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# Young people's experiences of parental involvement in youth sport

Åse Strandbu<sup>a</sup>, Kari Stefansen<sup>b</sup>, Ingrid Smette<sup>b</sup> and Morten Renslo Sandvik<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>The department of Cultural and Social studies, Norwegian school of sport sciences, Oslo, Norway; <sup>b</sup>NOVA – Norwegian Social Research, Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Oslo, Norway

## ABSTRACT

Recently parental involvement in youth sport has intensified, challenging the understanding of youth sports as an arena where adolescents can develop their identity and autonomy. On this background, our study explores how adolescents understand and negotiate their parents' involvement in sport and how they define ideal and undesirable forms of parental involvement. Our empirical setting is Norway, and we draw on data from 16 focus group interviews among 13–14-year-olds ( $n = 92$ ) recruited from two lower secondary schools. The analysis shows that young people distinguish between different aspects of the sport activity when defining ideal and undesirable forms of parental involvement. When discussing sport as a healthy activity necessary for physical and social development, the young people interviewed approve of parents' role in regulating and encouraging participation. When considering the athletic aspects and peer sociability, however, they see parental involvement as mostly undesirable. The analysis also shows that the adolescents generally describe their parents as attentive to the boundaries their children draw for them about levels and types of involvement. Therefore, young people should be seen not only as subjected to parental involvement but also as active co-constructors of valid parental roles in and beyond the sporting arena.

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## Introduction

In recent decades, parental involvement in organised youth sports has intensified substantially (Stefansen, Smette, & Strandbu, 2016; Wheeler & Green, 2014). The current situation, where parents are described as highly supportive of and involved in their children's sports activities, represents a stark contrast to the situation portrayed in Coleman's classic *Adolescent Society* (1963). Coleman described sport as a pillar of independent adolescent culture, representing values in opposition to adult society.

Parents' increased interest and involvement in their children's participation in sport illustrates the cultural shift towards involved parenthood that has taken place in Western countries in recent decades. Although this form of parenting may be most pronounced in the middle class (cf. Lareau, 2003; Stefansen & Aarseth, 2011; Vincent & Ball, 2007), parents now seek emotional closeness and a reciprocal relationship with their child and see themselves as responsible for all aspects of their development. Putnam (2015), for one, has described such a development in the US context: 'Concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2003) that used to be a middle-class child-rearing logic has spread as a

**CONTACT** Åse Strandbu  Ase.strandbu@nih.no

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cultural ideal—even if parents are differently equipped to follow through such a demanding parenting paradigm (see also Reay, 2005).

Our interest here is what happens when this type of ‘emotionally intense child-centred parenting’ (Jamieson, 1998, p. 63) moves into the sphere of youth sports. It could be hypothesised that youth sport has lost its relevance as a venue for developing autonomy and that it functions as a phase of prolonged socialisation. Our focus group interviews with young teenagers point to a different conclusion: While youth sport has indeed become an extension of family life and part of parental cultivation projects (Lareau, 2003; Stefansen et al., 2016; Vincent & Ball, 2007), it remains a domain for adolescents to develop autonomy from parents and family. This paper will explore how this somewhat paradoxical situation is understood from the perspective of the adolescent participants.

Our question, more specifically, is how young people understand ideal parental roles and their own scope of agency in the sphere of sports and in the context of intensive parental involvement. To date, most studies on parental involvement in youth sport have drawn on data from parents, not adolescents themselves. Most studies have also explored parental involvement in the context of elite-level sport rather than mainstream youth sport. This paper aims to address both these gaps in the literature. The paper contributes to the sociological study of the ‘sport-parenting paradigm’ (Elliott & Drummond, 2015, p. 4) by exploring young people’s views of ideal parental roles and their own negotiation of autonomy related to different aspects of sport participation.

