



A Phenomenological Study of Parental Involvement in Youth Soccer Following a Parent Education Program

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Abstract: This qualitative study examines parents' changing views on their children's participation in organized sport, focusing on shifts before and after a structured parent education program. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), data were collected through pre- and post-focus group interviews with 17 parents (average age 47.6) of football players aged 10–12. The program, held bi-monthly near the training venue, included ten sessions on communication, parental roles, anxiety, and child development. The study investigates how targeted pedagogical support influences parental attitudes, expectations, and behaviours. Findings showed changing parental interpretations of youth sport. Prior to the intervention, parents reported feelings of pride and enthusiasm, as well as concerns about injury, fairness, and coaching influence. Gender stereotypes influenced their views on participation and goals. After the program, parents noted three main changes: (a) better communication with children, (b) increased awareness of sport's psychosocial aspects, and (c) greater recognition of their influence on sports experiences. However, they also faced challenges in guiding children's health habits and performance, prompting broader debates on responsibility and adult boundaries in youth sport. The program encouraged parents to rethink their views of sport beyond competition, recognizing its role in personal growth, social skills, and values. Despite challenges with motivation, routines, and norms, parents showed more reflexivity, autonomy-supportive communication, and openness to change. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of well-structured educational programs in enabling parents to develop the skills and perspectives needed to navigate the complex realities of youth sport, thereby encouraging constructive, supportive, and ethically grounded involvement.

Keywords: Parent-Child Relationships, Sportsmanship, Life Skills, Youth Sports, Adult Education.

1. Introduction

Close and caring relationships are widely acknowledged as vital to health and well-being throughout life (Davis *et al.*, 2021; Dohme *et al.*, 2021; Lisinskiene *et al.*, 2018; Stefansen *et al.*, 2018). Parents have a key role in building and nurturing these relationships, which influence various aspects of their children's lives, including education, socialisation, and extracurricular activities (Dohme *et al.*, 2021; Lai & Carr, 2018; Quintó Romani, 2020; Stefansen *et al.*, 2018). The ability to foster meaningful connections is essential to children's psychological and emotional well-being (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Lai & Carr, 2018; Lisinskiene *et al.*, 2018; Sanders *et al.*, 2024), leading researchers studying the parent-child-adolescent relationship to have extensively relied on individual development theories (Dorsch *et al.*, 2019; Mahmud, 2021; Obikane

et al., 2020; Quinto Romani, 2020). Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1978; Ainsworth, 1989) has become a prominent framework in this field, offering a fundamental perspective on how parental behaviours influence children's interpersonal development (Cassidy *et al.*, 2017; Gibson *et al.*, 2008). The presence of secure attachment has been linked to emotional intelligence, autonomy, and self-esteem (Lai & Carr, 2018; Lisinskiene *et al.*, 2018), particularly when parents' behaviours and care shape the developmental pathways of young people (Davis *et al.*, 2020; Gibson *et al.*, 2008; La Guardia *et al.*, 2000; Mahmud, 2021; Monaco *et al.*, 2019; Scaini & Caputi, 2019).

In relation to the above, many theoretical constructions have been proposed. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) introduced a theoretical model where parental support is conveyed through four



primary modalities: (1) motivational encouragement, (2) behavioural demonstration/modelling, (3) positive reinforcement, and (4) guidance (Green *et al.*, 2007; Whitaker, 2019). Subsequent research indicates that parental involvement is associated with parents' motivational beliefs, which are particularly significant because these beliefs influence how parents approach their roles in their children's education and extracurricular activities (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2005). Consequently, a substantial body of research has developed regarding parental involvement in social studies, education, and sport. This phenomenon has been thoroughly documented, with numerous studies offering further insights into its implications and applications (Azimi & Tamminen, 2020; Davis-Keen *et al.*, 2021; Sampol *et al.*, 2019; Thrower *et al.*, 2017; Wagnsson *et al.*, 2021). Converging evidence highlights the vital role of parents in shaping children's motivation and sustained participation in sport (Stefansen *et al.*, 2018; Strandbu *et al.*, 2019; Thrower *et al.*, 2017; Wagnsson *et al.*, 2021). Parents influence their children's sporting experiences in various ways, including providing financial support, logistical help, and emotional encouragement (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004).

A significant body of research has shown that secure attachment relationships in sport are fundamental to children's athletic development and performance (Davis *et al.*, 2021; Davis-Keen *et al.*, 2021; Dorsch *et al.*, 2017). Parents, occupying a unique position, can notice subtle changes in their children's behaviours and emotions. As a result, they provide valuable insights relevant to the field of sport (Sarmiento *et al.*, 2019). The findings highlight a strong correlation between the nature of parental attachment and the quality of parental care, which ultimately shapes the development of healthy internal working models (Dorsch *et al.*, 2017; Wagnsson *et al.*, 2021). The existing literature shows common features in cases where secure and democratic parent-child relationships are established, leading to increased internal motivation among young athletes to engage in sport (Strandbu *et al.*, 2019; Wagnsson *et al.*, 2021). The significance of parental support in fostering strong bonds with teammates has also been emphasized in current research (Dorsch *et al.*, 2017; Freire *et al.*, 2019; Stefansen, 2018; Strandbu *et al.*, 2019).

The term "supportive role" refers to the provision of financial, logistical, and emotional assistance to foster initial and ongoing opportunities (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). Research shows that

parental expectations about the benefits of their child's involvement in sports influence the support they offer (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Sarmiento *et al.*, 2019). Researchers have studied the relationships between young athletes and their parents using current frameworks of sport parental engagement (Dorsch *et al.*, 2017, 2018, 2019; Fernandez-Rio & Bernabe-Martín, 2019; Garst *et al.*, 2020; Holt *et al.*, 2009). An interesting finding from the broader literature review was the link between athletes' age and their perceptions of appropriate parental involvement (Kilger, M., 2020; Strandbu *et al.*, 2019; Voula, 2017). While supportive behaviours can boost engagement, excessive pressure related to Performance-Contingent Parenting (PCP) has been shown to cause stress or lead to dropout (Felton & Jowett, 2015; Davis *et al.*, 2021). In their study, Krskova, Boumann, and Breyer (2024) identified a direct relationship between children's competitiveness, discipline, and parental expectations.

The social support system for young athletes encompasses a network of individuals, including coaches, parents, siblings, teammates, and sports officials (Dorsch *et al.*, 2022). Within this network, parents are considered a primary and influential force, forming the core of the support system (Burke *et al.*, 2021; Dorsch *et al.*, 2017). As parents invest more resources into their children's achievements, the concept of "appropriate" or "optimal" parental involvement at different stages of athletic development has become a key topic of debate among researchers, stakeholders, coaches, and parents (Dorsch *et al.*, 2022). Increased research highlights a higher occurrence of parental reports of stress related to their child's performance and reactions during competitions. The study by Burgess *et al.* (2016) suggests that this stress largely stems from parents' expectations for their child, regardless of how talented they perceive their child as an athlete. The findings support earlier studies showing that parents of adolescent athletes experience higher levels of life stress and greater time pressure compared to parents without children in sports (Sutcliffe *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, various stressors linked to children's participation in sports have been identified, including family difficulties (Burgess *et al.*, 2016; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that parents supporting young athletes may experience greater pressure in their relationships with their children than parents whose children are not involved in sports. This idea is backed by the research of Tamminen *et al.* (2024) and Schemenauer & Chu (2023).—However, a lack of training programs for

families still exists, as noted by scholars (Andermo *et al.*, 2020; Lisinskiene *et al.*, 2018).

