

## Parental Engagement in Tennis - The provider?

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Parents are considered to have the most influence during a child's early psychological and social development throughout their initiation into sport. Although the academic study of sport parenting is less extensive and historically established than sport coaching, the literature reflecting parental influence and involvement in youth sport has grown substantially in recent years. Research posits both the positive and negative effects of parental influence through the practices, behaviours and styles adopted but recently these experiences and developments have been contextualised within the sport of tennis (Gould et al., 2016; Knight & Holt 2015).

'The playing fields of sports are populated neither by angels or devils, but human beings who often act well, but sometimes do not' (Shields et al., 2005)

I think as coaches that we all have experienced this scenario within our work with all standards and ages. All parents want the best for their kids and this is an admirable goal as **parents provide** the opportunities for their kids to participate in a wide range of activities and in doing so, should be aware and understand what they and their child are seeking to achieve within the sport of tennis. This is a complex issue but at an introductory stage the motives should be for fun, enjoyment, making friends and acquiring new skills. At a later stage and skill level, the need for open communication between coach/parent/athlete to plan such direction is required. **Expert parents** adapt their involvement and support to different stages of their child's development and this role of **provider** at different levels – financial, transport, emotional, social and moral support are significant investments and require constant monitoring and attention.

Some degree of parental **involvement** is important as it communicates interest and support to the child and the coach and this involvement can be a positive contribution to young people staying in physical activity and sport.

Competition is only one reason for playing tennis and parents need to interpret their child's motives for participation and not their own. 36% of tennis parents are perceived to have a negative influence on their child's development by coaches and the label of the '**over involved parent**' has highlighted the need for caution when working with children and their parents. Some parents find it difficult to separate emotionally from their child's experiences and struggle dealing with the outcome of winning and losing. Their behaviours, goals and perspective become focused on winning and this puts pressure on both child, coach and parent (Gould et al. 2006). As coaches we also need to have insight into parental perspectives and research have illustrated that parents' main stressors are competition, coaches, finance, time, other family members, the tennis organisation and conflict and lack of opportunity within the development structure (Harwood & Knight 2009; Knight & Holt 2013).

Below are some of their main issues:

1. **Competition** - before, during and after. What experiences do parents have in dealing with what to say, what to do and how to interpret their child's response to competition? How many of them repeatedly tell their children to warm-up or place excessive emphasis on the outcome? Have you ever witnessed a parent walking away during a match because of the likely outcome? How many have witnessed parents continually pointing out their child's mistakes post-match? Research and interacting with other supports and other parents may help with these individual issues.
2. **Coach** – Parents would prefer coaches to attend competition, address on-court behaviour, be more organised, planned and communicative with them, refrain from favouritism and have more empathy. Yes, there are logistical, time and financial issues for the coach to many of their grievances but there are mutually agreeable solutions! Selecting an appropriate coach who has the skills to provide a holistic programme for their children is paramount in solving this matter.
3. **Finance** – Tennis has financial rewards but to achieve these there is a 'bigger picture'. Parents have to **provide** coaching fees and expenses, transport, equipment and clothing, accommodation, clubs and NGB fees. But the social, life-long and physical rewards are not so tangibly visible if the parent/child does not know where they are going or how much investment is required.
4. **Time** – being a tennis parent has 'sacrifices' as it restricts personal, partner and family time by travelling to matches/coaching sessions. It can conflict with work, homework and school commitments and there are dead times at tournaments due to weather and match scheduling. Again solving these problems by communication and perspective is easily achievable.
5. **Siblings** – Another issue for tennis parents is the perceived inequality given to tennis which can cause resentment, family disruption and induce conflicting and interpersonal difficulties within family life. This issue is problematic and requires a positive approach. As a parent you should always strive to accentuate the positive. One child might be outstanding at tennis, the other not very good at all, but you still need to turn up and cheer from the court side for both of them – that's one of the non-negotiables of parenthood. Thou shalt love your child no matter what! Spouses working together as a unified team is also a solution to the inequality that other brothers and sisters perceive.
6. **Organisational** – Parents describe problems with their club, the governing body, perceived favouritism within these structures, inefficient co-ordination in tournament and match play events and too much emphasis on results as well as poor communication. This is true in all countries and amongst sports within Ireland so a cultural and educational change is required to promote a parent friendly environment for their children.
7. **Developmental** – Finally parents raised educational conflicts, tennis or school, a limited opportunity for play multiple sports at a certain level the difficulty in transition from different age groups and levels. Understanding and negotiating player progression is important in the topic.

