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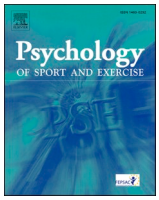

Understanding parental secure base support across youth sport contexts in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The notion of secure base explains how a child can grow and become independent through access to a significant other (i.e., parent) who is available, encouraging, and noninterfering. The purpose of the current study was to develop an understanding of parental secure base support within the context of youth sport in Sweden, with a specific focus on: (a) what parental behaviors constitute a secure base, and (b) how these behaviors differ across contexts (at home before and after sport, at practice and during competitions). An interpretive descriptive methodology (Thorne, 2016) was used. Interviews were conducted with 13 family triads (children aged 12–15 years) and 1 dyad living in Sweden. Analysis was conducted to illuminate associations, patterns, and relationships within the sample. Analysis led to the development of nine categories of parental behaviors that were perceived to underpin a secure base. Availability was seen to comprise physical presence and support provision, being responsive, and developing positive mental representations. Encouragement encompassed demonstrating that sport participation is valued, motivating to explore sporting endeavors, and reinforcing and rewarding persistence in sports. Interference was described as unrequested interference, requested interference, and intentionally constrained involvement. Additionally, influencing factors such as communication, family structure and culture, were identified. The findings provide an empirical illustration for several behaviors that have been perceived as positive in previous literature, as well as highlighting numerous further complexities, particularly as it relates to interference.

Parenting is an important responsibility that has the potential to determine the future independent lives of children. One arena of children's lives in which parents are of utmost importance is youth sport (Knight et al., 2024). Historically, sport parenting research has focused on how parents are involved in their child's sporting journey and how they influence children's development and experiences (Dorsch et al., 2021). For example, studies have identified several parental behaviors that are typically beneficial, such as being autonomy-supportive (Holt et al., 2021), providing structure (Pynn et al., 2019), being responsive to children's needs (Rouquette et al., 2021a; Rouquette et al., 2021b) and coping with emotional demands of sport parenting (Harwood & Knight, 2015). However, not all parenting actions lead to positive outcomes. Specifically, behaviors such as pressuring children, criticizing effort and performance, and interfering with coaches can lead to several negative outcomes (e.g., Charbonneau & Camiré, 2020; Crane & Temple, 2014).

Although research has provided a clear indication of the types of parental behaviors children prefer and that appear to lead to positive outcomes (Elliott & Drummond, 2017; Knight et al., 2011; Tamminen et al., 2017), it is also apparent that several factors influence children's perceptions of these behaviors and the consequences that subsequently arise (Knight et al., 2024). Specifically, children's perceptions of different types of parental involvement depend on the child's age (e.g. Furusa et al., 2021), timing (e.g. before, during, and after sports; Knight et al., 2011; Thomson, Simpson, & Berlin, 2020), competition situation

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(e.g. if the child is winning or losing; Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2011b) and context (e.g. at home, at practice; Knight et al., 2016; Tamminen et al., 2017). Furthermore, the presence of others (Dorsch, 2016) and parent-child relationship quality (Carr, 2009; Felton & Jowett, 2013) can all affect children's perceptions of parental behaviors.

Taken together, this literature provides a comprehensive picture of youth sport parenting, particularly illustrating the complexity of parents' influence. However, to progress this research area there are further considerations that need addressing. Firstly, previous studies have often considered parents and children separately (Dorsch et al., 2021), from a dyadic perspective (i.e., one parent and one child; Tamminen et al., 2017; Elliott & Drummond, 2017) or a child-parent-coach perspective (Thrower et a. 2022). As such, the extent to which there is alignment between parents' and children's perceptions within triads is relatively unknown. Such insights are important because parents may be involved in their children's lives differently (e.g., Holt et al., 2008), and thus gaining insights from both parents is useful to better understand their individual and combined influences. Furthermore, research shows that the reliability and consistency of support children receive is more important than the amount of support (Gunaydin et al., 2020), therefore suggesting that understanding the independent and combined influence of both parents is beneficial.

Secondly, many studies that have sought to identify preferred parental behaviors (e.g., Furusa et al., 2021; Knight et al., 2011) and optimal parental involvement (e.g., Knight & Holt, 2014) have lacked a theoretical underpinning (Knight, 2019). Where theories have been used, they have typically been motivational theories (e.g., Achievement goal theory – Keegan et al., 2009; Self-Determination Theory - Charbonneau & Camiré, 2020) or linked to parenting styles (e.g., Holt et al., 2021). To advance research in this area, drawing on a specific relationship theoretical framework to account for the reciprocal interactions between parents and children, acknowledging the cumulative impact of interactions over time and the subsequent result on children's behaviors is required (Rouquette et al., 2020).

One such framework is attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988, 2005). Attachment theory is one of the most influential developmental theories within the social and behavioral sciences (Thomson, Simpson, & Berlin, 2020). It has been used in research across various fields to understand the emotional bonds formed towards a particular attachment figure (i.e., a parent) present in childhood and adulthood. The theory is also significant in that it illustrates how being attached to a significant attachment figure can hinder or promote a sense of felt security and safety, which is considered a strong foundation for our urge to explore the environment, to play, discover, and take part in activities. However, very little consideration has been given to attachment theory when studying parental involvement in sport. Given that attachment theory explains how children develop emotional bonds with their caregivers and how these bonds facilitate development and exploration, one may anticipate the theory would provide critical insights into how the relationship present between parent(s) and their children in the context of sport may influence children's involvement and experiences of sport.

One important component within attachment theory is a secure base. A secure base functions to support exploratory behavior, involving a child or adult leaving an attachment figure/support provider (i.e., a parent) for autonomous exploration in their environment, to take part in activities, and for risk taking (Bowlby, 1988). A child's experience of having a secure base is the outcome of how well the attachment figure has been able to provide the child with security and nurture. When individuals are confident that an attachment figure can provide a secure base (i.e., a person who can provide comfort, assistance reassurance) they feel secure to explore the environment, take on challenges, and make new discoveries. In essence, the concept of secure base provides a sound theoretical basis for understanding how individuals can grow as a result of being attached to someone (Feeney & Van Vleet, 2010), which is important for continued engagement and motivation in sport.

Expanding Bowlby's notion of a secure base, Feeney and Thrush (2010) extrapolated three important characteristics necessary for exploration. First, a secure base is created through parents being *available* to help in times of need (e.g., assisting in removing obstacles, being sensitive and responsive to distress cues, and accepting a person's dependence when needed). Second, a secure base is created when *unnecessary interference* (termed non-interference) is avoided. Interference occurs when exploration behaviors undermine a person's ability and confidence by, for example, providing support that is not desired. Finally, a secure base is created when the significant other is *encouraging*. Encouragement includes the provision of praise and recognition of achievements and goal strivings.

Within Feeney and Thrush's (2010) work there is clear alignment with youth sport parenting research, both with regards to the types of behaviors being advocated and the outcomes being sought. Further, this theoretical lens offers potential suggestions regarding *why* specific behaviors from parents within sport contexts may lead to certain child outcomes, although this requires specific examination. To this end, the purpose of the current study was to develop an understanding of parental secure base support within the context of youth sport in Sweden, with a specific focus on participants' perceptions of (a) what parental behaviors may constitute a secure base and (b) how these behaviors differ between contexts (at home before and after sport, at practice and during competitions).