Consequently, recent research has concentrated on educational programs across various fields (Coates & Howe, 2023; Sampol *et al.*, 2019; Waters *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, research indicates that structured educational interventions can help parents develop healthier engagement strategies, promoting a balance between support and autonomy (Dohme *et al.*, 2021; Dorsch *et al.*, 2017; Fernandez-Rio & Bernabe-Martín, 2019; Sanders *et al.*, 2024).

Despite strong evidence linking parental behaviors with youth sport experiences, structured, theory-driven education for parents remains uneven in scope, duration, and evaluation. This study addresses this gap by examining how an adult-learning-informed intervention shapes the meanings parents ascribe to their actions in grassroots football.

Jarvis (2004) asserts that the primary goal of a non-formal adult educational program is not the transmission of pre-established knowledge; rather, it is the development of a "critical approach to situations". This is a skill that will be particularly relevant to everyday practice after completing the program. Accordingly, the principles that underpin adult education should form the foundation for creating a successful non-formal parent education program. Typically, the programs and interventions offered to parents are classified as either non-formal or informal educational initiatives, both of which aim to support and enhance parenting quality (Perrault & Massood, 2018). Developing effective parent education programs in youth sports requires careful attention to both content and delivery methods. Recent research highlights several key characteristics of effective interventions, including a grounding in adult learning principles (Knowles *et al.*, 2020), utilization of experiential techniques such as role-playing and guided reflection (Burgueño *et al.*, 2020), and the inclusion of sport-specific knowledge (Dorsch *et al.*, 2017).

Nevertheless, significant deficiencies remain in the design and implementation of a parental program. Many initiatives lack solid theoretical foundations, with numerous reviewed programs failing to clearly articulate their conceptual frameworks (Andermo *et al.*, 2020; Richmond *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, several programs are criticized for their insufficient duration, as real behavioral change usually requires sustained engagement that extends beyond the typical 2-week timeframe of many programs (Van Der Mheen, 2019).

The most successful programs demonstrate cultural sensitivity and flexibility, adapting content to address socioeconomic disparities and gender-specific needs (Azimi & Tamminen, 2020; Thrower *et al.*, 2017). However, challenges persist in effectively engaging vulnerable populations and overcoming resistance to change (Bankar, 2018; Verloigne, *et al.*, 2017).

The sports field is an emerging area in which parents require support to provide high-quality assistance to young athletes. Existing programs, whether offered by research organizations, clubs, or other groups, aim to enhance the positive influence of parents on the development of athletes at both individual and sporting levels (Côté, 1999). Research shows that parents seek science-based, structured educational programs (Thrower *et al.*, 2019). Designing and implementing these programs requires careful planning. In their influential work on core principles for designing programs to promote good mental health in sport, Breslin and colleagues (2019) provided a comprehensive framework for detailed planning, assessing the current situation and needs. This framework includes integrating theoretical models, developing approaches tailored to the specific sport context, and evaluating program effectiveness. The limitations of current programs are obvious as some lack systematic assessment methods (Breslin *et al.*, 2019), and few use validated measures to monitor long-term outcomes (Dorsch & Vierimaa, 2017). This evaluation gap hinders understanding of program effectiveness and limits evidence-based improvements. Recent research offers promising approaches, such as multi-level interventions that combine workshops with family activities (Tamminen *et al.*, 2020) and collaborative models involving both parents and coaches (Dorsch *et al.*, 2019). However, persistent disparities in participation – notably higher engagement among wealthier families (Dorsch *et al.*, 2017) – highlight the need for more inclusive design strategies.

Based on the above, this study aims to explore the effects of an educational intervention program - specifically designed for young athletes' parents—on parental behaviors, particularly focusing on the meanings parents ascribe to their actions and behaviors within youth sport settings. Accordingly, the main research questions are:

1. What meaning do parents attribute to their children's sports participation?
2. What motivations and challenges did parents encounter regarding their children's involvement in

youth sports before the implementation of an intervention?

3. What changes could have occurred in parental perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours following the intervention?

2. Materials & Methods

2.1 Methodology and Philosophical Underpinnings

Adopting an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, this study aims to examine parents' evolving experiences and perspectives on their involvement in youth sport before and after participating in an educational programme. IPA was chosen for its ability to uncover the subjective meanings that parents assign to their experiences, emphasising how their understanding of involvement evolves following structured guidance (Smith, J.A., *et al.*, 2009).

IPA is founded on three core principles: idiographic, phenomenological, and interpretative (Noon, 2018; Smith, *et al.*, 2009). The idiographic approach highlights individual parents' narratives, exploring their unique language, emotions, and contextual factors without reducing them to broad categories. This aligns with the study's aim to capture how parents interpret their roles differently over a longitudinal design focused on changes in involvement (Jeong & Othman, 2016; Smith, J. A., & Shinebourne, 2012). The phenomenological aspect focuses on maintaining parents' detailed descriptions of their lived experiences, including their direct quotations to show shifts in their perceptions after the program (Isari & Pourkos, 2015; Smith, J.A., & Shinebourne, 2012). The approach acknowledges that parental involvement is experienced subjectively, as even shared experiences (e.g., attending games) can have different meanings for different individuals (Isari & Pourkos, 2015; Noon, E.J., 2018; Smith, J.A., & Shinebourne, 2012).

Consistent with the interpretivist paradigm, the present study highlighted parents' narrated experiences, alongside the researcher's interpretive role in shaping these accounts into shared understandings. The interpretative process was inductive and iterative, with themes emerging through cycles of engagement between the researcher and parents, focusing on parents' self-reported meanings—how they initially rationalized their actions before the program and later reinterpreted them afterwards—thereby emphasizing the dynamic nature of parental involvement as a socially

constructed phenomenon (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Hurley *et al.*, 2017; Smith, J. A., & Shinebourne, 2012; Tsiolis, 2013).

IPA fostered a deep understanding of parents' perspectives through pre- and post-intervention focus group interviews conducted. This longitudinal approach enabled parents to share their initial beliefs (e.g., expectations, pressures) and later reflect on how the program developed or changed their understanding of support, communication, and boundaries in youth sport (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Pring, 2002).

IPA's flexibility was particularly well-suited to revealing shifts in parental attitudes, as it captures the complexity of interpersonal learning and the program's impact on collective norms.

