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Understanding and Addressing Parental Concerns in a Professional Football Academy: A Pragmatic Case Study

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Abstract

This study explored parental concerns regarding their sons' experiences in a professional football academy, using a case study methodology over a twelve-year period. Drawing on over 60 interviews with parenting pairs, the research identified that concerns were shaped by internal (e.g., personal beliefs), semi-internal (e.g., peer influence, agent input), and external (e.g., social media, educational trends) information sources. These sources often led to misaligned expectations between parents and the academy. The findings highlighted the prevalence of misinformation. In response, a series of targeted interventions were implemented, including structured communication strategies, shared mental models (SMMs), and a refined parent–academy code of conduct. These changes facilitated more integrated parent–athlete–coach relationships and improved clarity around developmental processes. Although causality cannot be established, the frequency of parental complaints decreased over time. This study emphasizes the need for academies to proactively engage parents as key stakeholders through clear, consistent, and evidence-informed communication, ultimately supporting a more coherent developmental experience for athletes. These findings have broad implications for talent development environments aiming to balance athlete and parent welfare with high-performance goals.

Keywords: parenting expertise; information grounds; integration; shared mental models; talent development; youth sport



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1. Introduction

Identifying and developing young talent, with the aim of developing senior performers, is high on the agenda of almost all sporting organizations, with the ambition of achieving or maintaining elite status (Martindale & Mortimer, 2011). Importantly, a long-term vision is seen as essential for the achievement of such success (Bailey & Morley, 2006; Ericsson et al., 1993). Therefore, the investment in and development of high-quality talent development environments (TDEs) is often a central focus of professional sports clubs (Martindale et al., 2007). Furthermore, for talented athletes to develop, it is advantageous for them to be in a TDE that is appropriate for their individual needs (A. M. Williams & Reilly, 2000). Accordingly, a crucial part of the TDE puzzle is the use and development of key stakeholder relationships (Mills et al., 2014b), with the parent stakeholder being seen

as an important ally when working with individual athletes (R. D. Taylor & Collins, 2015). Importantly, however, due to the dynamic nature of both talent development (TD) and parenting, aligning parents with a long-term vision can be challenging (Smoll et al., 2011). Such challenge involves a dynamic continuum of effective and ineffective practices which requires systematic consideration by sporting organizations to understand and align parent practices with their philosophy (Kramers et al., 2023). Furthermore, the monitoring of such congruency requires strategies to be tailored to fit the wants and needs of specific contexts (in the present context, football academies; Santos et al., 2025). Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to examine and respond to parents' perceptions of issues with their sons' professional football academy.

1.1. The Importance of Structure in the Academy Setting

Due to its non-linear and dynamic nature, TD is an inherently complex context (Abbott et al., 2005). Such complexity means that the design and implementation of appropriate TDEs is multifaceted and requires considerable thought. Crucially, we must recognize that there are many more factors within a TDE than simply the direct process of coaching (Gould et al., 2002). In fact, there is a need to incorporate a range of influential factors from over-arching and systematic (e.g., culture and policy) down to individualized engagement with those that influence specific athletes (e.g., parents; Martindale et al., 2007). Reflecting these issues, Martindale et al. (2007) and Martindale and Mortimer (2011) advocate four key features that underpin an effective TDE, namely long-term aims and methods, wide-ranging coherent messages and support, emphasis on appropriate development not early success, and individualized and ongoing development. Furthermore, Mills et al. (2014b) reported that effective TDEs are characterized by a strong organizational core, a flexible and adaptive approach that prioritizes athlete welfare, key stakeholder relationships and involvement, and a clear achievement orientation. Yet, when Mills et al. (2014a) considered athlete perceptions, academies were viewed as strong in areas regarding coaching, organization, and sport-specific support but limited when considering understanding the athlete, links to senior progression, and key stakeholder relationships. Consequently, the design and development of high-quality TDEs is vital to support all athletes in developing the skills to navigate through and beyond the pathway (G. Williams & MacNamara, 2020).