1. Methodology

1.1. Study context

It is important to situate our understanding of parent-child relationships within their cultural context. Sweden is described as having a progressive approach to parenting, where the responsibility is to foster morally and socially accepted behavior, mainly through authoritative parenting (high warmth and control; Gurdal & Sorbring, 2024) and role-modeling (Sorbring & Gurdal, 2011). Within Swedish culture a philosophy of horizontal individualism is supported, meaning each Swede should be seen as unique and should "do their own thing," and take care of themselves and their close ones (Gurdal & Sorbring, 2024) but importantly, no one should be seen as better than another (Sorbring & Gurdal, 2011).

1.2. Methodology and philosophical underpinnings

This study was conducted using an Interpretive Description methodology (ID; Thorne, 2016). ID is a beneficial for identifying relationships and developing conceptual descriptions of participants' experience, within applied disciplines (e.g., sport psychology). ID has been used extensively within sport parenting research (Elliott et al., 2021; 2023; Furusa, 2021) providing valuable insights to, among others, inform education and support programs for parents. Aligned with ID, the subjective, constructed, and contextual nature of human experience is acknowledged, while at the same time recognizing that individuals also have shared realities (Thorne et al., 1997, 2003). Specifically, ID recognizes that researchers and the participants influence each other. Moreover, it is recognized that no one theory can encompass participants' multiple realities. Thus, theory (i.e., secure base) within this study was used as a beginning point, with the intention of data collection and analysis providing an opportunity to challenge this theory and pre-existing knowledge.

1.3. Participants

Children aged 12–15 years involved in organized sport were purposefully sampled. This age was selected to ensure participants were: (a) mature enough to articulate their experiences in an interview (Rouquette et al., 2021a), (b) young enough that their parents play a role in their sport participation (Knight et al., 2017) and (c) at a developmental

stage were secure base support might become more critical (Kerns et. al., 2015). Subsequently, both the children's parents were recruited to address the triadic focus of the study. Overall, 41 individuals participated, 14 children (7 males, 7 females; $M_{age} = 13.5$ years, $SD = 1{,}05$) and their respective parents (n = 27; 14 mothers, 13 fathers) forming 13 child-parent triads and 1 child-parent dyad. All parents were Swedish heterosexual couples; nine were living together, three were separated couples (child living biweekly with each parent) and one mother was a single parent with full custody. The children were involved in various team and individual sports and had been competing regularly for at least one year. All athletes were competing at a youth sport club level. None of the parents were active coaches within their children's sport.

1.4. Procedure

Prior to starting data collection, institutional ethical approval was obtained. Subsequently, the local Swedish sport federation helped to advertise the project to sports clubs through emails, including a short video clip. The same video was also shared via social media. Interested parents were invited to contact the first author for further information. Once participants had provided consent/assent, individual semi-structured interviews were arranged. The first author conducted all the interviews. As an insider to the context (i.e., as a youth coach and mother of children engaged in sports) the first author could contribute with authenticity to the interviews. This was beneficial for establishing a trustworthy interview situation, fostering an informal dialogue, that contributed to the co-creation of knowledge central to ID, and enhancing interpretive authority (Thorne, 2016).

An interview guide was developed drawing on previous literature pertaining to parental involvement in sport, as well as the framework of secure base. The interview guide was scrutinized by the research team and piloted with one child-parent triad. After the pilot, parts of the research team listened to the audio recording and read through the transcription thoroughly. Minor adjustments were conducted, for instance offering more time for the respondent's answers. The interview guide started with broad questions. These questions sought to build rapport and ease the participants into the interviews. Such questions included: What do you think is fun about sports? Subsequently, broad questions regarding parental involvement in sport were introduced. Following this, the interview guide moved onto the main questions. These questions were deductively structured around three main areas: (a) availability, (b) encouragement, and (c) interference/non-interference (Feeney & Thrush, 2010). Questions were asked across each of these areas, exploring the types of behaviors that were displayed, preferred, and unwanted during competition, at practice, and away from the sport environment (e.g., in the car, at home). The questions were posed to parents and children. Examples of key questions were for instance; how do you/your parents make themselves available to you when you are competing? How do you/your parents encourage you during practice? Follow-up questions were used to elicit examples of behaviors.

Parents interviews lasted between 47 and 82 min ($M = 64$, $SD = 9.3$), and child interviews 31–90 min ($M = 54$, $SD = 13.5$). Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim by the first author, and all personal information removed. Transcripts included 807 pages in total (single line spacing, 12 points). Since only three members of the research team were Swedish speaking, the transcriptions were translated into English. Due to the large amount of data, the interviews were initially translated using automated software (Microsoft 365, version 2301, Word Translator) and manually adjusted by the first author. The analysis was led by the first author, using the original Swedish transcripts.

1.5. Data analysis

Data were analyzed concurrently with data collection (Thorne, 2016). Within the ID methodology, it is emphasized that different analysis methods can be undertaken (Thorne, 2016), the current analytic process was guided by Morse's (1994) sequential cognitive processes of comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing, and recontextualizing. The first step, comprehending, focused on the lead author becoming immersed with the data. During this period, meaning and patterns described by participants were noted in a reflective journal and after each read through, an individual and dyad/triad summary was compiled. Next, the text from each interview was reviewed line by line, while consideration was given to the three contexts in which behaviors occurred and across the behaviors described. Continual conversation occurred between the research team during this step.

Next, synthesizing and theorizing occurred. This consisted of inductively allocating the codes identified from the line-by-line review into themes. For instance, behaviors such as parents hearing children, understanding what children wanted, and responding accurately to their child were grouped, creating the theme attentive conversations. The research team met regularly to discuss and critically examine the interpretation of the data and the allocation of descriptive ideas into more interpretive themes. During this period, consideration was also given to distinguishing relevant from irrelevant themes, identifying patterns and deviation among participants, as well as re-engagement with the literature. Specifically, the research team theorized the alignment (or non-alignment) of the earlier generated themes, developing "best guesses" about relationships and explanations with the backdrop of previous sport parenting research and attachment theory. For instance, it was theorized that being responsive and developing positive mental representations were related and were deductively integrated under parent availability. During this step, the 'combine and collapse' technique (Elliott et al., 2023) was used, which led to the generation of refined sub-themes.

Finally, once the interpretive themes and associated sub-themes were developed, these were recontextualized within the overall data set and consideration was given to the applicability of these in practice. Specifically, during this stage, consideration of these themes within the broader parenting literature, as well as what they mean in practice for parents, coaches, sport psychologists, and sports organization, occurred. The key contextual factors influencing behaviors were also highlighted during this stage.