2.2 Participants

In line with IPA's emphasis on homogeneous samples sharing a common experience, this study recruited 19 parents (average age = 47.6 years, SD = 3.61; men = 12, women = 7) from a youth football team to examine their views before and after the educational program (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith, & Osborn, 2015). All participants were affiliated with a football academy that operated independently of the club's men's varsity team. Most of them (16/19) had prior sports experience (7 in team sports and 9 in individual sports), and their educational backgrounds included secondary education (n = 10), university degrees (n = 6), and master's qualifications (n = 3). This diversity enriched the dataset by capturing a range of perspectives on parental involvement, from practical support (e.g., attending training) to emotional engagement (e.g., communicating with coaches). This sample, described as purposive volunteering, is typical of IPA (responding to invitations) (Burgess *et al.*, 2016; Larkin *et al.*, 2018; Lisinskienė & Lochbaum, 2019; Maxwell & Kerwin, 2023; Noon, E., 2018; Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2024). The football academy adhered to clear operational regulations for parents, distinguishing it from other Greek youth teams (for example, it did not employ "assistant parents," a common practice in developmental leagues). Parents were selected from the U12 team (K13 age group) to ensure homogeneity. All players attended primary school and did not have specialized positional roles in football, ensuring that parents shared similar developmental concerns and levels of involvement. The participants' homogeneity—shared team environment, child's age, and participation in the program enabled a detailed analysis of how the

educational intervention affected the parental experience (Durá *et al.*, 2024a; Howard *et al.*, 2019). IPA's idiographic approach ensured that each parent's account was examined individually before identifying overarching themes, thus preserving the uniqueness of their pre- and post-program reflections (Crawford, 2019; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith, & Osborn, 2015).

2.3 Procedure and Data Collection

Aligned with IPA methodology, this study employed a blend of data collection methods with parents, including focus group interviews, observation, and reflective diaries (Miller *et al.*, 2018; Noon, M., 2017; Roberts, 2013; Tang & Santos, 2017). These methods helped gather detailed, experiential accounts relevant to the phenomenon under study (Rodham *et al.*, 2013; Smith *et al.*, 2009; Smith, & Osborn, 2015).

After finalizing the research design, the study received ethical approval from the institutional Bioethics Committee of the School of Physical Education and Sports Science at the University of Athens (1301/14-07-2021). Following ethical approval, the lead researcher first met with the head coach to explain the study's objectives. Following the initial contact, the head coach confirmed the club's suitability (e.g., structured parental regulations and moderate levels of involvement) and facilitated access to the U12 team. Upon receiving the team's coaches' consent, a one-hour informational session was held with parents to explain the study's aims, confidentiality protocols, and the educational program's structure. Written consent was obtained from all participating parents ($n = 19$). In the following weeks, two parents informed the researcher that they could not participate due to professional commitments. A social group chat facilitated logistics (e.g., scheduling) and provided a space for parents to share informal reflections between sessions. Focus groups were used as the main method for data collection to utilise group dynamics and draw out shared perspectives that might not surface in individual interviews (Jeitler, *et al.*, 2020; Luguetti *et al.*, 2019). This method was consistent with the study's phenomenological emphasis on lived experience rather than assessment (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Isari & Pourkos, 2015; Pring, 2002; Roberts, 2013; Santos Pastor, *et al.* 2021).

In each focus group session, at least 14 parents participated ($M = 14.2$). The discussion was facilitated by the lead researcher, with an experienced doctoral

student monitoring participant interaction and ensuring methodological rigour (Isari & Pourkos, 2015; Gratton & Jones, 2004; Morgan, 1987). Both the researcher and the assistant, who are experienced in conducting group interviews, also collaborated on the pilot focus group study (Dohme *et al.*, 2021; Lisinskiene & Lochbaum, 2019; Robson, 2008). The semi-structured interview guide was informed by existing literature on parental involvement in youth sports research (Gratton & Jones, 2004; Knight & Holt, 2013b; Knight & Holt, 2013a; Morgan, 1987) and refined after the pilot study involving parents of a girls' football team (Caillaud & Flick, 2017; Wilkinson & Penney, 2021). Demographic data, including age, gender, education level, and sporting background, were collected prior to the first focus group interview.

2.4 Pre-Program Data Collection

Two focus group interviews were conducted prior to implementing the educational program to explore parents' previous experiences and their interpretation of the phenomenon under study. The focus groups were held in a room adjacent to the training field during the children's sessions, providing a convenient, contextually relevant environment for participants and facilitating attendance (Garst *et al.*, 2020; Lane *et al.*, 2021; Wahl-Alexander *et al.*, 2017). Groups comprised thirteen and fourteen parents, respectively, and the sessions lasted 54 and 63 minutes until information power/saturation was indicated. A sample from the pre-program interview guide is presented in Figure 1.

The researcher also conducted semi-structured participant observations during training sessions and matches to contextualize parents' behaviours (e.g., sideline interactions, communication with coaches) (Durá *et al.*, 2024a; Luguetti & Oliver, 2020; Sinclair & Thornton, 2018). Field notes and audio recordings followed a semi-structured format across three stages—arrival, training/match, and departure and documented participants' language, nonverbal cues, everyday practices, and group dynamics (Horne *et al.*, 2020; Lindgren & Barker, 2019; Luguetti & Oliver, 2020; Robson, 2008; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Sinclair & Thornton, 2018).

A reflective research diary recorded the researcher's interactions with parents, emerging biases, and reflections on the research process (Lindgren & Barker, 2019; Roux, 2020; Santos Pastor *et al.*, 2021).

- How has the child's involvement with football and training changed over time? How has your role as a parent changed?
- Has your child's participation changed? How have your requirements and roles changed?
- What is your experience of coaches in sport?
- What factors do you think have the most significant impact on your experience as a parent during your child's practice and games?

Figure 1. Part of the pre-program interview guide

2.5 The Educational Program

The data collected from the pre-program focus group sessions, along with a thorough review of parent education schemes used in other countries, directed the design of the intervention (Harwood & Knight, 2015; Holt *et al.*, 2017; Knight & Holt, 2013a, 2013b; Thrower *et al.*, 2016, 2017; Vincent & Christensen, 2015).

The educational program was designed based on adult learning principles (Knowles, 1989, in Knowles *et al.*, 2020; Rogers, 1979), emphasizing creating a supportive and empathetic learning environment that fosters trust and rapport.

The program's core themes were derived from relevant literature (Harwood & Knight, 2015; Thrower *et al.*, 2016; Vincent & Christensen, 2015), highlighting that effective parental involvement depends on parents' ability to manage organizational and developmental needs of youth sports participation, foster positive relationships with key stakeholders, provide appropriate types of support, choose suitable sporting opportunities, employ effective parenting styles within sports settings, manage emotional challenges during competitions, and adjust involvement according to their child's evolving athletic career stage.

The program lasted six months, with 60-minute sessions held every two weeks, taking two breaks during the Christmas and Easter holidays. Research shows that programs shorter than eight weeks tend to have limited outcomes (Tamminen *et al.*, 2020; Van Der Mheen, 2019). Each session was designed as a standalone module, allowing parents who missed one to join later sessions without disruption (Vincent & Christensen, 2015). Additional measures included a blog where multimedia presentations were uploaded for absent parents, as well as a handbook containing session materials and guidelines for parents to use during and after the program. Lastly, an e-brochure highlighted good practices for sports parents.

Throughout the program, the researcher kept a reflective journal. Randomized observations were also conducted during training sessions and matches to record behavioral aspects.

The final version of the program consisted of ten 60-minute workshops covering communication skills, personal empowerment, athlete development, as well as knowledge of sports, developmental characteristics, and the evolving athletic journey of their children. The sessions focused on the following specific topics:

- Mainstream theories on parental involvement: reflections on the unique and vital role of parents, especially when it involves being a parent to a young athlete.
- Physical and social development for ages 10-12. Addressing young athletes' needs. Neurocognitive growth and sport with a field expert (sleep, screen time, concentration, rehabilitation, stress).
- Communication skills: active listening and effective communication techniques. The transition to adolescence. Engaging in constructive dialogue with coaches and athletes. Improving collaboration and relationships with a field expert.
- Emotional Regulation: Handling competitive stress. Choosing to value defeat over victory. Enhancing awareness of the connections between behaviors, thoughts, desires, and emotions with a field expert.
- Goal setting, both long-term and short-term, involves distinguishing support from over-involvement and adapting roles as young athletes develop.
- Nutrition and functional screening for young athletes, including a discussion with a doctor, an orthopedist, and a nutritionist.
- Long-term Development: Aligning expectations with athletes' needs. Clarifying parental roles within the coach-athlete-parent triad and ensuring personal behaviors align with aspirations.

