

**Parental stress and coping in elite youth gymnastics: An interpretative
phenomenological analysis**

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Abstract

Parents are essential in youth sport because they provide the emotional, informational, and financial support that enables their children to enjoy and succeed in their sporting endeavours. When providing such support, however, parents can experience a range of stressors from organisational, competitive, and developmental sources. This study sought to understand how parents of elite youth gymnasts cope within youth sport. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to facilitate an in-depth exploration of parents' experiences. Seven parents of national and international level gymnasts aged 11-14 years participated in semi-structured interviews and data were analysed according to the guidelines set out by IPA. The results suggest that parents face numerous organisational, competitive, and developmental stressors in youth gymnastics including time and travel demands, child's competition nerves, schooling, finances, and injury. Parents employed four categories of coping to manage these stressors: (a) detaching from gymnastics (e.g., by sharing parental tasks, relying on their children to cope, and maintaining balanced lifestyles); (b) normalising experiences (e.g., by recalling and comparing experiences); (c) willingness to learn (e.g., from others and from their own past experiences); and (d) managing emotional reactions (e.g., through emotional release, self-talk, distraction, and avoidance strategies). The findings suggest that parents' stress experiences are dynamic and complex, with parents utilising different coping strategies to manage different stressors in different situations.

Keywords: parents, youth sport, stress, stressors, coping, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

Introduction

Parents are extremely important in youth sport. For example, children are unlikely to fulfil their potential in sport without early and continuing tangible, emotional, and informational parental support (Wolfenden and Holt 2005). Further, parental support has been consistently associated with favourable outcomes for children, including increased enjoyment, perceived competence, and intrinsic motivation, as well as reduced pre-competitive anxiety, burnout, and withdrawal from sport (e.g., Babkes and Weiss 1999, McCarthy *et al.* 2008). However, providing support for their children's sport participation is not always easy for parents (Wiersma and Fifer 2008). Some parents of talented athletes have relocated to provide their children with access to better coaches and training facilities, temporarily separated from their spouses/family to move their child to new training locations, and left jobs in order to transport and support their children in sport (Bloom 1985). Parents have also faced challenges ranging from child injury, witnessing poor sportspersonship, and their child's disappointment, to a lack of family time, financial expenses, negotiating relationships with coaches, and balancing commitment and fun (Clarke and Harwood 2014, Knight and Holt 2013a, 2013b; Wiersma and Fifer 2008).

Recognising the challenges parents can encounter in youth sport, researchers have suggested that supporting children's involvement in sport can result in parents' experiencing stress (Harwood and Knight 2015). According to the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus 1991, 1999), stress is a dynamic, bi-directional transactional process between the individual and their environment. The stress process begins when an individual encounters an environmental demand (or stressor; Lazarus and Folkman 1984), for example the cost of youth sport (Harwood and Knight 2009a). After encountering the demand, the individual evaluates the threatening nature of the demand through a process of primary and secondary appraisals. The primary appraisal assesses the significance of a demand in relation

1 to the individual's life goals and wellbeing (Lazarus 1999). For example, one parent could
2 appraise their child going abroad with a fear that the child will suffer from homesickness.
3 Another parent may, however, appraise the same situation as an excellent opportunity for
4 their child to gain valuable competitive experience and not view it to be threatening. If an
5 individual evaluates a demand as personally relevant through primary appraisal, secondary
6 appraisal then occurs. In secondary appraisal, the individual assesses their abilities to cope
7 with the stressor at hand (Lazarus 1991). For instance, in the above example, one parent
8 might think that they have the resources to cope with their child being away because their
9 child will have access to a mobile phone and email for conversations, while another might
10 not feel that these strategies will be sufficient. Thus, secondary appraisals form the cognitive
11 underpinnings for coping (Lazarus 1999).

12 Within the sport parenting literature, some attention has been afforded to the stressors
13 encountered by parents (Harwood, Drew and Knight 2010; Harwood and Knight 2009a,
14 2009b). For example, it has been identified that parents experience stress within youth tennis
15 due to encountering competitive, organisational, and developmental stressors (Harwood and
16 Knight 2009a, 2009b). Competitive stressors are demands associated with the child's
17 participation in competitions, such as opponents cheating, the child's physical readiness, and
18 child nerves. Organisational stressors involve demands related to logistics, personal
19 sacrifices, and systems in which parents operate associated with their children's involvement
20 in youth sport, including the financial impact of sport upon the family, transporting the child
21 to training and competitions, and a lack of family time. Finally, developmental stressors are
22 demands associated specifically with the child's development, including the child missing out
23 on other opportunities and uncertainties surrounding the child's sporting future (Harwood and
24 Knight 2009a, 2009b).

1 In contrast to the understanding of the stressors parents can encounter in sport,
2 knowledge of the ways in which parents cope with these stressors is very limited. Coping is
3 achieved through on-going cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage the demands
4 appraised as overwhelming (Lazarus 1993), and can be broadly classified into two categories:
5 problem- and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Problem-focused
6 strategies aim to manage and/or alter the stressor at hand and include behaviours such as goal
7 setting, problem solving, time management, and information gathering (Levy *et al.* 2009).
8 Emotion-focused strategies (e.g., deep breathing, visualisation, and acceptance) regulate the
9 emotional distress resulting from demands (Nicholls *et al.* 2010), but do not attempt to
10 change the actual stressor. Within the sport parenting literature, a number of researchers have
11 suggested different problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies that may be beneficial
12 for parents. For example, it has been proposed that parents might benefit from utilising
13 relaxation strategies at competitions, interacting and working with other parents to reduce
14 organisational demands, and seeking out credible sources of information to address
15 developmental stressors (see Holt and Knight 2014 for a review). However, the actual
16 strategies parents' employ in youth sport in response to stressors remains unknown.

17 Despite such a limited understanding of parents' coping strategies, it has recently
18 been proposed that sport parenting expertise includes the ability to develop and deploy
19 appropriate coping strategies to manage the demands or stressors (e.g., time commitments,
20 financial requirements, and providing emotional support after losses) that parents encounter
21 in youth sport (Harwood and Knight 2015). Such a proposal is based on the understanding
22 that parental stress can contribute to negative parent actions such as punitive behaviours and
23 conditional love, which have been linked to stress, anxiety, and burnout in children (Bois *et*
24 *al.* 2009, Leff and Hoyle 1995). Additionally, if parents are unable to cope with stressors that
25 arise in youth sport it may result in parents themselves experiencing negative health

consequences, as well as decreasing their enjoyment of supporting their children in sport (Knight *et al.* 2009). Examining and improving parents' coping strategies is therefore critical to enhancing the experiences of both parents and children in sport. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand how parents cope with the stressors they experience within elite youth gymnastics. Two research questions were posed:

1. What stressors do parents of elite youth gymnasts encounter?
2. What strategies do these parents employ to cope with the stressors they encounter?

Method

Methodology and philosophical underpinnings

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed in this study to facilitate an in-depth understanding of parents' experiences. Conceptualised by Smith (1996), IPA aims to explore in detail how participants make sense of their personal and social worlds, and the meanings that particular experiences, events, and states hold for them (Smith and Osborn 2003). Further, IPA is "particularly suitable when one is interested in complexity or process or where an issue is personal" (Kay and Kingston 2002, p. 171). IPA was therefore chosen for this study because parental involvement in youth sport is highly complicated, and the stress process is both individual and subjective (Lazarus 2000).