2. Methodological rigor

To ensure coherence, we used the following four evaluative criteria associated with ID: Epistemological integrity, representative credibility, analytic logic, and interpretive authority (Thorne, 2016). With regards to epistemological integrity, we sought to demonstrate alignment from the development of the purpose to the presentation of the results with the philosophical approach adopted. Representative credibility was addressed by sampling family triads, ensuring the inclusion of mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons from various sport contexts to facilitate triangulation in the pursuit of a 'probable truth' (Thorne, 2016). The analytical logic can be followed through verbatim transcript documentation, extensive sequential coding (individual coding, group coding and summaries compilations), and research group meeting recordings. This extensive documentation created an audit trail, which provides the explicit reasoning pathway of the study. Finally, having the first author, who has extensive experience as a parent within the Swedish sport context conduct all interviews and lead analysis enhanced interpretive authority. Further, the first author was supported through peer reviewing by the research team, who have extensive experiential knowledge and are experienced researchers within the field.

3. Results

To understand secure base support in sport, we first need to acknowledge the social nature of support provision. How it is experienced and expressed is the reality of social constructs, therefore the

following results are based on interpretations of relationships, patterns, and differences shared by the participants. Data analysis resulted in the construction of nine themes and 23 sub-themes of parental behaviors that were subsequently perceived to align with availability, encouragement, and interference/non-interference across competition, practice, and non-sport settings (Figure 1). In addition, several overarching factors related to family structure and culture that were influential across all three areas were also identified.

3.1. Availability

Aligned with the definition of Feeney and Thrush (2010), availability is considered as a protective function where parents are available to respond to their child's needs as they arise, making their child feel safe. Some of the most important means through which children perceived parental availability was through parents' *physical presence* and support *provision* (both emotional and instrumental). With regards to this theme, G7[1] explained:

> I like it when they see that I'm making progress, it feels good that they see how good I am. But also nice to have someone you can look up to and smile at … There is a nice symbolism in being on the field and having someone in the stands. Some form of security. It's like dipping a little of your foot in the water each time but somehow running up the edge of the sand again.

Echoing these thoughts, her mother, M7 said: "She wants me to be there and watch her. She has said that. So just that I'm there is some kind of security." Correspondingly, her father, F7 speculated: "It could perhaps be that she has a need to be seen in the moment of basketball. That I show her my interest. I never really asked her, I should probably discuss that with her."

In contrast to competitions, all children indicated they did not need their parents to be present at practices, and most expressed a desire to have "their sport to themselves." M10 echoed her son, stating: "When he was younger, he needed us around for support but these days he doesn't need us anymore." However, although children indicated they were ok with their parents not attending training, there was an important nuance in their explanations. Specifically, when parents occasionally prioritized their training sessions, children suggested they felt important. On the contrary, if parents did not attend competitions, particularly without any communication, this could lead to children feeling disregarded. B9 explained:

> Once, my Mom chose to watch my sister's game more than mine. Our games weren't even at the same time. I got angry and asked why, but she had no excuse. I felt like she liked my sister more than me, that she only came to watch her and not me. I got angry and sad, and it didn't get any better that I didn't get any explanation.

Providing structure also appeared to be an important means through which parents could display availability. This theme entailed parents establishing routines that the children could rely on (i.e., regarding food intake, time schedules, driving or packing). Typically, these routines were established in the home environment but were particularly important during competitions when children were nervous. For instance, G12 acknowledged that her elaborate routines reduced her anxiety; "We are great at preparation. My parents support me, they help me pack, they drive me, they ask me questions, and show me that they care." Corresponding, her mother, M12, recognized the value of providing structure:

> We have the schedule on the fridge with all the activities, otherwise it would have been a complete mess. I think routines are important to her, so now she knows what's going to happen. I don't know, but maybe it's also important that she knows that we know. We haven't talked about that, but we've understood that.

Overall, it appeared that the provision of structure could demonstrate to children that parents would adapt to and prioritize their children's needs.

Quality time (e.g., excursions, family dinners, quality conversations) away from sport also appeared to be important as a means through which parents could demonstrate to children that they were there for them and also recognized them outside sport. M6 explained:

"I really notice with both my kids that when you sit with them and have time, without having planned things to do, that's when the conversations come and I am allowed into his thoughts. It's a chance for me to read him." These moments, where parents were attentively present, offered opportunities for parents to get emotionally close to their child, as F11 shared, "She is a daddy's girl, she likes to hang out, talk, and discuss. Even though I have worked a lot, I have always prioritized them. The little free time I've had I've spent on them.… When I'm with them, *I'm with them.*"

Correspondingly, his daughter, G11, said:

> You should be able to do things both inside and outside of sports, it's not just sport that counts, it's family spirit that counts. We do things together, maybe on Saturday or that we eat together on Fridays. We do things together, and that extends to sports as well. We have a good family relationship. We do things together, and we can talk about everything. It's probably all together that makes it so good, I think.

In sum, M11 stated: "We have a close relationship. I think we are close to each other, she tells us quite a lot. I think she feels that we are available, maybe not physically always, but we are there and support her."

Beyond physical presence, parents' *responsiveness* also seemed to influence parents and children's perceptions of availability. In line with Feeney (2007), responsiveness is considered as the attachment figure being tuned in to the child's signals, interpreting them correctly and responding promptly and appropriately, being accepting of the child, and demonstrating cooperativeness. Several means through which responsiveness could be displayed were suggested from the data. Firstly, through *attentive conversations,* which seemed to be important in the home environment. This included parents' asking questions and listening to responses, being focused, making empathic remarks, and showing genuine interest. This was important for most children as B10 declared: "I get happy when my parents really listen to me, not like fake-listen. Don't just answer "OK" without caring and watch TV at the same time." Correspondingly, his father stated:

> The parents must reflect the children's commitment, it goes back and forth. If my son comes to me and tells me that he did well at school, that he got top marks, or that he did poorly and is frustrated … If I then just start talking about something else … If I just change the subject, then he will stop, both stop talking to me about it and stop caring. If the parents don't care what the child is doing, the child won't care either.

Moreover, his wife, M10, touched upon the importance of listening attentively to underlying needs: "Sometimes when he can't sleep before a game, he calls for me specifically. I lie down next to him, ask "What is it?'. I scratch his back and I'm just there. He probably needs to unwind. I'm not that sporty, he knows I'm not going to talk tactics and stuff."

Additionally, many parents mentioned the importance of paying attention to what was not spoken. For instance, M6 explained: "We try to verbalize a lot, but I also try to read signals. It's important because they want so badly to be good and to please. It is a general parental responsibility to not always take the easy way out, like: "He's said it was fun' and leave it at that." Alongside being attentive, *providing comfort* was also important at home and in practice environments, particularly

[1] Quotes are labeled to illustrate the participants as follows; children are referred to as G/B1-14 (girl/boy), mothers as M1-14, and fathers as F1-14.

