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Parental support for navigating early involvement in professional youth soccer academies - A cross-cultural understanding of children's perceptions and expectations.

ECKARDT, Valeria C <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6852-7421>, BECHTLOFF, Anton, HASSAN, Rawa, NEWMAN, James <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4957-836X>, WRAGG, Connie and DORSCH, Travis E <http://orcid.org/0009-0006-6248-2270>

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Parental support for navigating early involvement in professional youth soccer academies – A cross-cultural understanding of children's perceptions and expectations

Valeria C. Eckardt[a,b], Anton Bechtloff[b,c*], Rawa Hassan[a*], James Newman[d], Connie Wragg[d] and Travis E. Dorsch[c]

[a]Department of Sport and Exercise Psychology, University of Münster, Münster, Germany; [b]Department of Performance Psychology, German Sport University Cologne, Cologne, Germany; [c]Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Utah State University, Logan, UT, USA; [d]Academy of Sport and Physical Activity, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT

Being involved in a professionalized sports pathway imposes unique demands and adaptations on youth athletes. A supportive environment can serve as an important social resource to facilitate this adjustment and future development. Therefore, the current study explored children's experiences and preferences for parental support during early involvement in a professional youth soccer academy from a cross-cultural perspective. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 33 male soccer players (7 to 11 years) of professional clubs in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Data were first analyzed independently in each country via thematic analysis and then integrated in a culturally sensitive manner. Findings showed interpretations of parent-athlete relationships related to athletic transitions and showcase how these interactions were shaped within pathways of each country. Cross-cultural themes included children experiencing increased parental involvement, struggling to voice support preferences, and valuing emotional support. Interview data supported the notion of parents acting as a social resource with shared and unique interpretations through culture. Findings are theorized and discussed, drawing from developmental and motivational psychology literature. Practical recommendations for enhancing children's early involvement in competitive soccer and expectations towards parental roles are provided with a focus on unique and interconnected learnings from cross-cultural comparison.

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A supportive talent development environment (TDE) can maximize children's development, well-being, and success in sports (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). Within functional TDEs (see Hauser et al., 2024), parents are recognized as key social agents, having the potential to impact children's multifaceted experiences, attitudes, and outcomes across career trajectories (Dorsch et al., 2022; Wuerth et al., 2004; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Parental support is well-documented for various career stages including sport initiation (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004), sampling, specializing and investment stages of sport participation (Burke et al., 2023; Côté, 1999), youth to senior transition (Stambulova et al., 2020), or sport retirement (Brown et al., 2018). Within the youth sport scholarship, less is known, however, about how parents can facilitate an early transition, adaptation, and involvement in a professionalized sports programme. Such a transition can be viewed within the context of early specialization which involves prepubertal children (i.e., < 13 years) committing to a single sport and engaging in intensive training for more than 8 months per year (LaPrade et al., 2016). Prior work (e.g., Wall et al., 2020) has viewed youth athletes entering a professionalized TDE as a transition process, imposing unique demands and adaptations on athletes which need to be managed successfully to continue sports participation (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). Challenges in transitioning from grassroots soccer clubs to professional academies often include balancing increased training demands and higher performance pressure as well as school and personal development. Considering the complexities surrounding athletic and non-athletic consequences of joining professionalized TDEs (see Waldron et al., 2020 for an overview), parental support can be understood as a resource to aid sport-related, individual, emotional, or social adjustments throughout the process of

CONTACT Valeria C. Eckardt v.eckardt34@googlemail.com Department Sport & Exercise Psychology, University of Münster, Institute of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Horstmarer Landweg 62b, Münster 48149, Germany

*Authors equally contributed to the manuscript.

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transitioning and adapting (see athletic career transition model; Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). The current study, therefore, aimed to explore children's experiences of and preferences for parental support upon advancing into professionalized TDEs in youth soccer academies across Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States.

A healthy parent-child relationship is established when parents recognize and enhance their children's experiences in sport (Knight & Holt, 2014). On a conceptual level, this facilitation of outcomes important to children (e.g., sport enjoyment) is defined as parental support (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). It is commonly distinguished into instrumental (e.g., finances, transportation), informational (e.g., feedback, interpretations), emotional (e.g., motivating, comforting), and autonomy support (e.g., providing opportunities and choice; Burke et al., 2023; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Gould et al., 2006). A plethora of evidence has linked parental support to adaptive outcomes for children such as sport enjoyment and autonomous motivation (Brustad, 1988; Sánchez-Miguel et al., 2013), perceived sport-related competence (Atkins et al., 2013), or continued sport participation (Strandbu et al., 2020). As an underlying mechanism, it is further assumed that a secure attachment with their parents allows children to effectively utilize opportunities for positive youth development, facilitating their growth and well-being within the sporting realm (Lisinskiene et al., 2018). The constitution of parents' behaviors as supportive and the development of associated outcomes including enjoyment, sport competence, or intrinsic motivation is not only impacted by the behaviors displayed by parents but rather how children perceive and interpret them (Holt & Knight, 2014).

Experiences of and preferences for parental support in youth sports depend on athlete, parent, and contextual characteristics (Burke et al., 2023). Evidence suggests that preferences for parental support are individual and tend to fluctuate across developmental stages (Burke et al., 2023; Knight et al., 2016). A recent review views parents as children's primary source of tangible support (Porto Maciel et al., 2021), while other studies have concluded that parents' emotional availability and responsiveness were most salient and important in contexts including academy soccer (Lobinger et al., 2021). Further, support preferences of girls participating in the specializing and investment stages of competitive golf were influenced by their sport performance and affective states (Burke et al., 2023). For example, after a poor performance, some golfers expressed a need for parental closeness and support while others preferred to be on their own. When parents have knowledge and personal experience of their children's sport, their provision of informational support and technical or tactical assistance was more valued (Burke et al., 2023; Knight et al., 2010). Further, preferences for parental support were contingent upon the context (i.e., at home, at practice, at competition) and timing (i.e., before, during, or after a competition), with youth expressing a desire for informational support at practice, before, and after competition (Burke et al., 2023; Knight et al., 2011, 2016).