IPA is underpinned by three key principles: idiographic, phenomenological, and interpretative (Smith *et al.* 2009). From an idiographic perspective, IPA encourages researchers to value each participant's story on its own rather than adopting an overarching view of all the accounts. Consequently, care was taken to analyse each parent's account individually rather than analysing all the transcripts together. Phenomenology is concerned with retaining participants' rich descriptions of their worlds and what it is like to be involved in these worlds. Thus, ensuring the parents' quotes and explanations are embedded in the results was central to this study. Finally, IPA is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which

1 aims to understand the complex world of human experience and behaviour (Krauss 2005).
2 Interpretivism posits that there is no single reality that can be objectively accessed (Smith and
3 Sparkes 2008). Instead, individuals experience different realities from their unique points of
4 view that can only be accessed indirectly by speaking to people (Ponterotto 2005). Within
5 interpretivism, knowledge is established through the researcher's interactions with
6 participants. Thus, the interpretivist researcher is viewed as "a co-constructor of meaning",
7 interlocked with the participant in such a way that the findings are a joint creation (Morrow
8 2005, p. 254). To align with an interpretivist approach, an emphasis was placed on parents'
9 experiences as told in their interviews, and the researcher's interpretations of these
10 experiences as co-constructors of meaning.

11 *Participants*

12 Seven parents (five mothers, one father, and one stepfather) volunteered to participate
13 in the study. The parents represented five female and one male gymnast (both the mother and
14 father of one gymnast participated), who had been participating in gymnastics for between 2
15 and 10 years (average 5.83 years involvement) at the time of interview. Five had household
16 incomes of £75,000-£100,000 per annum, one had a household income of £100,000 or above
17 per annum, and one did not provide financial information. It is worth noting that such a
18 sample size fits with the purpose of IPA because it facilitates the collection of richer, deeper
19 data from the perspectives of participants (Collins and Nicolson 2002).

20 Participants were purposefully selected based on the age of their child (11-14 years,
21 with national pathway starting aged 9 or 10 years) and the standard at which they were
22 competing (national or international level). It was important to recruit parents of children
23 within the specified age range, who competed at a high level, to ensure that the duration and
24 intensity of parents' involvement in gymnastics rendered them able to draw upon a plethora
25 of experiences during the interview process. It was anticipated that, due to the length of time

1 and level of their involvement, these participants would have had the opportunity to develop
2 and try out different coping strategies to address any stressors they encountered in
3 gymnastics.

4 ***Data collection***

5 Following receipt of University Ethics Board and national governing body (NGB)
6 approval, the research team asked the NGB for recommendations of parents who met the
7 inclusion criteria. Sixteen potential participants were identified and, after receiving an
8 information letter, seven accepted the invitation to participate. The lead researcher, who
9 subsequently conducted all the interviews, liaised with each parent individually to organise a
10 time and place for their first interview to take place. Each participant was interviewed
11 individually except for two parents, whose first interview was conducted together. These two
12 parents were a married couple that felt more comfortable speaking about their experiences
13 collectively.

14 Semi-structured interviews were used because they can elicit rich data on issues
15 involving emotions, experiences, and feelings, such as stress (Denscombe 1998), and are
16 considered the ‘gold standard’ method in IPA because they facilitate the collection of rich
17 data from the perspectives of “encultured informants” (Spradley 1979, p. 47). Prior to starting
18 data collection, two pilot interviews were conducted with parents of children who
19 participated in elite youth sport. These interviews provided the interviewer with an
20 opportunity to practice conducting interviews on this topic and also assess the
21 appropriateness of the questions contained within the interview guide. Following the pilot
22 interviews, adjustments were made to the wording and ordering of some questions. For
23 example, the first question was changed from, “how is your child enjoying their gymnastics
24 participation?” to, “how has it been for you being a gymnastics parent?” An interview

prompt, in the form of a diagram depicting the stress process was also introduced as a consequence of the pilot interviews.

The interview guide was created based on the guidelines set out by Rubin and Rubin (2012) and previous research conducted in this area (e.g., Knight and Holt 2013b). The guide provided the interviewer with an order of questions to ask, with the semi-structured nature of the interview allowing for changes in response to emerging and/or interesting themes (Silverman 2013). Each interview began with introductory questions that sought to establish rapport with the parents. Transition questions were then used to lead the parents to the main questions of the interview. Finally, parents were asked summary questions and provided with an opportunity for any final comments. The interview guide is provided in Table 1 below.

11 Table 1 Interview guide

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13 Interview section Ethics statement:

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Before we begin, I would like to remind you that this interview is going to be audio recorded but that all the information you tell me during this interview will be kept strictly confidential. You are entitled to stop the interview and the recording at any point during the interview or stop the interview altogether if you so wish. You also have the right to not any answer questions if you do not want to. There are no right or wrong answers; I am just interested in your experiences and particularly, the stories you have to tell. Do you have any further questions before we start?

15

16 Introductory questions:

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18 How has the experience of being a ‘gymnastics parent’ been for you?

19 Please could you tell me about your experience of being a gymnastics parent?

20 Overall experience positive/negative?

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22 Transition question:

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24 When you think about supporting your child through their gymnastics participation, what are the main causes of any stress you have experienced?

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26 Main questions:

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28 In relation to ... (specific stressor cited in previous question):

29 What is it about this experience that you find particularly stressful?

30 What particular emotions do you experience at the time (anger, confusion, guilt)?

31 How frequently would you say you experience this particular stressor?

32 How do you cope with this particular stressor?

33 Probe for behavioural (what actions did you take?), physical (how did your body react?), cognitive (what were your immediate thoughts?)

34 How effective do you think this/these strategies were at helping you cope with the stressors mentioned?

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36 Summary questions:

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38 Overall, what would you say are the three main stressors that you experience as result of your child's gymnastics?

39 Overall, what are the key strategies you adopt to cope with each of these stressors? How effective do you think these are?

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42 Conclusion:

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44 Thank you so much for participating; those are all my questions for now. Is there anything else you wish to share with me?

45 The interview is now finished. Thanks for giving up your time to take part in this study; I really appreciate it. Would you

46 mind if I were to follow up with you after this interview, if I felt the need?

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Before each interview commenced, participants were asked to provide informed consent and complete a short demographic questionnaire. Following the first interviews (22.58min–130.51min, average duration 57.75 min), each parent was invited to participate in a second interview (27.01min–61.82min, average duration 39.71 min) to elaborate on points of interest and/or address any unanswered questions. These second interviews occurred within one month of the first interviews, after initial data analysis had indicated that the opportunity to ask further questions would yield richer data regarding parents' experiences. A unique interview guide was constructed for each parent's second interview, based on the stories that emerged from their first interviews and the questions that these raised. Four of the seven participants (Philip, Emma, Diana, and Liz) accepted this offer. The varying duration of each interview can be attributed to a range of factors, including language barriers with parents whose mother tongue was not English and some parents' use of the interviews as a cathartic mechanism, whereby they offloaded their frustrations onto the interviewer.