1.2. Parents as a Stakeholder in the Academy Setting

There is significant emphasis on the role of stakeholders when supporting the operationalization and navigation of TDEs. Stakeholders in TD can be broad ranging but mostly consist of parents, coaches, scouts, and national governing bodies (NGBs)/administrators (cf. Martindale & Mortimer, 2011; Pankhurst et al., 2013; R. D. Taylor & Collins, 2015; Till & Baker, 2020). Specifically, we know that the right parental environment can help athletes reach their potential (Knight, 2017), but there must also be an appreciation that there is no singular approach to parenting expertise in this context (Harwood & Knight, 2015). This contention becomes all the more important when the young performer is highly committed and passionate about the activity (cf. Harris et al., 2023).

As athletes become embedded in TDEs, parents are faced with a range of demands, including organizational processes, the athlete's sporting and broader development (i.e., education), and transitions throughout their athletic career (Harwood & Knight, 2015). As such, parents are a unique stakeholder to support athlete development (Tamminen & Holt, 2012). Importantly, and despite widely held beliefs, instead of decreasing as the athlete specializes, the parental role changes yet continues to influence the performance and psychosocial outcomes of the athlete (Lyons et al., 2021; Sutcliffe et al., 2021). There-

fore, seeking to extend our understanding of their role is of significant value to research and practice.

1.3. The Importance of Synchronizing Parental Involvement in the Academy Setting

In their role, parents are required to demonstrate specific intrapersonal, interpersonal and organizational skills (Newport et al., 2021). Harwood and Knight (2015) suggest that parents face a consistent cycle of triangular responsibilities, namely managing and supporting the needs of their child, managing themselves and their wellbeing, and managing interactions with the environment. These responsibilities focus on a complex set of outcomes, including achievement of sporting potential, positive psychosocial experiences and supporting a range of positive developmental outcomes (Harwood & Knight, 2015). Such complexity increases the potential challenge of aligning parents and academies to create a shared vision for the development of their athletes. For example, negotiating the distribution of power and responsibility with coaches and understanding what was expected of them were two challenges illuminated by parents of academy football athletes (Clarke & Harwood, 2014).

Collectively, coach behaviors, club processes, and NGB processes often form prominent organizational stressors for parents (Lienhart et al., 2020). Beneath these overarching stressors, parents specified unjust and uncaring behaviors from coaches, officials and other parents; perceptions of coaching competence; lack of communication and feedback from coaches; non-transparent selection decisions; and pressurizing TD systems as causes of stress and concern (Knight & Holt, 2013; Omli & LaVoi, 2009; Webb & Knight, 2024). As athletes transition into the specialization stage (e.g., the academy setting), their athletic involvement intensifies, requiring a change in parental involvement (Sutcliffe et al., 2021). Demands on parents increase with logistical provision, organizational and relational management, and emotional, motivational and esteem support, as competition increases (Harwood & Knight, 2015). Such demands sit within a social space, both internal and external to the club, where parents will be exposed to a variety of information sources that will shape their relative parenting expertise in a TD context. Consequently, parents are faced with the significant responsibility of deciding what information to use and what to discard when making decisions about their athlete's development and the academy setting (Martindale et al., 2007).

1.4. Information Grounds for Parents in the Academy Setting

With parents now exposed to an ever-increasing range of information, it is becoming more challenging to determine appropriate and reliable sources (cf. Stoszkowski et al., 2020). For example, in recent years, information grounds (i.e., environments temporarily created through people coming together for a single purpose; Pettigrew, 1999) have become dominated by the use of online and social media for communication and information sharing (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Such social spaces are founded on connections and relationships, supporting the spontaneous and opportune sharing of information (Pettigrew, 1999). Yet there is a significant risk of the circulation of ideas that are persistent and persuasive yet may lack clear evidence (Matthews, 2015; Stoszkowski et al., 2020). Furthermore, peer guidance (i.e., other parents or coaches) is a valuable source of learning in social and professional contexts (cf. Coetzer, 2007). Here, consumers of knowledge may be swayed by the authority of those sharing the information (e.g., a more experienced parent in the academy or academy staff), reducing their desire to check or challenge information (Stoszkowski et al., 2020).

