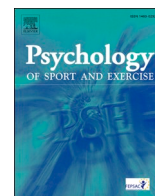




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# Sport parenting during the COVID-19 pandemic: Perceptions of parents and youth in Australia

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Parenting  
Youth sport  
Pandemic  
Qualitative  
Expertise

## ABSTRACT

Understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parental involvement in youth sport is largely unknown. The objective of the study presented in this paper was to understand parental involvement in relation to their child's participation in organised sport during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using an interpretive descriptive methodology, online qualitative interviews and online focus groups with parents and youth (15–18 years) ( $n = 29$ ) were conducted during June 2020. Following a rigorous reflexive thematic analysis, four themes illustrated the nature of sport parenting during this stressful and uncertain period: (a) reshaping sport parenting identity, (b) the unexpected growth of sport parenting responsibilities, (c) responding to children's loss of sport, and (d) policies impact family commitment and attitudes to returning to sport. The findings are discussed considering Harwood and Knight's (2015) postulates of parenting expertise in sport and offer potential ideas to better support parents and children situated in unexpectedly stressful situations.

## 1. Introduction

It is widely recognised that active participation in organised sport is associated with a range of social (e.g., social skills, sportsmanship), psychological (e.g., confidence, fewer depressive symptoms) and psychosocial (e.g., reduced social anxiety, connectedness) benefits among children and youth (Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013). However, the extent to which young people obtain these benefits is largely contingent upon sustained involvement and the support they receive when participating (Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017). One particularly important source of support are parents (Dorsch, Wright, et al., 2021). Parents play a key role in socialising children into sport (Coakley, 2006; Elliott, Bevan, & Litchfield, 2020), influencing their motivational behaviour (Keegan, Harwood, Spray, & Lavallee, 2009), and supporting their psychosocial development (Knight, Neely, & Holt, 2011). Parents can also be involved in more nuanced ways such as providing responsive emotional support (Rouquette, Knight, Lovett, & Heuze, 2021), feedback after competition (Elliott & Drummond, 2017; Tamminen, Poucher, & Povilaitis, 2017), and helping their child develop goals in relation to sport (Knight & Holt, 2014).

Given that parents comprise a vital 'gear' inside a complex youth

sport system (Dorsch et al., 2022), understanding the factors that impact parental involvement, and how clubs can help parents to best to manage these factors, can enhance the quality and impact of parenting in youth sport (Knight, Dorsch, Osai, Haderlie, & Sellars, 2016). If these factors are not identified and appropriately managed by governing bodies of sport and sport clubs, parental involvement and the subsequent provision of social and emotional support are arguably left to chance in the form of 'trial and error' experiences along the journey (Knight & Holt, 2013). Parents and children involved in organised youth sport cannot afford to simply make it up along the journey because a lack of appropriate social support can contribute to children's reduced enjoyment and perceptions of competence (for review, see Sheridan, Coffee, & Lavallee, 2014). Moreover, reduced parental involvement can be perceived by children as a lack of positive emotional support which has been associated with eventual drop out from sport (Crane & Temple, 2015; Jakobsson, Lundvall, Redelius, & Engström, 2012).

One factor that can influence parental involvement relates to their own stress and coping experiences in sport (e.g., Burgess, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2016; Crocker, Tamminen, & Bennett, 2017; Harwood & Knight, 2009a; Hayward, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2017; Neely, McHugh, Dunn, & Holt, 2017). This remains an important line of inquiry because

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2022.102299>

Received 6 July 2022; Received in revised form 22 September 2022; Accepted 24 September 2022

Available online 3 October 2022

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parents, as well as athletes and coaches, can influence one another's stress experiences in sport and the subsequent nature of involvement (Hayward et al., 2017), reflecting a major tenet – 'feedback loops' – of the systems approach as a conceptual framework for advancing knowledge about parents (and others) in youth sport (Dorsch et al., 2022). Indeed, research has consistently identified a range of competitive (e.g., behaviour, performance), organisational (e.g., finance, time) and developmental (e.g., pathway transitions, education) stressors that parents might experience in relation to their child's involvement in competitive sport (Burgess et al., 2016; Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b; Harwood, Thrower, Slater, Didymus, & Frearson, 2019). However, parents' own stress experiences may be contextually dependent and uniquely influenced by the surrounding environment (Knight et al., 2017). For example, parents situated in the sampling years of sport which, according to Côté (1999) includes children aged approximately 6–12 years, experience many competitive stressors while organisational stressors can be more prominent as parents and children progress into the specialising (~12–15 years) and investment (~15 years and older) years of sport (Harwood & Knight, 2009a). It is also plausible that more recently identified environments including recreational participation through sampling and elite performance through sampling pathways (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014) may also elicit different patterns of parental involvement. Similarly, some competitive stressors (e.g., parents, their child, officials, opponents) can comprise a source of stress for parents across different temporal phases of competition (e.g., before, during and after a competitive match), emphasising the complex nature of studying parental involvement in youth sport. Specific challenges and setbacks along the journey (e.g., de-selection, injury) can also comprise stressful experiences for youth athletes and parents (Elliott et al., 2020; Neely et al., 2017), emphasising the shared stress experience parents can endure.

Understanding parental stressors is therefore critical because sources of stress can change along a child's sporting journey and influence the manner in which parents become involved (Harwood & Knight, 2009a). Yet within the body of literature about parental involvement in organised youth sport, one potential stressor that has not yet received adequate academic attention is the impact of the global SARS Coronavirus-2 disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on parent and child sport experiences. This requires urgent attention given that parents (and siblings to some extent) have been brought to the frontline of sport activities during 'lockdowns' at the height of the pandemic (Kelly, Erickson, & Turnnidge, 2020).

From the limited literature available on parental involvement in youth sport during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been suggested that children's impending return to youth sport may be stressful for parents. For instance, many parents have purportedly experienced stress from providing social and emotional support for their child during periods of uncertainty (Elliott et al., 2021), concerns about their child becoming ill once sport participation resumed (Dorsch, Blazo et al., 2021), and perceived external pressure (e.g., coaches, clubs) for their child to return to sport (Edwards et al., 2022). However, the literature has also highlighted parents potential to adapt and assume coaching responsibilities during lockdown, albeit, in a professional soccer academy context (Maurice, Devonport, & Knight, 2021). Green and colleagues also noted how parents, coaches, and athletes developed greater awareness and empathy for one another by sharing roles and responsibilities during the pandemic. The nature of parent-coach collaboration in this regard contrasts 'pre-COVID-19' research which has previously emphasised the contentious and conflictual nature of many parent and coach relationships in youth sport (Harwood, Drew, & Knight, 2010).