1 Data analysis followed the guidelines set out by Smith and Osborn (2003), and
2 occurred simultaneously with data collection to ensure the lead researcher remained
3 immersed within the data. Audio files were transcribed within ten days of each interview,
4 after which the idiographic process of data analysis began. First, the researcher completed
5 several close readings of a single transcript to ensure familiarity with the content. The
6 phenomenological stage of analysis, whereby annotations of aspects considered meaningful,
7 important, and/or interesting were made in the left margin, was then conducted. During this
8 stage, an attempt was made to temporarily “bracket” (to set aside) presuppositions and
9 critical judgements in order to focus on what was actually present in the data (Ponterotto
10 2005, p. 131). This was achieved primarily through reflexive journaling.

11 Following this phenomenological stage of analysis, the transcript and the reflexive
12 journal was revisited, and the interpretative stage commenced. During this phase, the initial
13 notations were transformed into concise phrases that aimed to summarise the essential quality
14 of what was found in the passage, but with a higher level of abstraction (Smith and Osborn
15 2003). This resulted in a movement away from the original text of the individual participants
16 (Smith *et al.* 2009). That is, through interpreting the parents’ accounts, abstract ideas arose
17 that uncovered hidden meanings within the data, not explicitly stated by the participants. For
18 example, the initial notation of ‘child supported by coach’ was developed into ‘child ability
19 to cope,’ and then ‘parent ability to detach’.

20 All the themes were then listed chronologically as they appeared in the data and then
21 ordered theoretically, whereby themes were clustered together if they expressed similar ideas.
22 Overarching terms that summarised the nature of each theme as a whole were named
23 ‘superordinate’ themes. A coherent table of themes was designed to illustrate where in the
24 script each theme could be found and included meaningful quotes to illustrate how the
25 interpretations were grounded in the participant’s account.

After each transcript had been analysed, but before the results were written, each theme was discussed with a critical friend who sought to gain clarification and question thinking regarding different ideas. As a consequence of these discussions, certain interpretations were refined, having concluded that they were not as abstract or developed as they could have been. The analysis process was then repeated for each participant, resulting in numerous tables of various themes that arose from each individual interview. After each interview had been analysed, tables were examined for convergences and divergences across participants. Where possible, themes were merged if they expressed similar ideas; others were removed completely if they were perceived to lack meaning in comparison to others. An extended table was then produced, which contained all the themes, a description of each, and example participant quotations. The final stage of analysis involved translating the themes into a narrative account in order to present the findings. It became apparent during the writing process that data analysis continued during this phase as themes were refined and adapted.

Methodological rigour

In recent years, there has been much discussion regarding the strategies employed to assess the quality of qualitative work (e.g., Sparkes and Smith 2009). Yardley (2000) suggested four broad principles that can act as criteria for good qualitative work, which have been adopted within IPA (Smith *et al.* 2009). These criteria are: (a) sensitivity to context, (b) commitment and rigour, (c) transparency and coherence, and (d) impact and importance. Numerous strategies were used in this project that aimed to fulfil these four criteria. These strategies included pilot interviewing, maintaining interviewer consistency, keeping an audit trail of themes, reflexive journaling, and in-depth interviewing. For example, reflexive journaling assisted in meeting the criteria for transparency and coherence by encouraging the researcher to acknowledge and set aside her own biases, and maintaining the same interviewer ensured the nature of the interview, and in particular the delivery of questions,

was kept relatively constant across all parents. Further, the interviewer's contextual understanding from prior experience within youth gymnastics and previous interviews helped to establish rapport with the participants. Transparency and coherence was further met by keeping an audit trail of themes. Finally, maintaining interviewer consistency, in-depth interviewing, and pilot interviewing sought to meet the criteria of sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, and impact and importance.

Results

All the parents reported experiencing a variety of stressors as a consequence of their children's involvement in gymnastics and employed a wide range of coping strategies in order to manage these. Throughout the interviews, participants were asked to indicate which coping strategies were used to manage each stressor, enabling the link between stressors and strategies to be identified. However, parents indicated that they often utilised multiple coping strategies to manage one stressor and/or addressed multiple stressors with one coping strategy. Thus, in the following sections, a brief explanation of the stressors encountered by the parents is provided, followed by an extensive review of the coping strategies parents employed (this weighting was chosen because there is limited literature on coping strategies, whereas other research (e.g., Harwood and Knight 2009a, 2009b) has explored parental stressors). Following the description of the stressors and coping strategies, the link between these are then explicitly presented in Table 2.

Stressors

All the parents reported experiencing a variety of stressors as a consequence of their children's involvement in gymnastics. As Sofia explained, "well everything's difficult. Not wanting to sound negative, but yeah". Stressors were initially analysed and categorised independently of pre-existing literature, however, as analysis progressed, it became apparent that the parents' stressors aligned with the three categories (organisational, competitive, and

developmental) previously identified by Harwood and Knight (2009b). Examples of stressors encapsulated in these categories are provided below, with further examples provided in Table 2.

Organisational.

Organisational stressors involve demands related to the logistics, personal sacrifices, and systems in which parents operate and included finances, child nutrition, child injury, other gymnastics parents, and a level of gymnastics knowledge. For example, all the parents reported experiencing stressors associated with time and travel demands. Diana described struggling to transport her daughter to training sessions, in part because she could not rely on her family to help her, she said:

Because trying to find transport, you can't, I mean my parents are elderly, my in-laws are elderly, you know you can't be relying on people to run them round all the time... when this training programme started, when she increased her hours it was like "oh my god, how am I going to do that?"

Cost of gymnastics was also frequently recalled as a stressor by parents, with Philip explaining that, "the biggest thing, if anything, is the...financial cost". John described how, "we're not skint and it's [gym] still a massive financial burden" because of gym fees, subscriptions to the sport governing body, injury tape, wrist guards, leotards, medical expenses, travelling to competitions, and paying for hotel accommodation.

Interpersonal difficulties, such as conflict between parents, coaches, and/or athletes were a further stressor for parents. Anne explained that her daughter and her daughter's coach often experienced conflict, "she does clash with her coach, they both – the same temperament and they're both stubborn, strong willed, determined, and neither will give in to the other. And that I find difficult sometimes to cope with". Further, Anne reported, "there can be a lot of bitchiness amongst parents, a lot of tension among parents, competitiveness amongst

1 parents,” and Emma agreed, explaining, “it’s [competitiveness between parents] not a nice
2 atmosphere and it doesn’t benefit me. In fact it stresses me out even more”.

3 *Competitive.*

4 Competitive stressors are parental demands associated with a child’s participation in
5 competitions. The parents reported competitive stressors including their children’s anxiety,
6 the level of competition, the duration of competitions, and watching their children perform.
7 For example, long competitions resulted in parents spending many hours at competitions, yet
8 as Philip explained, “I suppose [a stressor is] being stuck in a gym on a competition day for
9 seven hours when she’s on or about nine minutes of the day with her three routines”. The
10 parents also reported that watching their children compete was a stressor, which resulted in
11 them experiencing anxiety and manifested in behaviours such as trembling, crying, and
12 nausea. As Sofia shared, “I get nervous but I try not to show it .It’s like ‘hold me I’m
13 fainting!’ I feel really you know like nervous and I feel sick and all the rest of it”. Parents did
14 not appear to cope well with this stressor, for example Emma reported how she struggles on
15 competition days:

16 I don’t eat the whole day, I can’t literally swallow anything, I can’t eat, I can’t drink,
17 um and I distance myself from [John] because I can’t act normally and I know that
18 will then stress him out so I just literally, and there is no way of, I’m just bad. I’m just
19 bad all day.

