

# Coaching the Dads - Understanding What Fathering Through Sport Can Mean for Coaches



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The phrase 'dads on the sidelines' likely conjures up a different image for anyone with experience of coaching youth sport. And while most coaches will have strategies for working with young players' fathers, do they consider the implications – for the player and their coaching – of fathers who are using sport as a site for undertaking their parenting role?

New research from a team of academics in America can help coaches understand the idea of fathering through sport, as well as the implications it could have for their own coaching experiences.

## Reimagining the theory

This new study is based on a comprehensive review of the fathering through sport literature to date, viewed through a lens of family system theory.

However, in this summary, rather than repeating the findings of the literature review or dissecting the theory that sits behind it, we examine what the results might mean from a different perspective.

Namely, what could they mean for coaches working with players whose fathers exhibit the tendencies identified? And what do coaches need to be aware of

when working alongside fathers who use their child's sporting experiences as a mechanism for fulfilling their parenting duties?

This approach to parenting can potentially impact on both the young player and the coaching provider; therefore action may be required on the part of the coach. Given dealing with parents is always a sensitive subject, we discuss some potential courses of action and provide some key reflection points for coaches in youth sport to consider in their own context.

## What is fathering through sport?

In developing this new study, the team started with an analysis of Active People Survey data in the UK and Department of Labor data in the US. The figures in both countries showed fathers are very keen to volunteer for sports organisations where their children take part.

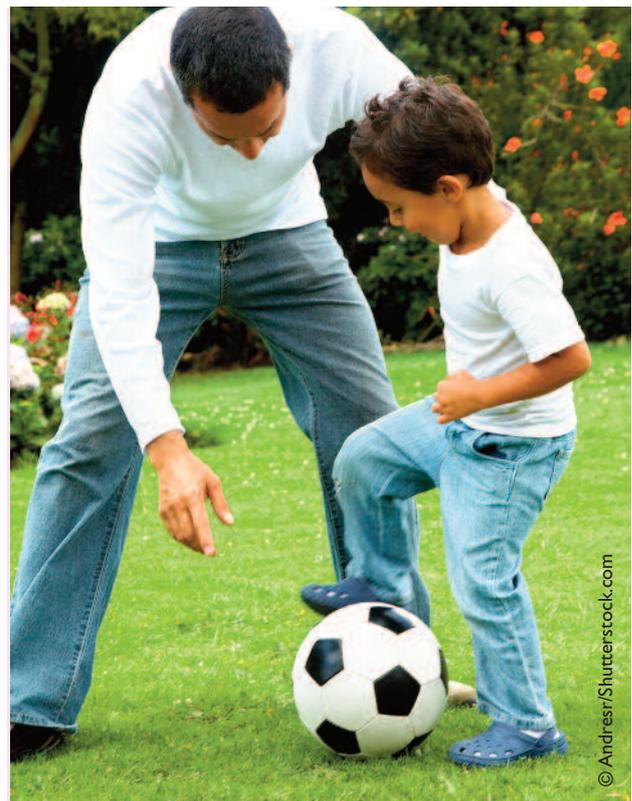
This willingness to volunteer for sports organisations is traced back to cultural change identified in the new millennium. That is, fathers found themselves under increasing pressure to spend more time at home with their children as women took up employment and co-breadwinning roles in the family system.

This challenged traditional gender roles in society, with fathers assigned more familial and caregiving responsibilities than they had become accustomed to in the past.

As a result, the researchers note sport became a natural environment for many fathers to fulfil these 'new' duties as it is one they are knowledgeable about, familiar with and perhaps even comfortable in.

The team suggests this sporting 'safe place' for fathers gives them the opportunity to conduct their parenting responsibilities without fear. For example, they are able to teach the values of hard work, aggressiveness and competitiveness while simultaneously comforting and nurturing the child through their experiences. The team notes that outside of sport, the latter emotions may lead some men to feel they have compromised on their masculinity. However, within the sporting setting, they are able to fulfil these roles with confidence.

Examples used to describe fathering through sport often involve fathers acting in a technical way, such as coaching or teaching specific skills, practising with the child, scouting opponents or teaching the rules of the sport.



## The outcomes of father involvement

Far from condemning fathering through sport, the researchers note the balance that must be found in order for fathers to have the most positive impact on their child's development.

Family relations literature consistently shows that when fathers are involved with their children, it can positively impact on the child's developmental outcomes. These outcomes include increased child happiness and well-being, a decrease in risky alcohol behaviour in adolescence, higher levels of cognitive competence, increased empathy, fewer sex-stereotyped beliefs and a more internal locus of control.

The research identifies engagement or direct contact with the child as the most impactful involvement for fathers. However, the impact may not always be positive.

Building on this, the researchers argue that the outcomes for children are far more dependent on the type of activities fathers engage in with them. The most effective activities are described as highly interactive, including verbal and physical interactions in which the father and child can participate mutually. Given this description, it is easy to see why sport fits the bill, but what are the implications for the coach delivering the sessions?