## The Norwegian youth sport context

Our study is set in Norway, and a few words on how youth sport is organised is instructive. Organised child and youth sport are conducted outside of schools, mainly as part of the civil sector. It is accessible and generally affordable, although fees for some sports are on the rise. At a macro level, the Norwegian sport model is described as a partnership between the state and civic society; the public sector (both state and municipalities) supports the infrastructure, and the clubs are responsible for the activities (Seippel & Skille, 2015). In the clubs, parents play crucial roles as coaches and ‘ground crew’. Participation rates in youth sport are high. In 8th grade, the age of our youngest informants, approximately 60% of young Norwegians take part weekly in a sport (Seippel, Strandbu, & Sletten, 2011). This high participation rate means that large numbers of parents are involved in youth sports in some capacity. The majority of coaches in child sport, and a high percentage of coaches in youth sport, are parents (Seippel, 2008). Most coaching positions are voluntary, with no (or symbolic) compensation.

The present paper draws on data from a larger project on young people and learning in different contexts. As part of the project, we conducted interviews with parents of close to half of the youths that participated in the focus group. A previous paper analysed parents’ narratives of their own involvement in their children’s sport (Stefansen et al., 2016). The analysis found a standard form of involvement among the parents that greatly exceeded their own parents’ level of involvement when they participated in sport while growing up. This standard form of involvement meant encouraging participation in sports from an early age, buying necessary equipment and paying for club fees, watching competitions, helping out with kiosks, and ‘taxi-service’ to and from practice if needed. Some parents, especially middle-class fathers, engaged more deeply in their child’s sporting activity, to the point where it was difficult to distinguish whether the sport was the child’s or the parent’s project. In such families, parents monitor the child’s athletic development closely and offer extensive practical and emotional support. The fathers would also use their own ‘sports capital’ to offer advice for further development. These patterns of parental involvement are the backdrop for our analysis of young people’s understanding of the ideal level and type of parental participation.

## Studies on parenting and sport

Starting from the premise that parents have a central role in ‘the athletic triangle’ along with the athlete and the coach (Smoll, Cumming, & Smith, 2011), the literature on parenting in the sport

studies context can be roughly divided into two partly overlapping traditions. The first tradition emphasises parental 'support' as a stressor that reduces the athlete's well-being (Knight & Holt, 2014; Sagar & Lavalley, 2010; Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, & Power, 2005) and, in some instances, involves psychological or physical violence (McMahon & Penney, 2014). In contrast, the second tradition highlights the types of parental involvement that may benefit the athlete's well-being and performance, especially parents' contributions to a child's transition into an elite level of sport (Coté, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Smoll & Smith, 2012).

More recently, and partly inspired by sociological studies of parenting (e.g. Lareau, 2003), a broader approach to the parent-child relationship in sport has emerged, addressing issues such as how parents shift between different roles, such as offering support and giving sport-related advice (Elliott & Drummond, 2015; Knight & Holt, 2014), how parents might either identify with or oppose the sporting culture of their child's team or club (McMahon & Penney, 2014), how family life is restructured when children enter a sport (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2014) and how parenting styles in sport depend on the child's personality and needs (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009; Trussell & Shaw, 2012).

General sociological studies on parenting have focused on the role of sport in the overall parenting project (Lareau, 2003). In these studies, sport is identified as a key ingredient in a cultivational approach to parenting, meaning a form of parenting where parents routinely scan the horizon for 'opportunities to activate their cultural and social capital on behalf of their children' (Lareau, 2008, p. 118). Furthermore, parental involvement in a child's sport is interpreted as a form of investment to make sure children develop skills and competencies that may be valuable in the future (Vincent & Ball, 2007). Studies have also highlighted the sphere of sport as a place where parents can develop and sustain emotionally close bonds with their children (Kremer-Sadlik, Izquierdo, & Fatigante, 2010), even into the teenage years often associated with growing independence (Stefansen et al., 2016). Writing about fathers, Coakley stresses the relational aspects of involvement in a sport: 'For many fathers, organized sports [...] provide a setting in which they feel comfortable and competent as a parent. Their knowledge of sports and their past experiences serve as a basis for fathering' (Coakley, 2006, p. 155).