20 Within the competition environment, their child’s pre-competitive anxiety was a
21 source of stress for parents because they wanted to reduce or prevent their children from
22 having negative experiences. Philip explained, “She’s only been upset a few times, but then
23 she gets very, very nervous, [daughter] does before she goes on. Which, that sort of worries
24 me, not worries me, but that affects me as well.” Further, parents explained that they often

1 experienced negative interactions with their children as a consequence of their and their
2 children's experiences of anxiety, which added to the stressor.

3 *Developmental.*

4 This category of stressors contains demands associated specifically with a child's
5 development and included stressors such as their children's potential to progress in sport,
6 children's behavior ("obsession") related to gymnastics, educational demands, and
7 engagement in social activities away from gymnastics. For example, Sofia expressed her
8 concerns about her daughter's future in gymnastics, "I'm conscious that there will come a
9 year where she's not able to do it anymore". Philip also described how he worried about his
10 daughter's future and related these concerns to his fear of child injury:

11 But that's my only concern because I know, I mean, you mentioned it yourself, you
12 had an injury. Now if she doesn't keep up where she is, she'll be dropped like that. So
13 to me, you could give up all your education, go into this sport and you're doing really,
14 really well and you have an injury or something, boomph, that's it.

15 Philip therefore wanted to ensure that his daughter still valued education because he was
16 concerned that an injury could render her unable to compete in gymnastics in the future.

17 The parents further explained that their children's opportunities to engage in social
18 activities away from gymnastics was a stressor. The parents expressed concerns that their
19 children's participation in gymnastics caused them to miss out on "normal" social
20 opportunities, as Emma explained:

21 The other thing that stresses me is that she has very few friends in school because she
22 has to remove herself so often, I mean it's not as if she hasn't got any friends, she just
23 doesn't have any close friends.

24 *Coping strategies*

1 Parents reported using several strategies to cope with the stressors detailed above.
2 These coping strategies were categorised into four superordinate themes: (a) detaching from
3 gymnastics, (b) normalising experiences, (c) willingness to learn, and (d) managing
4 emotional reactions.

5 *Detaching from gymnastics.*

6 One of the main strategies parents utilised to cope with the stressors associated with
7 gymnastics was by detaching. Detaching was evident through parents' implicit and explicit
8 suggestions that they withdrew from gymnastics to avoid becoming consumed by it, or
9 overwhelmed by the demands associated with their children's involvement. As Diana
10 explained:

11 Yeah I mean I don't get very involved, I know nothing about gymnastics, I'm not a
12 gymnastics coach... and you know, the coach has got a good relationship with all the
13 girls, she wants the best out of them, and I just trust her to deal with it.

14 Detaching appeared beneficial for parents because it reduced the intensity of stressors and the
15 frequency of encounters. Although parents used detaching to manage a variety of stressors,
16 the most apparent were time and travel demands, child injuries, schooling, and their child
17 missing out on social experiences. Parents' abilities to detach appeared to be facilitated by:
18 (a) sharing parental tasks, (b) child ability to cope, and (c) maintaining a balance.

19 *Sharing parental tasks.* To cope with demands, parents shared some of their parental
20 tasks with others. This was evident from their choice of language, for example, Sofia often
21 concluded her explanations with, "that's how *we* do it", recognising that she shared her
22 parental tasks with others to cope with the stressors she faced. Examples of these tasks
23 included transporting children to training and competition, financing their gymnastics
24 involvement, and providing emotional support. For example, in order to cope with the

1 demand of transporting their child to training and competitions, Philip often took his
2 daughter's team to a venue, whereas Diana collected them afterwards. Philip explained:

3 When we started there, it was like how much do you want for fuel and all this, and it
4 was like look let's just, it's pointless asking me that because I've got a company car
5 and it's paid for by a business so I don't pay for it. But if I do this, can you do the
6 next one? You know and we just take it in turns. And it seems to work like that.

7 Other members of the parents' families also shared parental tasks. Emma explained,
8 "like I said, most of it is taken up with her grandfather, he does most of the running around. I
9 do the picking up in the evenings". Further, Diana's sons supported their sister by packing
10 her bags for school and liaising with teachers when she was absent. As Diana said, "her
11 brother will do her schoolbooks for her. He likes doing it because he likes helping her. He'll
12 say 'mum I'll do her school books' because otherwise she goes into meltdown a bit, she's
13 tired". This help from her sons reduced the stressors Diana experienced, in particular
14 surrounding her daughter's schooling, because she knew her daughter was well supported in
15 balancing her educational and gymnastics pursuits.

16 Coaches also helped parents to step back from gymnastics by developing a close
17 relationship with the children. Sofia explained, "they're past the point of being coaches,
18 they're like – for them they are coaches and they have the image of respect and everything
19 but they're like a family". By creating close relationships with children, coaches attenuated
20 parents' concerns regarding their children not being able to cope with the pressures and
21 demands associated with gymnastics. Anne explained, "they see the coaches more than they
22 see us, and we've always told her if she's finding things difficult and she can't talk to me, she
23 should talk to them". By encouraging their children to turn to their coaches for support,
24 parents were able to detach from gymnastics because they were secure in the knowledge that
25 their children were safe and cared for.

1 *Child's ability to cope.* Parents relied on their own children's abilities to cope to
2 facilitate parental detachment from gymnastics, and consequently cope with stressors.
3 Particularly, due to children's own coping abilities, parents felt better able to cope with
4 stressors such as nutrition, schooling, and child injury. The parents explained that recognising
5 their children's own ability to cope enabled them to detach because the children did not
6 require parental intervention to manage the demands they encountered. For example, Diana
7 reported that her daughter understood her nutritional requirements, "nutritionally she
8 manages herself really well... she reads all the information from the dietician, she meets with
9 her regularly, and she's really good". Thus, Diana stepped back, leaving her daughter to cope
10 with her own nutrition instead of Diana struggling to manage it, as had previously been the
11 case. Similarly, parents explained how their child collected work and sat tests in advance
12 when they were scheduled to miss lessons. Relying on their children to manage educational
13 demands facilitated parental coping with stressors surrounding child schooling, including
14 missing important work, as Sofia mentioned, her stressors are reduced because:

15 She [her daughter] is very, for her age, she is really very responsible. I mean it's like
16 she was in school yesterday but she's not in school today so she went into school
17 yesterday and asked for all the homework and all what she needed.

18 Sofia also relied upon her daughter's mature and responsible nature to get herself to and from
19 her training sessions on the train, as she explained:

20 The other three or four trainings are in [location], so she travels on her own, she gets
21 the train. So it's like, they've got to grow up at a young age. Because other kids don't
22 even know what it's like getting on a bus.

23 Such maturity and organisation from her child helped Sofia to cope with the stressor of
24 transporting her daughter to training.