To date, evidence heavily relies on reports of adolescents in the specializing or investment stages of their sports career (e.g., Burke et al., 2023; Knight et al., 2010, 2011, 2016). Given parents are of crucial importance in the early socialization and facilitation of children's development in sport (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), it seems surprising that experiences and preferences of younger children remain under researched. Interviewing children attending youth soccer academies appeared particularly suited to address this knowledge gap because: (1) children are signed with youth soccer academies at an early age (i.e., commonly starting between the ages of 7 and 9 depending on the country), (2) youth soccer academies reflect a highly professionalized environment for talent development and sports specialization, and (3) parental support and the parent-child relationship have been found to be impacted by youth soccer academy circumstances, norms, and culture (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Clarke et al., 2016; Newport et al., 2020). As such, being part of a professional youth soccer academy can lead to fostering a shared parent-child experience and enhanced communication and relationship closeness (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Clarke et al., 2016) as well as increased demands, commitments, and sacrifices for parents (Newport et al., 2020). Particularly the transition into a youth soccer academy and adapting to a professionalized environment was perceived as challenging by parents (Newport et al., 2020).

Recognizing that parents' and children's experiences, relationships, and (inter-)actions need to be viewed within the broader context of youth sport cultures, societies, and countries (Dorsch et al., 2015, 2022; McMahon & Penney, 2015; Ryba, 2017), we adopted a cross-cultural approach to exploring parental support. By that, we acknowledge that culture can have a constitutive role (Ryba, 2017) in shaping children's experiences across their sports career, particularly since athletic career development and transition experiences are suggested as idiosyncratic and culturally situated (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013). For example, both inter- and intracultural variations in youth soccer academy structure or philosophy as well as parental involvement might present. As such, meanings attached to parental

involvement and the types of experienced and preferred support by children can vary across cultural contexts. These variations may reflect broader sociocultural models of parenting, motivation, and achievement that shape how young athletes negotiate relationships, autonomy, and success (Trommsdorff, 2013). To provide a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon as well as cultural similarities and differences, we explored children's (7 to 11 years) experiences of and preferences for parental support during early involvement in professional youth soccer academies across Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Method

Philosophical underpinning and researcher positionality

To answer the research question, a qualitative approach was chosen to explore participants' beliefs, experiences, and interactions (Sanjay et al., 2013). The study was conducted from a constructivist philosophical underpinning to understand the meaning that participants attribute to their experiences of parental support (Lincoln et al., 2018). To account for the cross-cultural design of the study and to enhance cultural sensitivity, we adopted a relativist ontological position (Lincoln et al., 2018). As such, we recognized that individual constructions of reality co-exist and are shaped by both participants' and researchers' lived experiences concerning the topic of parental support. Further, we believe that the generation of knowledge in the current study is subjective and co-created between participants and researchers (Lincoln et al., 2018). To be transparent on individual experiences impacting the interpretation of findings, we provide details on each research team (i.e., two researchers per country) and their roles as well as authors' personal and professional backgrounds at the time of data collection in Figure 1.

Participants

Overall, 33 male soccer players between the ages of 7 and 11 years in German, British and US-based professional youth soccer academies participated in the study. Across countries, the term 'professional youth soccer academy' denotes academies operated by professional clubs and integrated into professional infrastructures, while not implying that the interviewed youth players themselves are professionals. Academies in Germany, the UK and the US were selected to capture a range of professional youth soccer systems – from the world-leading Premier League academies in England, to Germany's well-established but mid-field model, to the rapidly developing academy system in the US – allowing for meaningful cross-cultural comparison of parental support experiences.

Germany

In Germany, 12 male players between 7 and 10 years ($M = 8.4$; $SD = 1.2$) from the U8 team ($n = 5$), the U9 team ($n = 3$), and the U10 team ($n = 4$) were interviewed. At the time of data collection, players had been a member of the soccer academy between two months and five years ($M = 2.1$, $SD = 1.3$) and reported to have played soccer between three and seven years ($M = 4.8$, $SD = 1.1$).

Parents of respective players were four mothers and eight fathers ($M_{age} = 42.5$ years; $SD_{age} = 3.2$). The majority of players' parents reported to be married (100%) and to have a competitive sports background themselves (73%). On average, parents attended five soccer matches of their children at the youth academy per month and dedicated nine hours per week ($SD = 3.6$) to their children's soccer involvement.

United Kingdom

Thirteen male players between the ages of 8 and 10 ($M = 9.3$, $SD = 0.6$) participated in the United Kingdom which reflected the U8 team ($n = 1$), U9 team ($n = 7$), and U10 team ($n = 5$). On average, players had been a member of the soccer academy between six months and four years at the time of the study ($M = 1.7$, $SD = 0.9$). Further, children reported to have played soccer between four and seven years ($M = 4.9$, $SD = 1.3$). Due to academy structure and regulations, no demographic information on players' parents were collected.

United States

The US sub-sample included eight male players between the ages of 7 and 11 ($M = 9.4$ years; $SD = 1.1$). Of those, one played in the U8 team, five in the U10 team, and two in the U11 team. On average, players had been a member of the soccer academy between one and four years at the time of data collection ($M = 1.8$, SD = 1.1). Parents of respective players were seven fathers and four mothers[1] ($M_{age} = 41.3$ years; $SD_{age} = 4.0$). The majority of players' parents reported being married (91%) and having a competitive sports background themselves (73%). On average, parents attended four soccer matches of their children at the youth academy per month and dedicated twelve hours per week ($SD = 6.8$) to their children's soccer involvement.

Figure 1. Composition of the cross-cultural research team.

