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Parental support in professional youth soccer academies – a cross-cultural understanding of children’s perceptions and expectations

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Participation in competitive youth sports has the potential to impact the physical, cognitive, and emotional development of youth. Although the literature has largely focused on positive outcomes, youth can also experience negative consequences such as anxiety, burnout, and depression. Positive parental support can be a protective factor against deleterious effects, especially at the elite levels of youth sport participation. Thus, the aim of the present study was to capture children's perceptions of parental support provided after their transition into a professional youth soccer academy. In pursuing this aim, we sought to explore the expectations children had for their parents' engagement. With the increasing importance of cross-cultural research in sport, and to highlight cultural similarities and differences in parenting across countries, this project compared parent support in Germany, England, and the United States. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with male soccer players aged 7 to 10 years who were attending soccer academies directed by first-tier professional clubs in these countries. Research questions were addressed using a six-step thematic analysis based on the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2013). Themes were influenced by the structural and organizational intricacies of elite pathways across countries. One salient finding was that children had little awareness regarding the behavior of their parents and did not place high value on their involvement. Theoretically, this could be explained by the developmental course of Theory of Mind and warrants future research across a range of participant ages and abilities. In the context of elite-level academy soccer, communication and transparency between athletes, parents, and coaches should be promoted to support the changing relationships among key stakeholders contributing to the elite pathway (i.e., sustainable personal and athletic development). Practitioners are further encouraged to provide opportunities for youth to discuss and reflect on their expectations for parental support.