The purpose of this study was to examine experiences of being elite tennis players' parents, social support they provided to their children, and athletes' perceptions of influences of their parents' support. Four focus groups (2 athletes and 2 parents groups) were conducted to collect data from both athletes and parents. The data were analyzed by thematic analysis and resulted in nine higher order themes including initiation of sporting career, expectations, satisfaction, parents' concerns, tangible, esteem, information, emotion, and network support. Later five themes which indicate kinds of support for athletes received from their parents were used to develop a matrix which can explain athletes' perceptions for each support they received from their parents.

The findings revealed that there were some gaps between providers' and receivers' perspectives in effectiveness of provided support because some kinds of support were not effective when the support was provided without considering athletes needs. Therefore, the findings highlighted that support could be much effective if support providers for athletes consider athletes needs before they provide certain support to those athletes.

**Keywords:** Athletes' perceptions, Social support, Parents' perspectives, Tennis

## INTRODUCTION

Researchers in sports psychology are interested in the topic of talent development and seek to identify high-performing athletes' key psychological characteristics. Such research has revealed that high-performers tend to employ various cognitive strategies to help them succeed (Weinberg and Gould, 2007). Other researchers have highlighted the importance of roles and the influence of social support networks on these athletes' development, especially when they are young (Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004).

Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) developed a developmental model that frames athletes' sports career progression in terms of developmental perspectives, based on Bloom's (1985) three stages of talent development. Wylleman and Lavallee's model presents four different levels of an athlete's development through their athletic careers: athletic, psychological, psychosocial, and academic and vocational levels. The athletic level refers to the different stag-

es of athletic development experienced during their careers (i.e., from initiation of sport to retirement from sport). The psychological level explains an individual's score psychological development based on Erikson's (1950) model (childhood to adulthood). The psychosocial level presents and the importance of the development of social support networks throughout the athletic career, and the academic and vocational level indicates athletes' developmental process in educational and professional areas. This model highlights the importance of support networks in athletic development. The authors suggest that there are different social support networks during different stages of an individual's development. For example, the model shows that, for teenage athletes, parents and coaches are the main support network during the adolescent's growth.

Several studies have examined the influence of family members on athletes, such as the parents' impact on sport participation (Wuerth et al., 2004), parental pressure on adolescent athletes (Lee

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and MacLean, 1997), and family members' role in talent development (Côté, 1999). However, most of these studies have focused on identifying the influence of family members on an athlete's development, not on examining how athletes actually perceive these influences.

According to Rosenfeld and Richman (1997), if support providers and receivers do not have appropriate exchanges, social support will not be as effective as it could be, because the receivers will not be satisfied with the type of support that was given to them. Therefore, it is necessary to examine athletes' perspectives on the different types of support provided by their parents, because understanding recipients' perceptions of support might aid in clarifying the types of support that are most effective to those athletes in various circumstances.

This is especially important for teenage athletes, as previous findings have indicated that parental influences are particularly strong in these individuals. For example, some athletes experience burnout from sport because of pushy parents (Coakley, 1992). Based on the developmental model (Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004), parents maybe the most influential group for teenage athletes. Thus, it is important to identify the impact of parents' social support on young athletes, and examine the gap between the providers' (parents) and the receivers' (children) perspectives.

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of parents of elite tennis players, the social support they provide their children, and the athletes' perceptions of their parents' influence and support. By examining the perspective of both teenage athletes and their parents, this study will help elucidate the gap between young athletes' perceptions and their parents' intentions of support.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Participants

Participants for the current study were young athletes and their parents. Twenty Korean junior tennis players age 11-14 yr (mean age: 12.6; 12 boys and 8 girls) were invited to take part in the study with the permission of their guardians. Their parents were also invited to participate in the study; 15 (4 fathers and 11 mothers) agreed to take part. The players were between 3 and 6 yr into their athletic careers (mean: 4.4 yr), and they trained for 24-40 h per week (mean: 30 h). The parents visited the tennis court 0-7 times a week (mean: 4 times) to see their children's training and competition.

### Procedure

The present study employed a focus group method to collect data from both athletes and their parents, allowing the researchers to gain rich information from key informants (Stewart et al., 2007). A focus group was used for the current study for several reasons, which included the following: 1) a focus group is beneficial for examining little-known phenomena, 2) focus group allows researchers to divide participants into different subgroups so that they can be more easily categorized, and 3) through the focus group, researchers can observe group dynamics and interpersonal interactions.