Procedure

Due to the cross-cultural design of the study, ethic's approval was obtained from respective ethics committees in each country (Germany: German Sport University Cologne, No. 001/2022; United Kingdom: Sheffield Hallam University, ER38070058, enhanced Disclosure and Barring Services (DBS) check; United States: Utah State University, Institutional Review Board 13,229). Recruitment and study participation adhered to APA 7th Edition standards for ethical engagement with research participants. Participation in the study was anonymous and voluntary. Players and their parents had the opportunity to ask questions before interviews commenced. The demographic survey administered to players and parents was identical across the participating countries.

Germany

The first author had an ongoing applied collaboration in the field of sport parenting with a local professional youth soccer academy associated with a top-tier club of the German Bundesliga (i.e., highest German league). As such, the first author introduced the purpose and procedure of the study to the academy's parent manager (i.e., staff member who is responsible for managing parental involvement, attending to parents' needs, and educating parents) who then distributed the call for study participation (i.e., short information text, flyer) to parents via the academy's e-mail newsletter. Parents could sign their children up and schedule an appointment through e-mail contact with the first author. On the day of the interview, either the first author or the third author met parents and children before soccer practice at the academy. Prior to study participation, parents and children provided written informed consent. Children completed an online demographic survey on a tablet and were helped by the researchers, if needed. The interviews were conducted before and during practice sessions on-site at the academy. During the interviews, parents were not present and were asked to complete a demographic online questionnaire on their smartphone which they accessed through a provided QR code. After the interview, the researcher took the child to soccer practice on the academy courts.

United Kingdom

The fourth author contacted the manager of a local category 2[2] soccer academy providing the purpose of the study and the proposed benefits the academy may receive from the findings. Following the partnership agreement, participant information sheets and consent forms were distributed to the parents of the athletes via the member Academy Player Care Lead at the academy (i.e., the individual responsible for player wellbeing and development). After consent was received, interviews were conducted with the players. These took place in a one-to-one environment at the club's training ground and were scheduled during practice hours. During the interviews, the player's parent(s) were not present and this time, the academy staff worked closely with the researcher to ensure all underage participants were safeguarded appropriately. The researcher visited the academy on several occasions to conduct interviews with the participants.

United States

The last author reached out to the director of the United States-based Major League Soccer (MLS) to explain the purpose and procedure of the study. The MLS director then facilitated contact with a top-tier team in the eastern region of the United States. After meeting with the safeguard and the head of the soccer academy, study approval was granted and the call for participation was forwarded to parents through a flyer and a short information video. Further, an online meeting was conducted to clarify potential questions of parents prior to study participation. Families could then schedule a meeting convenient for their preference. Once scheduled, parents and children provided informed consent and completed a demographic survey online. All interviews were conducted online by the second author; for the sake of the children's safety and well-being, there was a safeguard present.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with children. This technique was deemed particularly suitable to participants' ages given it allows the interviewer to carefully explain topics to children and follow up with thorough questioning (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). Prior to data collection, the research team met on several occasions to design an evidence-based interview guide based on previous studies (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Knight & Holt, 2014; Knight et al., 2011). The interview guide aimed (a) at understanding children's perceptions of and preferences for parent support surrounding the transition and adaptation to professional youth soccer academies, (b) at exploring the parent-child relationship and (c) was sensitive to cultural specificities. For example, children were asked, 'What sort of ways have your parents helped you as you've moved into the academy?', 'How would you like your parents to support you in soccer?', or 'How do you feel about your relationship with your parents now that you are in the academy?'

Please see the Electronic Supplement for the complete interview guide in English language.

Prior to data collection, one pilot interview with a child participating in soccer in each country was conducted to ensure a child-appropriate design (e.g., wording, length). Interviews in Germany lasted between 9 and 29 minutes ($M = 19.4$; $SD = 5.4$), between 8 and 13 minutes ($M = 10.8$, $SD = 1.4$) in the United Kingdom, and between 19 and 37 minutes ($M = 29.4$; $SD = 4.2$) in the United States. All interviews were conducted in the respective national language of the country (i.e., German, English). Interviews were conducted in person (Germany, United Kingdom) and online (United States), and recorded using a mobile phone (Germany), two separate devices (United Kingdom), and Zoom computer software (United States). Data were collected between March and May 2022 in Germany, between April and May 2023 in the United Kingdom, and between March and May 2023 in the United States.

Data analysis

Following the interviews, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim using the software f4x-Analysis (Germany), MS Word Transcribe (United Kingdom), and Otter.ai (United States). The second, third, and fifth author analyzed the respective data following six-step reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was chosen for several reasons. First, it allowed an application on any data set and the distinction in semantic and latent themes facilitated identifying explicit and surface meaning in the data as well as exploring underlying assumptions and ideologies, beyond what has been shared by participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, semantic coding allowed to capture explicit descriptions of parental involvement (e.g., showing up to games), while latent themes were used to interpret implicit cultural expectations and meanings embedded in children's narratives (e.g., how parental presence at games signalled commitment to academy soccer). Second, its analytic process provided the necessary (theoretical) flexibility and sensitivity for cross-cultural collaboration on a research project, specifically in recognizing that researcher subjectivity is a resource for knowledge generation and interpretative depth (Gough & Madill, 2012).

Data were first analyzed separately within each country. For each national dataset, two researchers individually began by becoming familiar with the data, this included reading and re-reading the transcripts. Furthermore, the researchers began to make notes and early impressions of the data at this stage. The second phase involved managing the data in a systematic and meaningful way by dividing the transcript into smaller segments and generating initial semantic codes line by line (e.g., verbal encouragement, performance expectations; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each section of data, related to the research questions, was coded inductively. Following team discussion based on individual mind maps and/or coding tables, these semantic codes were then collated into preliminary country-level themes (e.g., desiring more sideline encouragement from parents) which were illustrative of distinct ways children in each country described parental support (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After country-level themes were developed, the research team conducted a cross-cultural synthesis and comparison. As such, all country-level themes were compiled into a comparative matrix mapping the data related to each emergent theme and their variation across the three countries. This step allowed the researchers to consider if the data truly supported the themes and consequently if the themes supported the entire data set. Throughout the cross-cultural synthesis, the research team reflected on both semantic coding (i.e., presenting the data through participants' voices) and latent coding (i.e., presenting interpretations of the data by the cross-cultural research team; Byrne, 2022), acknowledging that children interviewed in the present study tended to offer simpler, more concrete responses with limited depth for abstract reflection. The penultimate step was to define the themes and their essence (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers examined patterns to identify cross-cultural similarities in children's experiences and preferences of parental support. The final set of themes was reflected again within each author team (i.e., Germany: first and third author; United Kingdom: fourth and fifth author; United States: second and last author) and then cross-culturally (i.e., second, third, and fifth author). Specifically, the wording of contextually similar themes (e.g., 'Parental support through physical presence'; Germany and United States) was matched.