Collectively, this work begins to illustrate being a sport parent during the COVID-19 pandemic as potentially stressful and fast-changing. At the same time, we argue that further understanding of parenting experiences in relation to their child's sport involvement during the pandemic remains largely understudied, providing a strong basis for this inquiry. Such investigations are vital because generative knowledge can

begin to assist with the development of informational support resources for 'sport parents' who need assistance and guidance (Kwon, Elliott, & Velardo, 2020). Although it is unknown if or when another unanticipated global event will affect youth sport, the development of information resources in the wake of COVID-19 is particularly important now as parents seek a return to sport or are trying to encourage children to re-engage in youth sport following a long hiatus. This need not be limited to global pandemics, but also economic recessions, extreme weather events such as cyclones and bushfires, and even political or governmental intervention. Moreover, understanding parenting experiences in relation to their child's sport involvement during the pandemic may provide useful knowledge for clubs and organisations to rebuild parental volunteerism in youth sport, which in Australia, remains a significant challenge for 42% community sporting clubs (Australian Sports Foundation, 2021). Although the notion of parental adaptability is a postulate theoretically focussed on a child's developmental stage of sport participation (Harwood & Knight, 2015), we contend that parent's capacity to adapt to different phases of their child's athletic development might include long-term periods of unexpected change such as those impacted by COVID-19.

Furthermore, given that the study of parental involvement in youth sport is complex, intricate, and influenced by dynamic surrounding environments in which they are situated (Dorsch, Wright, et al., 2021; Knight et al., 2017), pursuing this line of inquiry is justified because the COVID-19 Pandemic likely represents an additional stressor for parents who were already dealing with job stress and possible job insecurity. From a sport perspective, families otherwise accustomed to the routine that organised youth sport provided may have also endured difficulty in adjusting to the 'new normal' during COVID-19 enforced lockdowns. When faced with stress and uncertainty in organised sport, parents have previously been found to adopt reactionary actions and processes to cope with stressors, even if they are not necessarily optimal for them or their child (Neely et al., 2017). The influence of parents on their child's sporting attitudes and behaviours within the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic is therefore warranted. The objective of the study, therefore, was to understand parental involvement in relation to their child's participation in organised sport during the COVID-19 pandemic. One priori research question guided the study: (1) How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted parental involvement in organised youth sport?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. The research context

For the past two years, COVID-19 has arguably become the most significant global event to impact human society since World War II. At the time of data collection (June 2020), countries including Australia implemented some of the strictest policies in the world to manage the outbreak of COVID-19, from full lockdowns to rigid 'get in, play/practice, get out' policies pertaining to organised sport participation (Hughes, 2020). States and Territories closed borders and were left to manage the first and second wave of infectious, community-spread COVID-19 cases. In South Australia, the rate of infection and COVID-19 related death was one of the lowest in Australia, precipitating a slow and cautious return to sport. Reduced number of participants at training, restricted parental attendance, and immediate egress from sporting venues following training and competition characterised the nature of youth sport in South Australia particularly during the three-month period of June to August 2020. Some sporting seasons were reduced to half seasons while other sports were cancelled altogether. It is within this backdrop that the current study was situated. The objective

of the study presented in this paper was to understand parental involvement in relation to their child's sport<sup>1</sup> involvement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2.2. Epistemology and study design

Ontological relativism (i.e., the assumption that people actively construct and act upon realities they assign to events, actions, processes, ideologies, and conditions in the world) and epistemological interpretivism (i.e., understanding the meanings and interpretations people give to actions) comprised the philosophical underpinnings to this study. Such a paradigmatic approach encourages the exploration of unique experiences of individuals and groups based on the assumption that there are multiple realities rather than one single, objective truth when studying human society (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The chosen methodology, Interpretive Description, was consistent with these philosophical beliefs and appropriate for addressing the above stated research question. Also known as 'qualitative description', an interpretive descriptive research approach is well suited for studies seeking to generate insights and perspectives about how individuals feel about, and experience, a phenomenon (Neergaard, Olesen, Andersen, & Sondergaard, 2009). Interpretive Description is a research approach by which real-world questions receive attention, an understanding of what we do and do not know is recognised based on all available literature, and subsequent knowledge extends prior understandings and interpretations beyond the 'self-evident' and have the potential to inform changes in applied settings (Thorne, 2016). To understand and interpret meanings, values, and explanations about sport parenting during the COVID-19 Pandemic, the adoption of methods for exploring the social location of participants, the meanings ascribed to contextualised events, and the unique perceptions of individual experience were warranted.

## 2.3. Researchers

Regarding positionality, the research team comprised of two male and two female academic researchers at different career stages (two full professors, a mid-career researcher and an early career research fellow) and of different races (Australian, French, South-Korean). The researchers had each forged different academic careers in sport policy, sport management, sport sociology and sport psychology. All researchers were actively involved in community, state, and national sport as a club leader (e.g., president, coaching coordinator), coach, policy consultant or committee member. Three researchers were also parents of children (ranging from 2-to-20 years of age) involved in sport and outdoor leisure activities. Subsequently, the research team was quite heterogeneous, reinforcing unique insider and outsider positions in relation to the research. For instance, author 1 was state-league level U16 development coach who experienced the disappointment of a cancelled competitive season at the time of data collection. Author 2 was not involved in youth sport as a parent, coach, or volunteer at the time of data collection. Author 3 was a parent at the time of data collection of two adolescent boys involved in competitive tennis while author 4 was a club leader of an amateur surf-lifesaving club. These diverse profiles and experiences emphasise how insider and outsider positions were identified and acknowledged in the research, promoting opportunities for rich perspective taking and reflexive practices in the form of a critical friend technique (detailed later) to take place.

## 2.4. Participants and sampling

Following university ethics approval (project number 8647), 29

participants (16 male and 13 female) were recruited to participate in an individual interview or focus group discussion. Recruitment involved the circulation of a single-page flyer for voluntary study participants via mailing lists and social media platforms. In addition to the research team's personal and professional research group's social media platforms (e.g., Facebook™, Twitter™, LinkedIn™), fifteen state sporting organisations supported recruitment efforts by sharing the recruitment flyer via their respective mailing distribution list. At the time of recruitment, the significance and timeliness of the study led to additional media opportunities to promote the research and inadvertent opportunities to increase public awareness about the study. Radio interviews, print media (<https://borderwatch.com.au/sport/2020/06/04/former-resident-leads-research-team-to-assess-covid-19-impact-on-youth-sport/>) and guest invitations for online webinar panel discussions (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZL7nBZ3JBkg>) assisted the recruitment process by directing audiences to the recruitment flyer situated on designated social media pages.

The sample comprised of youth athletes<sup>2</sup> aged 15–18 years ( $n = 18$ ) and parents ( $n = 11$ ) of children involved in organised youth sport, from across metropolitan, regional, rural, and remote South Australia. A broad geographical sample was achieved because social distancing restrictions and lockdowns proliferated the use of online videoconferencing. This change in consumer behaviour was subsequently considered in the study design by offering online interview or focus group participation. Informed, written consent was gained from all participants, including written parental consent for minors aged under 18 years and written assent from youth participants aged under 18 years.

Study participants were predominately white, Anglo-Saxon except for two youth participants of Asian origin. Information about socioeconomic status was not obtained. The youth participants were involved in a diverse range of sports including BMX bike riding, Australian football, netball, tennis, soccer, swimming, basketball, and athletics. The parent participants (who were not necessarily the parents of the youth participants in the study), had children involved in Australian Rules football, water polo, netball, athletics, swimming, triathlons, and tennis. Participants were involved in community- or state-level competition at the time of data collection.