- Meeting with the coach, athletic development, and available meeting opportunities; managing the demands of youth sports.
- What comes next? Thinking about the 18-year-old son or daughter.

Following the key guidelines for adult education within experiential learning, each training session included introductory, main, and concluding parts with interactive activities such as communication exercises, role-playing, and guided discussions (Knowles *et al.*, 2020; Dorsch *et al.*, 2017; Szeszulski *et al.*, 2021; Vella *et al.*, 2021). When physical attendance was not possible, online participation was offered as an alternative. This option was used on two separate occasions.

2.6 Post-Program Data Collection

Two focus group sessions with fifteen and sixteen parents were conducted, lasting 63 and 76 minutes respectively, until information power/saturation was indicated, to explore:

Changes in parents' perception of "appropriate" involvement.

Reflections on their and their children's sporting experiences.

Reflections on the program's impact (e.g., communication strategies, emotional regulation).

A sample from the post-program interview guide is presented in Figure 2.

2.7 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

The analysis followed the iterative stages of IPA, as described by Smith *et al.* (2009), with a particular focus on parental voice in youth sport. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and each transcript was subjected to multiple detailed readings. During this process, descriptive comments captured the experiential content of parents' accounts, while linguistic comments concentrated on language use, metaphors, and emotional tone. Conceptual notes, by contrast, represented the researcher's initial interpretive engagement (Burgess *et al.*, 2016; Rodham *et al.*, 2013; Santos Pastor *et al.*, 2021). These overlapping layers of annotation offered a multidimensional entry point into the data.

From these notes, emergent themes were inductively developed, with a focus on parents' perspectives rather than imposing predefined categories. This method enabled the variety and uniqueness of parental experiences to surface, while also recognizing points of overlap across accounts (Roberts, 2013; Smith & Osborn, 2015). Themes were identified from verbatim extracts to ensure transparency and depth in the analysis.

- How would you describe your experience as a parent of this football team now that the season is coming to an end?
- Has the child's involvement with football and training changed over time?
- Has your role as a parent changed?
- How would you describe your overall experience of the team's matches? What factors make your experience positive and what factors make it negative?
- Can you describe an incident that comes to mind from your experience in the group this year that relates to the program you attended?
- What suggestions do you have for improving parents' experiences in football/sports?
- What factors do you think had the most significant impact on your experience as a parent during your child's practice and games?

Figure 2. Sample items from the post-program interview guide

The themes were then organized into overarching categories through iterative comparison, abstraction, and refinement. At this stage, the interpretative work deepened, moving beyond descriptive accounts to explore the significance of parents' experiences within the broader context of the educational program. Direct quotations were integrated to illustrate meaning-making processes and to anchor interpretations in participants' own words (Noon, E. J., 2018; Smith, J. A. *et al.*, 2009).

To ensure analytical credibility, several measures were implemented. First, member checking was conducted with 12 parents, who reviewed the emerging findings and unanimously confirmed that they reflected their lived experiences. Second, a collaborative audit took place: the second author systematically examined the coding framework and thematic synthesis to ensure alignment with IPA's idiographic and interpretative principles (Rodham *et al.*, 2013; Smith *et al.*, 2009). These steps enhanced both the coherence and transparency of the analytical process (Smith, & Osborn, 2015).

3. Results

3.1 Focus groups

The interpretive phenomenological analysis of data from focus group sessions identified five main themes reflecting the evolving perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of parents before and after participation in the educational program. The themes were:

- The meaning of sport and its implications.
- The challenges involved in children's development.
- The impact of sport on the parent-child relationship.
- The role of the coach and the dynamics within the team environment.
- The influence of adults on the development of young athletes.

The narratives revealed a gradual shift in parents' understanding from viewing sport primarily as a means to discipline or distract from technology to embracing a broader perspective that sees sport as a space for emotional, social, and personal growth. Additionally, parents reported improved communication and emotional closeness between parents and children, especially after the intervention. The following table

offers an interpretive summary of the themes, their subcomponents, underlying meanings, and illustrative quotes from participants.

3.2 Observation and reflexive diary

The data from observations and the researcher's diary revealed aspects of sporting experiences in developmental settings. IPA demonstrated how small "critical moments" such as a positional change, a coach's tone, or a parent's protest shaped children's and families' experiences. Coaches' pedagogical efforts were in ongoing negotiation with parental expectations, creating a contested environment where success was redefined between the joy of participation and the joy of winning.

During training, children established routines that promoted safety and familiarity. Parents remaining in the café area, trusting the coaches, contributed to a stable environment, enhancing a sense of belonging and psychological security.

Tensions arose between the team's pedagogical approach and some other teams' parents, who prioritized victory. The coach fostered resilience calmly, while others adopted a more authoritarian style. This difference often led to complaints about participation and requests to prevent overly competitive teams. For children, the game is about joy, but for some parents, it becomes a matter of validation and comparison. There were occasions when coaches needed to intervene with team parents of the team, who were subtly trying to guide their children or gently complain to referees. The agreed procedures and team rules did not cause tension but instead fostered humor and understanding in these situations. Parents often expressed pride in the team's mentality and the coaches' attitude during tense moments, such as those involving the referee, the opposing coach, the opposing team, or the parents of the opposing team.

They repeatedly emphasized that the coaches prioritized the young athletes and their development over conflicts focused on winning at all costs. Although trust in the coaches' work was apparent, disagreements also arose from time to time. The example of a young goalkeeper with Asperger syndrome (observed across several matches) highlights the theme of vulnerability. The coach's decision to include this player in the varsity team and give meaningful playing time—despite some unfavorable outcomes—reflected an inclusive pedagogical approach. Conversely, some parents who focused solely on defeat rather than the opportunity for

participation underscored the divide between none of the parents involved in the educational program developmental and competitive mentalities. Notably, expressed disappointment with the coaches' decisions.

Table 1. A presentation of an interpretive synthesis of the themes, subcomponents, underlying meanings, and illustrative participant quotes.