Methodological rigor

Qualitative research is particularly suited to capture how cultural processes shape psychological outcomes (Karasz & Singelis, 2009). Potential sources of inequivalence or bias as common in quantitative approaches to cross-cultural research (e.g., construct bias, method bias, and item bias; see van de Vijver, 2015 for an overview), are less prominent in qualitative designs due to their exploratory nature and the aim to capture and understand participants' experiences as embedded in their cultural context. To foster methodological coherence and equivalence in the current study, we considered

several recommendations specific to cross-cultural research (Buil et al., 2012; van de Vijver, 2015).

We attended to *construct equivalence* (see van de Vijver, 2015) by establishing whether parental support is conceptually and functionally equivalent through our research objective of exploring experiences of and preferences for parental support in three different countries (Buil et al., 2012; Karasz & Singelis, 2009). As recommended (Hult et al., 2008), the study reflects an international collaboration with a multicultural research team (see Figure 1). Further, in line with our relativist ontological position, we present similarities and differences across participants' lived experiences sensitive to cultural influences (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). To enhance *sampling and data collection equivalence* (i.e., comparability of participants and collected data), the first, fourth, and last authors met before data collection to agree upon (1) recruiting comparable samples (i.e., children between 7 and 11 years in professional youth soccer academies), (2) providing the same instructions before the interview, (3) utilizing the same interview guide, and (4) providing an interview training with and instructing the second, third, and fifth authors. The first and third authors translated the interview guide for the data collection in Germany. Lastly, *data analysis equivalence* (i.e., the extent to which data are perceived and interpreted in the same way) was considered in light of our philosophical positions which acknowledge multiple realities, subjectivity, and a co-construction of knowledge. In the current study we approached equivalence and rigour through (1) following guidelines of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) on each data set, and (2) completing rounds of critical friendship and reflective discussions within and across research teams.

Results

In the following, a culturally sensitive synthesis of findings regarding similarities and differences across the data along with results specific to each country of data collection (i.e., Germany, United Kingdom, United States) will be presented (see Figure 2). Our interpretations of the data are substantiated with respective interview quotes pertaining to each country (Germany = G_x; United Kingdom = UK_x; United States = US_x); themes and sub-themes are highlighted in bold. German interview quotes were translated from their original language to English by the first and third authors.

Cross-cultural synthesis

Our cross-cultural analysis of interview data identified three overarching themes that captured children's interpretations of parental support during early specialization: experiencing increased parental involvement, struggling to voice support preferences, and valuing emotional support. Most interviews did not reveal substantial changes in parental support behavior upon transitioning from a grassroots soccer club to an academy. Nonetheless, children in each country noticed an increased involvement of parents through time commitments or soccer-related goals and attitudes, whereas children in the United States specifically described improvements on a relational level, evident through feelings of enhanced closeness towards their parents. Specifically in Germany and the United Kingdom children reported their parents to enforce the idea of becoming a professional soccer player which maximized performance expectations.

Children's voice emerged as a central theme in how young players were better able to identify undesired parental behaviors such as parents yelling from the sidelines or enforcing performance-related pressure than relating their needs and expectations to discrete support behaviors. Overall, emotional availability and support were identified as important resources to facilitate children's socialization in and adaptation to the academy. As such, children viewed it as essential to nurture their self-esteem and competence beliefs as well as to alleviate soccer-related performance pressure. Parents' informational support was perceived differently in each country: German children desired more frequent conversations to reflect their academy experiences; children in the United Kingdom placed an emphasis on individualized non-verbal communication with their parents; and children in the United States appreciated their parents' feedback or coaching advice, even after a negative performance. Further cross-cultural differences related to the utilization of private training and at-home equipment which reflected a unique tangible support resource for children's skill development in the United Kingdom. Interview data further showed that parental support dimensions (i.e., instrumental, emotional, informational) were evident in each country. Instrumental support behaviors such as transportation or emotional support through words of encouragement were disclosed more by children in the United Kingdom and the United States. Here, structural differences in academy pathways were revealed because parental behaviors in Germany were to some extent dependent on academy regulations. Hence, German children expressed an increased desire for their parents' physical proximity to allow for praise and encouragement. This is further complemented by children in Germany and