Semi-structured focus group topics were developed based on existing literature and theories (Rosenfeld and Richman, 1997; Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004). The focus group topics included 1) the influence of parents on athletic development; 2) behavioral, cognitive, and emotional experiences; and 3) positive and negative aspects of being athletes or athletes' parents.

The current study employed purposeful sampling to select participants for four different groups. To examine both athletes' perceptions of their parents' influences and parents' perspectives of their role and influence on their children's athletic development, four focus groups were conducted: two athlete groups and two parent groups. The Korean Tennis Association provided contact information for potential participants, and the focus groups were held in two different locations (Munhyung: athletes, parents; Andong: athletes, parents) between July and October 2013, at the participants' convenience. Before the focus group interview began, all participants signed consent forms while researchers provided information related to the study, such as the aims of the study and the potential risks and benefits.

### Analysis

Each focus group lasted between 61 and 118 min (average: 84 min); the focus groups were recorded on both audio and video devices. The recorded files were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 48,998 total words in Korean.

The data were analyzed by thematic analysis, in accordance with Patton's (2002) method. The analysis process contained four different steps: 1) reading and re-reading the original transcripts while watching and listening to the recorded file, 2) breaking down raw data into meaningful units, 3) categorizing meaningful units into first-order and higher-order themes, and 4) developing an outcome matrix that helped to explain relationships between the higher-order themes and directions of parental influence.

To enhance trustworthiness of the current study, theory and

analysis triangulations were employed (Patton, 2002). Theory triangulation (i.e., applying different models and theories from the existing literature) was derived from the development of the focus group topics and the analysis process. For analysis triangulation, two of the authors of the current study who were involved in the data analysis conducted a cross-reference check for each other's outcomes. In addition, a behavioral sciences expert conducted an audit-trial (Patton, 2002) that attempted to 1) examine the process of the overall research protocol, and 2) ensure that the results were developed from the original data.

## RESULTS

The analysis identified 192 meaning units, 19 patterns, 13 first-order themes, and 9 higher-order themes related to experiences of being elite tennis players' parents, the social support they provided to their children, and the athletes' perceptions of the influences of their parents' support (Table 1). The findings of the current study are presented in two sub-sections: general findings and social support. General findings refer to information relating to the participants' experiences. Social support details the type of support provided to the athletes from both the parents' and children's perspectives, as well as how the athletes perceived the provided support (e.g., whether each type of support had positive or negative influences on their psychological well-being) (Table 1).

### General findings

Four out of nine higher-order themes related to the experiences of the athletes and their parents, including initiation of their sporting career, expectations, satisfaction, and parental concerns. Both athletes and parents thought that parents influenced the initiation of the athletes' sporting careers. One father said, "I started to play tennis first and brought my son to free tennis class one day, and he continue to play..." However, athletes also discussed personal factors such as fun, and coaches' suggestions that led them to get involved in tennis at an early age.

Both parties also discussed their expectations for one another. Athletes tended to seek pleasurable communication with their parents, wanted their parents to trust them, and expected their parents and coaches to provide the same information when discussing their tennis skills. One girl said, "I hope that my parents understood me and had some nice conversation [with them]." In addition, one of the girls hoped to avoid punishment from her father. Conversely, the parents wanted their children to enjoy their sport and have a balance between sporting and non-sporting lives.