Theme	Sub-theme	Interpretation	Authentic Data
1. The Meaning of Sport	1.1 Initial perceptions — Sport is viewed as a means to reduce screen time and encourage discipline.	Parents view sports, especially football, as more than physical activity; they foster cooperation, discipline, and social skills. It promotes shared responsibility and reduces screen time, keeping children engaged and 'safe' from digital distractions. This perspective emphasizes sport's functional role rather than its intrinsic meaning.	"Children learn to interact in different social settings through football." (Parent 9) "We encouraged him to participate in football to limit his use of the PlayStation" (Parent 8) "It helped us keep him active and away from distractions" (Parent 2)
	1.2 Reframed meaning after the program — Sport as holistic development and character formation	Parents see sport as transformative, fostering resilience and growth. This shift moves from external regulation to internalized learning, making sport a source of moral lessons, perseverance, and identity. Guided reflection helps parents focus on the developmental rather than the instrumental value of participation.	"I now understand that sport is not just an activity, but a character-building process" (Parent 3) "Sport taught him how to lose and stand back up" (Parent 11)
	1.3 Cultural resistance evolving into acceptance	Some parents initially voiced reservations about football's culture and environment but gradually acknowledged its benefits. This reflects a cultural tension between stereotypes of football as "dirty" or morally questionable. Their acceptance increases as they observe their children enjoy themselves and grow.	"I did not want my son to play football, but seeing his passion changed my mind." (Parent 3) "I was not thrilled with the environment, but now I see the value for him" (Parent 1)
	1.4 Gender stereotypes present but also challenged	Parents' narratives showed both reinforcement and disruption of gender norms. While they easily discuss girly sports, the persistence and competence of young female players are gradually shifting these views. Seeing girls thrive in sport can challenge stereotypes and foster more inclusive ideas of football.	"Sofia is the only girl in the team, but she does not give up..." (Parent 7) "I was hesitant at first, but she proved me wrong" (Parent 12)
2. Challenges and Difficulties	2.1 Digital media compete with children's interest in sport	Parents noted the tension between screen entertainment and activity, reflecting a broader childhood struggle where instant digital gratification undermines sustained physical effort.	"Now he would rather play video games than go out to play football" (Parent 10) "Sometimes he says he is too tired, but he is just glued to the screen" (Parent 4)
	2.2 Training vs competition — Lack of motivation for	Children's enthusiasm peaks during games but wanes in training, indicating a preference for visible achievement over slower, skill-building activities.	"They do not want to come to practice. If they had matches all the time, they would" (Parent 5) "He only gets

	practice without immediate reward	From an IPA perspective, it reveals how children's sport's meaning is shaped by extrinsic excitement, while parents struggle to foster intrinsic motivation.	excited when there is a game" (Parent 9)
	2.3 Peer influence — Social context as encouragement or hindrance	The role of peers is crucial to maintaining participation. While belonging offers children a sense of identity and joy, peer dynamics can sometimes discourage involvement or cause disappointment. This highlights sport as a space where friendships enhance participation beyond just skill competition.	"He goes only to be with his friends, but always leaves with a smile" (Parent 13) "The team helps him feel he belongs" (Parent 6) 'He scored two goals, but his teammates complained. Upset, he said he did not want to come back to the team.' (parent 9)
	2.4 Struggles with habits and regulation	Parents struggle with their children's habits, like screen time, nutrition, and sleep. These issues highlight how lifestyle choices outside sports affect physical readiness. The tension between parental guidance and children's autonomy reflects a broader negotiation of control, discipline, and care.	"It is a battle with food... they cannot resist the bad habits" (Parent 15) No matter how hard we attempt, junk food always wins It is challenging to put them to bed on time (parent 2)
	2.5 Online platforms shaping technical and tactical awareness	Children are increasingly using digital resources to learn football strategies, highlighting technology's dual role: competing with physical play while enhancing tactical literacy. It offers agency, self-directed learning, and identity as "knowledgeable players," highlighting its paradoxical nature.	"I see my daughter sitting on YouTube watching some players and saying, 'I am going to try this triple.'" (Parent 7) I have begun reading about football to stay informed. "Now they know more than us; they analyze games like experts." (Parent 8)
3. Parent-Child Relationship	3.1 Shared experiences through sport	Sport creates a space for shared experiences, dialogue, and joy. It acts as a relational bridge, fostering closeness through storytelling and laughter after practice. These moments demonstrate that football's importance extends beyond mere performance, as it helps strengthen family bonds.	"Now we have something in common to talk about and share" (Parent 9) "After training, he tells me stories from the field, and we laugh together" (Parent 7)
	3.2 Emotional resilience and support	Parents view sports as a safe space to experience and process disappointment, thereby fostering emotional regulation in both the child and the parent and highlighting the family's co-learning process. The IPA view shows sport as a	"Losing is a lesson. The important thing is how we handle it as parents" (Parent 6) "He cried after a loss, but then we talked, and he felt better" (Parent 10)

		test for vulnerability, resilience, and empathy.	"My son needed help understanding that defeat is part of the game." (Parent 2)
	3.3 Adolescence- Peers outside the sport environment	Peers outside sports act as competing influences, shaping children's values and behaviors and sometimes challenging the club's ethos and athletes' engagement. Parental and coaching efforts must navigate wider adolescent cultures beyond sport.	'He started to avoid training. I think he wants to go out with friends outside the team instead (parent 14)
	3.4 Program impact: Improved emotional communication and understanding	Parents reported improved communication and increased awareness in responding to their children's emotions, demonstrating how structured interventions can transform parenting and encourage more reflective and attuned responses. These developments strengthen the program's capacity to influence children's experiences and the family's emotional climate.	"Now we can talk to him with more understanding" (Parent 6) "The sessions helped me reflect on how I respond when he is upset" (Parent 1) 'The program was a game changer for me and my son.' (parent 4)
	3.5 The challenge of managing parental and child stress	Managing stress for parents and children is challenging. Parents view sport as both joyful and stressful, balancing their desire for success with the fear of disappointment, often mirroring their children's vulnerabilities. Practical support needs (time, equipment, money) add to stress, showing how parental stress intertwines with identity, responsibility, and relationships.	'I feel stressed when I watch him play and not be disappointed (parent 1) I feel very frustrated because when we reached the stadium, he discovered that he had forgotten his shoes (parent 9) 'My god, what is this? Another game at 8 am on Sunday? (parent 17)
4. Role of the Coach and Team Climate	4.1 Pedagogical Credibility- Coaches as knowledgeable and constructive	Parents valued coaches' expertise and feedback, highlighting the importance of pedagogical authority in teaching skills and modelling positive behavior. Trust in the coach is crucial to the confidence of both children and their parents.	"Our coach explains what the kids need to improve positively" (Parent 9) "He gives feedback without discouraging them" (Parent 11)
	4.2 Desire for structured, ongoing communication.	Parents expressed a strong desire for clearer communication channels. This suggests a need for recognition and partnership, where parental insights and concerns are incorporated into the developmental process. It also highlights a perceived gap between technical guidance and relational transparency.	"I would like him to call us once per term to talk about our child" (Parent 5) "We want to be more informed about our child's development" (Parent 14) 'The coach should insist on not wearing tapes. They do not listen to us.' (parent 17)