Consequently, finding and evaluating knowledge is challenging. Andersen (2006) uses the term "public sphere" to describe an individual's (in the present case, parents') ability to

search for and use information from within a social context. Importantly, this is based on the individual's experience in, and familiarity with, the social context (Andersen, 2006), emphasizing the importance of trust and accessibility. Trust is critical due to individuals within a specific context (i.e., a football academy) accepting information from those they know and can reasonably trust (e.g., parents, coaches, academy staff; Huotari & Chatman, 2001). Moreover, parents tend to seek information from social sources that are easily accessible (Dewdney & Harris, 1992). Accessibility comes in two forms: Firstly, the proximity or availability of the information to the parent (e.g., social media or another parent). Secondly, the ability of a parent to fully and easily understand the source of information (i.e., comprehension; Julien & Michels, 2000). Accordingly, information from within a football academy, where there are a range of stakeholders, and outside of the football academy (e.g., social media, other sports) may influence a parent's actions and behaviors and therefore requires careful consideration.

This study is situated within a category 1 (the highest classification) academy in the English football system. Introduced in 2011/2012, the Elite Player Performance Pathway or EPPP was designed to develop more and better "home-grown" players. Interestingly, at the time this paper considers, the EPPP had seen several measures introduced to promote and assess player performance. One of these considerations was the arbitrary division of the whole player development pathway across three phases: Foundation (Under-9 to Under-11), Youth Development (U12 to U16) and Professional Development (U17 to U23). Other developments of relevance included a standardized code of conduct for parents and a requirement for psychological expertise within each academy. As such, this study examines parent perceptions contextualized against a national designed and driven system. Although parental issues were rarely if ever a direct questioning of the EPPP precepts, it is important to remember this context when critically considering the status and transfer of the findings.

1.5. Study Focus

Alongside the practical need for exploration within the context of study, this research responds to calls for educational support to parents to deliver context-specific scientific information aligned with the developmental stage of athletes (Cahill & MacNamara, 2025). Furthermore, Knight et al. (2017) call for a need to understand what parents know and believe and where those beliefs come from. Reflecting this, the purpose of the investigation was to examine parents' perceptions of issues with their academy and the sources of these issues. Specifically, we spoke with parents who expressed concerns with the offerings and processes they perceived in their son's academy. Accordingly, this study responds to calls for more negative case studies through research to inform evidence-informed real-world practice (cf. Kiely, 2011; J. Taylor & Collins, 2021). Reflecting the pragmatic need for action, these data were then used to adjust the content and style of support.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Methodology, Positionality and Researcher Situation

We adopted a pragmatic case study design to explore and respond to the nature and origin of parental concerns with their sons' academy offering. Taking a pragmatic approach, through a case study methodology, aligned with our intention to generate practical solutions to address real-world problems, rather than testing a specific theoretical model (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Consequently, this allowed for an in-depth exploration of parental concerns within a specific case, in this instance the academy context (cf. Yin, 2018).

Through a combination of qualitative data collection, analysis, and the implementation of data and context-informed interventions, this design aimed to understand what works,

for whom, and under what circumstances, to meet the need for applied research in this context (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Reflecting the role of the researcher within a pragmatic case study, we considered our role to be supporting the co-construction of knowledge with participants (Giacobbi et al., 2005). Data were collected by the first author, who was embedded as an insider within a category 1 football academy for over ten years as the lead sports psychologist. This incorporated a variety of inputs, including player education, coach support, contributions to welfare and, in the present context, interactions with parents through an increasingly structured series of workshops. These latter inputs were usually held two or three times per school term but also increasingly involved meetings with family units, either at the academy, off site or through home visits. The origin of these meetings was always initiated by the parents, who had expressed some concerns with the support being offered to their son. As such, the meetings always followed a rough framework. This started with the first author stressing the confidentiality involved in his role (as a chartered psychologist) and then talking through the use of the information as anonymous sources which would be used to improve the structure and content of the academy service. Mention was made of the clearances offered by the Club, University and Premier League, and then, finally, the potential use of anonymized data as part of a published paper. The first author then adopted a “listening mode” before probing for the origin and implications of their concerns. The present paper presents data on the first two elements (concerns and origin) whilst the implications and solutions formed the latter unreported elements as the reaction to their expressed concerns.

Furthermore, the second author acted as an outsider to the context as a TD coach in another sport. However, instead of being seen as risking bias, this was considered a resource in the collection and analysis of data, due to our understanding of the (wider) context (May, 2011), without which there is potential for weakened sensitivity and reduced quality of findings (May, 2011).