**Table 1.** Comparing themes from athletes' and parents' groups

Higher-order themes <i>First-order themes</i> Patterns	Identifying recurrent themes		Present in both groups?
	Athletes	Parents	
Participants Themes			
Initiation of sporting career	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Initiation</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parents' influences	Yes	Yes	Yes
Coaches suggestions	Yes	No	No
Expectations	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Expectations to each other</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hoping for	Yes	Yes	Yes
Satisfaction	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Satisfaction for support</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
Positive aspects of support	Yes	Yes	Yes
Positive experiences	No	Yes	No
Parents' concerns	No	Yes	No
<i>Fear of uncertain future</i>	No	Yes	No
Fear of failure	No	Yes	No
Sacrifices	No	Yes	No
Tangible support	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Instrumental support</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
Being there	Yes	Yes	Yes
Material assistant	Yes	Yes	Yes
Esteem support	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Positive aspects of esteem support</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
Help to build confidence	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Negative aspects of esteem support</i>	Yes	No	No
Social comparison	Yes	Yes	Yes
Information support	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Positive aspects of information support</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
Feedback	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Negative aspects of information support</i>	Yes	No	No
Feeling of confusion	Yes	No	No
Emotion support	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Positive aspects of emotion support</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sympathy	Yes	Yes	Yes
Comforting	Yes	No	No
<i>Negative aspects of emotion support</i>	Yes	No	No
Criticism	Yes	No	No
Network support	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Positive aspects of network support</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
Communicate to each other	Yes	Yes	Yes
Communication with coaches	No	Yes	No
<i>Negative aspects of network support</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
Difficulties in communicate	Yes	Yes	Yes

The parents also discussed the need for education programs for athletes' parents and coaches to address their lack of experience and the limited information available regarding effective ways to support young athletes.

Athletes reported satisfaction regarding the support they received from their parents, such as caring for them and cheering them on in their daily lives. From the parents' perspective, they tended to enjoy watching their children's positive development in both physical and psychological areas. One mother said, "I think

**Table 2.** Athletes' perceptions of provided support

Types of support from parents	Recipients' perceptions	
	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
<i>Tangible support</i>	-Being there for training and matches -Food -Equipment	Feeling of pressure parents to be with them all the time
<i>Esteem support</i>	-Words to help building confidence	-Comparing themselves with other players -Ask them to be like other players
<i>Information support</i>	-Information regarding to tennis skills -Information regarding to game plans	-Different messages from parents and coaches
<i>Emotion support</i>	-Being understood -Cheer up before the match -Positive feedback after the match -Positive feedback during the training	-Negative non-verbal expression -Negative feedback after the match -Too much pressure on winning -Asking to stop playing
<i>Network support</i>	-Parents listening what athletes say -Trying to understand children's need -Usefulness of coaches feedback	-Discuss only about tennis -Too much information was given -Avoiding to communicate -Misunderstanding of coaches' feedback

my daughter become much healthier and better in many ways after she plays tennis." Parents were happy to be a part of the team supporting their children's athletic success, and they enjoyed connecting with other athletes' parents at social events.

On the other hand, parents reported concerns and worries about their children's future because not all young athletes become successful adult athletes. They also discussed their sacrifices to support their children's sporting dreams. One father said, "...only few people become world class athletes. Not sure whether my son can do it or not... but as a father, I believe my son and support him even he can't make it..."

### Social support

Views on social support fit into the five different categories suggested by Murphy (2009): tangible, esteem, information, emotion, and network support (Table 2). Table 2 presents a matrix that was developed to explain how athletes perceived the support provided by their parents. This table helps to demonstrate that social support is not always positive for recipients, particularly if the support provided was not congruent with the receiver's needs.

Tangible support involves parents' attendance at their children's training sessions and matches. Both parties mentioned this behavior, and some of the players said that they enjoyed their parents' presence during training and competitions. However, others stated that it made them feel pressure. One player said, "Sometimes I want to be myself. But my dad is always there. It is good if it happens once in a while but for every day? It makes me feel pressure."

Other aspects of tangible support included supplying food and

providing equipment for their sport. Athletes tended to be happy with this type of instrumental support.

Esteem support also had both positive and negative influences on athletes' perceived psychological well-being. This type of support was considered positive when parents helped athletes to build their self-confidence, especially when they did not have a good match day. In contrast, athletes perceived that social comparison, especially when their parents compared their sons and daughters to other athletes, could hurt their feelings. One boy said, "My dad asks me to play like other players in my age. Even I am better player than them...I don't want to do that...sometimes I just want to quit [tennis] and leave my home."

In terms of information, parents discussed how they enjoyed giving feedback to their children, especially when it was related to tennis. Athletes also reported that some information support from their parents was useful in developing their athletic career, both for physical skills and game strategies. Those athletes expressed gratitude for their parents' feedback. One boy said, "I like my mom to tell me how to play..." However, others stated that inconsistent information from parents and coaches confused them, and that it did not help them to concentrate on their sport. For this reason, some of the athletes wanted clearer and more consistent directions from their supporters, such as parents and coaches. One girl said, "My dad says something different from my coach... then I got confused, don't know what to do..."