1 All of the parents also reported that the nature of their children's goals facilitated their
2 detachment from gymnastics because they were less concerned about the pressures
3 experienced by their children to meet "unrealistic" goals. For example, Emma's daughter was
4 realistic about her chances of success, "she doesn't have any sort of ideas of Olympics does
5 she? Her main aim is Commonwealth. She wants, that's what she's going for, and after
6 discussion, is to get in an American uni scholarship". Further, both Diana and Sofia explained
7 that their daughters adopted self-referenced goals, as Diana explained, "she sort of
8 concentrates on herself rather than concentrating on others, so she wants to better her own
9 scores, better her own performance". Such an approach enabled the children to avoid
10 pressures that could arise from constant comparisons to others and subsequently, parents'
11 stressors related to their child's anxiety were reduced.

12 *Seeking to maintain a balance.* Many parents reported struggling to cope with the all-
13 consuming nature of gymnastics. As Emma explained, "there isn't any part of her life where
14 she can just be a normal kid and that stresses me". The final sub-theme within detaching
15 concerns the idea of parents actively resisting both them and their children being consumed
16 by gymnastics, by encouraging and maintaining a balanced lifestyle. The parents used
17 numerous strategies in their attempts to give their children balanced life experiences and
18 identities independent of gymnastics. Such strategies included Liz going against the advice of
19 her child's coach and allowing her son to go on a school skiing trip, and Emma and Anne
20 allowing their daughters chocolate and pancakes as treats. As Emma put it, "I will allow her a
21 treat a week because for Christ's sake she's 12 and should have a treat a week!" By
22 encouraging their children to, at times, resist adhering to the strict gymnastics lifestyle they
23 usually adhered to, the parents limited the impact of gymnastics on their children's lives, and
24 consequently their own.

1 Extending children's social opportunities was also seen as an important strategy to
2 maintain a more balanced life. For instance, Emma reported actively trying to increase her
3 child's friendship circle outside of gymnastics by creating opportunities for her daughter to
4 spend time with children from school:

5 Um... so I'll say to her "what did you do at school today?" "Oh I did this". "So who
6 were you sitting next to?" and she knows, she knows where I'm going with it... "Oh I
7 sat next to so and so". "Do you want to invite them over...?"

8 By encouraging the development of non-gymnastics friendships, Emma attempted to achieve
9 a degree of balance in her daughter's life. She was therefore able to cope with her fears of her
10 daughter being consumed by gymnastics and consequently missing out on regular life
11 experiences.

12 *Normalising experiences.*

13 Parents attempted to normalise their gymnastics experiences, and those of their children, to
14 cope with the stressors they encountered. That is, parents reappraised demands as normal in
15 the context of their life histories and the histories of others. For example, Sofia explained that
16 experiencing stress is normal for her in the context of her job:

17 Well my life is a stress. The way that we work and we live and everything, it's quite
18 dynamic in a way so it's like we've got to be here and then we've got to be there, we
19 manage lots of businesses.

20 By reappraising stress as normal Sofia was able to cope with the stressors associated with
21 gymnastics because she found them less threatening.

22 Normalising was employed to cope with a range of stressors but the most commonly
23 reported were child schooling, child injury, time and travel, their children's disappointments,
24 and finances. Parents' attempts to normalise gymnastics experiences in order to cope with

demands are discussed as: (a) attempts to normalise parents' own experiences and (b) attempts to normalise child experiences.

Normalising parents' experiences. To manage stressors such as other gymnastics parents' behaviours, children's experiences of anxiety, time and travel demands, and finances, parents attempted to normalise their experiences of these demands. One way in which parents normalised stressors was by comparing their children's experiences to those of other gymnasts. For example, Diana explained how her husband had protested about how much schooling their daughter would miss due to gymnastics:

Because my husband was like "she can't do it! Education comes first!" um but then you look at the other girls she trains with, they've also done the same thing, she's not the only child to have done it, and all the other girls were older than her and they've managed to do it, they juggle the schoolwork and gym.

Anne also attempted to normalise her daughter's obsession with gymnastics by comparing her behaviours to those of her teammates, "I do think that they're all the same because you see them you know, and they're all either stretching or they you know they're doing some leaps and jumps or whatever".

Parents also normalised their experiences to those of other parents in order to reduce the intensity of stressors including time and travel demands, financial costs, and the demands of competition. John compared his experiences to other parents' when discussing the constraints on his time that arose due to his daughter's gymnastics involvement, "it's no different to anyone else with kids...she's in the gym most the time, but we don't sit in gym with her". Anne normalised her experiences at competitions by comparing them to those of other parents, "everybody's sort of going through the same emotions, the same turmoil and everything". Finally, Emma and John normalised their negative experiences with other

gymnastics parents as ‘par for the course’ within youth sport by making comparisons to, “your rugby dads and your football dads, your hockey dads”.

Normalising child’s experiences. Parents conveyed to their children that the stressors they encountered were normal and thus attempted to reduce the intensity of the stressors experienced by their children and by themselves. For example, most of the parents reported trying to calm their children down before competitions by normalising the experience of anxiety. Philip, for example, described how he made comparisons to his own experiences to help his daughter cope with her pre-competition nerves:

But yeah, I have a chat to her before she goes on and I’ll say are you nervous, “yeah, a bit”. I say “well that’s good, you’ve got to be nervous, you’re nervous and everything”. Because I play in a band as well. And I say, “well every time we do a gig”, and I’ve been doing this for like 20 years, I said, “every time I go on, I’m always nervous. But it makes you play better; it makes you do what you do better”.

Philip also drew on comparisons to role models in order to normalise his daughter’s experiences of anxiety before a competition:

Because it is inevitable... everybody gets nervous, I mean even [elite adult gymnast] said to [daughter] before, she said I was nearly sick when I went on in the [name of competition] when she won on the last routine. So yeah, it happens to everybody, you’ve just got to be able to cope with it.

By reducing the emphasis placed on anxiety, Phillip hoped his daughter would be able to cope with her anxiety and that subsequently he could cope more effectively at competitions.

Parents also encouraged their children to normalise their experiences of performance disappointments and injury. For example, after she had made mistakes in a competition, Diana told her daughter that, “everyone has a bad day; everyone has a day that’s not as good as they’d like it to be, move on, start again tomorrow”. When Anne’s daughter hurt her hand,

1 Anne normalised her daughter's reaction as a reflex to prevent her blaming herself, she
2 explained, "so I say to her 'it doesn't matter [daughter], it's a natural reaction, if something
3 comes at you towards your face you're going to have that reaction'". Through such
4 comments, parents sought to reduce the intensity of the demands faced by their children (and
5 subsequently the competitive stressors parents' encountered) by encouraging children to view
6 their experiences as normal, because "everyone" goes through it.