In summary, studies on parental involvement address numerous issues relating to parents' motivations and practices and the consequences of involvement in terms of athletic progress and the parent-child relationship. These studies, however, are mainly from the parental perspective. Few studies examine parental involvement from adolescents' point of view.

Exceptions include Knight, Boden, and Holt (2010) study of junior tennis players' preferences for parental behaviour and Trussell's (2016) study on adolescents' views of parents' voluntary work for sports clubs. The young tennis players interviewed by Knight et al. (2010) preferred parents to offer general support, rather than technical advice (unless they were highly knowledgeable about the sport). They also wanted parents to comment on effort and attitude, rather than performance; they recognised and were affected by parents' nonverbal as well as verbal behaviour. Trussell (2016) similarly concluded that, for the most part, teenagers appreciated their parents' contribution, even though they had little awareness of the parents' motives for taking on formal roles in the club. Drawing on the general insight provided by these studies, we aim to more closely examine how teenagers understand parental involvement in youth sport as it relates to the negotiation of autonomy.

### **Young people's autonomy and ideal parental roles**

Holt et al. (2009, p. 54) call for more studies into 'the reciprocal influence of children on their parents' parenting style' (p. 54) related to sport. Pursuant to this goal, we found it useful to draw on psychological and anthropological notions of autonomy. As Quinn (2005) has noted, although decreasing dependence on parents in some form is universally seen as a goal of childhood socialisation, how parents assist children in developing autonomy, and what independence and dependence means,

varies historically and between contexts. Based on analysis of biographical narratives from three generations of Norwegians, Gullestad (1996) has argued that finding and knowing oneself is a key aspect of autonomy in late-modernity and that a central task for parents is to assist their children in the process of finding themselves (p. 31).

In the psychological sense and within the framework of family relationships, Parra, Oliva, and Sanchez-Queija (2015) argue that autonomy involves at least three dimensions: first, a young person's ability to act independently; second, a sense of competence and agency; and third, increased self-confidence and sense of individuality, as well as more symmetrical emotional bonds (p. 57). In this sense, autonomy is related to a particular cultural construction of the person as an individual and bounded unit capable of agency and decision making (cf. Brannen, 1999; Côté, 2014) even if they are contrary to parents' or guardians' wishes. In addition, autonomy involves the idea of adolescents navigating and establishing social relationships independent of the family. Linked to sport participation, this aspect of autonomy is discussed in analyses of peer cultures in sport (Fine, 1987; Fundberg, 2003) and in studies of sport representing civil society and, as such, a venue where teenagers establish voluntary bonds outside and independent of the compulsory relations in the family (Anderson, 2008, p. 202).

Furthermore, Smette (2015) suggests that, when speaking of autonomy and young people, one tends to refer to two co-existing but distinct meanings of the term: One meaning refers to an adolescent's right to make decisions contrary to a parent's wishes, the other refers to an adolescent's ability to make decisions based on self-knowledge. Regarding the latter meaning, parents are considered crucial in assisting children (Gullestad, 1996; Parra et al., 2015).

These contributions highlight the importance of nuanced analyses of negotiations of autonomy and relations with parents. Our analysis aims, then, at identifying links between parental involvement and autonomy regarding three aspects of young people's sporting life.

The first topic is young people's perceptions about what parents want for their leisure life. We begin by assuming that adolescents have ideas about what parents want for them in various areas (Strandbu, 2005). Adolescents may choose to follow their parents' ideals and expectations—either because they do not want to disappoint their parents or because they want the same as their parents. They might also choose differently from their parents. We assume that negotiations about how to relate to their parents' wishes are happening at both an explicit and a non-reflexive level, as 'inner dialogues' (Strandbu, 2005). In any case, teenagers can be expected to reflect on at least some aspects of this form of parental influence.