Emotional support was one of the most commonly reported support types in both the parent and athlete groups. Parents reported that they intentionally attempted to provide positive feedback to their children in any circumstance, including training ses-

sions and before, during, and after matches. Athletes also discussed that receiving positive feedback while training and competing had a positive influence on their emotional state. One boy said, "When I had a bad day...my mom comfort me...than [it] makes me feel much better." However, even if their parents provided positive verbal feedback, some athletes said that their parents' non-verbal signals would indicate negative reactions, which usually had a detrimental effect on them. They also mentioned that when parents put too much pressure on winning or suggested they stop playing tennis, it caused them to feel negative emotions. One girl said, "when I lost [my match] and talk to parents... it makes me feel guilty...it feels like shit...I really hate that..."

Because parents and coaches are teenage athletes' main support groups, both parties discussed how network support was centered on communication among themselves and with coaches. Parents and athletes both expressed some satisfaction in their communications with each other, but they also reported that there were some difficulties in communicating with the other party. Athletes seemed to perceive communication as satisfactory when parents listened to what they said and put in the effort to understand their children's needs. One father said, "I try to monitor what my kid need...when I know it, all goes well." However, when parents tended to talk too much about tennis or tried to give too much information at once, athletes tried to avoid the situation by not responding. Regarding communication with coaches, parents tended to report a positive opinion. In contrast, athletes were not very happy when their parents and coaches communicated with one another, as their parents would often misunderstand the coaches' feedback, which could lead to arguments.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between elite tennis players and their parents, both the social support the parents provide their children and the athletes' perceptions of the influences of their parents' support. The results revealed both positive and negative aspects of parenting an elite athlete, and that parental support could be grouped into five categories based on Murphy's (2009) model. Athletes perceived that all five types of support had both positive and negative influences on their psychological well-being.

Similar to previous findings (Wuerth et al., 2004), athletes in the current study were influenced by their parents as to when they first started with their sport. However, the current study also revealed that school coaches played an important role in these young

athletes choosing to stay in tennis. In addition, internally motivating factors, such as fun, were an important part of sport participation.

The current findings showed that athletes' parents provided various types of support for their children, and athletes were also aware of receiving those different types of support from their parents. Among the five types of support, athletes perceived emotional support as the most effective because it helped them to feel better. Previous findings (Park et al., 2013) suggested that different kinds of support might be effective for different kinds of problems. According to Cohen and Wills (1985), social support could function as the "main effect" to help improve individuals' emotional, psychological, and behavioral status. On the other hand, support can be useless unless receivers are in a stressful situation for which the support is needed, a scenario called "stress buffering." Athletes in the current study might perceive their parents' emotional support as both a main effect and a type of stress buffering, as they mentioned the importance of being understood (main effect), as well as positive feedback after a bad match (stress buffering).

In contrast, esteem support was less effective or less satisfactory to athletes because of the social comparisons made by their parents in an attempt to motivate them. This result highlighted that even in parents who expend significant effort to find ways to support their children, there might be a gap between the parents' and athletes' perspectives. For example, all athletes expressed unpleasant feelings when their parents attempted to motivate them by comparing them to other players. This finding supports Rosenfeld and Richman's (1997) argument that providers and receivers may have different perspectives regarding support, and that support could be useless or even have negative effects if it was not tailored to the receivers' actual needs.

The current findings indicate that parents make a substantial effort to support their children; however, their support was not effective if it was not congruent with the athletes' needs. Therefore, evaluating the athletes' current status and needs might help in the development of more appropriate ways to assist and support young athletes. In addition, as shown in the results section, parenting an elite athlete might involve unique experiences; for this reason, organized educational programs could be beneficial to assist those parents who are trying to support their children.

The current study was conducted with a homogeneous sample of Korean elite tennis players and their parents. Although we were able to collect rich information on the research topic, the results can only be applied to people who are in a situation similar to that of these participants. In addition, responses to questions about sup-

port may differ between individuals of different ages, types of sport, and sport contexts. Therefore, future research is needed to examine this issue in other groups of athletes and parents.

Parents are one of the most influential contributors to young elite athletes' development, not only in their athletic careers but also in terms of their subjective well-being. The current study contributed to this area of study by revealing the importance of both providers' and receivers' perspectives in the effectiveness of social support.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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