## 3. Data collection

Data collection involved the use of both online individual interviews ( $n = 11$  parents;  $n = 9$  youth athletes) and two online focus groups ( $n = 9$  youth athletes). While individual interviews are the most common qualitative method for collecting rich, descriptive qualitative data in the field of sport and exercise (McGannon, Smith, Kendellen, & Gonsalves, 2021), they were employed in the current study because they were regarded the most appropriate method for the exploration of unique experiences of individuals and groups in relation to a social phenomenon (e.g., parental involvement in youth sport during the COVID-19 pandemic), and thus consistent with the philosophical underpinnings of the research. Online individual interviews were offered to parent participants because they were perceived to be convenient, flexible, and easy to access for those working from home during lockdown. The individual interviews were semi-structured which involved using a pre-planned interview guide to ask participants relatively focused but open-ended questions about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth sport and parental involvement within this context. A semi-structured approach provided flexibility for participants and the researcher (author 1) to construct dialogue that invited storytelling, insights and experiences, and reflective accounts about feeling,

<sup>1</sup> This study includes youth sport participants from across a range of competitive levels (from organised community-based competition to development and high-performance pathways).

<sup>2</sup> Recruitment was open to youth participating all levels of competitive sport including grassroots, community-level participation and development or high-performance pathway participation.

emotions and behaviours in relation to the research questions (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

Online focus groups were also utilised for methodological and interpersonal reasons. Methodologically, focus groups have the potential to invite dynamic dialogue and proliferate different perspectives. Focus groups also promote group familiarity and comfort for participants (Smith & Sparkes, 2016), which was considered particularly important when working with youth athletes in this study. Focus groups consisting of 4–5 participants per group were organised by age (e.g., 17-year-old participants were grouped together). To promote comfort and dialogue, ice-breaker techniques were initially employed to (a) ensure that all focus group participants could hear the researcher's (Author 1) questions via online host sites and (b) gauge who might be the dominant and confident voices within the group. Ice-breaker questions included: *To begin with and make sure our audio is working could I please ask for your name, your age and maybe what sport you play?* In addition, the researcher used an ice-breaker activity to stimulate ideas and discussions involving the screensharing of media stories about the pandemic and community sport. These techniques coupled with a semi-structured discussion guide provoked strong interplay of ideas between youth participants (for a full list of topics and questions, please see Table 1).

#### 4. Data analysis

Overall, the online individual interviews and focus groups ranged from 20 to 90 min in duration and produced 254 pages of 1.5 spaced textual data. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim using an independent, third-party transcription service. Upon

**Table 1**  
Focus group topics and questions.

Topic: Introductions and ice-breaker activity	Notes
<i>Questions</i>	
To begin with and make sure our audio is working could I please ask for your name, your age and maybe what sport you play?	
[Screenshare media story about the pandemic and organised sport]	
<i>Before the pandemic</i>	
Before the pandemic, what were you looking forward to about the upcoming/current season?	
What were your parents looking forward to about the upcoming/current season?	
What were your individual (and team) goals going into the upcoming/current season?	
[Screenshare a local media story about the pandemic an organised youth sport]	
<i>During the pandemic</i>	
How would you describe your reaction to the disruptions to sport because of COVID-19 restrictions? How did your parents react?	
What did you do to fill the time that would otherwise be spent training and competing?	
What has been the most difficult thing about not training and competing? The most enjoyable (if anything)?	
How have your parents assisted you during this period of uncertainty?	
In relation to your sport and training, what things are your parents doing that are not that helpful at this time?	
What things could your parents be doing to help you at this time (in relation to sport)?	
How are you managing the prospect of a lost sporting season (refer to screenshare story)? How are your parents managing their time, emotions and energy?	
A lot of parents really enjoy your sport involvement as well. Are any of you supporting your parents at this time in response to the disrupted sporting season? How so?	
<i>The next season</i>	
What are your thoughts about the next season?	
What advice do your parents provide about the next season?	
How are your parents support your for the next season?	
What challenges are there for you and your parents going into the next season?	
<i>Other topics that emerge</i>	

receipt, NVivo software was used to assist the organisation of transcripts and support a reflexive thematic analysis. A reflexive thematic analysis was chosen because it was deemed appropriate for addressing the research objectives and chosen methodology. Reflexive thematic analysis was also deemed to be the most appropriate analytical approach for capturing the complex, contradictory and often chaotic nature of psychological and social meanings (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016) in this study. Furthermore, we reconcile the use of (reflexive) thematic analysis within an interpretive descriptive methodology on the basis that it is useful analytic tool for the identification of patterns (themes) and interpretation of meaning and importance of those (Braun et al., 2016). The iterative nature of the data analysis involved a 'one step forward, one step backward' process of data immersion and familiarisation, initial coding, initial theme generation, candidate theme review, theme definition and name, and writing up. To begin with, the researcher (Author 2) read the transcripts for familiarity and began a process of 'snack writing' (writing in short slots of time) for developing thoughts about the data and moving beyond the 'obvious' ideas that were announced during the early stages of analysis. These 'running thoughts' facilitated the next stage of analysis involving initial coding of the data. At this point of the analysis, a critical friend technique (Smith & McGannon, 2018) (fulfilled by Author 1) was integrated into the analytical process to soundboard ideas and deepen the analysis. This was particularly important given that the researcher (Author 2) was relatively inexperienced using reflexive thematic analysis. The researcher (Author 2) and critical friend (Author 1) met (online) on four separate occasions to discuss initial codes, the potential meaning of the codes, and reflect on their relevance and resonance with the original data. One outcome included the dynamic exchange of interdisciplinary ideas in which multiple realities and coding interpretations were fully explored owing to different sensibilities, proclivities, and background experiences. This process was supported by a 'combine and collapse' technique of initial codes, leading to the generation of initial themes.

At this stage, some initial themes were considered undertheorized (e.g., 'parental attitudes toward the club'), leading to a second round of initial coding that occurred simultaneously with re-engagement of the sport parenting literature. In particular, Harwood and Knight's (2015) position paper on the concept of parenting expertise was revisited given that their six postulates<sup>3</sup> were deemed theoretically relevant for studying parenting experiences and styles in youth sport. We did not intend to explicitly employ Harwood and Knight's (2015) postulates from the outset of the project. However, as Thorne (2016) describes, ID celebrates the universal techniques and tools available to qualitative research beyond convention structure and rule. In this process, we re-engaged reading some literature including Harwood and Knight's (2015) paper about parenting expertise in youth sport, which was deemed to be versatile and relevant for developing interpretations. This creative process helped the researcher (Author 2) move past obvious interpretations of the data and develop a more compelling analysis of social meaning. The combined use of a snack writing, a critical friend technique, re-engagement with the literature, and an iterative process of initial coding ultimately led to the development of four candidate themes. For example, the codes 'renewed expectations on children', 'being an active role model', 'challenges motivating children', 'pleasing mum and dad', 'battling boredom', 'managing concerns about lack of physical activity', 'creating opportunities for activity', and 'shared exercise and physical activity time' were aggregated together to develop a broader central