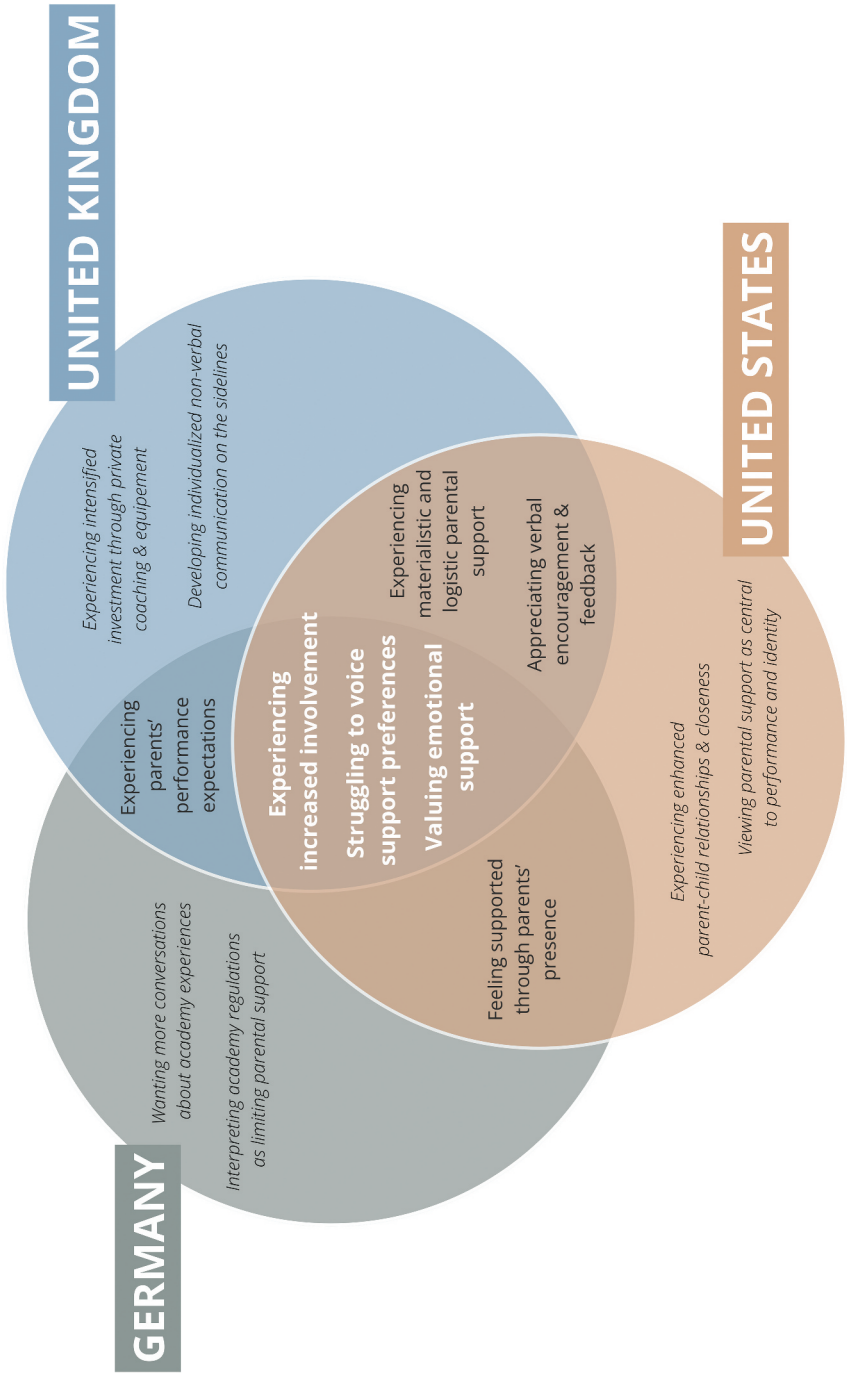

Figure 2. Visual synthesis of findings. Note: Shared themes across all three countries are presented in white and bold font; shared sub-themes between two countries are presented in black font; unique sub-themes for each country are presented in cursive font.

the United States uniquely valuing their parents' physical presence, e.g., while observing practices. Children viewed this undivided attention and availability as their parents taking interest and thus supporting their academy involvement. Together, these overarching themes point to the ways children actively interpret, negotiate, and sometimes challenge parental involvement as part of their professionalized academy pathways.

Germany

Seven sub-themes were identified to describe how German children perceived their parents' roles and support during and after transitioning (see Table 1). The mere presence of parents, e.g., on the sidelines during practice/competitions, emerged as the most notable support dimension for children: "They both always came to practice. They watched and got to experience how it was there" (G_5) or "And then he actually watches [*us play*] the whole time" (G_5). Further, children mentioned parental support in preparing for practice and competitions (e.g., packing a bag, monitoring time management) or encouraging affirmations as parents' emotional support. When prompted about additional observations on how parents expressed their support, it became apparent that children experienced difficulties in generating detailed answers. As such, children did not disclose elaborate parenting strategies of how they were supported, rather the mere physical presence and an emotional availability seemed to reflect parents' involvement and interest in their everyday life at the academy. Moreover, the interviews did not reveal perceived differences in parental support upon transitioning, as evident in the following quote: „Um, it [*i.e., parental support*] is pretty much the same as before. I don't really see anything different" (G_5). However, children disclosed that they observed a change in their parents' performance expectations and attitudes towards soccer. Specifically, children recalled how their parents made them aware of the potential extent of their academy participation: 'So, they [*i.e., parents*] keep saying: "This is your big chance to get into the Bundesliga" (G_4).

Children's preferences for parental support related to an increased need for conversations with parents about their academy experiences and an improved opportunity for parent-child interactions during competitions. Age effects were apparent in the occurrence of reflective conversations given children of the U10-team reported more frequent conversations about their academy-related experiences and how it benefitted them: "So when I come home, I usually talk to my mum about soccer because she's interested in soccer too" (G_{11}). Further, children reported that parental sideline support was regulated by coaches and academy rules in Germany: "[. . .] the coaches don't want parents yelling from the sidelines. They're even trying to keep the goal posts away from the parents so that no one shouts in" (G_6). These regulations were, however, perceived negatively by children as they viewed it as a limitation to receive parental support and preferred an increased encouragement: "Well, um, to cheer me on. Like, even louder. It's not just about my parents, but all parents" (G_{12}).