The second topic is young peoples' perceptions about how parents should encourage and regulate their sporting activities. Love/caring and control/monitoring are considered essential aspects of parenting (Hennum, 2002). What are the teenagers' views about how parental caring and control should take place in relation to participating in a sport? Moreover, how is autonomy negotiated related to parental monitoring and caring?

The third topic is young peoples' views about how parents should behave at sporting venues. During their teenage years, young people increasingly operate in venues outside parental presence and control. How do young people negotiate parental involvement in these circumstances? Does parental presence threaten adolescent autonomy?

## The study

The data analysed in this paper stem from the research project Knowledge in motion across contexts of learning (KnowMo). The overarching aim of the project was to explore the connections between young people's learning experiences on different arenas, particularly school, leisure and family (Erstad & Smette, 2017). The project involved four classes in two lower secondary schools in a medium-sized city in Norway and comprises fieldwork and video observation at school; interviews with students, teachers, parents, and coaches; and participant observation in sporting arenas. The material analysed in this paper consists of 16 focus group interviews with students conducted

early in ninth grade. A total of 47 girls and 45 boys, aged 13–14, took part in mixed gender groups with 4–7 participants. The interviews were conducted at school and two interviewers were present in each interview; the first three authors of this paper and two additional researchers from the project team in rotating pairs. The interviews lasted 50–60 min. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Using existing social groups for data collection is considered a suitable approach for eliciting shared representations (Dittmar et al., 2000). We followed this advice and divided each class into four groups based on information about their leisure interests from our initial fieldwork at the schools and a survey conducted early in the project. Among the 16 groups, 8 were mixed in terms of leisure interests, and 8 were more homogenous. We used a semi-structured interview guide to explore several topics, including participants' perceptions of the ideal level and type of parenting for teenagers in the areas of sport, school and in general.

The analysis proceeded in a circular process of moving back and forth between raw interview transcripts, thematically coded transcripts, and suggestions for theoretical interpretations, in a way that resonated with the abductive approach suggested by Tavory and Timmermans (2014). A key premise of this approach is that researchers draw on their repertoire of theoretical knowledge in their engagement with the data. For the initial step of the data analysis, we read and re-read the transcribed interviews and coded the material in descriptive categories such as school, leisure and parental involvement in both spheres. For the second step of the analysis, we conducted a more detailed form of coding based on sub-themes related only to parental interest and involvement in sports. As part of this second step, we utilised an 'analyst driven' thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84) guided by our knowledge of parental roles in sport from the parents' perspective (Stefansen et al., 2016).

The following sections are organised in three broad themes; 'parental rationales for youth sport participation', 'parental encouragement and regulation' and 'parental presence at sporting venues'. These themes represent different contexts for adolescents' negotiations of ideal parental roles in relation to sport. Throughout the text, we use illustrative examples from the interview dialogues. All quotes are translated by us into English, and the names used are pseudonyms.

## Parents' rationales for encouraging participation in sport

One question addressed in the interviews was what parents wanted their adolescent children to do in their leisure time. In general, the participants assumed that their parents wanted them to take part in organised activities, and sport was the most frequently mentioned activity. Encouraging sport participation was portrayed as normal and part of a parent's responsibility to ensure a healthy lifestyle for their children.

The participants described their parents' rationale for encouraging sport participation in general terms, without referring to actual discussions with their parents. For example, one girl asserted, 'They want me to take part in a sport so that I can get to know new people and ... keep in shape'. When talking about their parents' rationales, the notion of sport as a social, healthy and fun activity was put forward as 'common knowledge'—the simple answer to a simple question: 'So we can keep in shape ... or have fun in our leisure time' and 'Because it's healthier for the body and [it is] social and all that stuff too'.

Participants who explained further tended to do so in light of what parents *did not* want for them. Roger, for example, talked about his mother's reaction to him quitting his sport activity:

- Roger: Yes. It is much better to be more social than to sit ... When I didn't have practice, when I quit martial arts, I really just sat at home gaming, [playing] computer games. My mother got very tired of that.
- Interviewer: Why did she get tired of that?
- Roger: Because she doesn't think I should spend all of my time on computer games and homework. That's no life.