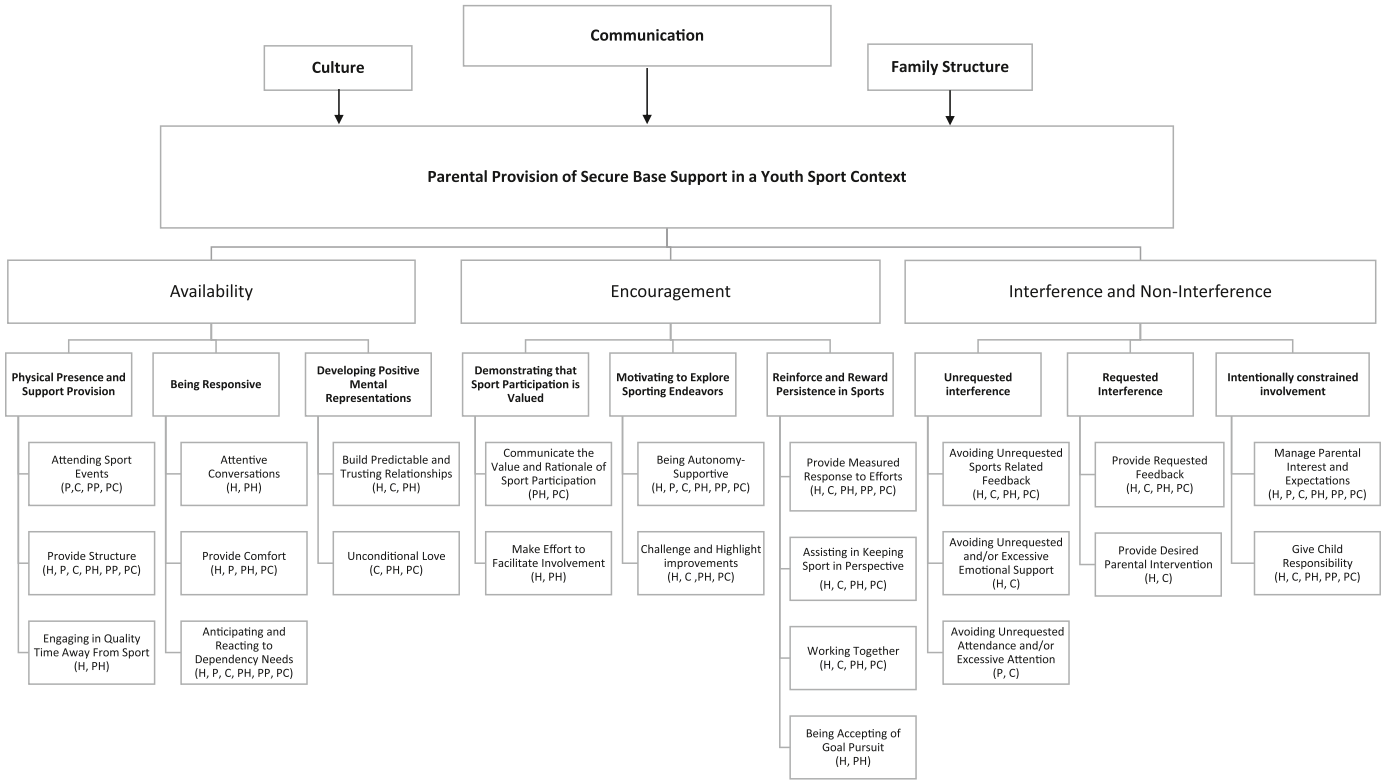

Figure 1. Provides a summary of the findings, depicting behaviors that conceptualize the provision of parental secure base support. Contexts are referred to as H (at home/non-sport setting), P (at practice) and C (in conjunction with competition). Parental statements are labeled with an initial P, for example PP (parent/practice) or PC (parent/competition) PH (Parent/home). Accordingly, child's representations are displayed H, P, C.

when children were experiencing adversity or perceived they had failed to achieve their/other's expectations. However, participants generally indicated a preference for when and how this comfort was provided and thus, it was deemed important that parents aligned their comfort provision with these preferences. In many cases, it was recognized that children preferred to be initially comforted by their mothers before turning to their parents for advice. B4 shared:

> If things have gone bad, I usually go to my mother first, then she comforts me. She's a bit better than Dad at comforting, I don't know if it has anything to do with her being a mother. After that, I go to dad to get playing advice, that's because Dad is interested in football, Mum is interested in me.

Correspondingly F4 declared: "I think my wife wants to know more, like: "What do you feel? What is it? And things like that, I am not like that. We are different as people."

Providing comfort aligned with children's preferences could be challenging for parents depending on individual needs. However, one child (B9) summarized this simply: "Leave the child alone until he is ready to make contact. Be present but leave space, that is showing respect for the child." Accordingly, his mother (M9) was compliant: "He wants his own space, I disturb him as little as possible nowadays. If he needs me, all he must do is ask."

To be able to align comfort to children's needs, it appeared parents needed to anticipate and react to children's needs and adapt their support behaviors over time**.** This was important across all contexts. For example, explaining what she preferred from her parents, G12 stated:

> You know your child, you know if she is upset and you should leave her alone, or if she wants you to sit next to her and ask what happened. It is from person to person if you want attention when you've had a bad practice or if you don't. You might want to be alone after a bad game. It depends. You probably know your child that well. My parents know me so well that they know what I'm like."

Meanwhile, her father (F12) shared:

> My youngest daughter has high standards for herself. She has always been like that, so we adapt. Sometimes I avoid giving her feedback because she associates it with her having done something wrong. Then she might be disappointed. Her big sister would never draw that parallel.

With such a clear understanding of their child, parents can anticipate what their child is likely to need in different situations. However, recognizing when needs change and adapting their behaviors was critical and required good communication.

Based on the earlier behaviors parents displayed, it appeared that children created and subsequently relied upon *positive mental representations* of their parents' availability, even when parents were absent from their sport. Such mental representations could develop when parents were being reliable and trustworthy over time, particularly when faced with adversity. F13 placed great value on not letting his daughter down, he explained: "If you have promised something, you'll keep it," and correspondingly his daughter, G13, said: "I have always been able to trust that if I need help, I will get it.' As a result of parents fulfilling their promises and children trusting them, anxiety was minimized even if their parents were not present.

The development of trusting relationships, and as such a perception of availability even when parents were absent, seemed to be facilitated through the provision of *unconditional love***.** Participants acknowledged that during competitions, and at home, it is of utmost importance that parents provide children with a sense of mental security by demonstrating unconditional love regardless of performance. B6 shared: "My parents have said several times that it doesn't matter what sport I play, or how the hockey goes, the important thing is that I have fun."

Similarly, his mother, M6 explained: "Probably the most important thing is that no matter how it has gone, I give him a hug and convey the feeling that mom cares regardless of the game result or whatever feeling he comes home with."

3.2. Encouragement

Within literature pertaining to a secure base, encouragement serves as a motivating function where parents support exploratory activities by being encouraging and accepting children's involvement (Feeney & Thrush, 2010). One of the main avenues through which parents perceived they could display encouragement was to verbally and non-verbally demonstrate the value of sport. Parents indicated that they perceived sport involvement to be fundamentally important for social and physical development. As such, they sought to *communicate the value and rationale of sport participation* to their children in hope of encouraging their involvement. M11 summarized the views of many: "I want to teach them that movement is part of life. Or that it should be to feel good. Public health basically." This typically occurred at home and competition contexts either through their own sport participation or discussions. M12 shared:

> Everything is not a competition, nor an achievement; you can do it just because it's fun. That's my role for her. I could give her thousands of advices about horse riding, but I choose *not* to. She doesn't have to become a pro rider, she just rides because it's fun and to snuggle with the horses. It's performance in school and everywhere else, so as far as we're concerned, riding it's not a sport, in that way, it's more of an activity.