7 *Willingness to learn.*

8 The parents were willing to admit knowledge gaps and seek to reduce these in order to
9 facilitate coping in youth gymnastics. Parents enhanced their knowledge by reflecting on
10 their own experiences and by actively and passively seeking advice from others. Admitting to
11 knowledge gaps, and actively seeking to reduce these, enabled the parents to cope with
12 stressors such as child injury, child nutrition, and the demands of competition. For example,
13 Anne learned that her daughter would communicate with her about gymnastics if and when
14 she wanted to, and that pushing her to do so would likely only make things worse:

15 They do it when they're ready and I've learned that, and I think I've learned it the
16 hard way sometimes! You know, and that's the reason now why I don't say nothing.
17 I'll wait for her to say something to me, like "oh, I've been practicing such and such
18 today" or "oh, I've been doing this, I've done that, this might be ready". And you just
19 think "oh, well that's great". And then I'm thinking "I must remember those names to
20 look up on YouTube later so I can see what it is!".

21 Through trial and error Anne had come to understand her daughter's communication patterns
22 and that she should not disrupt these.

23 The theme of willingness to learn contains two subthemes: (a) learning from others,
24 and (b) learning from their own experiences.

1 *Learning from others.* The parents accepted advice from other gymnastics parents,
2 medical professionals, their children in sport, and other family members to enhance their
3 knowledge about gymnastics. Information gained from these sources helped the parents cope
4 with stressors such as educational concerns, child injury, and child nutrition. Other parents
5 played a key role in this by providing information and support, as Diana explained:

6 One of the girls [my daughter] is going away with next week, we were just talking
7 about size of tracksuit and where to sew the badge onto and which arm and how far
8 away... you know, and I didn't know that so she shared that information with me.

9 Medical professionals and sport scientists were also important sources of information
10 and support. For instance, Emma explained how she and her husband John actively sought
11 support to facilitate their coping when they watched their daughter at competitions, "[John's]
12 seeing a counsellor, and we've had discussions about how his actions impact upon both
13 myself and [daughter]". Seeking this professional guidance increased both Emma's and
14 John's awareness of the effects of their behaviours on each other. They were therefore able to
15 work towards finding a strategy that helped them both to cope at competitions.

16 *Learning from experiences.* In addition to learning from others, parents also learnt a
17 large amount from their own experiences, which they found useful in coping with stressors.
18 This was an on-going process for many of the parents, as Emma explained:

19 There is no right or wrong, as I've said I've tried going in different ways, I've tried
20 going in as a mother, I've tried going in as a second coach. That failed. Dismally. So I
21 reverted it to being a mother, but I've also reverted to being an equal, you know, so...
22 I'll tell you, when I find a way that works! I shall let you know. [Laughter]

23 Parents learned from their own experiences in order to cope with stressors such as their
24 experiences of anxiety at competitions, their children's nutritional habits, and parental
25 experiences of blame. For example, John explained how he had learned over time that his

wife's behaviours at competitions were not intended to be malicious towards him, but reflected her inability to cope with her feelings of not being in control. This facilitated his coping with his wife's behaviours at competitions as he explained:

It took me a while to accept that it wasn't me. Over time, literally the first couple of times I went it felt that she was genuinely taking it out on me you know, but I learned that, I understood that a lot more.

Many parents learned through trial and error experiences, whereby they made several attempts to cope with stressors before finding a way that worked for them. For example, Anne had learned how to get her daughter (who did not like to eat) to eat after a training session:

She loves nuts again, so I'll always go and put nuts upstairs for her then, pretzels and dips so when she's doing her homework she will sort of like tend to snack, pick on them... I found out, yes, yes. I played around and found out the most I could give her without her really realising.

Parents also learned from other sport experiences and applied these lessons to gymnastics. For example, Liz had another child who was involved in youth sport at an international level. Through this involvement, she had learnt about "growth mindsets and fixed mindsets". Liz then applied these lessons to gymnastics by encouraging her son to develop a growth mindset. Further, Diana's previous experiences in elite youth sport taught her how to organise her time efficiently, "so we manage to juggle things, as I said we've been doing it for a while now and you just, you just learn to juggle and you learn to manage your time more efficiently". She was therefore able to cope with time stressors because she had previously developed coping skills that she was able to employ within gymnastics.

Managing emotional reactions.

1 The previous themes detail how parents cope by modifying their behaviours and
2 behavioural reactions to stressors. The final theme focuses upon coping strategies targeted at
3 managing emotional reactions. In order to manage their emotional reactions, parents
4 employed: (a) emotional release, (b) self-talk, and (c) avoidance strategies.

5 *Emotional release.* Parents reported utilising emotional release strategies in order to
6 cope with the negative emotions they experienced due to time and travel demands, issues
7 with coaches, and spousal disagreements. For instance, Anne employed emotional release to
8 cope with the anger that arose due to spousal disagreements about their daughter's training
9 schedule. Anne explained how she would cope with these negative emotions by, "shouting
10 and bawling. Yes, just get it over and done with and that'll be it." Parents also explained that
11 unloading on others (usually their spouses) enabled them to cope with negative emotions. For
12 example, John unloaded on his wife Emma after having an argument with his daughters'
13 coach, "I mean I got to the hotel and I unloaded on her because I do, I think sometimes you
14 have to get a bit of perspective on life you know". However, Diana was careful not to unload
15 on other gymnastics parents:

16 If there are any concerns, it's best to discuss with my husband, do you know what I
17 mean? Because otherwise it goes a bit pear shaped. Over the years seeing through
18 football and tennis, seeing parents confide in other parents and children getting slated,
19 it just gets, sometimes it can just get a bit nasty.

20 *Self-talk.* Parents utilised self-talk in order to cope with the negative emotions they
21 experienced at competitions and those derived from their children travelling abroad. Emma
22 explained how she used self-talk to cope when her daughter travelled without her, "a lot of
23 just talking to myself, just talk to myself. Saying to myself, 'if she's not texting me saying
24 'I'm upset, I want to come home', then it's ok! It's me that's got the problem, not her'".
25 Philip also employed self-talk to cope with the anxiety he experienced at competitions,

1 “you’ve just got to bite your lip and just pray they don’t drop that ball... I just have to deal
2 with it. I just have to tell myself over and over again that she’ll be fine”.

3 *Escape, avoidance, and distraction.* Finally, parents reported employing avoidance
4 strategies in their attempts to cope with various negative emotions. Such emotions derived
5 from stressors including child injury, managing child schooling, watching their children
6 compete, and the behaviours of other gymnastics parents. For example, Anne explained how
7 she coped with her fear of child injury by ignoring it, “I just sort of, just try to put it at the
8 back of my mind”. Anne therefore coped with the stressor by pretending it did not exist.
9 Other parents attempted to cope with negative emotions by escaping the situations that
10 caused these experiences. John explained how he attempted to cope with his wife’s obsessive
11 behaviours:

12 We went to London overnight and [stepdaughter] was taking part in the [name of
13 competition] and I left the hotel, I wasn’t prepared to sit there whilst she watched the
14 feeds [the online score], that’s just ridiculous, in a small confined space. So I just
15 went to the pub and she rung me when it was finished.

16 Removing himself from their hotel room enabled John to cope with the anger he experienced
17 towards his wife’s obsessive behaviours, which arose due to her absence from her daughter’s
18 competition.