Another example is Nina, who explained that 'In a way, you want that your kids do something instead of just sitting at home like I do. Because I'm not taking part in anything, almost ... The parents want you to go out and have fun instead of sitting inside and being bored'. Nina seemingly shared her parents' perspective even while admitting that she did not live up to her parents' expectations.

According to Roger and Nina, their parents believed that sport protected them against social isolation, inactivity and boredom. Many participants thought that their parents viewed sport as an alternative to physically passive and supposedly socially isolating practices like gaming, watching TV, homework and simply 'being at home'.

Among the numerous comments about sport operating as a protection against less desirable practices, only one participant talked about 'traditional' deviant behaviour like smoking:

- Johannes: I believe they want us to do activities instead of hanging out at the mall or something like that ... In a way, it's the sports people, and then there's the [mall-people], in a way. And it's generally the [mall-people] who try out everything. Like snuff, smoking ... Yeah, all that stuff.
- Interviewer: So parents are concerned with that?
- Johannes: I actually don't think my dad would be very happy if I had been that type.

Johannes' use of the expression 'mall-people' for teens who do not participate in sport adds to the social imaginary of where not participating in sport may lead.

The participants' understanding of their parents' wishes can be summed up as follows: Sport is viewed by parents as social, fun and healthy and as protective against practices that parents fear to be unhealthy and socially isolating. This understanding resonates with the meanings the parents themselves ascribed to sport, presented in another paper from the project (Stefansen et al., 2016). The teenagers were less aware of their parents' view of sport as a domain for the accrual of skills and competencies for the future or other life domains or the correction of maladjustment. Still, parents and teenagers agreed that sport is a natural part of growing up. Even those not participating in sport endorsed the overall positive evaluation of sport. The analysis thus suggests that young people recognise both that parents know what is best for them and that they share those assessments.

## Parents' encouragement and regulation of participation in sport

The focus group interviews also explored the extent of parents' involvement in their teenage children's deliberations and decisions about whether to begin, continue or quit a sporting activity. With a few exceptions, the participants concurred that the final decision to take up or quit an activity was their own. If they were in doubt whether to quit or continue, parents seemed to play an important and welcomed part in the decision process. The following passage, the response to a question about whether parents should encourage their children to continue if they considered quitting, is an apt illustration:

- Jens: A year ago or something, I wanted to quit. Because that's, in a way, a period where one gets bored. But then, I wasn't allowed to quit, and now I'm glad I didn't.
- Grete: The same thing happened with me and football. I've played football almost as long as I can remember. But then it got really boring and stuff ... And then there were many who quit. Then I wanted to quit as well, but they said, 'Just try'. So I tried. But I still didn't have fun, so I quit.
- Interviewer: So you think it was okay that they ... Or do you think that ...
- Grete: No, I think it was okay that they tried. Because it could be that I still would have enjoyed it.
- Ninni: But it may be that if you want to quit the sport badly, and then if the parents, like, really urge you to continue, that's no good. But it's okay that they ... Yes, if one's in doubt about whether to quit, it's okay that they try to ...
- Tale: I understand [it] if you're intending not to do sport at all. Then I understand if parents will encourage you to continue. But if you've plenty of other things to do, like other sports, then it's fine, really, if you quit.

Knut: Actually, I don't think parents should decide if you should do a [specific] sport, but I think, like Jens says, that they in a way [could] get you to continue so that you then try it out a little longer. To see if it gets fun again, in a way. But if you still don't think it's fun, like Grete said, then I don't think they have the right to decide that you should continue. Because we're old enough to know what we want.

The participants welcomed their parents' attempts to encourage them to continue a sport if they considered quitting. This parental guidance was probably accepted because of trust in the parents and a sense that parents see the bigger picture. It was important, however, that the final decision was their own. This position received broad support across the focus groups.