Notably, the importance of communicating the value of, and rationale for, sport participation was only mentioned by the parents. Children instead emphasized the importance of parents demonstrating that they valued sport participation by *making effort to facilitate their sporting involvement*, specifically in the home environment. Such demonstration of effort included, among others, parents making time for their child's activities (even if they as parents did not really have time), providing transportation, volunteering, and learning about their children's sport. Particularly, it was noted that parents may have to take an interest in something that they would not have chosen personally. F12 explained: "If I'm at a game, I watch the game, or watch the competition if it's gymnastics. Even if I have to be very patient with gymnastics. I'm not fiddling with my phone." In sum, children appreciated that their parents showed interest in their sport, as G12 shared: "It feels good that they get involved in what I do, they show interest, ask me questions, and sell coffee in cafeterias for the club." Despite this, there were a few children who wanted to be "as little trouble as possible' and were less comfortable when their parents had to commit time to their sporting endeavors.

As well as communicating that sport was valued, the specific ways in which parents supported involvement were also seen as encouraging. Particularly, participants suggested that parents' *being autonomy-supportive* was beneficial across all contexts. G13 summarized:

> You don't want them to decide what to do. They should show that they are committed and come to some games. But if they were to come to every game it would be like them going to a game and taking me with them, instead of me going to a game and taking them with me.

With such autonomy, children perceived they were more motivated to continue participation. However, not all parents agreed upon this, M1 declared: "The most important support I give her in sports is probably to motivate her when she doesn't have the motivation herself." Accordingly, the father, F1 said: "It is difficult to motivate her, to awaken her own enthusiasm. Getting better health is difficult to grasp as a 12-year-old. We have encouraged her by talking about the social benefits of football. I think now we get the payoff for dragging her to practices earlier. Now she enjoys football." The daughter, G1, shared: "My parents say that I'm getting stronger with each training, that I can be great in the future, like them in the national team. They say, if I go to training, it will feel great afterwards and it always does."

Correspondingly, parents' *setting challenges for children when needed and highlighting their improvements* at competitions and away from the sports environment was also seen as desirable. For instance, M11 emphasized:

> We've always challenged the kids, and we have made them feel that they have succeeded. For example, we have made them all cycle and walk long distances abroad, so they have had challenges growing up. I don't know if that might have affected them, that we have set suitable goals. It hasn't been small stuff, it's been challenging.

Meanwhile, her daughter, G11 shared: "You always want to show what you're good at, I guess that's what all people want. But I don't have to prove anything to anyone, Mom is proud of me. She says that all the time and she shows it too. And I am pretty proud of myself as well." By providing challenges and then highlighting improvements, children felt recognized, encouraged, and gained the confidence to try new activities.

Finally, parents' *reinforcing and rewarding children's ongoing persistence* with activities appeared valuable. This could be displayed through parents *providing measured responses to efforts*. For example, when reflecting on competitions many children explained that it made them feel good when their parents conveyed both verbal and non-verbal praise. G1 said: "They usually look at me and give me thumbs up. That makes me happy and makes me want to keep playing." Accordingly, her mother, M1 described: "We are always there cheering because we know she likes it. She wants as many people as possible to come, she asks grandma and grandpa to come along too."

However, children expressed mixed thoughts about parents cheering during competitions. Optimal cheering occurred when parents' behaviors aligned with the child's preferences (linking to responsiveness above) and this ranged from silence to enthusiastic cheering. Meanwhile, having positive conversations after competitions were generally desired as it increased children's feelings of recognition, competence, and pride. B10 explained: "It makes me happy when they mention something that I did well. Even though I think I've played well, it's nice to hear that from them." Additionally, this also emphasized positive reinforcement in adversity, his father (F10) expressed: "I say: No, it wasn't a good day today, everyone has bad days sometimes'. And then I try to point out things that he did well to show that even though things have gone bad, he has also done good things."

In addition to recognition, praise, and feedback, participants felt that parents should encourage persistence by *keeping sport in perspective*, particularly before and after competitions and in the home environment. The participants emphasized that parents sometimes need to assist in reducing the seriousness of sport, for instance, M5 shared: "This year we've tried to make him realize that hockey isn't everything, we've really tried to de-dramatize. There's a lot of other fun stuff to do, like skiing. Otherwise, winters have always been all about hockey." Additionally, parents need to assist in shifting children's mindsets by redirecting focus and re-framing disappointments. M5 explained:

> I can tell by the look of him that things have gone badly. Then I try to de-dramatize it, say: "Try to forgive yourself and brush it off. You're only human, everyone has bad days." Of course, you must adapt based on age … "I hear what you're saying, you say it went badly. Okay." I let him be grumpy for a while, there will be new games."

Similarly, F5 shared: "If we focus too much on results then we might forget that he did a fantastic game, even though the team lost. Therefore, we try to lift his strength and his performance." In addition, parents initiating alternative activities were useful to re-direct attention according to the children, their son, B5 described:

> Sometimes when things go bad, I get a bit down and it affects the atmosphere outside of sport as well, so sometimes we talk a little

about it, so it feels better or they come up with something fun to do, to make me think about something else. We might go on an excursion, maybe cycle somewhere and buy ice cream. They usually say that one match is not the whole world.

Encouragement was also displayed through parents and children *working together* to overcome setbacks and find solutions to challenges. These behaviors were desired in the home and competition environment and included accessing external help if needed (psychologist). G12 explained: "My parents must help me with my mindset … Most of the time we talk about it, like, 'You're here to have fun' and we set goals together." Her parents, M12 and F12, explained similarly: "She has too high performance demands on herself, and we are working on that. We have taken external professional help because it concerns both school and sports. So, we are working on it, basically every day." Although many children emphasized the importance of parents reducing the pressure associated with sport, it was also important that, parents were *accepting of their child's goal pursuits*. Importantly, parents' investment should be in proportion to the child's investment. It was clear that the children placed great value on having someone who believed in them.

3.3. Interference/non-interference

On interpreting the data in study, it was apparent there was a need to reconsider interference in comparison to Feeney and Trush's (2010) secure base framework. Interference is typically referred to as a major inhibitor of explorative behavior since it communicates diverse negative messages to the recipient (Feeney & Thrush, 2010). However, children within the current study, indicated that some interference was a facilitator of exploration. Thus, consideration is given to behaviors that fit within interference and non-interference.

Firstly, it was clear that when parents interfered when it was *unrequested*, this was not perceived positively. Such interference included *unrequested sport feedback*, which included unrequested advice, excessive analysis, sideline coaching, and questioning of strategies. These behaviors from parents were found to negatively affect children's confidence, enthusiasm, and enjoyment. G14 shared:

Dad usually gives me advice after games, like: "Play like this instead, do like this instead", then I get irritated. I tell him to be quiet, to let me think for myself, but he mostly laughs at me. I get annoyed, he should let me think for myself. *I know* what I should have done, I did wrong. I shouldn't have done that. I know what to do, but sometimes it is just hard.