## Helping dads find the moderate balance

The researchers note family systems theory states not all levels of father involvement are healthy, and on a scale ranging from under-involvement to over-involvement, a moderate involvement approach is most likely to maximise positive outcomes for a child.

The idea of moderate involvement is described as fathers providing firm direction with enough flexibility to give the child significant involvement in decision making. The study notes the parent is supportive, but the ultimate decisions about participation and achievement are made by the athlete.

If you are reading this as a coach with experience in youth sport, does it describe the fathers you come into contact with?

If so, it's good news. The team notes that when fathers replicate this approach, it is likely their children will experience positive outcomes, which in turn may lead to positive outcomes for their coach too (ie a more satisfied player who develops and keeps coming back).

Taking this idea further, the academics note a potential technique that fathers may use to exhibit moderate involvement, turning sporting moments into teaching opportunities for their child.

Specifically, they note how fathers can help develop their child's coping skills by firstly acknowledging the stressful situations they may encounter and then creating a supportive environment that enables them to learn from the moment and cope more effectively when facing it again.

For example, competition can provide stress in the form of pressure to play well and avoid mistakes or injury. Fathers can help their child deal with this stress by listening to their concerns, asking relevant questions and reminding them how they dealt with similar situations in the past.

Coaches could potentially encourage fathers to play this role before any competition starts, leaving the coaching side of things to the expert (ie the coach), so as to ensure they do not become over-involved.

## Spotting over-involved fathers

When father involvement is not moderate, it is likely those who are using sport as a mechanism to father their child will be over-involved. This can present problems for the child and, as a result, the coach. However, the team provides some useful information for coaches to help identify over-involved fathers.

Warning signs include excessive attendance at practice, standing near to the coach, shouting frequently, disagreeing with officials and showing excessive attempts to coach the child themselves.

The study notes over-involved fathers who exhibit these traits likely have their own self-esteem tied in with their child's sporting success. They will not accept their child's improved performance as success as they are dreaming of far loftier, often unrealistic, ambitions of professional athletic careers.

If the child does not progress in this way, they may become angry and withhold affection from the child.

Clearly, as well as the relationship between father and child suffering, the child's sporting experience will also be affected, which has implications for coaches seeking to retain and develop the players they coach.

Raising this with fathers is not a straightforward issue. Instead, coaches may consider an approach that avoids them becoming over-involved in the first place. As described above, this could include providing fathers with one role to practise with the child, such as helping them cope with stressful situations. This would ensure the coaching is left to the coach, and the child has freedom to choose what they do with every other aspect of their sporting experience.

Timing when to discuss this with fathers may also be key. Coaches may consider explaining to all parents at the start of the season that over-involvement will limit the likelihood of children experiencing positive developmental outcomes from sport, rather than discussing individually with those they suspect may exhibit over-involved traits.

## Learning from the research

Given the nature of the study on which this summary is based – a literature review, rather than primary research conducted with fathers – it is difficult to suggest key learning points that are proven to work.

Instead, we provide a list of questions that can help coaches reflect on their own experiences of working with fathers. In reflecting on these, consider how you have dealt with fathers in the past, and how you might change your approach now, given the findings included in this summary:

- What else could you do to ensure fathers maintain only moderate involvement in their child's sporting experiences?
- Are there other approaches you can use to sensitively help fathers avoid becoming over-involved?
- Is it possible to create a schedule or charter of involvement that all fathers can sign up to, to avoid them becoming over-involved? Something they have physically signed up to and can refer to may help fathers take responsibility for their actions if there are signs they risk becoming over-involved.
- Is the idea of fathering through sport different when dealing with fathers of male or female young players? How does the gender of the child affect your coaching approach?

## Further information

If you are interested in reading more about fathering through sport, this summary is based on the research article below:

Graham, J.A., Dixon, M.A. and Hazen-Swann, N. (2016) 'Coaching dads: Understanding managerial implications of fathering through sport', *Journal of Sport Management*, 30 (1): 40–51.

Other academic articles covering this subject are also available:

Buswell, L., Zabriskie, R.B., Lundberg, N. and Hawkins, A.J. (2012) 'The relationship between father involvement in family leisure and family functioning: The importance of daily family leisure', *Leisure Sciences*, 34: 172–190.

Coakley, J. (2006) 'The good father: Parental expectations and youth sports', *Leisure Studies*, 25 (2): 153–163.

Gottzen, L. and Kremer-Sadlik, T. (2012) 'Fatherhood and youth sports: A balancing act between care and expectations', *Gender and Society*, 26 (4): 639–664.

Jeanes, R. and Magee, J. (2011) 'Come on my son! Examining fathers, masculinity and fathering through football', *Annals of Leisure Research*, 14: 273–288.

Tamminen, K.A. and Holt, N.L. (2012) 'Adolescent athletes' learning about coping and the roles of parents and coaches', *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 13: 69–79.





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