<sup>3</sup> Harwood and Knight (2015) proposed six postulates of parenting expertise in youth sport: (a) selecting appropriate sporting opportunities and providing necessary types of support, (b) understanding and applying appropriate parenting styles, (c) managing the emotional demands of competitions, (d) fostering healthy relationships with significant others, (e) managing organisational and developmental demands associated with sport participation, and, (f) adapting their involvement to different stages of their child's athletic career.

organizing theme *rapid growth of responsibilities*. Similarly, codes ‘relief about cancelled season’, ‘relief through certainty’, ‘adjusting to new routines’, ‘creating new routines’, ‘reflecting on time commitments’ and ‘reducing future volunteerism’ combined to develop a sub-theme *decompressing from sport commitment*. Using NVivo, the relevant coded data extracts were collated within potential preliminary themes to ascertain if more robust themes could be constructed. As a result, four themes were perceived to be essential for telling the overall ‘stories’ about sport parenting during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 5. Methodological rigor

We offer an eclectic set of criteria for readers to assess the methodological rigor of the study. We employ the general principles commonly used with interpretive descriptive research including *epistemological integrity*, *representative credibility*, *interpretive authority*, and *analytic logic*. However, we also recognise that these criteria alone do not necessarily ensure the “excellence of any specific qualitative product” (Thorne, 2016, p. 239). Therefore, additional criteria commonly employed in qualitative studies including *worthy topic*, *rich rigor*, *credibility*, *resonance*, and *significant contribution* were included for readers to make a total judgement about the methodological rigor of the research and resulting themes. The following criteria is not based on fixed universal criteria but rather the final ‘list’ of an open-ended research process (Smith & McGannon, 2018), consistent with the philosophical assumptions underpinning this study.

*Epistemological integrity* was achieved by developing research questions and employing means, methods and practices consistent with ontological relativism and epistemological interpretivism. *Representative credibility* can be judged by our deliberate efforts to recruit a heterogeneous sample (parents and youth athletes) and employ different data sources (focus groups and individual interviews) to go beyond ‘a single angle of vision’ (Thorne, 2016) about sport parenting during the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that we practiced *interpretive authority* through the collaborative roles fulfilled by each of the authors and the specific critical friend technique employed as a system to ‘check’ (Thorne, 2016) or reflect on our own interpretations of the data. Moreover, *analytic logic* was practiced by making visible the process of moving from codes to themes and openly describing the researchers’ own positionality. We also argue that the research presented within this paper is indeed a *worthy topic*. Given that worthy topics can often develop from timely societal and personal events (Tracy, 2010), this research is of clear significance and importance given that parents are the ‘backbone’ of communities and sporting communities, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, this topic is worthy because it responds to wider calls in the literature to explore the impact of the pandemic on key stakeholders in youth sport (Elliott et al., 2021). In judging *rich rigor*, we emphasise the complexity of sampling and collecting data during the COVID-19 pandemic which nonetheless produced sufficient and abundant qualitative data. The use of online focus groups was particularly complex because of the additional need for early planning and scheduling, establishing a comfortable online ‘environment’, conducting discussions with youth participants, and working within an ethical framework to elicit mixed and varied responses from a variety of key stakeholders. Similarly, online qualitative interviews exhibited rich rigor through reporting the number and length of interviews, the types of questions asked, the level of transcription detail, and the resultant number of pages of interview transcript data. The criteria *credibility* has been practiced in the way in which the ensuing results are thoughtfully and descriptively presented to “show” rather than “tell” the readers about the phenomenon. The use of verbatim, evocative descriptions of the data are characterised by multiple and varied voices and considers not only what is being said and by who, but also what is not being said. Moreover, *resonance*, we argue, is actively demonstrated through rich theoretical expressions and details which will meaningfully connect with readers experiences, settings they have

moved through, events they have observed or heard about, and/or people they have communicated with, which might suggest that the work displays a form of naturalistic generalisability (Smith, 2018). Resonance is thus practiced through the research’s potential to elicit a vicarious experience for readers as they connect the findings with their own engagement in life’s tacit experiences as a sport parent during the COVID-19 pandemic. The final criteria offered is *significant contribution*. Given that there are very few empirical accounts about sport parenting during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research promises much theoretical and practical potential. For instance, if a generation of young people are lost to sport due to COVID-19 (Drummond, Elliott, Drummond, & Prichard, 2020), this research has the capacity to ‘lift and shift’ future scholarly directions by exploring how parents influenced their child’s relationship to organised sport during an unspecified period of uncertainty. It is also anticipated that this study might offer useful insights and advice for sporting organisations, clubs and families who may one day be forced to endure another unexpected hiatus from youth sport.

## 6. Results

Overall, being a parent in youth sport during the pandemic was characterised by unexpected stress and uncertainty and indicated the need for sport parents to quickly adapt the nature of their involvement to support children’s loss, navigate friction caused by policy reform, manage the rapid growth of sporting responsibility, and traverse their own identity reconstruction of being a sport parent.

### 6.1. Theme 1: Reshaping the sport parenting identity

Parents experienced a variety of positive and negative reactions to the interrupted youth sporting season caused by COVID-19. One consequence related to the way in which the pandemic influenced a reconstruction of the sport parenting identity because of the polarizing emotions and thoughts that parents experienced. Sport parenting identities were reshaped at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic by a loss of routine, sense of self and purpose in relation to their child’s sport involvement.

### 6.2. Loss of self, routine, and purpose

For one father who has been the coach of his son’s team and has gone watch each of his daughter’s trainings, the loss of sport parenting translated to a loss of purpose in life, affecting healthy habits:

“... I’ve been involved in football for 40 years in a row ... it’s also just become a part of my life ... I’ve watched more TV in the last 6 months than I have in my entire life ... And that’s because there’s nothing else to do. You can’t go out, there’s no sport ...”

Q: Are you sleeping?

... well, - actually, I’ve been sleeping during the day, but that’s another story. So, yeah, watching a lot of television ...” (Parent 3)

Another parent highlighted the “real shock to the system” (Parent 10) brought about by the lack of sport commitment. Indeed, for parents of children living in rural areas where COVID-19 cases had not been detected, not being able to continue playing sport because of State-wide COVID-19 public-health response, created confusion: “... that was quite baffling I think for the kids and for the parents, we were all a bit you know, bamboozled as to why it couldn’t continue.” (Parent 10) Losing the sense of community and life direction, which some parents gained from organised community sport parenting, was the hardest to cope with:

“I think also from our perspective as parents too, you do create really good friendship networks with other families and parents and, just to have that completely cut off from us was, yeah it was, you did grieve

for it because it was gone. We had everything planned out, you knew what you were going to be doing, every winter you know exactly how your life is going to be essentially and it was just taken away ...” (Parent 10)

Similarly, one parent described the ‘numb’ feeling of being a sport parent during COVID-19:

“I definitely did struggle ... it almost felt very lonely and as I said before, I really thrive around being with others and everything. And just being at home just, it just, it almost made you feel numb in a way, like you did not really have anything to look forward to.” (Parent 11)

### 6.3. Decompressing from sport commitment

In other ways, some parents were perceived to be relieved with having a forced break from the routine of organizing life around their children’s sport. Within this space, parents could reassess what mattered to them:

“... it showed you just how much time you did devote to sport and it – I think it’s a little bit like your work, life balance. It made you have a bit of a reset and think about what you wanted to do moving forward ...” (Parent 5).