Her father, F14, said: "Maybe I give some tips sometimes but I try to stay away from it. That's the coach's job." Correspondingly, M14 explained: "One should not give unsolicited advice, it would only give her a hint that she can do better. That she is not good enough." It is important to recognize that how advice is provided or received, differed between individuals.

Linked to above, children also indicated that *unrequested and/or excessive emotional* support, particularly after competition was undesirable. Excessive emotional support was described by children as not being left alone or being forced into unwanted conversations. Although most children wanted emotional support pre-competition, especially when they were nervous, opinions differed after the competition. B9 explained:

If I'm sad or disappointed, I lock myself in my room. I don't want Mom to come in and try to talk to me, that will never work. It only gets worse, then I just get angrier. It doesn't solve anything. She should let me come out myself when I want to talk.

Notably, unsolicited and/or excessive emotional support was only described by the children and was mentioned only in relation to the home environment and competitions.

Linked to the above was *unsolicited attendance or excessive attention*, which occurred when parents were present more often than children desired or displayed behavior that was inconsistent with the child's wishes. These behaviors were only mentioned by children in relation to training and competition. Overall, children wanted their parents to be involved, however, sports should be their "thing" and parents should only attend if desired. G7 explained: "Parents should keep a low profile in a good way, my parents do. Being present without yelling is a good example. Being kind to the other players and don't hate them."

In contrast to unwanted interference, children did express a *desire for parental interference* in certain situations. Specifically, children *requested feedback* in relation to competitions, but it was only desirable if parents were able to discuss and provide positively framed advice, enabling children's confident explorations of goals. However, a certain ambivalence was discernible among the children, they all wanted realistic feedback without exaggerations, but preferably nothing negative either. There also appeared to be a potential gender split, with several of the children valuing feedback from fathers more than mothers, often with the explanation that "he knows more about sports'. G12 described:

It is often after games that I ask my dad what he thinks I can do better. He usually says; "You did this great, I want to see more of that because it's very good. And after you've done that, you can do this …". I think it's very good because I want to learn.

Correspondingly, her mother, M12 discussed that parents have competence capital in various areas: "She wants advice on how to get better, but she doesn't always want the advice from Mom and Dad. For instance, if I were to say something about her floorball, she wouldn't even take me seriously because she knows I can't." Her husband (F12) agreed: "Certainly, on some occasions I can give advice, like in football I can express myself more. At gymnastics or orienteering – *definitely not*."

Children also indicated that, at times, they *desired parental intervention*, particularly within the home or at competitions. For instance, some children thought their parents needed to take a more explicit approach to encouraging them to practice, G2 said: "Sometimes I don't feel like going to practice but then my mom makes me go anyway, I think that's good because otherwise I might not go.' Additionally, children wanted their parents to stand up for them if they are treated unfairly, even if it was inconvenient for the parent. B3 recalled:

An incident quite a while ago, it was a parent who yelled at me during a bus ride with hockey. I wished my parents had handled it better. They weren't there but I told them later that I got really scared, but they did nothing about it. I wish that they would have made him apologize to me, I didn't do anything wrong.

Meanwhile, sharing a positive example of requested interference, B6 explained: "If someone has been stupid to me in hockey or at school, I've told Mom and Dad and they've sorted it out right away. I have always been able to trust them."

While requested and unrequested interference were often discussed by children, a third category of interference which we interpreted as *intentionally constrained engagement*, was described by both parents and children in relation to all contexts. Children described the importance of *parents managing their own sports-related interests and expectations* and in doing so reducing expressions of disappointment or excessive pride. F11 summarized: "I think the most important support is to be aware of your own needs and dreams and not to project them onto the children." Accordingly, his wife (M11) stated: "I think it is important to support based on the child's needs. Support but do not make demands. You want the drive to come from them themselves, so to speak." Their daughter (G11) further explained: "Parents can challenge the child based on where the child is located. And set higher goals based on what the child feels that she can handle." On the contrary, B9 expressed: "If mom has been bragging about me, then I feel pressure that I *have* to do well to prove it."

Another means through which to demonstrate constrained engagement was by *giving children responsibility*. Typically, it was recognized

that as children become older they want more responsibility. G12 explained: "I think it's good for me that I learn to take responsibility that they aren't curling parents. I can't always trust other people to do things for me." Further, she discussed that parents should constrain their sideline involvement: "There are some people that I get so frustrated with at football games. Parents who yell at us, who yell at their kids, and parent-coaches who are way too harsh. Some take sport far too seriously."

In a similar vein, participants perceived it was important that parents let children make their own mistakes, and only correct them if necessary. For example, F14 monitored his daughter but *intentionally constrained* his involvement:

> If there's stuff that they might need to solve with a 13-year-old's logic, to drive in the ditch and learn from it, it's a useful part of development. We trust her, we have discussed this, to dare to trust that they can handle things. I think independence in sport is about independence in other areas as well, to become an independent person.

His daughter (G14) shared: "If my parents don't help me, I'll fix it myself." The most common example of parents' constraining involvement was not interfering with packing, F12 explained: "I'm a little tougher if it's training, then they can come home and pick it up themselves if they forgot something. So that they learn to take responsibility themselves."

3.4. Influencing factors

As articulated above, there were specific behaviors associated with availability, encouragement, and interference/non-interference. However, it was also apparent that certain overarching factors influenced the extent to which different behaviors were displayed and/or desired. First, participants discussed challenges in their ability to provide or receive a secure base due to their *family structure*. For example, living bi-weekly (i.e., one week with mother, one week with father) meant having one parent physically available 50 % of the time and this influenced whom the children had the opportunity to seek proximity. G14 explained: "It all depends on whom I am staying at, if it is Dad week or Mum week." Similarly, M7 shared:

> Whoever has the kids, is in charge. I have no insight into how he supports. We have a very good teamwork, but we don't share parenthood. I guess it's the case with biweekly life that dads must take more responsibility than otherwise. I've let go of control quite a bit, but I don't want her to have to suffer for it."

Children also expressed that parental availability was influenced by the number of children in the family. B6 highlighted:

> Mom is with my little brother a lot because she is the coach of his team, and she must take care of him. I get that, I don't get sad. But it would have been fun if they came to my games, I get more excited then and get more desire to win. I don't want them to shout and cheer, I kind of just want to see them there.

Meanwhile, M6 said: "It feels a little sad that I'm not attending all of his games, but that's because it clashes with his little brother's games. He knows that's why." Importantly, many of the parents' shortcomings were accepted by the children as long as they were communicated.