United Kingdom

Children's perceptions of parental support in the United Kingdom were captured in six sub-themes (see Table 1). The interviews suggest that parental emotional support surrounding their involvement in early academy life was a vital part of children's relationships both at home and at the academy:

> [. . .] if I didn't have them, then like I wouldn't be as good because they like say stuff to me that helps me a lot [. . .] they always motivate me by like encouraging and shouting to me like "come on!" to just keep me going. (UK_2)

Alongside verbal encouragement, the provision of transportation was also a frequently mentioned support dimension by children such that it was recognized to facilitate their involvement in soccer: "He [*i.e., dad*] takes me all over the place, and he took me to all the way to like City C, and down to City D and that" (UK_9). Further, most children described how their parents created opportunities for private coaching and afforded at-home training equipment to assist their skill development and self-reflection:

> With the things I'm not great at, I can work on them at home because my dad bought me like loads of training equipment so we can go to the field and practice [. . .] they've bought me a net and a mannequin so I can do skills. (UK_1)

Across the interviews, it became apparent that parents and children in the United Kingdom seemed to engage in various forms of shared non-verbal communication, specifically on the sidelines during match play. As such, one player recalled: "My dad sometimes says drop into that space there, but he doesn't say it, I know what he

Table 1. Overview of identified sub-themes and corresponding example quotes by country of data collection.

Germany		
Sub-Theme	Description	Example Quote
Feeling supported through parents' presence	Children interpret parents' physical presence as showing care, interest, and commitment to academy soccer.	*'They both always came to practice. They watched and got to experience how it was there'*. (G_5)
Struggling to recognize parental support	Children experience difficulties in identifying and articulating subtle forms of parental support and their influence on development.	*'Phew. . . I don't know. So, supporting . . . I don't really know'*. (G_8)
Wanting more conversations about academy experiences	Children express a desire for parents to engage more in conversations about their academy experiences.	*'Because otherwise, if they don't tell me [i.e., about their academy-related thoughts], then I just don't know. That's why it's important to me that they tell me'*. (G_9)
Experiencing parents' performance expectations	Children interpret parents' communication as conveying expectations around performance and achievement.	*"So, they [i.e., parents] keep saying: 'This is your big chance to get into the Bundesliga'."*(G_4)
Interpreting academy rules as limiting parental support	Children view academy regulations as influencing the degree of parents' involvement.	*'[. . .] the coaches don't want parents yelling from the sidelines. They're even trying to keep the goal posts away from the parents so that no one shouts in'*. (G_6)
Noticing few changes in parental support during transition	Children experience a continuity (or a lack of change) in the way parents provide support upon transitioning.	*„Um, it [i.e., parental support] is pretty much the same as before. I don't really see anything different"*. (G_5)
Desiring more sideline encouragement from parents	Children want parents to offer more visible verbal and non-verbal encouragement.	*'That they [i.e., parents] cheer more, because I think it's cool when I watch other teams and see the parents really getting into it, for example. Then I think that's cool. I would like our parents to do that too'*. (G_{10})
United Kingdom		
Sub-Theme	Description	Example Quote
Appreciating verbal encouragement and affirmation	Children value supportive words and affirmations provided by parents.	*'[. . .] if I didn't have them, then like I wouldn't be as good because they like say stuff to me that helps me a lot [. . .] they always motivate me by like encouraging and shouting to me like "come on!" to just keep me going'. (UK_2)*
Experiencing intensified investment through private coaching and equipment	Children interpret private coaching and training resources as signs of parents' increased commitment to their academy development.	*'My mum and dad take me to private sessions and to training sessions outside the club [. . .] we do things that I need to work on and improve for matches, like let's say dribbling, if I need to get better at dribbling then we'll like go to a one-on-one and focus on that most of the session'*. (UK_4)
Developing individualized non-verbal communication on the sidelines	Children notice and make sense of non-verbal encouragement and tactical from parents.	*'My dad sometimes says drop into that space there, but he doesn't say it, I know what he says because he uses hand signals and I know what he says when he does that, there's a right lot of sign language going on'*. (UK_1)
Experiencing (or missing) parental transportation support	Children experience transport to games (or lack thereof) as a form of tangible support (or not) to games.	*'He [i.e., dad] takes me all over the place, and he took me to all the way to like City C, and down to City D and that'*. (UK_9)
Feeling pressured by parental over-involvement	Children perceive parental pressure to succeed which strains their relationship.	*'They tell me I need to work harder [. . .] they want me to get into a better academy and play for the under elevens and it puts me under pressure'*. (UK_7)
Experiencing parents' performance expectations	Children feel pressured to improve at a fast rate with the goal of being a professional soccer player.	*'They want me to play football really bad, they want me to go far like making a professional footballer'*. (UK_{13})
United States		
Sub-Theme	Description	Example Quote
Feeling supported through parents' presence	Children interpret parents' physical presence as showing care, interest, and commitment to academy soccer.	*'Well, they show up to my games. That's one way how they support. Because some parents don't even show up to the game. They just drop off the kids and just leave and come back. They actually stay and watch the whole game'*. (US_2)
Experiencing (or missing) materialistic and logistic parental support	Children experience transport to games (or lack thereof) and provision of material as a form of tangible support.	*'Like they bring me to all my soccer games on time and stuff. And they like get my cleats, they get my shin guards and my ball and stuff before my game so I can get ready'*. (US_8)
Receiving (or missing) emotional parental support	Children describe parents' emotional availability (or lack thereof) shaping their academy experiences.	*'They comfort me honestly. (. . .) I'm an emotional kid, I get it from my mom. And like, they will probably comfort me and I really like that because like, I know, I could trust them and love them'*. (US_7)
Interpreting tactical and technical parental support	Children notice and make sense of informational support and soccer-related feedback.	*' . . . they [i.e., parents] instead of like, training with me, they talk to me about it, right? And so like, they talked to me about what I can do at practices to like, maybe, like, be better. And they helped me like, they helped me get ready for like what I do'*. (US_1)
Perceiving change in parental support behavior during transition	Children notice and interpret changes in the way parents provide support upon transitioning.	*'I think we've definitely, like, come closer. Like, talking about soccer. [. . .] Um, I think we've kind of like, they were happy when I made the decision to switch. So, [. . .] I guess that bonded us a little bit'*. (US_8)
Viewing parental support as central to performance and identity	Children connect parents' thoughts and behaviors to their academy performance and identity as soccer players.	*'It's important that they think that my soccer is important and that they care about it. And that makes me feel like I'm important and my soccer is important'*. (US_1)

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

Noticing gaps between desired and received parental support	Children identify mismatches between the support they hope for and what they feel to receive from parents.	*'Well, there's this thing my dad does. He, he used to do it all the time. Now he does it sometimes. If I usually make a mistake, he's like, yelling and like "get back, get back get forward, we'll get forward". I'm like, I can't concentrate at the sport and him at the same time. So, it's kind of confusing and hard'.* (US_7)

says because he uses hand signals [. . .], there's a right lot of sign language going on" (UK_9).