The issues presented in this paper were of high relevance to the academy and to the role, based on a need to build trust and rapport with parents whilst avoiding any disruptions to the development process for their sons. The work was systematic and conducted with the full approval and involvement of academy staff. The target participants (parents) were clearly invested in the process of their sons’ sporting development but equally importantly were comfortable sharing opinions in the knowledge that input would be kept anonymous (as per the British Psychological Society’s (2021) Code of Conduct on confidentiality). As additional safeguards, the whole process was considered and approved by the authors’ and then the University Ethics Committee (BAHSS 514) and through advisors from the Premier League, the ruling NGB for football at this level and the authority for approval and classification of English academies.

Initially, the process used small focus groups with select groups. However, whilst these data were insightful, there were three significant challenges. Firstly, and as highlighted earlier (Stoszkowski et al., 2020), groups were often “overpowered” by one or two strongly expressive, perhaps even domineering, individuals (cf. Krueger & Casey, 2014). Secondly, it was often difficult to solicit engagement from those parents who, at least by reputation or hearsay, were the most vociferous in their criticisms of the academy system (cf. Paton, 2015). Finally, in the absence of more in-depth conversations with family units, it was impossible to probe for and uncover the processes through which issues emerged, developed and were pursued. For these reasons, the first author moved quite early to a single-family approach, which always involved some conversations with the parent(s), guardians or effective carers.

2.2. Participants and Data Collection

Completed across the first author's tenure at the academy (December 2010–May 2022), this paper is built on interviews with 67 parenting pairs, focused mostly on the younger-aged players, who were within the Foundation and Player Development stages. These data are based on the first meetings in every case, so each of the interviews is with a different set of parents/guardians. Subsequent meets were usually focused on monitoring the implementation of agreed solutions. There were no repeat appearances (that is, addressing a separate issue with the same player or another sibling), so each dyad can be considered as a unique data source. We were also conscious of the potential for different dynamics within dyads and between dyads and interview locations. After some thought, however, we decided to let dyads chose their own location (as reflected in the advice of [Green & Thorogood, 2004](#)). Participants were generally dyads of parental units or family members. Each dyad was "self-selected", as they followed up on open invites to meet with the first author in his role as academy psychologist. These were made up of several combinations, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Ages, Status, Venue and Duration for Parent Meets.

Player Age(s) and (Number of Dyads)	Pair Status	Venues for Conversation	Duration
Under 8 (10)	Married, separated and one stepparent	Academy, coffee bar, home and pub	15–45 min Median = 24 min
Under 9 (10)	Married, separated and one stepparent	Academy and home	9–38 min Median = 22 min
Under 10 (9)	Married, separated, one stepparent and parent/brother	Academy, coffee bar and home	12–42 min Median = 26 min
Under 11 (11)	Married, separated, one stepparent and parent/uncle	Academy, coffee bar, home and pub	5–28 min Median = 20 min
Under 12 (9)	Married, separated and one stepparent	Academy, school, coffee bar, home and pub	19–31 min Median = 18 min
Under 13 (9)	Married, separated, one stepparent and parent plus friend	Academy office and home	8–20 min Median = 13 min
Under 14 (6)	Married, separated and one stepparent	Academy, coffee bar, home and pub	19–40 min Median = 29 min
Under 15 (3)	Married, separated and one stepparent	Academy, coffee bar, home and pub	22–50 min Median = 35 min

2.3. Data Treatment, Synthesis and Action

Following each interview/meeting, case notes were completed on the key elements reported; in some cases, this included the written recording of verbatim quotes. Following each interview, and usually within a few days, these notes and initial observations were shared with a full-time member of staff acting as a significant other, who carried responsibility for parent–player welfare and liaison. Across the 12-year period, this role was filled by only two individuals, offering a good level of consistency across the period. As the data set grew, issues were discussed anonymously with the academy staff involved. These ranged across the coaches responsible for the specific age group/phase, welfare staff and teachers involved, those colleagues responsible for the processes of player and parent education and, at a more general level, the academy director.