Linked to their family structure, parents discussed the impact of shared parental responsibility and the ability to reflect on their behaviors. Several parents described having "different roles" and "different agendas" for their children's sports. For example, if one parent was very driven in sports, then the other could concentrate on something else. F7 explained: "If one parent is involved, the other might back off a bit. It could be some group dynamic thing. You can feel it in an ensemble in music as well. If someone steps forward, then someone else takes a step back." As such, it was common for mothers to take a step back in favor of the fathers' strong sporting interest and the fathers reported that usually mothers took the lead regarding the emotional parts of parenting. M5 elaborated: "The slightly more 'soft bits,' if you can say so, he'd probably rather take with me. And a lot of sports tech pieces with his dad." F6 had the same thoughts about this but described it as a division between "hardware/software." All parents acknowledged that all sport parents must make sure that the child eats before practices and games, however, in most triads it was more common for mothers to mention preparatory support such as planning, washing, packing, and the importance of the child getting enough sleep. F11 described, somewhat humorously:

> My wife can do whatever she wants, really, but we've talked about not projecting. That I should behave as my wife thinks it should be. I think it's a bit too much curling sometimes, with driving and thinking if they brought the right things with them. To think *for* them. I think they have to learn the hard way. If they forget, they forget. My wife thinks it's a cheap way for me to avoid having to take responsibility. Hahaha!

To effectively provide responsive support and work together, parents had to be able to reflect upon their own and their partner's behaviors, be able to be self-critical and acknowledge their impact. It appeared that many parents continuously discussed how they supported their children, although they did not necessarily agree with each other. In these families, there was also an acceptance on the part of the children that their parents were doing the best they could, and they perceived themselves as well supported.

Finally, several parents touched upon the consideration of *culture*, influencing expectations regarding attendance at competitions as well as interfering behaviors. F2 claimed: "The Swedish society says you should be there [at competitions], otherwise you're a bad parent.' Additionally, M2 declared: "Interfering is love for me, it's in my culture." Moreover, parents' support provision was provided with a backdrop of their own experiences from diverse sporting cultures. This was often expressed as follows: "I know how it works, I've played myself … ", and "When I used to play myself … " Thus, through the lens of their own sport-cultural experiences, the parents adapted their supportive behavior. In family triads where fathers exuded a "know-it-all-about-sports-attitude," mothers often withdrew in order to let the husband "do his thing."

4. Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to develop an understanding of parental secure base support within the context of youth sport in Sweden. As the first study integrating the concept of a secure base within the sport parenting literature, the results provide novel insights of previously identified optimal or exemplary sport parenting behaviors (e.g., Knight & Holt, 2014; Pynn et al., 2019). Specifically, it is apparent that several of the behaviors that have been promoted or preferred by children are associated with the characteristics of a secure base. However, the results demonstrate that preferences for and demonstration of certain behaviors vary across the different contexts in which children operate (i.e., training, competition, or home environments) and differ across individuals due to, for instance, age, perception of support, differences in family structures and culture.

Considering availability, as expected based on previous studies (Burke et al., 2023; Knight et al., 2011), being physically present was important for parents and children, particularly at competitions. However, such physical presence was only desirable and deemed a necessary component of a secure base if it was provided in the preferred manner (i.e., in the way the child wishes; Knight et.al., 2011), requiring parents to be responsive to their children's needs and wishes (aligned with Rouquette et al., 2021a; Rouquette et al., 2021b). Of note, parents' physical presence was generally desirable at competitions but not at training. From a theoretical and applied perspective, this makes sense. Competitions, compared to training environments (except perhaps in elite sport where training may be associated with selection processes), are often

perceived as stressful or anxiety provoking events (Ross et al., 2015). Consequently, the stress, anxiety, and fear experienced may activate the need for parental security (Bowlby, 1988) to buffer against the potential perceived negative effects associated with sport competition (Feeney & Collins, 2015). However, for training environments which are typically associated with less stress and anxiety, children desired independent exploration and autonomy. Such insights are particularly important when considering which policies or practices to put in place to minimize negative sideline behaviors from parents at competitions (cf., Webb & Knight, 2023). For instance, practices such as silent Saturdays or parent free competitions which have been highlighted as useful strategies within youth sport, might enhance athletes' anxiety, or fear and run counter to the desired behaviors of many.

Despite typically preferring their parents to be present, children recognized that parents could not always be present at competitions. Children were generally satisfied with this as long as they knew why their parents could not attend. The ability to cope when parents were not present at competitions may be due to the positive mental representations that the children developed regarding their parents. This aligns with Bowlby's (1988) concept of mental working models, which are formed based on the child's previous experiences of interactions with their parents. Specifically, from a theoretical perspective, if parents are trustingly and consistently available to their children from the outset of their sporting journey, children build positive internalized mental representations of parental support. This can provide a feeling of security even in the physical absence of the parents. With such a finding in mind, practitioners and coaches focusing attention on parents at earlier stages of the sporting journey and helping them to understand the importance of their positive presence to build long-term mental representations will be beneficial. Furthermore, understanding that children may not need or want their parents present at training is also important knowledge for practitioners who may be working with parents, as well as clubs and organizations, because criticisms are sometimes levelled at parents who just "drop and leave" (e.g., Knight & Harwood, 2009).

Additionally, when considering availability from a triadic perspective, an interesting distinction was drawn between mother and father roles, particularly regarding responsiveness. Specifically, these current findings echo the gender differences found in earlier research, which indicated that children often first prefer emotional support from their mothers (Kerns et al., 2015; Lev et al., 2020), subsequently followed by potential informational support from fathers. Within this study, these gendered parenting roles were explained by participants from a cultural and developmental perspective, whereby mothers (in heterosexual, two-parent families) were recognized to typically spend more time with, and take more responsibility for their children, often being the first source of comfort (Grossmann & Grossmann, 2020). Given our findings that parents within the triad compensate for each other's support and engagement, it is thus important to strengthen fathers' confidence in providing emotional support, specifically in Sweden where every fourth child lives with separated parents (Swedish Central Statistics Office, 2024).

Regarding encouragement there are several important elements to unpack. Firstly, our results demonstrate that encouragement in youth sport expands beyond parental behaviors displayed on the sidelines or to facilitate initial involvement, such as demonstrating praise and providing verbal reinforcement. Rather, this study suggests a broader conceptualization of encouragement in which keeping sport in perspective, being autonomy supportive, and balancing different roles between parents away from sport settings are also important, specifically in the context of the home. Thus, extending education programs delivered to parents, which often focus almost exclusively on parents' behaviors at competitions or trainings (see Burke et al., 2021 for review), to include consideration of how parents are engaging with their children in their homes may be valuable.

Further, expanding the insights regarding encouragement, alongside the protective function of availability, there are some interesting parallels between the current findings and previous research regarding smooth transitions as a central marker for attachment security (Grossmann & Grossmann, 2020; Holt et al., 2021; Pynn et al., 2019). Within attachment theory, when a child meets adversity, a parent's role is to meet the child, make them feel safe and smoothly transition them back to explorative behavior. Within the sport setting, the current study suggests that parents should encourage continued exploration of sport by setting challenges for the child, reinforcing efforts, highlighting improvements, rewarding persistence, and keeping sport in perspective (e.g., de-dramatize, refocus). However, this transition places demands on the parents' emotional intelligence and their ability to "read their child," which has been highlighted as important in previous research (Harwood & Knight, 2015; Pynn et. al., 2019) and is an area where further education may be beneficial for parents. Particularly, it was apparent that such transition work predominantly occurred away from the sport setting, further illustrating the need to understand and support parents' engagements within the home to maximize their involvement in their child's development.