	4.3 Behavior and team culture- Coaches as moral exemplars	Coaches and clubs act as moral role models. Parents regard coaches as crucial in shaping children's values and behavior. This emphasizes leadership as performative: a coach's calmness, respect, or aggression influences players. The findings show coaching is an ethical practice that impacts character beyond tactics.	<p>"The coach is the one who determines the behavior of the children" (Parent 3)</p> <p>"If the coach is calm, the kids copy him" (Parent 13)</p> <p>"Some kids would not even shake hands after the game." (Parent 2)</p> <p>"In most cases, you find parents who will be screaming at the referee, or 'Go and kill them.'" (Parent 7)</p> <p>"In the previous team, there was tension and arrogance from the parents, but here the atmosphere is much better." (Parent 12)</p>
5. The influence of adults on the sporting experiences of children.	5.1 The call for psychological and pedagogical expertise	Parents emphasized the importance of consistent psychological and pedagogical support, highlighting the role of sport psychologists in managing emotional regulation and stress in children's sports. They acknowledged that coaching alone cannot fully address emotional challenges, demonstrating an understanding of sport as an emotionally charged pursuit. This also reveals parents' vulnerability as they seek help with complex emotional issues.	<p>"We need someone specialized in sports psychology... not just coaches... someone who can help us and the kids with emotional control during games."</p> <p>It would be helpful to have someone to talk to. Sometimes I do not know how to support my child when she is upset about the match.(parent 4)</p>
	5.2 Adult behavior shaping the sporting atmosphere	Adult behavior impacts a child's sports experience. Parents reported adverse incidents like shouting and unsafe acts in the stands, showing the sidelines as another arena where adult anxieties affect children's safety and enjoyment. This raises ethical questions about the roles of adults as co-creators of the sporting environment.	"Some parents yell so much, it ruins the whole atmosphere" (Parent 2)
	5.3 Structural Barriers and Infrastructural Inadequacies	Infrastructural shortcomings, such as a lack of playing fields and facilities, hinder children's participation and growth. Families view resource shortages as barriers to involvement, highlighting how systemic issues can reduce motivation and disrupt routine and a sense of belonging, leading to frustration.	<p>There are not enough football fields... We keep moving from one place to another – it is tiring for the kids and confusing.</p> <p>'Other teams with fewer athletes have more time to train. (parent 17)</p>

			'They got tired. It is not weird. They train in one-third of the field they play. (parent 10)
	5.4 Organizational Deficits and Federation Policy — Mismatch Between Goals and Practices	Parents criticize the club and Federation policies, calling for annual reclassification of age groups. They highlight a gap between developmentally appropriate goals and an overemphasis on winning, criticizing rigid age categories and result-focused league mentalities. This reveals a disconnect between developmental needs and organizational inertia, emphasizing tensions between grassroots principles and top-down governance.	"Why don't they change the age categories every year? A child born in January has nothing in common with one born in December." (parent 2) 'They did it despite the difference in strength and size from the other team' (parent 1) 'There are so many differences between a child in primary school and a child in junior high school' (parent 9)
	5.5 The men's team: Contrasting mentalities and parental rejection	Parents reacted negatively to the professional men's team culture, like watching the Cup final, which emphasizes results and competition. This contrasts with their preference for developmental, child-centered values over win-at-all-costs mentalities. The rejection redefines what "success" means in youth sport, influenced by their experience in the program.	"We saw bottles flying over the children's heads" (Parent 3) 'We were used to getting youngsters into the stadium with flares. The youngsters should not have been on this side of the field with the hooligans. Board members were cursing the opponents throughout the game. Unacceptable.' (parent 3,7)

4. Discussion

This study aimed to examine how parents interpret their children's participation in sport and how an educational program can influence their engagement and perceptions. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the findings emphasize the evolving importance of sport for parents, the challenges they encounter, and the transformative impact of guided reflection. We position these results within the broader literature on parental involvement, child development, and sports pedagogy, and discuss implications for practice and policy.

The initial discussion centered on the meaning that parents attribute to their children's participation in sport. In this study, parents described their children's involvement in football mainly from a functional perspective, often emphasizing its role in reducing screen time, fostering discipline, and providing structure in daily routines (Coulter *et al.*, 2020; Fredricks & Eccles,

2005; Freire *et al.*, 2019). These findings align with research indicating that parents often introduce children to sports to establish structured routines that limit sedentary behaviors and unhealthy habits (Bailey, 2006; Petersen *et al.*, 2020). Such views reflect the broader role of parents as "gatekeepers" of sport participation (Côté, 1999; Horn & Horn, 2007), where the initial purpose of sport is linked less to intrinsic enjoyment and more to its protective and regulatory functions in childhood. They also align with recent studies indicating that parents often use sport as a response to digital saturation and to maintain stability within modern family routines (Durá *et al.*, 2024b; Freire *et al.*, 2019).

In this study, most parents had prior sports experience. Past involvement in sports is consistently linked to greater engagement and increased confidence in supporting children's sporting activities (Knight *et al.*, 2016; Knight *et al.*, 2017). Whether this support feels encouraging or pressurizing for the child depends on

factors such as whether parents prioritize enjoyment and development over performance and results, the level of control or autonomy-support they offer, and how well they attune to their child's preferences regarding feedback (Knights *et al.*, 2016; 2017; Kovács *et al.*, 2023). Research suggests that experienced sports parents are not inherently more supportive; instead, their experience tends to reinforce the particular style of involvement they adopt (Bonavolontà *et al.*, 2021; Furusa *et al.*, 2020).

As Côté (1999) and Horn and Horn (2007) suggest, parents provide logistical support alongside the values and expectations that shape their children's involvement. The parental effort to promote a healthy lifestyle through football participation may reflect a broader pattern where family health concerns intersect with sport as a strategy for fostering positive developmental habits (Coakley, 2011; Szeszulski, *et al.*, 2021; 2022). Aside from health concerns, parents explained that unhealthy lifestyle habits directly impact children's readiness for sport. These issues highlight the embodied nature of sporting participation, where the boundary between home and the playing field is permeable (Harwood & Knight, 2009b; Burgess *et al.*, 2016). The tension between parental guidance and children's growing autonomy was particularly noticeable, echoing what Dorsch, Smith and Dotterer (2016) describe as the "spillover" of family routines into sport, where parents' regulation of daily habits redefines authority and care within sport (Harwood *et al.*, 2010; Lisinskiene & Lochbaum, 2019; O'Rourke *et al.*, 2014).

An emerging aspect of meaning-making was the ambivalence many parents felt towards football's culture. Initially, some regarded the sport as morally questionable or excessively aggressive, echoing concerns highlighted in earlier research about football environments characterized by tension, authoritarianism, or exclusion (D'Hoore & Scheerder, 2023; Santo, 2015; Walters *et al.*, 2011). Over time, children's enjoyment shifted parents' perceptions towards acceptance, aligning with IPA's view that meaning develops through lived experience and reflection (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Callary *et al.*, 2015). Parents' ability to mentalize and update their internal working models in response to new experiences supported the athlete's secure exploration of identity within sport.

The discussion also considers the persistence and evolution of gendered attitudes towards football. Initially, parents held stereotypical views about which sports were appropriate for girls, consistent with

previous research indicating that parents are generally less supportive of their daughters' participation in contact sports (Knight & Holt, 2013; Lienhart & Nicaise, 2022; Burke *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, witnessing female players' skills and resilience challenged these assumptions and beliefs, offering evidence that embodied experiences can question restrictive gender norms and encourage more inclusive attitudes among adults (Bankar *et al.*, 2018; Wagnsson *et al.*, 2021). Parents' shifted perceptions helped create a more inclusive and belonging-rich environment, which is a key contextual asset in PYD (Eccles *et al.*, 1983; Fraser-Thomas *et al.*, 2005).