Another topic explored was how parents should regulate sport activities. Leaving the overall decision of whether to participate aside, youth sport can be challenging in terms of time management and priority setting. For many young people, it is a question of what comes first: school or sport. Should parents regulate how much time and energy their adolescent children spend at sport? The participants referred to two main concerns among their parents. First, most parents clearly felt that school comes first. Roger's comment is illustrative:

If I had the choice ... If it had been an important game and an important test [at school], I would've chosen the game, but my mother would've denied me. Because she would rather I do well at school instead of sport, whereas I'm more interested in sport, so I would have gone with sport instead.

Conflicting priorities between sport and school were one of the few situations mentioned in the interviews where parents could put their foot down and make the ultimate decision. However, stories about parents forcing teenagers to stay home and study instead of going to practice or games were few and, like Roger's story, hypothetical. More often, this conflict was about parents ensuring that participants did their homework before practice or initiating a serious talk if they witnessed that sport participation happened at the expense of homework or school performance. Berit's case provides an example:

I really just did handball and one dancing class a week last year, and I thought the dancing was so much fun that I asked if I could go to two classes a week. And I was allowed. Because [my dad] said ... if he could see that I skipped homework or something like that or if I had one bad test or something like that, then I had to quit. Because it can't be at the expense of my schoolwork.

Even though the participants, like Roger and Berit, described this kind of parental control as annoying and conflictual when it occurred, generally they understood the parents' point of view—it was how things had to be. Like Berit concluded, 'I believe most parents think that way'.

The second and related concern among parents had to do with the overall load put on teenagers by the combined demands of school, sport, socialising and other organised leisure activities. Maria, who did not want to miss out on anything, explained:

My mom usually nags about this. I used to exercise a bit and, lately, there have been a lot of birthday parties and stuff. So, then she usually nags about it and doesn't allow me to go to birthday parties, training and homework and school on the same day. I usually get tired, and then I begin to cry, and then I get really tired, and then I go to the birthday party even though ... And then we usually have an argument, that I shouldn't do all this stuff.

In these cases, sport was one of several activities that contributed to the parents' concern. According to the teenagers, parental opinions differed substantially regarding whether one could skip sport practice in order to reduce the overall load. Some, like Nanna, told the interviewer that 'My mom is very happy if I don't go to practice because she thinks I wear myself out too much. So she would rather I take an extra day off than to do more than I can handle'. In contrast, other participants reported that illness was the only accepted reason to skip practice.

Although participants tended to speak about 'the parents' as a unit, concerns about possible overload were more commonly related to the mother. There were exceptions, as in Berit's case, but parental control that regulated and constrained sport activity was more likely to be mentioned as a mother's domain.



In summary, the participants seemed to understand parents' reasons for intervening; for example, pushing them a bit to maintain their involvement in sport. While they often viewed such parental control as annoying and conflictual when it occurred, they nonetheless acknowledged its validity and found it appropriate. They felt that this level of parental control, however, should be expressed in a polite and 'soft' way and the teenager should have the final word when deciding.

The teenagers seemed to understand that parents, through 'scaffolding', give them the opportunity to decide for themselves, based on self-knowledge. In short: they acknowledged that parents play a vital role in their development of autonomy.

## Views on parental presence in the sphere of sport

The most concrete aspect of the negotiation of autonomy concerned questions of parental presence in adolescents' sport. The participants described their parents as extensively involved in their sporting activities; parents watched competitions and even practices. Some teenagers had a parent as coach, and a few talked about regularly jogging or skiing with their parents. Others recognised how parents supported them by driving them to practice and competitions. Although only a few participants said their parents were not involved, many were vague regarding how much their parents were involved. Presumably parental involvement in sporting activities may be a sensitive topic, and the voices of participants with little or no parental involvement were heard less in the focus group context.

Questions about the preferred extent of parents' presence at matches and competitions revealed three different positions: First, some expressed that they wanted their parents to be present at competitions and watch them play. Second, some wished their parents would be less involved. Third, a few participants explained that having parents watch them compete had been very important throughout childhood, whereas recently, they were more indifferent.