Parents influence the child's experience in tennis through the actions they display, the behaviours they exhibit and the opportunities and feedback that they **provide** to their child. If this information is 'tainted' or misinterpreted by parents, then this can be exhibited through the child's attitude and behaviour. This is where coaches, other parents, administrators and officials have to be positive in facilitating a solution to the misinterpretation and educate all significant stakeholders.

However, sometimes it is difficult to know what feedback to provide to your child, what actions are the "right" actions, and how to best support your child. Below are a few tips to help guide your involvement in your child's tennis and, hopefully, help you help your child enjoy tennis and perform at his or her best. I will use the pre-during and post-match scenario for some universal guidelines to parents.

#### Pre-Match

- Only **provide** match tactics **IF** your child asks for them
- Give your child time and space to be alone
- Recommend and reinforce good pre-match habits BUT do not try and do everything for your child
- Remind your child you will be proud of them whatever the outcome
- Emphasize effort, attitude, and enjoyment
- Keep relaxed and calm before the match

#### During Match

- Attend matches to demonstrate your interest
- Be attentive to the match throughout
- Show your support by clapping and cheering (e.g., "come-on") appropriately during the match
- Have a positive and happy attitude
- Keep a neutral or happy expression throughout the match
- Keep calm
- Be respectful towards your child's opponent

### Post-Match

- Comment on effort and attitude rather than the result
- Support your child and keep your behaviour consistent whether they won or lost
- Encourage your child for the next match and boost their confidence if they have lost
- Be realistic about the outcome rather than finding excuses for the result
- Give positive feedback first
- Keep feedback simple and keep it to a minimum after a loss
- Ensure your child has food after a match
- Talk about the match **IF** your child wants to
- Give your child space after a loss

(Thrower et al. 2016; Harwood & Knight 2009)

Parents provide the experience of tennis and also interpret those experiences and as coaches we also perform the same function. The key is to **help children and parents define success**. For some it may be national titles, for others it may be enjoying playing with their peers and both coaches and parents must provide both the performance pathway and the developmental lifelong participation one to achieve everyone's success.

Despite the wealth of educational advice to parents and coaches the issue is a boundless one. Scientific work on parental influence of all ages is critical. Parents form a consistent part of the fabric of youth sport and it is incumbent upon coaches, clubs and Tennis Ireland to help strengthen the competencies and skills of sport parents so that healthy sport experiences are achieved. Anecdotal evidence highlights the need for sport parents to acquire certain cognitive, social and emotional skills so that their children will benefit from such skills themselves in sport. **Working with parents and for parents** in sport begins with an empathic awareness of the demands that they face and an understanding of how to provide stage like education and provision for not just children but for parents, led by coaches. Recognising the challenges parents can face as they attempt to provide support to their children and the fact that parents are often unsure of how to best support their children are where the National and Provincial bodies should focus their attention. We are all **providers** of a positive tennis experience and research and evidenced based learning should identify if any of the grievances are common in Irish tennis and facilitate solutions to player, coach and parental stressors.

Parents should accept their children at their strongest and support them at their weakest. Outlined below are the Ten commandments for tennis parents.

## Ten commandments of tennis parents

Parents of young athletes should:

1. *Listen to their children's views about playing tennis*
2. *Provide unconditional love and support during success and loss*
3. *Help their children understand that the definition of a good performance is giving one's best effort*
4. *Encourage performers to be self-reliant and to accept responsibility for their actions and decisions*
5. *Encourage a non-sport interest*
6. *Allow children to set their own standards of excellence*
7. *Provide encouragement and optimism*
8. *Emphasise enjoyment*
9. *Be realistic about your child's abilities*
10. *View tennis as a positive influence in your child's development and learning*

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