Another challenge related to motivation was the difficulty of maintaining children's intrinsic motivation during training sessions, where enthusiasm often waned without competitive play. This supports research on motivational climates, which indicates that children tend to respond more strongly to immediate rewards and visible results than to long-term skill development (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). As Bengoechea, Streat, and Williams (2004) suggested, the perception of "fun" is often linked to the excitement of the game, whereas practice settings risk being viewed as monotonous. This, according to Deci & Ryan (1985), occurs because young athletes perceive that a drill-focused environment undermines their autonomy and competence, whereas game-day excitement fosters relatedness and immediate feedback about their competence. The parents' observations, therefore, highlight the difficulty of fostering autonomy and intrinsic enjoyment through the coaches' approach (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Okanlawon, 2024). As a result, when the sporting environment stresses extrinsic markers of success, children may disengage, placing pressure on parents to maintain commitment through encouragement or negotiation (O'Rourke *et al.*, 2014; Rouquette *et al.*, 2021).

Peer relationships are recognized as a crucial factor influencing children's motivation and participation. Parents reported that friendships within teams are often the primary reason their children attend training, consistent with findings by Smith (2003) and Davis, Brown, Arnold, and Gustafsson (2021) on the significance of social belonging in youth sport. However, negative peer interactions—such as criticism or exclusion—can reduce enthusiasm, underscoring that sport is a relational environment in which meaning is shaped through interactions with others (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Lisinskiene *et al.*, 2018). This aspect,

described as the personal need of relatedness in SDT, renders peers as both motivators and potential sources of discouragement. On the level of parents, Burke, Sharp... and Paradis, (2023) and Diaconu-Gherasim & Duca (2018), found that secure parent-adolescent attachment is related to better perceived relationships with best friend and higher social competence ratings from teammates/coaches in sport teams. This dual influence of peers aligns with Strandbu *et al.* (2019), who emphasised that parental and peer influences interact dynamically for young athletes, sometimes reinforcing and at other times undermining one another. Parents' awareness of these dynamics underscores the complexity of developing children's social identity in sport, particularly during adolescence, when peer groups beyond the team become more influential (Hurley *et al.*, 2017). This awareness is also a key mechanism for fostering the "4 Cs" of PYD (Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character/Caring) in co-creating need-supportive environments.

A paradox surrounding technology also emerged. While digital platforms often competed with sport by offering instant gratification, they also functioned as tools for learning tactics and shaping children's identities as knowledgeable players. This duality aligns with findings by Fernandez-Rio and Bernabe-Martín (2019) and Kwon, Elliott, and Velardo (2020), who observed that online resources can extend learning into the home, encouraging parental involvement as co-learners. Similarly, Gentile *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that enriched programs combining cognitive and digital elements can boost children's motivation. However, as parents in this study noted, these platforms also made it more difficult to limit screen time, highlighting the broader ambivalence of digital culture in youth sport (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020).

Over the course of the educational program, however, parents' understanding of sport evolved significantly. They came to see sport as a space for holistic development, emphasizing resilience, empathy, and the cultivation of moral and social values. This shift aligns with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005), which underline the importance of environments that foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness in supporting children's psychological growth (Okanlawon, 2024). Parents progressed from basic functional understandings to recognizing sport as a process that builds character and promotes inclusion, reflecting

broader evidence that well-structured youth sport encourages positive youth development (Coakley, 2011; Fraser-Thomas *et al.*, 2005; Holt *et al.*, 2017; Lerner, 2012; Vierimaa *et al.*, 2012). Similar outcomes were observed in studies where life skills interventions in sport settings led to shifts in parental perceptions and enhanced children's developmental experiences (Papacharisis *et al.*, 2005; Tamminen *et al.*, 2020; Burgueño *et al.*, 2020).

Taken together, these findings confirm that, before the intervention, parents' motivations were rooted in protective and developmental aims. However, their practices were challenged by children's fluctuating motivation, peer influences, lifestyle difficulties, and digital distractions. These tensions align with previous research highlighting organizational, competitive, and developmental stressors as common parental challenges (Harwood & Knight, 2009a, 2009b; Amoah-Oppong & Appiah, 2024). By emphasizing these experiences, the present study addresses the second research question by showing that parental involvement is driven by aspirations for discipline and well-being, yet limited by social, technological, and developmental pressures (O'Rourke *et al.*, 2021; Rouquette *et al.*, 2021).

Following implementation, the findings indicate that parents experienced a significant shift in their approach to their children's sports participation, moving from functional oversight and external regulation to reflective support and emotional attunement. Parents reported being better able to communicate with their children about sport, respond to disappointment with greater empathy, and reframe challenges as opportunities for resilience. In the same vein, a study grounded in attachment theory found that sport-active adolescents reported stronger attachment to parents (in terms of trust, communication, and alienation) than non-athletes (Lisinskienė *et al.*, 2018). These changes align with research demonstrating that parent education programs can effectively enhance parental responsiveness and reduce pressuring behaviors (Dorsch *et al.*, 2017, 2019; Burke *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, Thrower, Harwood, and Spray (2017) and Reynolds, (2021) demonstrated that structured interventions can modify parental knowledge, attitudes, and emotional regulation, thereby creating more supportive environments for children in sports.

A key change reported by parents was the improvement in the quality of emotional dialogue within families. Sport has become a relational bridge, creating new opportunities for parents and children to share experiences, discuss emotions, and build trust.

Consistent with an IPA study of a one-year sport-based parent-child intervention grounded in Bowlby's attachment theory, the program also enhanced parent-child attachment and relationship quality. It also helped parents better understand their role and behaviour in youth sports (Lisinskiene, & Lochbaum, 2019). The finding reinforces prior evidence that positive parental responsiveness promotes secure attachment relationships, which, in turn, support thriving and resilience in youth sport (Davis *et al.*, 2021; Lai & Carr, 2018; Rouquette *et al.*, 2021). Studies based on attachment theory have also found that young athletes reported stronger attachment to their parents measured by indicators such as trust, communication, and feelings of alienation—than non-athletes. And as parental involvement in sports evolves, it influences the overall quality of the parent-athlete relationship (Lisinskiene *et al.*, 2018; Ntalachani *et al.*, 2025; Santana-Ferrández *et al.*, 2025). By reframing defeats as learning experiences and disappointment as part of the growth process, parents aligned their practices more closely with developmental models of positive youth development (Coakly, 2011; Lerner, 2012; Holt *et al.*, 2017). This transformation also supports Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), as parents began to nurture children's autonomy and competence rather than focusing narrowly on external discipline.

The program also encouraged parents to develop critical awareness of their own stress levels and behaviors at sporting events. Several parents noted becoming more reflective about how their emotional reactions whether anxiety, frustration, or excessive competitiveness affected their child's experiences. Similar findings have been reported by Burgess, Knight, and Mellalieu (2016), who demonstrated that parental stress is often transferred to children, and by Harwood and Knight (2015), who stressed the importance of "parenting expertise" in managing such pressures. By providing parents with structured spaces for reflection, the intervention helped them adjust their behaviors, a process consistent with Sampol, Salas, Rotger, and Verdager (2019) and Reynolds, (2021), who found that socio-educational interventions reduced negative parental commentary in grassroots football.

Another significant change involved parents redefining success in sport. Success was often seen as discipline, characterized by results, or as protecting children from negative influences. After the program, parents described success as their child's enjoyment, resilience, and developmental growth (Gu *et al.*, 2023; Furusa *et al.*, 2020; Miguel *et al.*, 2012; Okanlawon,

2024). This new understanding aligns with the findings of Tamminen *et al.* (2020), who reported that parent-focused programs helped families prioritize children's psychosocial wellbeing over winning. Parents in this study increasingly rejected win-at-all-costs mindsets, especially after comparing their children's environment with the more aggressive culture of professional men's football. These reflections align with the broader literature that warns against early professionalization and excessive competition in youth sport (D'Hoore & Scheerder, 2023; Durá *et al.*, 2024a; Fraser-Thomas *et al.*, 2005).