Due to the pragmatic nature of this case study, data were considered by a thematic analysis enabling the identification of meaningful patterns within participants' accounts while

maintaining a focus on generating practical insights relevant to the case context (Braun et al., 2019). Analysis considered case notes and written records (each fixed immediately post-meeting), with supplementary insights offered by staff and psychologist observations. These were mostly conducted on training nights but supplemented by observations reported by coaches. Once again, all specific data and conclusions were anonymized, but named comments from coaches (e.g., “Christ, XXX was a pain this weekend... always looking at his dad for guidance and ignoring us”) were incorporated into the profiles. Thematic analysis consisted of six stages using a qualitative software package (QSR NVIVO 20). Familiarization took place through immersion in the content through reading and re-reading the data. Descriptive coding then took place to assign initial raw data codes, before searching for subthemes through examination of these codes based on patterns of meaning. Next, subthemes were reviewed to determine an accurate picture of these data and one that illuminates parental concerns. Subthemes were then grouped into distinct overarching themes with informative names that represent the parental concerns, before contextualizing the analysis in relation to existing TD literature (King & Horrocks, 2010). To address data trustworthiness and the possibility of misrepresenting data codes, peer debriefing took place with a second researcher. In the case of a dispute (<5% of cases), alternative interpretations were presented until a plausible explanation was agreed upon (Sparkes, 1998).

3. Results

The processes described above yielded a large volume of data, which were used for evaluation, refinement and redirection of the programs provided. An overview of data themes is provided in Table 2, followed by the presentation of some key aspects of the data in the subsequent narrative. We would remind the reader that this analysis was focused on criticisms and concerns, which are almost by definition negative in scope.

Table 2. Sources of Parent Concerns and Points of Contention.

Themes	Subthemes	Example Quotes
Internal Factors	Parent opinion	“When I was playing youth football, we didn’t fanny about with fitness drills... we just played”
	Perceived benefits obtained by other parents	“The missus said to me, look at what XXXX has got for his boy. You need to push harder... get him playing up”
	Perceived importance of specific child characteristics	“I think you’ve got to look at your son as an individual. I’m just not sure that the coaching suits his nature”.
Semi-internal factors	Parent reading of “authority” texts and sources	“I’ve been reading ‘Bounce’. Why don’t the coaches follow those ideas?”
	Other family members’ input	My Uncle played semi pro in the 80s and is very scathing about the program offered here”
	Agent input	Since XXXX has been advising us, our eyes have been opened to what we need to do to get [our son] progressing”
	Other parents’ opinions	“You get a lot of chatter amongst the parents... but it makes a hell of a lot of sense”

Table 2. Cont.

Themes	Subthemes	Example Quotes
External factors	Central advertising campaigns	"I've been looking at the Government stuff... we need that Joe Wicks to get the kids enthused"
	Advertising from other sports	"Hockey have a load of stuff which we should look at... I love that 'end in mind' idea"
	Social media drivers from other sports	"I read a lot by M on Twitter. He seems to be suggesting a completely different approach"
	"Educational" ideas	"Clearly, academies are just like schools. So why don't we use some of their methods?"

3.1. Internal Factors

Internal factors were those seen as within the compass of control/influence of the parents themselves or as a group. As described in the introduction, parental pairs drew on a wide variety of sources. As shown by Pankhurst et al. (2013), other parents were a common source, whether instigating a criticism or reinforcing it through an "echo chamber" effect. For example, one U11 father shared, "fairness in selection is a common concern across us all. It's the usual topic of conversation whenever we get together to watch games". Extending this "fairness concept", an U12 mother said:

It's really hard... at home we stress to the kids how they have to be fair with each other. Give each other space, respect each other's toys, etc. So, when X [their son] talks about how he has been passed over again... it's a real family issue!

Furthermore, parents presented arguments for a more individualized treatment for their sons, raising issues which, they felt, made some "special treatment" essential: "G takes a while to pick up new stuff... his school have identified this and are addressing it. Surely his coach should too" (U10 stepmother). An U14 father observed:

This year is really crucial for him. He knows it, his teammates know it but no-one seems to be offering him the specific feedback he wants. Clear examples of what he can do to make sure he gets a contract in 18 months' time. That's a key worry for us all.

Of particular interest for us was the role which the two parents/members of the pair played in suggesting concerns. On a rough estimate, this was around 60:40 male to female. More importantly, however, in most cases, the rationale underpinning or attributed to the comment was made in an opposite breakdown. That is, females were more considered and articulate in stating *why* the criticism was being made and, furthermore, offering some justification for it. An U15 mother explained:

His father and I are separated and that's been very hard on him. I took the trouble to keep the club informed but that doesn't seem to have been considered. We all know how important this year is, with release decisions being made over the Summer and early next season. So, I am here to day to fight his corner... to make sure that you have a complete understanding of where he is right now and what that does to his confidence.