An important reflection regarding the above is that, through the triadic analysis of data, aligned with previous research (Dorsch et al., 2016; Knight, 2024), there was sometimes a lack of consistency between the suggestions provided by children and their parents. For instance, parents highlighted the importance of being good role models (in accordance with research on Swedish parenting culture; Sorbring & Gurdal, 2011) and providing a rationale for sport in the home context, but this was not something the children commented on at all. Instead, children emphasized the importance of parents making efforts to enable participation thus providing "visible" support. Such differences may be due to the young age of the children, in that they lack the awareness to reflect upon their parents' more subtle efforts or embrace abstract long-term arguments. Nevertheless, the results of this study show that secure base support is the accumulated sum of all efforts, even the subtle ones, of which the child may be unaware.

Finally, considering the secure base function of interference and non-interference there are some important findings that extend previous understanding of parental involvement in sport and previous work on the concept of a secure base. In the adult attachment literature, interference is referred to as a major inhibitor of explorative behavior since it communicates diverse negative messages to the recipient (Feeney & Thrush, 2010; Feeney & Van Vleet, 2010). Our study lends support to the notion that when parents provide unrequested interference in children's sport (e.g., excessive analysis, questioning of strategies), they can communicate that the child is not competent or capable enough (aligned with Expectancy-value theory; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) or that children need to be controlled, typically leading to reduced enthusiasm. However, in contrast to Feeney's studies with adults as well as earlier work on parental interference (bib_cassidy_and_berlin_1994Cassidy & Berlin, 1994), the current study provides an alternative interpretation of interference within the context of youth sport.

Specifically, within the current study, some behaviors that Feeney and Thrush (2010) identified as intrusive were viewed as facilitators of exploration and categorized as requested interference. This may be due to the hierarchical nature of the parent-child relationship where inference could be perceived as signs of caring, helping, and engagement. Importantly, the current findings indicate that children want their parents to interfere when needed or requested, if it aligns with the desires of the child. For instance, children wanted their parents to interfere when being treated unfairly or in case of injuries. This proximity seeking behavior can be explained by the need for children to activate their attachment system when threatened in order to feel a sense of psychological security (Ainsworth et al., 2015; Grossmann & Grossmann, 2020). However, as a parent to intervene in a Swedish horizontal individualistic culture can be precarious for various reasons. For instance, everyone is expected to take care of themselves (Gurdal & Sorbring, 2024), and also because most sporting activities at club level in Sweden are led by volunteer parents, which can lead to role conflicts for adults

and children (Eliasson, 2019). Therefore, helping parents understand the value children attach to some types of interference is particularly important.

Appearing somewhat contradictory to the need for parents to interfere in certain situations, the current findings also suggest the importance of parents intentionally constraining their involvement in certain situations. For instance, it was apparent that parents should manage their own interests, emotions, and expectations, to avoid negative impacts on the child. It is important to acknowledge that a large part of being someone's secure base is waiting, knowing how, when, and when not to interfere (Feeney & Thrush, 2010). However, this places great demands on parents' emotional intelligence and coping skills (Harwood & Knight, 2015), and parents' ability to communicate with each other and their child.

Further, constrained involvement requires parents to recognize when changes in their behaviors are required. From a developmental perspective, the current findings reinforce the tenant that children increasingly want to take personal responsibility as they age and their need for tangible and information support from parents decreases (Burke et al., 2023). However, beyond age, we would suggest that such changes are needed as children increasingly establish and are confident in their secure base. Thus, from a practical perspective, it may be useful to help parents to consider their children's changing needs and subsequently the increased desire for parents to constrain their involvement as a positive illustration of their successful establishment of a secure base.

Across all three characteristics of a secure base, it was apparent that certain contextual factors may influence what is desired from parents and what parents can provide. Previous studies suggest (e.g., Furusa et al., 2021) that factors such as family structure and cultural or environmental factors will influence the types of involvement parents can display in sport or perceptions of what they should do. These two factors were identified as influential across secure base provision and were identified by both parents and children. Given such insights, and aligned with previous suggestions, it is crucial that we move beyond an assumption that all parents must or should be involved in the same ways. Rather, we must remember that parents are a diverse group (Knight, 2019) and understand the factors that are affecting parents, and account for them within our recommendations (e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2015). Research, including this study, shows that parents come from differing backgrounds and contexts (e.g., finances, emotional availability, time), and children have varied needs. As such, it is important that practitioners, coaches, and organizations avoid introducing blanket policies and practices that dictate specific actions from parents without any understanding or flexibility to enable adaptation to the specific desires or preferences of their child, or to account for contextual constraints.

In accounting for these influential factors, and the development of a secure base, it is apparent that communication is key. Specifically, when seeking to identify the specific behaviors children wanted from parents in different settings and contexts, the children frequently indicated that parents just needed to ask the child what they wanted. However, very few parents had ever asked their children what types of behaviors they wanted or desired. Thus, aligned with previous suggestions (Knight & Holt, 2014; Tamminen et al., 2017), there appears to be a need for parents to engage in attentive communication and create an environment in which their child feels comfortable communicating their views (Burke et al., 2023). Practitioners and coaches can play a key role in this, by providing opportunities for parents and children to communicate within sport settings, providing questions for children to share with parents, and supporting parents to understand how valuable it is to listen to their children to be able to optimize their involvement in their child's sporting and broader life.

4.1. Limitations and future research directions

The findings must be considered within certain limitations. The first consideration is the sample interviewed. The participants were aware of what the study was about, and this may have influenced who subsequently signed up to participate, perhaps limiting the breadth of insights gained. Additionally, our focus on studying family triads has also limited recognition of other family constellations. No information on the income or level of education of parents was collected, as it was perceived that this may be off-putting for parents, especially considering the Swedish culture where income is a private matter and where education can create a hierarchical positioning.

Moreover, the interviews were conducted shortly after the COVID-19 restrictions had been lifted (which had prevented parents' attendance at sport practices). Thus, it is feasible that this may have influenced the participants' perspectives as the pandemic had a major impact on parents' sport involvement (Elliott et al., 2023). Finally, youth sport is a dynamic and complex experience, and conducting interviews only once with the participants may have prevented opportunities to fully examine this complexity. Future research may benefit from following triads through a season or longer, supplementing insights through observations, and seeking to explore how secure base behaviors may change or need to change over time.

5. Conclusion

The current study explored what parental behaviors constitute a secure base within youth sport. Drawing on a strong theoretical framework and integrating an applied perspective, the current study highlights the numerous avenues through which parents can display availability, encouragement, and interference/non-interference. Moreover, certain contextual factors that influence the desire for, and perception of, these behaviors were also identified. At the broadest level, these findings provide information about ways in which parents can provide secure base support, facilitating children's explorative journey in sport.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Mårs Tove: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Camilla J. Knight:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Louise Davis:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Markus B.T. Nyström:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Olivier Y. Rouquette:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflict of interests.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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