Some realised the impact that sport commitment “was having on their [person] life” (Parent 5), the parent noted that “when the switch got flicked ... you realised how much more time you actually now enjoy being at home” (Parent 5) to reconnect with the kids, as a family. In addition to enjoying having more time and space, for some parent-volunteers, the break from sport also meant re-assessing their future involvement in the life and management of the club: “I won’t be putting as much of an effort as I did because I could see the impact it was having on me, and I really actually enjoy my time at home now.” (Parent 5) In contrast to the above example, the space created by the pandemic “fuel [ed] that fire to want to get back to it” (Parent 10) and provided a renewed focus and purpose for sport participation.

Decompressing from the normal sporting routine was a significant period demarcated by the way that parents reflected on how their chose to spend their time. Reiterating the notion of reshaping the sport parenting identity, one parent reflected:

“I have two children so I – we connected with, no reconnected but it almost feels like it is a reconnection because my daughter is always saying you always put athletics first you know. So that, that time that I’ve spent with them over the last couple of months, I think it’s going to change me, I really do, I think it’s going to change, I’ve got to prioritize what I can do.” (Parent 7)

Parents of children involved in talent pathways perceived the hiatus from sport provided opportunities to “have a really good break on his [the child’s] body” (Parent 3). Parents also observed their children flourish in other areas of life such as family relationship and psychological and intellectual development. Perhaps, the decompression from sport commitment meant opening up a space for parents to widen their parenting to further developmental opportunities for their children:

“I’ve seen the kids a bit more mindful about not only themselves, but other people; you know, little conversations ... more socially aware, but also, about themselves as well. I’ve seen some real kind of spiritual connections, when it comes to schoolwork, some more in-depth thought about certain situations where they’re having to write about.” (Parent 3)

### 6.4. Theme 2: Unexpected growth of sport parenting responsibilities

In the absence of timely support from the sporting club, this theme

describes parents’ struggles and self-responsibility to manage their child’s motivation in staying active and their desire for and the necessity of screen time during the pandemic. It also describes how resourceful parents became for their children through role modelling, structured routine, and shared exercise sessions.

During the COVID-19 restrictions, keeping children engaged with sport was a challenge for parents, who perceived a lack of motivation among children consumed by online learning and entertainment. Parents expressed their struggle in managing their children’s emotions and having conversation about keeping active. Parents of families living in more regional/remote areas stressed the importance of the Football-Netball clubs in the life of the community and for their children’s leisure time. One of the parents seemed overwhelmed by the fear their children would lack purpose without sport “parents are really worried that the kids go to school Monday to Friday, do their homework, what are they going to do? They’ve, they’ve just got nothing to look forward to.” (Parent 8)

Several parents and children discussed how the lack of motivation could threaten continued skills development in the absence of the club’s trainings and matches. Ensuring children kept up with sport specific training was an ongoing struggle for several parents, reinforcing emotional tensions with demotivated children. The following example demonstrates how this situation was particularly challenging to manage alone, in the absence of the support from other significant adults and role models that children would usually draw on at the sport club:

As a parent, you always want to make it better, and sometimes you just can’t make it better, and getting into, almost like arguments, because they’re so demotivated and trying to explain to them, you can’t go back to a zero point, you need to keep your fitness up, you need to do this stuff, because there will be other kids out there who are continuing to train and do that kind of stuff; you need to do it too ... It’s been really hard, because like I said, in a sporting environment they have other adults that they listen to, but when it’s your mum and dad, who are pretty much the only adults that you’re having conversations and communicating with for eight or nine weeks or whatever it’s been, that kids at the best of times, don’t want to listen to what their parents have got to say, and they think that we’re nagging ... (Parent 3)

As the pandemic restrictions forced families to isolate at home, parents were permissive about the use of technology and were empathic about the fact this was one of the only means for their children to experience independence: “the age that they’re at, they like their own space. So yeah, a lot of it was spent on the PlayStation or on Netflix” (Parent 10), as well as take control their social connection: “... she’s on the iPad. And it’s either Facetiming friends – so in a way – you, you haven’t had social – impact, you know, with the, with the Facetime.” (Parent 2) While parents tended to report difficulties with managing their child’s motivation in keeping connected to sport and the time they spent on their devices, all children interviewed were very positive about their parents’ support in remaining active. Several children mentioned feeling very encouraged by their parents joining their exercise sessions, as illustrated by this comment:

... my parents are really supportive, like trying to keep me motivated, even like coming out for runs with me, like they couldn’t keep up and that’s fine, but like, they still came out, supported ... they were a huge help to keeping me enthusiastic about the sport (focus group 13)

Maintaining a physically active routine was easier to achieve for some families during the height of the pandemic: “The four of us and my youngest, we were all at home together, all doing our work, like whatever we needed to do, maintaining our fitness.” (Parent 5) Several children reported that a structured approach to managing time was very helpful to keep them motivated: “My parents were very helpful with, ‘no, we’re going to make sure we keep the same diet and the same

structure of everything'. So, like going to bed on time and just that kind of thing." (Child, Focus group 15). But even highly supportive and engaged parents shared the struggle of their children's demotivation as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions:

My mum plays netball, so she wanted to keep herself and me motivated, so she would often grab a ball, take me outside and do some passing and some one-on-one drills. But then, as the months went by, we both lost motivation, so we just kind of let go, and yeah, netball just became a thing that we did sometimes, on a day. (Focus group 13)

While strong directives from parents did bring about conflicts and negative emotions for children, they recognised that without them they would have lost their motivations and overall fitness. The role modelling and strong support offered by a mother to her daughter was particularly critical in that regard:

I definitely drew on my mum because my mum, she's a very fit and active person. She goes to the gym a lot, so just her, she's just always so empowering. She'll always push me, and my parents are always there to push me, but just having her home as well. You know, just saying "You need to do it" and "You'll thank me later", just telling me just to get up and do it. And even though I did get mad at her at some points, because for some reason you just, I just didn't want to, but then just, I'm very thankful that she did push me to do it though. (Child, interview 11)

Parents of children involved in talent pathways were also aware of the club's resources to support children's sport-related training. In these situations, it was their responsibility to ensure training sessions were implemented at home:

"The coaches of the under 17s team, they would send out a weekly fitness schedule for the boys to do. So, I was pretty keen for him, our eldest son [name] to make sure he was participating in getting that done and getting his results sent through to his coach on a weekly basis." (Parent 10)

In some instances, children problem-solved their own ways to maintain physical activity to ensure they were 'fit' to return to sport later. Some used traditional ways: "he was doing his, his big 7k runs and doing a lot of fitness himself off his own back." (Parent 8) Others were inspired by more unstructured, play exploration.