Finally, the female input was particularly notable where comparisons were made to other boys, and the perception that complaining/raising concerns was offering that player an advantage over their son. For example, an U13 mother said the following to the father: "I know that D's parents are really pushy on his playing time, and it seems to be effective. Think you need to get stuck in too."

3.2. Semi-Internal Factors

Sources from outside the nuclear family but led through direct communication with the parents (e.g., the player's agent offering direct advice) were defined as semi-internal. These also often played a big part in the concerns expressed. For example, notably across the time period, parents' issues and ideas were increasingly related to the potential for neurodivergence, most notably ADHD or autism, although this was sometimes not based on a formally conducted diagnosis (as this would have been captured formally through academy procedures). For example, during a conversation, one U8 mother asked, "L has real problems with ADHD... can you get the coaches to consider separate briefings for him?" Additionally, a U15 father commented: "Could the academy employ an educational psychologist? I read that so many children these days are autistic. A diagnosis seems important." In a rare but positive comment, an U9 parent commented:

We were so concerned about W; reading so much about ADHD, autism and the like. It was great to sit down with you and get some insights into this. Your advice on how to work with the school and local authority was welcome and summed up the service and support we have come to expect from this club.

Another element that grew throughout the period was the role of the agent. This was clearly more common in older players but often a significant influence where two children were involved or where one parental pair spreads opinions which they had received from their own son's agent. This was exemplified by the following: "X [player's agent] has offered us a completely different perspective on his play. Don't you ever talk to and listen to them [the agents]. After all, they know what it takes" (U14 father) or "Y [older son's agent] has pushed us to challenge his coach for extra specific sessions. It makes so much sense... can we get this for W [younger son]?" (Father of U15 and U11 players).

3.3. External Factors

Finally, issues originating from sources outside the social grouping of the families were defined as external. For all parents, social media was a frequently cited source of information. Unfortunately, this was also commonly seen as an important and even "proven" source. One U13 parent highlighted "I read about what some clubs are doing... one academy called Z that doesn't play any competitive football at all. They seem to get great results. Why not here?". Another U13 parent commented:

I have read an article about a club in Sweden who seem to do it completely differently to English clubs. Apparently, they have provided almost half of the national squad at senior level. Surely [this club] should be taking a look and copying what they do.

We found that many of these ideas were "socially contagious", leading to a general hum of dissatisfaction that spread through the group. Accordingly, and in all these cases, we were careful to critically examine the claims and take what could be useful but also share with the group alternative interpretations or contradictions to the "sales-promoting data" which had been shared.

Other sources cited were often "topical". For example, the popularity of stars, such as Joe Wicks, the physical activity guru, was a source of comment which emerged, waxed and subsequently waned with the level of media exposure through the COVID-19 pandemic. Another topical concern related to media attention to schools and the pressures for more evidence-grounded approaches. These sources were often combined by parents with personal claims and concerns of neurodivergence in their child (see the previous section). One U13 parent claimed, "I saw someone on Twitter who showed how autism can limit technical skill development... we need to have all the players tested and plans individualized."

Finally, a particular “hot topic” was related to ideas of the relative age effect (Coto-Lousas et al., 2026) with several parents enthusiastically “reading up” on approaches designed to counter this, such as bio-banding. One small group of U11 parents came in with copies of articles and a cry for this approach to be generally applied:

We have researched this carefully. It seems like this is an inevitable but avoidable source of bias that should surely be being factored into club selection. After all, you don’t want to waste any talent, do you?!

Once again, T-shaped expertise and carefully considered research on the part of the lead psychologist were key in allaying fears and countering often uncritical ideas.

3.4. *Changes Made and Implications for Practice*

Although not formally evaluated through the methods described, it helps to situate the data against changes made and the outcomes which seemed to accrue. Firstly, across the first author’s time at the academy, several interlinked initiatives were taken, in no small part as responses, either directly or indirectly, to the issues raised. To exemplify the case study approach employed, we will focus on three. First was the wider use of a parents’ and club “code of conduct”, which set out requirements and responsibilities for both parties. An extension of the Premier League-provided document, this was presented annually for parents up to the U15 stage, with a requirement to re-sign. As such, parents were reassured/reminded of the joint roles involved and the logic underpinning the responsibilities espoused. A group presentation at the start of the season, supplemented by regular sessions, also served to increase a shared mental model (SMM) across parents, with impacts on subsequent discussions and debates.

