



# Recommendations for coaches on enhancing parental involvement in tennis.

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## ABSTRACT

Parents play a critical role in the development of tennis players. Although numerous parents are involved in their child's tennis in appropriate ways, some parents are less appropriately involved. Inappropriate involvement can lead to a number of negative consequences for players, including competitive anxiety, fear of failure, and reduced perceptions of competence. As such, enhancing parents' positive involvement in tennis is important. This article will provide some recommendations to coaches regarding how they can help to enhance parents' involvement in tennis..

**Key words:** Parental involvement, Coaches, Player development.

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## INTRODUCTION

*"I never questioned my father's love. I just wish it were softer, with more listening and less rage. In fact, I sometimes wish my father loved me less. Maybe then he'd back off, let me make my own choices...having no choice, having no say about what I do or who I am, makes me crazy" (Andre Agassi, Open: An Autobiography, 2009, p.65).*

When Andre Agassi released his autobiography he provided numerous candid and vivid descriptions of his father's intense and, at times, seemingly abusive involvement in his tennis development. In recounting these experiences, Agassi drew attention to the range of negative consequences he associated with his father's involvement. For example, Agassi described a lack of interest in playing tennis, reduced enjoyment for the sport, and a desire to dropout. These negative consequences, in addition to others such as heightened pre-competitive anxiety, lowered self-esteem and self-confidence, and fear of failure, have frequently emerged in the scientific literature as possible consequences of inappropriate parental involvement in sport (e.g., Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006; 2008; Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996; Leff & Hoyle, 1995; Sager & Lavallee, 2010).

Given the negative consequences that are associated with inappropriate parental involvement in sport, striving to enhance parental involvement seems to be an important endeavour (Gould et al., 2006; Knight, Boden, & Holt, 2010; Knight & Holt, 2011a; 2011b). Coaches can play a critical role in this endeavour (Knight & Holt, 2011a). Specifically, coaches can

help to enhance parental involvement in (at least) three ways: (1) By understanding parents' experiences, (2) By supporting parents, and (3) By educating parents (Knight & Holt, 2011c). Overall, if coaches can work with parents to enhance their involvement in tennis, it will hopefully lead to children having more successful and enjoyable tennis experiences.

## UNDERSTANDING PARENTS

Understanding parents' experiences of parenting children in tennis is important because supporting children's tennis involvement can be a difficult task for parents (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Further, the inappropriate behaviors that some parents display may occur as a result of the emotions or stressors they are encountering in the tennis environment (Gould et al., 2008; Knight, Holt, & Tamminen, 2009). By committing time to learning about parents' experiences, coaches may be able to develop a better understanding of why parents behave in the manner they do and help parents to change these behaviors (Knight & Holt, 2011c).

There are a number of ways coaches can learn about parents' experiences. For example, the most direct route is to engage parents in formal or informal conversations and ask parents about their experiences. Hosting social evenings or parents meetings could also provide a forum for parents to share their experiences with other parents and coaches. This would not only help coaches to understand what parents are experiencing, but also allow parents to learn from other parents. There is also an increasing body of literature exploring

parents' experiences of tennis, which coaches could use to guide their interactions with parents (Knight & Holt, 2011c).

For example, two studies exploring "tennis parent stressors" were conducted with the parents of tennis players in the United Kingdom (Harwood & Knight, 2009a; 2009b). These studies illustrated the numerous stressors parents encountered as a result of supporting their children's tennis involvement. Stressors were varied, but included among others, uncertainty regarding appropriate behaviors at tournaments, difficulties watching their children underperform, struggling to finance their children's tennis involvement, encountering issues at work due to the time commitment required to take their children to training, and general concerns regarding their children's development. By reading about and understanding these experiences coaches can help prepare parents for the potential challenges or demands that might arise as they support their children's tennis involvement (Harwood & Knight, 2009b). In turn, hopefully, reducing the negative behaviors that parents may display as a result of the stress they experience.

