

Chronicling the rise in sports parent stresses during the COVID era

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Parents increased their involvement with children's sports activities during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic—but new research shows that associated stresses had many parents considering the extent of

their continued involvement.

The research led by Associate Professor Sam Elliott from the SHAPE Research Center at Flinders University, shows that parental responsiveness to their children's sporting needs was higher during lockdown, but added greater responsibilities and pressures on their available time.

The study aimed to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parental involvement in their child's participation in organized sports during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviews and online focus groups conducted during June 2020 with [parents](#) and sports participants aged 15–18 years old, identified a reshaping of sports parenting identity and an unexpected growth of sports parenting responsibilities—both which have the capacity to impact family commitment and attitudes to returning to sports.

The study indicates that the indefinite hiatus from sports caused by COVID-19 precipitated a re-evaluation of parental time commitments in youth sports. This finding has significant implications for organized sports and broader governing bodies because parents are the main source of sports volunteerism in Australia. In 2021, sports Australia reported that 69% of Australian sports volunteers had children in their household.

To improve the situation, the researchers recommend policy changes that improve the capacity for parents to provide logistical, informative and [emotional support](#) for their children in sport, and to better support parents and children situated in unexpectedly stressful situations.

"Moving forward, [sports clubs](#) and their state and national governing bodies must consider how best to support parents and families in this challenging, stressful and unpredictable role," says research co-author

Associate Professor Sam Elliott, from the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work at Flinders University.

"We argue that government sports agencies, national and state governing bodies of sports and clubs need to develop and circulate research-informed, targeted resources for maintaining supportive forms of parental involvement during times of high stress and uncertainty.

"If they do this, clubs can promote a virtuous cycle of support in the family unit, which will benefit parents as well as youth participants."

The research, "Sport parenting during the COVID-19 pandemic: Perceptions of parents and youth in Australia," by Sam Elliott, Aurélie Pankowiak, Rochelle Eime and Murray Drummond, has been published in the journal *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*.

The pandemic highlighted the complexities of returning to volunteering for parents, prompting some to reconsider their future level of involvement in the club. One survey respondent said the mental health impact she felt from being a [club](#) administrator throughout the pandemic, was also felt by her children.

The study also shed light on ways that parents helped children respond to the loss of sporting opportunities due to COVID-19 enforced lockdowns and restrictions, to help their child cope with uncertainty and disappointment by offering perspective and empathy.

To better prepare parents for a similar situation in the future, additional informational support to select appropriate and vary sporting opportunities may be useful.

"Governing bodies of sports and clubs will do well to consider how they might support parents to remain strong and consistent sources of

support," says Associate Professor Elliott.

To achieve this, governing bodies of sports might consider providing sports clubs and parents with informational resources to vary [training methods](#) that are engaging, build competence and perceived to be relevant to their sporting aspirations and development.

Some ideas might include developing "big picture" narratives with parents to show how their contribution and commitment to their child's sports can be linked with increased chances for children to achieve their athletic potential, enjoy a positive psychosocial sports experience, and develop a range of positive developmental outcomes such as improved confidence and competence.

Clubs could also renegotiate playing and training expectations with families who are required to travel long distances to support their child's sports. By collaborating on new timelines and revised commitment to training programs, clubs can potentially increase the chances of helping parents navigate rapidly changing policies and remain involved throughout the pandemic.

While the study was conducted before the full impact of COVID-19 on broader society and culture had been realized, the researchers believe the timing of the research has revealed unique stresses that face parents and children surrounding youth sports.

More information: Sam Elliott et al, Sport parenting during the COVID-19 pandemic: Perceptions of parents and youth in Australia, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.psychsport.2022.102299](#)

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