The first position was primarily expressed by participants who were emphatic in stressing the importance of their parents' involvement:

- Ingår: It's everything, really. That parents are involved in the sport you do and support you and are there for you and all that. It really means incredibly much.
- Interviewer: Why does it mean so much?
- Ingår: It's to have that support in a way, to know that ... [To] have a parent who thinks it's cool what you do. And then it's unbelievably important with driving and support for different stuff in the beginning and ... All that stuff is very important; you can't do it without [their support].

Parents were seen mainly as a source of emotional support and, in line with Knight et al.'s (2010) findings, not as a source for advice about sporting skills and strategies. An exception, also in line with Knight et al., was in cases where the parents were highly skilled in the sport in question.

For some, wanting parents to be present at competitions was about feeling safe. For others, like handball player and dancer Natalie, it provided extra motivation to perform:

- It's nice that they're there and cheer and stuff. And yes, it's positive, you get more energy when you see people cheer for you and are there to see you. So then you think, in a way, that, yes, now I have to show them I can make it. And then you get better.

Other participants reflected on sharing the fun of sport, having something in common to talk about over dinner and getting support from a person close to you.

The second position, wishing parents were less involved, was partly expressed in response to the question about whether parents could get *too* involved. One reason for wanting parents to be less involved had to do with 'feeling free', 'getting away' and expressing oneself socially in ways some found difficult when their parents were present. Hockey player Ivan, for example, explained that 'Yes, that they're there at every practice and every game [is too much]. I think it's good to be *a bit* alone as well. Get away from homework and school and be with friends and stuff. So, if they're to be there all the time ... It will be a little too much'. It was not that participants' behaviour changed substantially in the absence of their parents, but rather a sense of relief when they did not have

to be concerned about the parental gaze. The respondents also linked this position to experiences with overly enthusiastic parents as spectators at competitions. Lisa, for example, had issues with her dad's behaviour at football games:

I want them to be a bit discreet, but dad isn't anyway ... He's very enthusiastic, really, when he watches football games and such ... So, I'm a bit ... Yes, I almost don't allow him to come to tournaments and stuff.

Furthermore, there was one 'horror story' about an overly committed parent:

Peter: There's not that many, but some [parents] are very enthusiastic and walk onto the pitch and ... Do you remember David's mom? A teammate's mom, he was tackled, and she got very aggressive. She walked onto the pitch and started yelling at the referee and yelled at the coach and just went on like that.

Nils: She had a go at my team's coach.

In this case, the respondents expressed sympathy for the boy whose mother had behaved in this manner. Mostly, however, the wish for parents to be less enthusiastic was expressed laughingly and with a hint of mild embarrassment. The general impression from these comments is that such mild embarrassment (that was expressed intertwined with a hint of pride) was a price the athletes were willing to pay for their parents' involvement.

The third position was that parental involvement was no longer so important, though it had been so when they were younger. Some respondents had difficulty explaining why it had been so important earlier. Nadia tried:

Nadia: I always wanted my parents to come and watch ... I definitely wanted them to be there.

Interviewer: Can you remember why it was so important to you?

Nadia: Now, I just wanted them to ... I don't know really. But I just remember I wanted that very much.

Interviewer: When does that change? Is it when you start in lower secondary school, or ... ?

Nadia: No I ... don't think it's exactly lower secondary school, but when one can manage oneself a bit.

Although hard to articulate, adolescents seem to link needing less parent involvement to growing older and not being as dependent on parents' practical and emotional support as when they were younger.

A final point is the experience of having a parent as a coach; participants described both positives and negative aspects. For Ylva, having both parents as coaches benefited family relations and her sporting performance:

My mom and dad, they're both my coaches. So, our family is pretty social when it comes to handball because my brother is playing too ... What's good about it is that dad's very honest and says ... so that I improve. This summer, for example, I'd improved because he'd always been there. But the downside is that he's always at tournaments. I've never been at a tournament alone; they always have to be there, because they're the coaches.