19 Parents also employed distraction techniques to cope with negative emotions. Emma
20 explained that, “[John – her husband] brought marking along to occupy himself” at a
21 competition to distract him from the stressor of Emma’s behaviours. Diana reported that
22 filming her daughter’s performances provided a distraction from the fact that she was actually
23 competing, “I find if I video it, it’s as if I’m not actually watching her because otherwise I’m
24 like that! [Shaking, unable to watch] I get really nervous”. Employing videoing as a distraction
25 strategy thus enabled Diana to cope with the anxiety she experience due to the potential for her
26 daughter to become injured or underperform.

Table 2 Stress Experience of Parents

	Stressor	Overarching Coping Strategy	Example of Specific Coping Strategy
Stressor			
Organisational Stressors	Transporting child to training and competitions	Child ability to cope Sharing parental responsibilities Willingness to learn from experiences	Trusting child to take public transport Sharing lifts with other parents Travelling the night before a competition
	Amount of family time	Normalising parents' experiences Escape Emotional release	Comparing their lack of time to that of other sport parents Leaving competitions to spend time with family members Venting and unloading to partner/spouse
	Access to information	Willingness to learn from experiences Normalising parents' experiences Emotional release	Understanding who are the gatekeepers from whom to access information Realising that information is hard to obtain Venting about lack of information
	Level of gymnastics-related knowledge	Willingness to learn from experiences Willingness to learn from others	Researching terminology on the Internet Learning from coaches, medical professionals, and other parents.
	Child nutrition	Willingness to learn from experiences Willingness to learn from others Sharing parental responsibilities	Learning what to feed the child and when Seeking advice from professionals and parents Allowing nutritionists to assist the child
	Other gymnastics parents	Distraction, escape, and avoidance Self-talk Emotional release Normalising parents' experiences	Not interacting with some gymnastics parents Counteracting negative parent behaviours with positive thoughts Venting to spouse/peers Comparing experiences to those of parents in other sports
	Financial costs	Normalising parents' experiences	Making comparisons to other sport parents and parents in general

Competitive Stressors	Child-coach conflict	Child ability to cope Willingness to learn from experiences	Realising child is mature enough to manage conflict on their own Using another coach as a mediator
	Risk of child injury	Avoidance Self-talk Normalising children's experiences Sharing parental responsibilities Child ability to cope	Resist thinking about child injury Reassuring themselves that the child is safe Understanding many children experience injuries in gymnastics Relying on the expertise of medical professionals Relying on child to cope with injury themselves
	Length of competition days	Normalising parents' experiences Escape Distraction	Understanding that parents are 'in it together' Leaving a venue to get a break from gym Bringing work to as a distraction
	Child anxiety	Willingness to learn from experiences Normalising children's experiences Distraction	Avoid speaking about a competition on the way there Realising that other children feel the same way Playing music to forget about a competition
	How to respond to child	Willingness to learn from own experiences Willingness to learn from others Normalising parents' experiences Normalising children's experiences Sharing parental responsibilities	Learning from post-competition interactions Seeking advice from other parents Understanding that most parents face this demand Realising that most children struggle with competition emotions Allowing coaches to speak with child first
	Spousal behaviours	Willingness to learn from own experiences Willingness to learn from others Normalising parents' experiences Normalising children's experiences Emotional release Escape, distraction, and avoidance	Remaining quiet at competitions to prevent spouse distress Seeking the advice of a counsellor Making comparisons to other sport parents' behaviours Making comparisons to teammates to justify time commitment Venting and unloading to spouse Staying away from spouse when they exhibit negative behaviours

Developmental Stressors	Child behaviours related to gymnastics (“obsession”).	Maintaining a balance Willingness to learn from experiences Normalising children’s experiences Escape Distraction	Offering alternative activities to child Distracting child from gymnastics Making comparisons to teammates’ obsessions Leaving a room to escape gym practice at home Encouraging child to participate in other activities
	Level of social opportunities due to gymnastics.	Normalising children’s experiences Maintaining a balance Child ability to cope	Making comparisons to teammates’ limited social lives Organising social events for the child Child prioritising gym over social activities
	Managing child education.	Normalising children’s experiences Willingness to learn from others Willingness to learn from own experiences Child ability to cope	Making comparisons to teammates missing school Understanding how teammates manage missing school Formulating routines to facilitate child homework Recognising child’s organisational skills

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how parents of elite youth gymnasts cope with the stressors experienced in elite youth gymnastics. Overall, the findings suggest that these parents encounter a variety of competitive, organisational, and developmental stressors and employ a range of strategies to cope including: detaching, normalising experiences, willingness to learn, and managing emotional reactions.

The overall findings of the present study suggest that parents experienced a number of common stressors such as child injury, time and travel demands, finances, and watching competitions. There may therefore be several stressors that are faced by most parents of elite youth gymnasts. However, not all of the parents experienced identical stressors; indeed, the parents recalled several different stressors to one another. For example, four of the parents recognised the behaviours of other gymnasts' parents as a stressor, whereas three did not. Further, some of the parents did not perceive that they were able to cope with time and travel stressors, whereas others found coping with these manageable. These findings suggest that, although several commonalities exist between parents' encounters with stressors, the overall stress experiences are unique and personal to individuals, which aligns with Lazarus' (1999) contention that stress experiences are individual.

The inter-individual differences apparent in the parents' stress experiences may derive from their previous stress experiences. Several parents described previous encounters with stressors within youth sport and in occupational settings as enabling them to cope more effectively with the demands associated with youth gymnastics. Consequently, parents may employ transferable and rehearsed coping skills across a variety of contexts. Parents in sport

1 could therefore be encouraged to reflect on previous coping experiences, practice coping
2 skills, and apply coping strategies they employ outside of sport within youth sport, in order to
3 manage demands more effectively. Indeed, Tamminen and Holt (2010b) reported that
4 adopting a problem-focused approach whereby individuals anticipate stressors and which
5 coping strategies to deploy (proactive planning), leads to more effective coping in athletes
6 than employing a more reactionary approach to coping. The same is probably also true for
7 parents in sport contexts.

8 Further aligned with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, the stressors
9 experienced by parents were also dynamic in nature (Lazarus 1993). Specifically, parental
10 stressors varied according to time period and the context. For example, the demands
11 experienced by parents at competitions varied from those experienced in their day-to-day
12 lives, including the demands associated with training. Additionally, stressors encountered by
13 the parents altered within the same context. Competitive stressors varied depending on
14 whether they were experienced before, during, or following their children's performances.
15 The changing nature of stressors as reported by the parents suggests that stress is a personal,
16 context-dependent, and temporal process (Lazarus 1999).

17 The parental stressors reported in this study have also been reported in soccer and
18 tennis (e.g., Harwood *et al.* 2010, Harwood and Knight 2009a). The commonalities between
19 parents' experiences may be explained by the similarities between various youth sport
20 environments. For example, across youth sport generally there is an increasing push for
21 children to specialise early (e.g., Jayanthi *et al.* 2013), resulting in engagement in highly
22 competitive sport at a younger age. It would therefore make conceptual sense that parents in
23 sport might find competitive stressors particularly challenging due to their children
24 participating in intense competition earlier than ever before. Practitioners and researchers
25 within the youth sport context should therefore be aware that these processes could be having

detrimental effects on parents, as well as children (Jayanthi et al. 2013; Malina 2010; Merkel 2013).