Secondly, and in a similar vein, first presentations to parents offered an emphasis and justification on when, how and, most importantly, why players would be challenged (cf. Collins et al., 2016). Parents were encouraged to ask the coach directly rather than seeking advice from others if they had any specific concerns. Parallel briefing and development for coaches prepared them for this understandable inquisition, reducing the perceived threat which was previously the usual response. The need for this process to normally be shared in advance with coaches but sometimes only afterward with the player was also explored and explained. In parallel, coaches were encouraged to have their logic thought through, with explanations ready. In short, the process of challenge as a crucial development tool was explored each year, situated against the major issues the group would face that season (e.g., retain–release at 12, 14 and 16).

The status and role of the psychologist also grew in scope and complexity, particularly as concerns over neurodivergence (whether formally diagnosed, extrapolated or assumed) became more common. The coaction and collaboration between the psychologist and other staff (e.g., medics and fulltime teachers employed by the club) was a positive reaction, offering confirmation/reassurance and arrangements for referral or questioning as needed. Parallel understanding of developmental issues, particularly around growth and maturation, was another addition, further and appropriately extending the scope of expertise beyond the traditional emphasis on mental skills training and safeguarding/wellbeing. These and other concerns stressed the need for T-shaped expertise in the psychology role (cf. McKinsey & Company, 2021), also paralleling the advantages conveyed by interdisciplinary skills and support (cf. Burns & Collins, 2023).

Finally, there was the introduction of a formalized player review /case study process, held weekly and tightly scheduled. This meant that every player in the squad was reviewed every five to six weeks, a “tight team” plan was developed and reinforced, and all enquiries would be met with a consistent, clear and well-evidenced response.

Direct causation is impossible to demonstrate, but it seems relevant that the volume of parent complaints decreased to 20% of the previous high spot across the period. The necessity for strong leadership and the evolution of SMMs are important contributory factors within the breadth of changes expertly led by the then academy manager, to internal approval and more general acclaim.

4. Discussion

The results of this study reveal a range of factors that influence parental concerns about their sons' involvement in the academy. The proximity of the origins of these factors appears to sit on a continuum from internally generated by the parent(s) (e.g., parent opinion) to external sources (e.g., social media). Of importance to the academy is recognizing that all sources, whether internal or external, are accessible to parents, highlighting the growth of "information sources" that parents are drawn to or find when seeking information (cf. Pettigrew, 1999). Parents in this instance are likely to be swayed by those sharing the information (e.g., coaches, other parents, other sports), reducing their desire to check and challenge information (Stoszkowski et al., 2020) and therefore increasing the risk of persistent and persuasive external ideas becoming prominent, which may be detrimental to athlete development (cf. Bailey et al., 2018). Unfortunately, these sources often rely on anecdotes and testimonials, emphasizing confirmation rather than refutation (Bailey et al., 2018). An example is the reference to "Bounce" (Syed, 2011), which, amongst other popular sources, leans toward an over-simplified interpretation of talent research (Baker & Cobley, 2013). As such, parents may rely on information to support or push their sons' developmental opportunities in the academy that contradict practices and processes conducive to the non-linearity of TD (cf. Collins & MacNamara, 2012).

The consumption of such information can also often lead parents to voice concerns and opinions regarding their sons' development. Parents may consider this to be protective and therefore an aspect of "good" parenting. Importantly, however, too much of this, especially at the wrong time and/or in the wrong place, can be detrimental (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). Consequently, parents must be encouraged and supported to distinguish between appropriate and maladaptive protection (Thomasgard & Metz, 1993). Such perceptions of being protective and therefore raising concerns may be misplaced in a professional academy, where there is significant intentionality regarding the development of athletes (Premier League, 2012). For example, the exposure to appropriate challenge as a developmental process is likely to be deemed uncomfortable by parents (and athletes) but is central to effective TD (Kong et al., 2026). Consequently, such inappropriate involvement is reflected in the notion of helicopter parenting (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). Importantly, recent research shows that many of the concerns expressed about young peoples' committed involvement in sport (e.g., the negative impacts of hard training) may actually be inaccurate and misplaced (cf. Harris et al., 2023). In fact, although they do not "exactly enjoy it", young athletes see this level of work as an important part of achieving their self-determined goals.