When prompted about their preferences for parental support behavior, children disclosed that they were not fond of their parents' over-involvement and display of performance-related pressure. Specifically, children identified negative effects of their parents' behavior on their soccer performance, their enjoyment, as well as the parent-child relationship. One player reported: "Just not shout at me when I'm like, because when I work hard, they encourage me to work hard but still shout at me" (UK_{10}). Similar to sentiments in the German data, children described their parents to place an emphasis on remaining in the academy for future benefits which evoked a perceived obligation to improve in children: "They want me to play football really bad; they want me to go far like making a professional footballer" (UK_{13}) or "It matters a lot what they think about my performance, like I'm trying to impress my mum and dad but also because I'm trying to impress the coaches, too" (UK_6).

United States

Seven sub-themes were created to describe children's perceptions of and expectations towards parental support in the United States (see Table 1). In line with the German interviews, children determined parental support by their physical presence in attending practice and competitions or in facilitating soccer-related preparation and logistics. This commitment of parents reflected their interest and unconditional love: "They're watching me [. . .] and they're not doing something else because that means that my soccer is really important" (US_8). Further, children described instances of parents providing transportation or equipment as well as emotional support through positive reinforcement which alleviated their perceived performance pressure and positively nurtured children's self-esteem: "[. . .] they would tell me that I could, like, do some stuff that I thought I couldn't do. And in the end, I was able to do it" (US_2). Along with the provision of emotional support, interviews showed parents' informational support in sharing performance-based feedback, game analysis, or soccer-specific coaching. Here, children recognized the value of honest feedback from their parents for their development, even after a negative performance: "Yeah, sometimes, they give me negative feedback. I mean, it feels like they're doing the right thing. Because like, they don't want to like, fake that I did a really good job" (US_6). For some children in the United States, the transition to a soccer academy was associated with increased parental involvement and improved family relationships, as one player recalled: "I think we've definitely, like, come closer. Like, talking about soccer. [. . .] Um, I think we've kind of like, they were happy when I made the decision to switch. So, [. . .] I guess that bonded us a little bit" (US_8).

Across the interviews, children identified undesired parental behaviors including unwanted coaching advice, distractions caused by parents' yelling from the sideline or their parents being angry after a negative performance. However, it seemed difficult to express expectations on how they would prefer their parents to act which is reflected in the following quote: "Ah, not really [*i.e., having an idea on support preferences*], I just want them to be happy that I am on a team and stuff" (US_2).

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore children's experiences of and expectations for parental support upon transitioning and adapting to an early specialization pathway in a professional youth soccer academy. In adopting a cross-cultural approach with data collections in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States, we situated children's experiences within a broader societal context, recognizing the constitutive role of culture to talent and career development. Overall, our findings confirm parental support as an important resource for children transitioning to and navigating talent development environments (Dorsch et al., 2022; Hauser et al., 2024; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Wuerth et al., 2004). Established social support dimensions including instrumental support, emotional support, and informational support (Taylor, 2011) were evident in each country with unique presentations, whereas autonomy support (see Burke et al., 2023) was not reflected in our data. Considering that Burke and colleagues interviewed

adolescent athletes, the distinctive emphasis of our work on including younger children who get involved with an intensified context early must be highlighted.

The importance of parents' physical presence for children in Germany and the United States can be understood through multiple theoretical lenses. According to attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991), children seek emotional security from caregivers, and thus parental presence provides a sense of safety to explore ("secure base" effect). This effect might be particularly pronounced upon transitioning to a new talent development environment, as children need to manage adaptations to professionalized structures, rules, and norms (Reeves et al., 2009; Richardson et al., 2004). It is well-documented that children's perception of their parent's interest and involvement in sport is a predictor for sustained participation (Gould et al., 1985; Horn & Horn, 2007). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1971) would hence argue that when parents are continuously present, children associate soccer with positive reinforcement and are more likely to stay motivated and engaged, which is mirrored in the present data. Similarly, parental presence could fulfil the relatedness need of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), making children feel emotionally connected and valued, and thus increasing their intrinsic motivation.

A large body of evidence positions parents as an ambiguous but key factor to a healthy and sustained sports participation, having the ability to facilitate children's development and success through support while often being a reason for early dropout due to pressure (Battaglia et al., 2022; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2016). A corresponding cultural difference in the data relates to perceived changes in and interpretations of parental involvement when transitioning into and adapting to becoming involved with a professional youth soccer academy. Children in the United States reported an enhanced sense of closeness within the parent-child relationship due to their increased involvement, which aligns with reports on the potential of high-performance sports pathways to generate a shared reality and increased connection between children and parents (Clarke & Harwood, 2014). Children in Germany and the United Kingdom, however, described their parents to (over-)emphasize the importance of their academy participation for future success, resulting in undesired and pressuring parenting behaviors. Overall, these findings resonate with Dorsch et al. (2009) systemic understanding of parent-child relationships as dynamic (i.e., being improved or disrupted by a sport environment). The divergence might further be explained by the social status of soccer and its varying degree of professionalization in each country. In Germany and the United Kingdom soccer is deeply rooted in the culture and is of high social significance, constituting to national and athletic identity (Mitchell et al., 2014). Both countries further share that soccer is highly professionalized and commercialized, with the English Premier League being the market leader (e.g., commercial and broadcasting revenue). As such, it appears plausible that upon being signed by an academy becoming a professional soccer player reflects a viable life trajectory for families in Germany and the United Kingdom more than in the United States, which is mirrored in perceived differences of parental pressure.