The findings suggest that parents often employ multiple strategies in combination to cope with the stressors they encounter in elite youth gymnastics. Aligned with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus 1999), these strategies varied according to the stressor, the situation, and the temporal period at hand. Studies have suggested that such a multidimensional approach to coping is common within sport. For example, Gould and colleagues (1993a, 1993b) and Nicholls, Holt, Polman, and James (2005) indicated that elite athletes often utilise several strategies simultaneously to manage stressors they face. Further, in their longitudinal study examining coping, Tamminen and Holt (2010a) illustrated that the coping strategies employed by athletes fluctuate over a season. The findings therefore suggest that parents' coping efforts are similar to athletes' and thus, methods employed to enhance athletes' coping, such as practicing strategies, anticipating what coping strategies to use in response to various stressors, and adopting problem-focussed and emotion-focussed strategies according to the Goodness of Fit model, could potentially be used to help enhance parental coping in sport (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Tamminen and Holt 2010a).

Parents' coping efforts were organised into four higher-order themes, with social support running through each theme. Of particular note, was that most of the parents emphasised how they relied on other parents for support. This finding aligns with previous literature that has indicated that some parents want to interact with other parents in order to reduce feelings of exclusion, boredom, and anxiety at competitions (Knight and Holt 2013a, 2013b). But, again consistent with some previous literature, some parents restricted their involvement with other parents (e.g., Harwood and Knight 2009a, Streat 1995). Given the importance of parents being able to share their parenting tasks, such restrictions on interactions with other parents may have a substantial impact upon parents' abilities to cope

1 with stressors. Thus, fostering an environment that encourages parents to support each other
2 will likely create a more positive youth sport experience.

3 The parents expressed considerable frustration about the extent to which their lives
4 revolved around gymnastics, with detaching strategies being adopted to help reduce the
5 impact of gymnastics on their lives. One of the ways in which parents were able to detach
6 was through sharing of parental tasks, which enabled parents to reduce their gymnastics-
7 related “workload”. Knight and Holt (2013a) suggested that spouses work together within
8 tennis in order to support their children. The present study adds to this finding by indicating
9 that parents’ division of tasks facilitates parental coping, and extends to siblings,
10 grandparents, and coaches, as well as the parents’ friends, spouses, and other gymnastics
11 parents. Consequently, parents who do not have access to such an extensive support network
12 may struggle to cope with the demands of youth sport.

13 Normalisation has been identified as a coping strategy within the general parenting
14 stress literature, particularly relating to parental coping with their children’s experiences of
15 chronic illness and disability (e.g., Roy and Chatterjee 2005). Interestingly, limited attention
16 has been devoted to normalisation strategies within sport. When normalisation has been
17 identified, rather than standing alone as a coping strategy, it has been included within
18 descriptions of rationalisation, acceptance, and reappraisal strategies (e.g., Thelwell *et al.*
19 2010). The current study suggests that normalisation holds sufficient meaning to be
20 considered on its own within sport parent psychology and that future research should
21 examine normalisation strategies independent of other techniques. However, it is also
22 important to examine what stressors these normalisation strategies are being used to address
23 and whether it is actually appropriate to normalise these stressors rather than reduce or
24 change them.

1 In contrast to normalisation, there is much evidence regarding the use of learning as a
2 coping strategy in both parent and athlete populations (e.g., Knight and Holt 2013a,
3 Tamminen and Holt 2012). Learning about how to cope may have enhanced parents' feelings
4 of competence and confidence within their sport parent role because they had developed
5 more effective ways of responding to various demands. There are, however, several issues
6 associated with parents 'learning on the job'. For example, the parents reported that they
7 sought and took advice from other parents. These individuals may not recommend optimal
8 coping strategies because they are unaware of what these are and/or because their children
9 might gain from other parents' inabilities to cope. Indeed, previous research in youth tennis
10 has indicated that parents fear other parents' attempts to gain by providing detrimental advice
11 (Knight and Holt 2013b). Further, if parents do learn via trial and error, they must first make
12 mistakes, which could have negative consequences for athletes and parents.

13 The emotional regulation strategies described by the parents in this study have
14 attracted substantial attention within sport psychology literature, particularly within athlete
15 populations (see e.g., Gould *et al.* 1993a, 1993b). The widespread use of self-talk strategies
16 within sport has led to studies dedicated to the types, outcomes, and effectiveness of these
17 techniques (e.g., Goudas *et al.* 2006). But, there are several issues concerning the use and
18 recommendation of emotion-focused coping strategies. Problem-focused strategies are
19 generally perceived as the 'gold standard' for coping whereas emotion-focused strategies
20 have been associated with increased distress, depressive symptoms, and future experiences
21 with stress (e.g., Ntoumanis *et al.* 2009).

22 *Limitations and future directions*

23 There are several limitations to this study that should be taken into account. First,
24 three out of seven parents were unavailable to be interviewed a second time. The opportunity
25 to gain a more in-depth understanding of their experiences may consequently have been lost.

1 Further, all of the parents were interviewed individually, except for John and Emma. Their
2 joint interview may have prevented either, or both of them, from disclosing intimate personal
3 stories, particularly about each other. However, the combined nature of their interview was
4 also beneficial in that it illustrated the convergence and divergence between their coping
5 experiences.

6 IPA's use of the spoken word to understand individual experiences relies on
7 individuals' willingness to speak about them (Back *et al.* 2011). Potential participants with
8 rich stories to tell may therefore have been dissuaded from enrolling in the study due to their
9 reluctance to speak about their experiences. Those parents who did participate may also have
10 omitted particular narratives from their accounts because they were unwilling to verbalise
11 them. Interesting and meaningful stories may consequently have been lost.

12 The findings of this study indicate that stress is a constantly changing, dynamic
13 process. Interviews may not have captured this dynamic nature as effectively as other
14 methods. Researchers may undertake longitudinal examinations of parental coping in youth
15 sport, for example, over the course of a season. Examinations of parental coping that seek to
16 understand if and why the nature of parental coping alters over time would further research in
17 this field and likely reveal developmental, temporal, and contextual changes in parents'
18 coping.

19 Although this study illuminates the coping component of the stress process in parents
20 of elite youth athletes, the effectiveness of such strategies has yet to be explored. The
21 presentation of coping strategies as inherently effective or positive might have limited the
22 extent to which parents fully explain or explore both effective and ineffective approaches.
23 Understanding the effectiveness of various strategies would assist practitioners in
24 recommending what strategies to use in different contexts to enhance parents' coping efforts.

1 The effectiveness of parents' coping strategies, and methods to enhance these, should
2 therefore be examined by research.

3 ***Conclusion***

4 The present study illustrates the inherently complex nature of the stressors and
5 subsequent coping efforts among parents within elite youth gymnastics. The parents in this
6 study reported varying levels of strain stemming from a wide variety of competitive,
7 organisational, and developmental stressors. In their attempts to cope, parents employed
8 several strategies including detaching from gymnastics, normalising experiences, a
9 willingness to learn, and attempts to regulate emotions. It is possible other parents may
10 enhance their own coping efforts by employing these strategies. Future research should
11 undertake longitudinal examinations of parental coping in sport, evaluate the effectiveness of
12 parents' coping strategies, and seek to understand the nature of parental coping in other sports
13 and cultures.

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