Youth sport offers intense social settings, especially when travelling with a team for tournaments, which often mean multiday, sleepover events. Several respondents mentioned never having been at a tournament without parents as a disadvantage of having a parent as a coach or team manager. Some participants said parental coaching was ok if the parent was considerate about the social aspects of the sport; for instance, keeping his or her distance when travelling with the team for tournaments. Handball player Karl, for example, said that 'It is okay, as long as he doesn't sleep [in the same room as] us. In the same school ... classroom'. As Trussell's (2016) study discussed, having the opportunity to express oneself freely among friends limited by the presence of a parent seemed to be the participants' main concern with parent-coaches.

The participants with parent-coaches emphasised both the benefit of sharing an activity and commitments and the advantage of having a person close to you tracking your sporting development and providing regular feedback. This last perspective, in particular, gives the impression that parent-coaches are mostly favoured by teenagers who aspire to compete at a high level.

## Discussion

Our analysis explored adolescents' perspectives on parental involvement through three broad themes: their understanding of parents' rationale for supporting their sport participation; their opinions on parental regulation and encouraging participation; and their views on parental presence and involvement at sporting events. Taken together, our interviews contrast sharply with Coleman's description of sport participation as opposition to the adult and parental world. Rather, what we see is a general identification with the parental perspective on the value of sports participation for children and young people.

It is generally agreed that focus groups give access to shared opinions and non-controversial positions (Bloor, 2001). It is less certain, however, whether such interviews give access to deeper layers of personal experiences; for example, relating to parents behaving contrary to the common norms for parental involvement. Participants whose parents were less involved probably spoke less in the interviews. This limitation should be kept in mind for further discussion of the data.

The analysis showed that, for the most part, the adolescents wanted their parents to be involved in and present at their sporting activities. At the same time, they clearly wanted to define and set limits for how parents were involved; they expected parents not to interfere in their social relationships with teammates. In addition, although participants clearly appreciated encouragement and wanted support to continue when motivation was low, they insisted that the final decision regarding participation be their own.

The participants stressed the importance of separating bonding with parents from interacting socially with peers in the sport arena. This distinction was also the case for those who were deeply appreciative and partly dependent on parental support. Very intensive involvement from parents was, however, sometimes a source of mixed feelings, mainly related to the desire to escape the parental gaze. Participants who had parents as coaches exemplified this dilemma. They explained that although having a parent as a coach could strengthen family relations and benefit their sporting skills, it could also make it more difficult to 'feel free', 'get away' and express oneself socially; this finding echoes Trussell's study (2016).

The analyses do show varying intensities of negotiations of autonomy. The general recognition and acceptance of the parental perspective and responsibility, even though annoying when encountered, is striking. A certain level of guidance and control was accepted as appropriate parental behaviour. However, the participants also clearly asserted their right to contest the sensibility and validity of parents' concerns—either concern about too much activity or insistence that schoolwork be prioritised over sport. Parental involvement, in order to be acceptable to teenagers, must balance support and encouragement with respect for their increasing autonomy.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have explored parental roles in youth sport from participants' own perspectives. The article thereby contributes to the literature about parenting in youth sport by showing how young people have active roles in shaping parents' level and form of involvement, thus defining valid parental roles on this arena. The analysis of young people's perspective of parental involvement in youth sport also contributes to the literature on the complex relational processes involved in the development of autonomy. The participants' definitions of ideal and undesirable forms of parental involvement reflect two co-existing meanings autonomy can have: on the one hand, the right to make decisions against a parent's wishes and, on the other, the ability to make decisions based on self-knowledge (Smette, 2015). The finding that teenagers want support and guidance from their parents while simultaneously 'negotiat[ing] the limits of their own agency' (Lahelma & Gordon, 2008, p. 218) is thus not a contradiction, but a consequence of these co-existing expressions of autonomy.

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