Further cross-cultural differences became evident in the lived extent of parents' involvement in their children's academy experiences. Evidence has shown that children's development is fostered through parental engagement and interest in their offspring's sporting experiences (Côté & Hay, 2002). Utilizing the informational support dimension as an example, children in the United States valued their parents' performance-related feedback alongside coaches', and families in the United Kingdom were characterized by developing a unique sense of non-verbal communication during soccer play. However, in the context of German academies, children expressed an increased need for conversations with their parents to reflect and make sense of their soccer-related experiences which alludes to parents' role as interpreters (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). This might be explained by the cultural understanding of parenting across the respective countries. In Germany, parental involvement, particularly in cooperating with institutions such as schools or academies, seems to be more conservative and restricted and less organized as compared to, e.g., Parent-Teacher-Associations, in the United Kingdom and the United States (see Eckardt & Dorsch, 2025). Parent-child affirmative communication, however, has been identified as fundamental to procuring positive developmental outcomes for children in sport (Grimm et al., 2017) and should thus be facilitated by stakeholders, particularly in Germany. In line with this notion, societal and cultural effects on talent development environments become salient in the data through children's reports of manifested academy regulations. Because transgressive parental sideline behavior seems to be more prominent in Germany (Finn & Giulianotti, 2013; Grunau, 2020), it could have contributed to the academies' pursuit in distancing parents from the soccer ground. According to the interviews, these regulations, however, limited children's opportunity for desired support.

Across all three countries, children experienced difficulties in voicing their preferences for discrete parental support behaviors. Drawing from developmental psychology theories (Piaget, 1976; Premack & Woodruff, 1978; Raphael et al., 2007), children's

abstract understanding of concepts (i.e., parental support) and mental states (i.e., understanding of parents' intentions) as well as their linguistic abilities (i.e., translating needs into actions) might not have been fully developed in the present sample. On the other hand, knowing that their children did not disclose preferences for complex support behaviors could also alleviate parental stress, as parenting has been found to become increasingly demanding due to, e.g., cultural values (DeFreese et al., 2018; Ren et al., 2024).

Limitations & Implications for future research

Despite the unique contributions offered by this research, several limitations of the study should be acknowledged and discussed. Although we employed a cross-cultural approach to data collection and analysis, we acknowledge the North American/Eurocentric nature of the participants with whom we engaged. Further, age- and gender-specific influences on parental support should be considered, as the data speak to lived realities of male soccer players aged 7 to 11 years. Interviewing young children who have invested in football academy involvement early reflects a major strength of our study but potentially limited the depth and degree of reflection within the interviews. Methodologically, limitations pertain to the procedure, length, and timing of conducted interviews. Although striving for a degree of standardization across countries, our field research was determined by academy facilities and organization. As such, interviews were conducted in person in Germany and the United Kingdom but online in the United States, and interviews were scheduled during practice in Germany and the United Kingdom which might have made children distracted and eager to return to training.

Given the global nature of soccer, future research may wish to address our research objective in other cultures as well as in female talent development pathways. Considering children's difficulties with formulating expectations towards their parents, we further recommend favouring more child-oriented methods of data collection such as photovoice reflection (see Johnson et al., 2020) or "draw, write, and tell" (Angell et al., 2014) to facilitate children's meta-cognitions and reflections.

Practical implications

Sharing best practices across TDEs is essential for optimizing support systems for young athletes. Insights from the present study have generated important cross-cultural knowledge and therefore hold the potential to inform developmental trajectories within soccer academies around the globe. In each of the three countries, children voiced the importance of their parents' involvement in academy pathways for their individual development which reflects an imperative of youth sports associations to create effective partnerships with parents (see Eckardt & Dorsch, 2025). When understanding parents as contributors to children's sport experiences and outcomes, youth soccer academies can leverage opportunities for parents to meaningfully participate and support talent development.

It is common practice for soccer academies to regulate parent behavior through, e.g., codes of conduct or a "silent sideline" initiative. The importance of parents' physical proximity for children in Germany highlighted the shift towards a holistic athlete-centred developmental approach, as commonly adopted in Scandinavia and the United States. The effects of regulations limiting parent-child interactions on children should thus be assessed and inform adaptations where necessary.

Academy practices in Germany and the United Kingdom should also be mindful of the expectations placed on young athletes concerning their professional futures. To mitigate potential negative consequences, practitioners within academy soccer should implement educational programmes for parents, raising awareness about the risks of excessive pressure and promoting a more balanced approach to talent development and wellbeing. Specifically, parents should become aware of individualized and stage-specific support needs of their children and view sports as a means to connect and nurture the parent-child relationship beyond the home. Similarly, practitioners should create TDEs which empower and enable children and youth to reflect on and to communicate their support preferences to parents to best support their wellbeing and athletic development.

Conclusion

The present study explored children's experiences of and preferences for parental support during early engagement with academy soccer. Comparing data in Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States revealed how TDEs and pathways uniquely shape psychosocial outcomes for children. As such, the transition and adaptation to competitive youth soccer was associated with experiences of increased parental involvement across all support dimensions (i.e., instrumental, emotional, informational support) but also performance expectations. Although data do not speak to perceived

substantial changes in parental support, children expressed difficulties in voicing their expectations towards discrete support behaviors. Recognizing cross-cultural differences can inform efforts to create supportive environments where children feel both encouraged and able to voice their needs, ensuring that parental involvement remains a *resource* rather than a source of pressure during early academy involvement.

Notes

1. *Note*. In three cases, both parents of the player completed the demographic questionnaire.
2.. The Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) in British soccer classifies academies into four categories (1–4), with Category 1 denoting the highest level of resources, recruitment reach and competition, and Category 4 the most limited.

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ORCID

Valeria C. Eckardt http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6852-7421
James Newman http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4957-836X
Travis E. Dorsch http://orcid.org/0009-0006-6248-2270

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