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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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Objectives: The present study aimed to capture children's perceptions of parental support as they transition into a professional youth soccer academy. Moreover, given the increasing importance placed on the need for cross-cultural research in sport (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009), this study compared parent support in Germany, England, and the United States to explore whether there were similarities or differences in parent practices during this transition.

Methods: A total of 33 semi-structured interviews were conducted with male soccer players aged 7 to 11 years who attended soccer academies at three professional clubs in these countries. The data were first analyzed for each country via thematic analysis and then merged.

Results: Overall, the findings present a detailed description and interpretation of the parent–athlete relationship and how these relationships were situated within the unique elite pathways within each country. General dimensions illustrated cross-cultural themes connected to parents’ presence, parents’ coaching, and how parents could best provide support. Although some of the results suggested that the parent-athlete relationship can influence an athlete’s goal orientations, competence, and emotional responses, some children had little awareness of their parent’s behavior and placed less value on their parents’ involvement. Therefore, the findings are theorized both in terms of motivational and developmental psychology literature.

Conclusions: From an applied perspective, the findings provide important recommendations for athletes, parents, and coaches regarding the importance of managing the transition into elite football and the potential role that parents might play. Furthermore, the study reinforces the need for young athletes to be able to discuss their expectations with their parents in sport.