As an alternative to this controlling style, expertise in sport parenting is demonstrated through parental involvement that increases the chance of their son having an effective developmental experience (i.e., achieving sporting potential, positive developmental and psychosocial outcomes; Harwood & Knight, 2015). Requiring the development of intrapersonal, interpersonal and organizational skills allows parents to develop and maintain healthy relationships with significant others (i.e., coaches, psychologists, other parents) in the academy setting (Harwood & Knight, 2015). These relational skills can have a positive impact on the functionality of the coach-athlete-parent relationship, supporting the development of trust, understanding and mutual appreciation (Smoll et al., 2011). In this setting,

these skills will support parental adaptability as their son navigates the academy setting and the experiences they are exposed to (cf. [Lauer et al., 2010](#)), reducing concerns.

4.1. Impactful Action Through Change

We suggest the reduction in concerns voiced by parents across this study was partly achieved through increased integration between members of staff at the academy (i.e., coaches, welfare, medics and psychologists) and parents. With integration being the extent to which the system (i.e., the academy) and stakeholders (i.e., parents) work in tandem to support an athlete's development horizontally (i.e., through a season) and vertically (i.e., across age groups; [J. Taylor & Collins, 2022](#)). Such integration is central to the coherence of experience for athletes (i.e., the extent to which vertical and horizontal experiences are reinforcing; [J. Taylor & Collins, 2022](#)). With evidence highlighting the importance of coherent athlete experience in successful talent systems (e.g., [Henriksen et al., 2010](#); [Till et al., 2020](#)), this improved integration strengthened the connection and clarity across the coach–athlete–parent relationship through tying in the organization (i.e., the academy).

In essence, we synchronized parents with the academy processes through the development of an SMM. SMMs are seen as especially important in contexts where broader knowledge foundations and different skills are necessary to support efficient decision making ([Kellermanns et al., 2008](#)). Furthermore, they support team members (e.g., parent, coach, psychologist) in developing appropriate knowledge structures to form accurate explanations and expectations, leading to more coordinated actions and behaviors ([Cannon-Bowers et al., 1993](#)). This approach improved the consistency of communication and understanding across the “coach-athlete-parent-organization tetrad”.

We suggest that the positive impacts were further underpinned by the refinement of two-way contracting between parents and the academy. Such contracts help to promote effective collaboration and facilitate the benefits derived from multiple perspectives regarding the developmental needs of athletes (cf. [Ekstrand et al., 2019](#)). Without such contracting, there are likely to be lower levels of communication, leading to higher risk of misunderstanding and tension (cf. [Ekstrand et al., 2019](#)). Furthermore, this contracting increased role clarity, improving the socialization and integration of parents with the academy ([Leo et al., 2020](#)).

4.2. Limitations

Due to the research being carried out in a single football academy, the results may not apply to all parents across the academy and sports settings more broadly due to the potential for cultural and managerial variations. Furthermore, data collection was more “real-world” than academic, although anonymized triangulation with academy colleagues and the collating of views from other parents served to promote accurate perceptions. Furthermore, there is the possibility that the sample may disproportionately represent parents who were willing to engage in discussions about their concerns. Finally, the data reported refer to over 60 specific interactions and may reflect more specific individuals (i.e., that family/player). Once again, however, we would report that the issues highlighted in these interviews did seem to carry generic weighting and justification. They also match concerns raised by coaches (although coaches were not studied here specifically) taking part in the Football Association's specialist training course, the Advanced Youth Award, with content provided in part by the first author, so far having been provided to and endorsed by over 600 English academy coaches.

5. Conclusions

This study explored and addressed parental concerns in a football academy. Through highlighting a range of sources of information (namely internal, semi-internal and external), this study emphasized the need for academies (i.e., organizations) to engage with parents (i.e., key stakeholders) early in their sons' academy journey and sustainably across their experience. Such support would help parents to manage and support the needs of their child, manage themselves and their wellbeing, and manage interactions with the environment (Harwood & Knight, 2015). Furthermore, this more integrated approach between parent and academy has the potential to enhance the cohesive experience of the athlete through a more clearly defined SMM (J. Taylor & Collins, 2022), ultimately developing a more harmonious and effective coach–athlete–parent–organization tetrad.

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