... he really spent a lot of time either mucking around in the shed or shooting, you know, shooting his bow at targets or blowing stuff up outside or making motorbike track in the yard or, you know, just doing other, I don't know, kid stuff. (Parent 5)

In these instances, parents' responsibility was to acknowledge their child's need for independent, self-directed, and often unstructured playtime.

### 6.5. Theme 3: Responding to children's loss of sport

This theme describes parents' attunement and responsiveness to their child's feelings and emotions following the loss of sport during the pandemic. Tuning into their child's emotions provided parents an opportunity to understand their profound connection to sport. Some parents felt overwhelmed about the difficulty of providing guidance and certainty to children trying to navigate and process the impact of the pandemic on their athletic development. For example, a mother expressed the many complicated emotions she felt towards her child losing sport while involved in a talent pathway: "he'd put everything that he had into it, and for it to be taken away and not be able to explain to him when it's coming back has made it really hard ... it's hard, as a parent, because you can't tell them when it's going to be okay or when it's going to be over ... so he's been struggling a lot ..." (Parent 3). For another parent who similarly had a child for whom it felt like "life had ended when sport had ended" (Parent 8), a strategy was to provide

perspective to the child "... we tried to keep explaining to them it's everybody, it's not just country kids it's everybody." (Parent 8)

While most parents were in tune with their children's emotions and seemed to be consistent in how they supported their child, for one father, learning about his daughter and son's connection to sport and engaging them about their emotions and connection to sport provoked a gendered response. On the one hand, the father did not have difficulties having an adult-to-adult discussion with his son who was planning to go back to sport because "he recognises that the benefits are there, socially, physically. Just – his sense of wellbeing ... because we had a conversation about this very thing." (Parent 2) However, this was a different situation with his 15-year-old daughter, with whom he had not had "the same sort of conversation ..." (Parent 2) The dad went on justifying:

My son and I – he's an adult. I can talk to my son, and that's the way I treat my kids, as soon as you're 18 – you make your own decisions ... I'm not at that stage with [daughter], because [daughter]'s a 15-year-old girl at school, who's very sensitive at the moment ... So, the answer is, no. I haven't had the same conversation with my son, as my daughter, because they're two different people in two very different spaces. (Parent 2)

Compounding how traditional gender ideologies may have influenced parental involvement, the father continued to justify the nature of advice and support given to his children, potentially complicating the situation:

I'm the P.E master and she [the mother]'s ... the science and English master, right .... if she tried to infiltrate and tell me what to do with the sport side of things, I'd say, you know, know your role. I don't tell you how to run science, you don't tell me how to run sport (Parent 2)

Moreover, the father's lack of communication skills was perhaps further impacting the daughter's connection to sport as shown by the following extract:

I – did a bit of a dad quiz, you know. 'Oh, so, girls, how are you getting on? ... , you know, you must be looking forward to getting back in the pool?' All three of them said that they weren't, right. And I, you know, I made a bit of a joke about quitters and all this sort of stuff. And how quitters never win or something like – winners never quit or something, you know .... And it struck a nerve with my daughter ...

... but why is she not returning to sport? Is that COVID's fault? Is that because of that's where she's up to in her life? At the end of the day she's, she's 15, it's a funny age ... You know, girl – girls in a sporting environment, they're not all in – in it for the right reasons. I mean, I'm sure they are, but they can be bitches to each other, right ... is it COVID-19's fault or has [she] got some mental health problems, or is the sport got some issues as well? All of those are, are realistic possibilities. Question is, 'is my daughter returning to sport?' and the answer is, possibly not. (Parent 2)

Being emotionally responsive was particularly difficult for parents who were unsure what to do or say in relation to their child's sport involvement during the height of the pandemic. Most parents tried to meet children's frustrations about a lost sporting season with honesty and directional advice about maintaining individual fitness levels, but this was difficult to communicate at times. One mother explained:

"So, we're trying to be honest with them about what's going on, not just in South Australia, but what's going on in other parts of the world, and explaining to them, giving them the real information, and not sugar coating it ... letting them know that we will do everything that we can, but our hands are tied too; so we can appreciate that they're missing this stuff, we can appreciate that it's hard, because it's hard for us too, because we – we don't know what to tell them, we don't know what to say to make it better ... and sometimes you just can't make it better, and getting into, almost like arguments, because



they're so demotivated and trying to explain to them, you can't go back to a zero point, you need to keep your fitness up, you need to do this stuff." (Parent 3).

Finally, some parents approached the loss of sport in a more pragmatic way. They perceived that giving children autonomy to make decisions about their future sport involvement was important during a period of global uncertainty, although the situation was very challenging for the parents who valued sport. A mother explained the situation in relation to the economic impact the pandemic had on the potential livelihood of children and their families:

"... because there is so much focus on Job Keeper, Job Seeker, etcetera, he [the son] realises that it's very important that he has a job and that he can keep a job and that he's happy to forgo the opportunity to play sport to keep that income ... So, he said, well, why am I going to bother to train if I'm not actually going to get a game anyway? And it's hard, it's really hard and then at the end of it, it was like, well, okay, that's your choice. We don't necessarily agree with it, but you are 15, you're entitled to make your own choices." (Parent 5)

#### 6.6. Theme 4: Policies impact family commitment and attitudes to returning to sport

This theme developed from families' challenges in re-engaging in sport, and specifically in dealing with the ongoing changes in government public health responses and how these impact youth sporting clubs. Indeed, there were polarizing views and attitudes regarding re-engagement in sport with some families being impacted by the restrictions in more significant ways than others.

##### 6.6.1. Managing the public health restriction

In reacting to the club's handling of the public health policies, some parents were very empathetic about how their respective sporting club was managing programs and communications with families during the pandemic. They were very cognisant of the fact that the situation was managed by volunteers who also had to go through the complexity of the situation with managing their own personal life. A parent who worked in the health field was particularly aware of the extreme pressure put on the frontline workers, and felt it was not her place to judge how clubs went about managing the pandemic:

"Who is it for me to say to my kids' coaches, who are dealing with their own family, maybe their loss of a job, maybe their whatever, who is it for me to say, why are you not running some kind of program to keep my kid connected?" (Parent 3)

In contrast, some parents adopted a 'black and white' mentality in response to strict public health advice (e.g., parents or spectators not permitted to watch games) as aptly described by one child participant about their parents: "[mum] said there's not a lot of point going all the way – an hour away and then not even being able to watch." (Focus group 16)

Policy health restrictions also meant that families had to carefully consider if a return to sport was safe to do so. This was a complex issue that included club pressures to return, remuneration and individual health circumstances. One parent explained how public health restrictions and return to play policies had reinforced cautious attitudes within the family unit:

"I mean we – so all of our boys have some level of asthma. The older two have had pneumonia, so they've got weakened lungs anyway, so they understand that if they are going to be playing sport, they need to be peak fitness and they're concerned obviously that there's still a number of active cases around and if – and they're in a very high-risk group. So, if they are going back to play sport, they have to be doing so safely ... and that pressure at the moment, the pressure of some

elements wanting to return to sport quicker than what a lot of people think that they should be is really playing with their minds, particularly the older one, Ryan. I think there's a real genuine concern about – well, in our family – about their elevated risk and the – you know, risk of going back to sport when they may not be at 100% fitness." (Parent 5)

##### A community and health-centred return to grassroots sport

Parents had a wide range of insights and perspectives about the ways clubs and state sport organisations could facilitate the return to sport to re-engage and retain youth sport participants, and their parent-volunteers. On one hand, some thoughts that moving forward, sporting organisations should provide a child-centred approach to allow youth sport players to return to sport:

Put all the politics and all the other rubbish aside and just let the kids play ... It's not about me, it's about my kid, and I feel very strongly about that. I'm not living vicariously through my kids, and if my kids can play and I'm not there, then I'm sad that I'm not going to be able to watch them, but ultimately, it's about them, it's not about me. (Parent 3)

On the other hand, families living in regional areas believed club should be more family-focused in their approach. Parents expressed how critical it was to let them spectate their child's game. Restricting parental attendance was thus perceived as a potential barrier to children's participation:

"you're not going to drive your kids all 100 km to [town] to play soccer and then have to sit outside in the car on the road and wait for the game to be played because you can't go in and watch." (Parent 10)

In terms of club organisation, a mother believed that the sport may want to be flexible in their team's management to accommodate for younger children who had their athletic development disrupted. For example, a mother explained how the clubs could consider being flexible in the junior to senior transition, to ensure that the junior players that missed a critical year of skill development could have the choice to play another junior year to build their confidence. The parent thought that this strategy "might retain a lot more kids because they'll go 'right well I'll have another year to build up my confidence to step into seniors the year after when I'm 18.'" (Parent 8)

The pandemic also highlighted the complexities of returning to volunteering for parents. Several parent-volunteers had mixed intentions regarding their future level of involvement in the club. A mother clearly stated she would not commit as much time and energy as she used to because of the mental health impact being an administrator for the club has had on her throughout the pandemic, which was also felt by her own children:

"... my kids, are going, 'mum, you don't need this. You know, you don't need this, you've just gone back to work yourself, you've been at home for 2 months. You don't need this pressure, you're not getting paid, it – you're not getting paid a cracker to have to follow all these protocols'. And the fines that are associated with them are reasonable, as you would know, and ultimately, we want to make sure that everybody's safe. So yes, community sport's really important, but the cost as in, you know, mental health like you were saying, the mental strain of returning community sport and the risks associated with that under the current no contact rules are just too great." (Parent 5)

In contrast, several parents stated they intended to maintain their level of volunteerism, and one indicated "I'm probably likely to increase my involvement just because I really want to have our kids keep going with it and it does worry me how many kids are just going to just drop out and just next year not be bothered." (Parent 8) The devotion parents felt to volunteering so that their children could continue to play in a

functioning club transpired in some children's responses: "my mum she usually does some canteen stuff, and she doesn't particularly like it. But yeah, she – I reckon she'll still – still do some. And my dad he always – he's always loyal to the club. And he'll do anything that the club asks of him." (Focus group 16)

## 7. Discussion

The objective of this paper was to understand parental involvement in relation to their child's participation in sport during the COVID-19 pandemic. The intention was to engage in a more rigorous understanding about the complex and dynamic surrounding environments in which sport parenting exists which, in the current paper, was situated within the unprecedented COVID-19 context. This study revealed four themes which illustrated the nature of sport parenting during this stressful and uncertain period: (a) reshaping sport parenting identity, (b) the unexpected and rapid growth of sport parenting responsibilities: managing motivation for sport and physical activity, (c) responding to children's loss of sport, and (d) policies impact family commitment and attitudes to returning to sport.

Pre-pandemic understandings about parenting in youth sport indicated that many parents devoted significant time and support to enable their child's sporting participation (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). In addition to travel support, parents tend to devote time to other important roles including emotional and social supporters of sport experience, volunteering roles such as coaching and managerial roles, and providers of opportunity (Knight et al., 2016). However, the current study indicates that the indefinite hiatus from sport caused by COVID-19 precipitated a re-evaluation of parental time commitments in youth sport. This finding has significant implications for organised sport and broader governing bodies because parents are the main source of sport volunteerism in Australia, with 69% of Australian sport volunteers having their children in their household (Sport Australia, 2021). To combat parents' current posture to reduce their involvement as club volunteers, national and state governing bodies of sports, and other sport agencies (e.g., the Australian Sport Volunteer Coalition) might want to guide and assist clubs communicating to parents' alternative ideas for managing the organisational and developmental demands associated with competition, which have taken on new meaning since COVID-19. For instance, parents might be in a position to share tasks with their spouse or other family members to reduce or better manage time commitments and demands (Knight & Holt, 2013). Sport governing bodies and club leadership could also communicate the benefits of developing social connections with other families within the communities and provide opportunities for social networking given that friendship and camaraderie have been found to be useful distractions from the pressures and anxiety they may experience in youth sport (Knight & Holt, 2013). Sport governing bodies could also support clubs and coaches to enhance the quality and timing of their communication with parents (O'Donnell, Elliott, & Drummond, 2022), which could be an important coping mechanism and source of support for managing the organisation (e.g. time) demands associated with youth sport (Harwood & Knight, 2015).

Parents also reported a reshaping of their sport parenting identity during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the meaning and significance of their child's sport to their own lives. This is not surprising given that parents are socialised and develop goals and expectations from engagement with other adults, family members, and participating children (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2015). The impact of children and youth not being able to play sport therefore has wider reaching family and community impacts. In the event of another global pandemic, or other (natural) disaster such as current and recent floods and bushfires in Australia, resulting in an indefinite closure of youth sport competition, clubs and organisations may wish to consider their significant role in supporting parents and children under such circumstances. While the loss of a sporting season can negatively impact the mood and mental wellbeing of youth sport participants (Elliott et al.,

2021), the current study suggests that parents too can lose a sense of self and purpose. This is not dissimilar to previously documented experiences of parental 'adjustment' when children (17–19 years) retire from elite level sport (Lally & Kerr, 2008) or the emotional reactions parents experience when their child is deselected from sporting teams (Neely et al., 2017). The way in which parents grieve and cope under these circumstances cannot be understated given that feelings of purpose are inextricably linked with happiness (Robak & Griffin, 2000). Therefore, clubs may feel compelled to help parents to adapt their involvement to different stages of their child's athletic development and progressions (Harwood & Knight, 2015), including periods of uncertainty and setback. This need not be limited to global pandemics, but also economic recessions, extreme weather events such as cyclones and bushfires, and even political or governmental intervention. Although the notion of parental adaptability is a postulate theoretically focussed on a child's developmental stage of sport participation (Harwood & Knight, 2015), we contend that parents capacity to adapt to different phases of their child's athletic development might include long-term periods of unexpected change such as those impacted by COVID-19. For instance, governing sporting bodies could help clubs and parents adapt the nature of their involvement by encouraging and support their child to engage in individual training and online team communications and activities in the event of future and indefinite sporting restrictions. Proactively fulfilling these roles may help parents feel connected to youth sport, sustain some semblance of a sport parenting identity, and usefully support children to remain connected to sport.