The intervention also appeared to strengthen the triangular relationship among parents, children, and coaches. Parents showed increased trust in coaches' pedagogical expertise, while recognizing the need for more structured communication (Gu *et al.*, 2023; Okanlawon, 2024). This aligns with Knight and Holt (2013a), who highlighted the importance of coach-parent partnerships in shaping children's sport experiences, and with Santos *et al.* (2025), who emphasized the significance of constructive coach-parent relationships across youth sport settings. An IPA study explicitly grounded in Bowlby's attachment theory results showed that a sport-integrated program improved parent-child attachment and relationship quality and helped parents understand their role and behavior in youth sport (Lisinskiene *et al.*, 2019).

By viewing coaches as allies rather than adversaries, parents in this study reinforced the cooperative ethos of the sporting environment, thereby supporting children's sense of security and belonging (Lisinskiene & Sukys, 2014; Horne *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, parents reported changes in their practical and logistical involvement. While challenges such as scheduling and infrastructure persisted, parents increasingly regarded these commitments not only as burdens but also as investments in their child's development and family life. This subtle shift reflects what Stefansen, Smette, and Strandbu (2018) describe as the intensification of parental involvement in organized youth sport, and what Lisinskiene and Lochbaum (2019) documented as the evolution of parental engagement over time during intervention programs. Taken together, these findings reaffirm that parental involvement is a dynamic, context-dependent phenomenon influenced by personal beliefs, cultural expectations, and organizational structures (Johansen & Green, 2019; Peng, 2021). By placing parents at the intersection of these influences, this study highlights

both the opportunities and challenges in creating supportive youth sport ecosystems.

Future interventions should therefore build on existing evidence emphasizing parental education, collaborative practices, and the alignment of developmental goals among all stakeholders (Dorsch *et al.*, 2019; Fernandez-Rio & Bernabe-Martín, 2019). The study demonstrates that parents' interpretations of sport evolve from initial, functional, and culturally limited perspectives towards more developmental, moral, and inclusive understandings when supported by reflective interventions. This emphasizes the importance of education programs in transforming meaning-making into sports (Burke *et al.*, 2024; Dorsch *et al.*, 2017, 2019; Thrower *et al.*, 2017). The current findings reinforce that structured educational initiatives can influence parental behaviors, reduce stress, and enhance the quality of parent-child relationships in sport. The study also indicates that, following the intervention, parents became more reflective, emotionally attuned, and developmentally focused on their involvement. This change highlights the potential of parent-centred educational programs to recalibrate parental practices, guiding the culture of youth sport towards one that emphasizes psychosocial growth, relational well-being, and inclusivity rather than instrumental or purely competitive aims.

5.1 Limitations and Future Directions

This study has limitations. Although the design was carefully planned and implemented, it is also worth noting that this particular club is unique, as its coaches prioritize the holistic development of children over winning, which may limit transferability of the findings to clubs with different philosophies. To address these issues, efforts were made to improve methodological rigor through triangulation (focus groups, observations, reflexive diary), prolonged engagement, and member-checking procedures (Credibility). These strategies aimed to produce detailed descriptions of the setting, enabling readers to assess whether the results apply to similar environments (Transferability).

Further discussion is needed regarding potential biases arising from parental self-selection and prior sports experience (15/17), and how these factors might influence their receptivity to the program. Research indicates that experienced sports parents are not inherently more supportive; instead, their experience tends to strengthen the particular style of involvement they adopt. Additionally, regarding transferability, with

IPA, the aim was to produce an in-depth examination of a certain phenomena, and not generating a theory to be generalised over the whole population.' (Pietkiewicz & Smith, J.A., 2014, p.9)

The use of focus groups also presented specific challenges. Although parents were familiar with each other from previous seasons, the absence of strong trust within the group may have limited equal participation. Despite careful facilitation, dominant individuals sometimes influenced the discussions, potentially silencing quieter voices and reducing the diversity of perspectives collected. Additionally, since the study depended on self-reported data (interviews, focus groups, questionnaires), there remains a risk of social desirability bias, with participants possibly underreporting difficulties or overemphasizing socially valued behaviors. Future studies could mitigate these issues by using smaller groups, rotating speaking turns, providing anonymous written prompts before discussion, and conducting follow-up individual interviews to elicit less public views. Lastly, the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) used, although comprehensive, may have been influenced by the researcher's dual role as both observer and interpreter, particularly given her prior personal involvement in sport as both a coach and a parent.

Future research should consider expanding the sample to include multiple clubs and employing a mixed-methods approach to deepen understanding and improve the generalizability of results. Longitudinal studies, gender-inclusive coaching workshops, and community engagement initiatives would be instrumental in promoting more inclusive and sustainable practices. Longitudinal studies would also provide valuable insights into how parental engagement evolves across developmental stages in young athletes.

6. Conclusions

This study explores how parental perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors evolve through participation in an educational program. Initially, parents saw sport mainly as discipline and protection but gradually shifted toward holistic development, resilience, and value creation. This highlights the potential of educational programs to foster reflective, empathetic, and supportive parental behavior. The study affirms parents as co-creators of the sporting experience with coaches and peers, showing that pedagogical support can guide involvement towards more constructive, ethically responsible practices.

Despite positive developments, parents still face challenges like motivating children, establishing healthy habits, and navigating cultural aspects of football. While parent education can change perceptions and improve communication, barriers such as peer influence, digital distractions, and infrastructure issues remain. Clubs, federations, and policymakers must address these. Equipping parents with tools to handle youth sport complexities strengthens family bonds and creates environments focusing on children's development, well-being, and enjoyment over just competition.

The findings highlight practical steps for youth sport stakeholders. For parents, educational programs can improve communication, reduce stress, and support children's social development through sport. Coaches should maintain consistent communication with families, viewing parents as partners. Clubs and federations must address structural issues like inadequate facilities, rigid formats, and negative spectator behaviours that lessen parental involvement's benefits. Policymakers should integrate parent education into youth sports to foster inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and ethical practices, creating a supportive environment that promotes resilience, well-being, and lifelong physical activity. Future research should include longitudinal studies, cross-sport comparisons, and children's perspectives to better understand youth sport's relational dynamics.

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Author Contribution Statement

Kallirroï Ntalachani: Conceptualization, methodology, Formal analysis, investigation, writing original draft. Aspasia Dania: Writing, review and editing. Konstantinos Karteroliotis: Writing, review and editing. Nektarios Stavrou: Writing, review and editing. All the authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Ethics Approval Statement

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Informed Consent

Written informed consent was obtained from both participants prior to their inclusion in the study.

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- **Language Assistance:** The original Greek textual data (e.g., interview transcripts) were translated into English using DeepL Pro Translator to facilitate analysis.
- **Language Editing:** Grammarly Pro was used for post-writing language checks to correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation in the manuscript's English text.
- **Data Presentation:** ChatGPT Pro was utilized to reformat raw, categorized textual excerpts from the qualitative analysis into structured tables for more straightforward presentation in the results section.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there was no conflict of interest.

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