### SUPPORTING PARENTS

Working with parents has been identified as one of the main sources of stress for tennis coaches and recognized as a contributing factor to coaches leaving the profession (Knight & Harwood, 2009). This is an understandable finding given that many coaches find parents to be difficult, challenging, overly involved, and negative (Knight & Holt, 2011c). However, despite the difficulties coaches might encounter with some parents, working with parents is an important and necessary component of the coaching job (Harwood, 2011). Particularly because parents often rely heavily on the support of coaches as they seek to provide their children with the best possible tennis experiences (Knight & Holt, 2011b).

Parents have indicated that they turn to coaches for informational, emotional, and tangible support to cope with the stressors they encounter and to be able to provide the best tennis experiences for their children (Knight & Holt, 2011b). Specifically, parents look to coaches to provide them with appropriate information to allow their children to progress in tennis. For example, parents seek coaches who will share information regarding their child's development, goals, and potential progression. Further, parents benefit from coaches advising them and their children on more than just technical aspects of the game. In providing such information, coaches can help parents understand all aspects of their child's tennis, which can help parents to provide the appropriate support and information to their children (Knight & Holt, 2011a).

Given the extent of the demands parents encounter, parents also look to coaches for emotional support, particularly following difficult matches. Such support can be in a variety of forms, such as a shoulder for parents to cry on, taking time to listen to parents' problems, or providing parents with advice on

how to deal with different situations. By providing such emotional support, coaches might reduce the emotional strain parents encounter; hopefully reducing any negative reactions parents might have towards their children (Knight & Holt, 2011c).

### EDUCATING PARENTS

One of the main difficulties for parents is knowing how to behave at tournaments, particularly knowing how to respond to their children following losses or poor performances (Knight & Harwood, 2009b). Coaches, children, and parents have identified the behaviors that are more and less appropriate in relation to tennis (Gould et al., 2006; 2008; Knight et al., 2010; Knight & Holt, 2011a; Lauer, Gould, Roman, Pierce, 2010a; 2010b). Coaches can play a vital role in educating parents, based on this information, regarding the behaviors that are and are not appropriate in different situations.

Gould and colleagues (Gould et al., 2006, 2008; Gould, Lauer et al., 2010a; 2010b) conducted a series of studies examining the role of parents in the development of junior tennis players. Through interviews, focus groups, and surveys with coaches, elite players, and parents, these studies highlighted a range of positive and negative parental behaviors that could influence children's tennis development. The behaviors perceived to most seriously hinder players' development were parents overemphasizing winning, criticizing their child, and lacking emotional control. In contrast, the parental behaviors perceived to most positively influence players' development were the provision of unconditional love and support, logistical and financial support, and parents holding children accountable for their on-court behavior. Providing such information to parents and ensuring that parents understand why certain behaviors are more or less helpful to their children may enable parents to better regulate their tennis involvement (Knight & Holt, 2011a).

Coaches can also encourage parents to talk to their child regarding their involvement in their tennis, specifically at competitions (Knight & Holt, 2011a). A recent study with adolescent tennis players indicated that children prefer their parents to display certain behaviors at tournaments and dislike others (Knight et al., 2010). Players identified five primary preferences for parental behaviors, which were grouped under a broader theme of athletes' views of supportive behaviors. The five preferred behaviors were; (a) Do not provide technical or tactical advice (unless parents had the appropriate knowledge due to being a coach or having played at a high level); (b) Ensure comments focus on players' effort and attitude, rather than their performance or match outcome; (c) Provide practical advice to help players prepare and recover from matches, but do not become repetitive; (d) Respect the etiquette of tennis by not becoming involved in matches or excessively supportive of children during one-sided matches, and; (e) Match nonverbal behaviors (such as facial expressions and body position) with supportive comments and keep these consistent

throughout the match. Using these findings as a starting point, coaches could encourage parents to identify their child's individual needs at tournaments (Knight & Holt, 2011a). By having such a conversation parents might be able to alter their involvement to meet the needs of their child.

## CONCLUSION

Parenting children in tennis is an important but potentially challenging endeavor. The support and guidance parents receive from coaches can greatly influence the extent to which parents are positively involved in their child's tennis. If coaches can commit time to understanding, supporting, and educating parents, the potential for parents to be appropriately involved in their child's tennis may be enhanced.

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