



## Understanding the behaviours employed by parents to support the psychological development of elite youth tennis players in England

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### ABSTRACT

The current study had two objectives: (1) to explore which psychological skills (e.g., self-talk and imagery) and characteristics (e.g., motivation and focus) (PSCs) parents deemed important for their children's development, and (2) to investigate and understand the parental behaviours employed to support the growth or development of these PSCs. A nine-month qualitative study comprising observations of and semi-structured interviews with 15 parents of 11 British male elite youth tennis players (8-15 years of age) took place. Results suggested that parents were sceptical of the development of psychological skills due to (1) a perceived inability to support the development effectively, (2) a misconception of psychological skills, and (3) concerns about unnecessary pressure. Despite this, parents reported the use of four behaviours in an effort to develop psychological characteristics within their children, including (1) talking about valuable psychological characteristics, (2) intentionally creating learning opportunities, (3) enabling athletes to go the extra mile, and (4) fostering developmentally beneficial peer relationships. Although well intended, these behaviours were usually informed by intermittent self-education, sometimes resulting in unwanted consequences such as the establishment of performance-orientated climates. The results of this study add to the youth sport literature by providing insight into sport parents' perceptions of PSCs, as well as the behaviours they employed to support their children's psychological development. Additionally, it reinforces the need for more formalised parental education opportunities to support parents' positive involvement in their children's sporting lives.

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The importance of athletes' psychological development, specifically psychological skills and characteristics (PSCs), in determining and maintaining elite athletic performance has long been evidenced through empirical research (Holt et al., 2017; Orlick & Partington, 1988). In fact, extensive research has affirmed the supposition that well-developed PSCs distinguish successful from less successful athletes (e.g., Gould et al., 2002; Van Yperen,

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