The current study also illustrated how parents assumed additional roles of motivator and surveyor of sport, physical activity, and healthy eating during the pandemic. These additional roles extended beyond more commonly identified parenting practices such as negotiating commitments, managing expectations (Wall et al., 2020) and developing shared goals together about youth sport (Knight & Holt, 2014). One consequence of the rapid and unexpected rise in parenting responsibilities during COVID-19 was that parents risked developing negative emotions with their child while attempting to fulfill a formal coaching (e.g., training) or support staff role (e.g., motivating). For instance, parental attempts to support their child's sport specific training mode and frequency was often met with a decline in motivation. In this way, the COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the important but understudied issue about how parents can manage (but not over-manage) their child's motivations in sport. This appears to be a worthwhile direction for future research independent of the context at hand. Nonetheless, to better prepare parents for a similar situation in the future, additional informational support to select appropriate and vary sporting opportunities may be useful. Although the selection of appropriate sporting opportunities is a postulate of parenting expertise concerned with diversified sampling experiences during the formative sporting years (Harwood & Knight, 2015), we argue that this concept could be applied to parents who are seeking to maintain and (re)energise child motivation during a lockdown. To achieve this, governing bodies of sports might consider providing sport clubs and parents with informational resources to vary training methods that are engaging, build competence and perceived to be relevant to their sporting aspirations and development. If sport governing bodies and clubs' leadership do not seize this opportunity, parents may be caught 'off guard' when selecting appropriate sporting activities during the height of an unexpected hiatus from sport.

Furthermore, the current study sheds light on the ways in which parents helped children respond to the loss of sporting opportunities due to COVID-19 enforced lockdowns and restrictions. Parents employed different strategies to help their child cope with uncertainty and disappointment including perspective taking and empathy. However, in one instance, parental support was underscored by gendered behaviours and attitudes, resulting in one father assuming the dominant role as support of their child's emotional reactions during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, relegating the mother to a periphery role of

support and advice. This is problematic for several reasons. First, spousal or other family support is vital for problem solving, enhancing decision making and sustaining emotional support for children involved in sport (Knight & Holt, 2013). Second, reducing advice and emotional support, in this case, to fathers (or mothers) may not be optimal because children perceive different sources of support from both parents (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006). Finally, limiting parental involvement based on gender stereotypes (e.g. the father as the “P.E. master” and the mother as the “Science/English master”) appears to be counterintuitive to developing and practicing parental expertise in youth sport, which is based on emotional intelligence and one’s ability to maintain social relationships with significant others (Harwood & Knight, 2015). Therefore, being a sport parent in what can be reasonably assumed to be a high stress environment is not only difficult for parents and children but also problematic if parents’ default to gendered and other limiting roles of social and emotional support.

The other major factor that influenced parenting in youth sport was the impact of the State Government COVID-19 public health response on the organisation of the club, including changing policies around competition, return to play protocols and COVID-19 safety compliance. Parents located in regional and remote locations and forced to travel long distances to enable their child to train and play were perceived to be most impacted by strict policies enforced during lockdowns. For example, restricting parents from spectating training and games meant that families were forced to consider the value of travelling long distances to drop off their child to organised sport and then leave the venue/location altogether for the duration of training and/or games. This appeared to demotivate parents from the prospect of reinvesting time and effort into youth sport in the future. While these policies were, at the time, frustrating for parents and children, they also reflected a broader need to support parents to manage the organisational and emotional demands associated with their child sport – a key postulate proposed by Harwood and Knight (2015) of parenting expertise. Subsequently, governing bodies of sports and clubs might do well to not only focus their attention to engaging children during pandemics and other sudden hiatus from sport but simultaneously consider how they might support parents to remain strong and consistent sources of support. Some ideas might include developing ‘big picture’ narratives with parents to show how their contribution and commitment to their child’s sport can be linked with increased chances for children to achieve their athletic potential, enjoy a positive psychosocial sport experience, and develop a range of positive developmental outcomes such as improved confidence and competence (Harwood & Knight, 2015). Another idea is for clubs to renegotiate playing and training expectations with families who are required to travel long distances to support their child’s sport. By collaborating on new timelines and revised commitment to training programs, clubs can potentially increase the chances of helping parents navigate rapidly changing policies and remain involved throughout the pandemic. Another idea is for governing bodies of sports and clubs to consider how they might improve communication with parents and child athletes so that parents do not feel pressured to ‘do the impossible’ with regards to time and travel commitments, especially at a time of great stress and uncertainty.

This study was not without limitations. For instance, at the time of the study, the impact of COVID-19 on broader society and culture had not yet been fully realised. The nature of repeated lockdowns, enduring uncertainty, and further declining mental health are all characteristic elements of the past two and a half years. These findings may not therefore truly resonate with all parents and families involved in youth sport who may harbour different experiences and perceptions because of a prolonged exposure to COVID-19 restrictions and governance. Furthermore, a delimitation of the paper was that the research was fully situated in the Australian context which might impact families in specific and even unique ways. Highlighting this point is important because different lockdown policies and restrictions around the world varied, which potentially shapes different parenting experiences globally. It is

also possible that context in which this data was collected did not present a stressor for parents and children. This is a major assumption underpinning the research however we believe the timing of the research, the analysis and construction of the resulting themes, and the conceptual ideas that encourage scholars to consider societies (e.g., traditions, values, socialisation, resources, sponsorships, and policy) influence on the youth sport experience provide substantive footing for viewing the COVID-19 pandemic as a unique stressor for parents and children surrounding youth sport.

## 8. Conclusion

This study illuminates the nature of parental involvement in youth sport during the height of the first wave of serious COVID-19 infection in Australia. While children have clearly been impacted by the restrictions surrounding training and competitions, so too have parents. This previously undocumented perspective is important given that parents assumed significant role and responsibility for supporting their child’s emotional responses about, and motivation for sport during periods of uncertainty. Moving forward, sports clubs and their state and national governing bodies who continually seek to futureproof their players/members and participants will need to consider how best to support parents and families in this challenging, stressful, and unpredictable role. By applying our findings to Harwood and Knight’s (2015) postulates of parenting expertise, we argue that government sport agencies, national and state governing bodies of sport and clubs need to develop and circulate targeted resources for maintaining supportive forms of parental involvement during times of high stress and uncertainty. In doing so, clubs can promote a virtuous cycle of support in the family unit which will benefit parents as well as youth participants.

## Funding

This project was funded by a Flinders University research grant. The funding body did not have any involvement in the design of the study, collection and analysis of the data or writing of the manuscript.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

## Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the participants who graciously volunteered their time to be involved in this study during a difficult and uncertain time of distress caused by COVID-19. Without their generosity, this research would not have been possible.

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