



UNITED STATES TENNIS ASSOCIATION

Understanding the Role Parents Play in Junior Tennis Success: Phase 3 Interviews with Players, Parents, and Coaches



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INTRODUCTION

- Parents are one of the most controversial issues in sport.
- Junior coaches from around the U.S. are reporting an increase in the frequency of over involved parents who pressure their children, interfere with coaching and unknowingly thwart both their child's love of the game and development of their tennis talent.
- Yet Phase 1 study revealed that 66% of parents are positive sources of support.
- Parents are a growing concern and yet essential to the development of junior tennis players.

PURPOSE

- The study was designed to better understand the role that parents play in tennis talent development and success.
- Phase 3 was designed to provide an in-depth examination of parental involvement in the development of top level tennis players by retrospectively interviewing outstanding players, one of their parents, and a coach who had a great deal of interaction with the parent during the junior tennis years.

PARTICIPANTS

- Nine American-born tennis players, eight of their parents, and eight of their coaches were interviewed.
- Each of the players were on the professional tour at the time of the interview.
- Selection criteria for being a participant were:
 - American-born tennis players who were developed in some capacity by the USTA.
 - Talent tennis player on the professional tour or playing some professional events and highly successful in ITF tournaments.
 - Were of close to the same generation/age group.
 - Parents and coaches were selected based on the players' perceptions of the most involved parent and the coaches who best knew their parents and were involved during the developmental years.
- Four male and five female players averaged 20.5 years of age and had an average tour ranking of 83.
- Four male and four female parents averaged 58 years of age, 4 competed as a tennis player, and 2 were trained as a coach.
- All 7 coaches were male (one coach worked with 2 of the players) and averaged 47 years with 28 years of experience coaching.
- Players listed their developmental phases according to Bloom (1985).

Bloom (1985) Progressive Phases of Talent Development

Phase 1: The Early Years M Age Began = 4.6 Range = 2-8.5 M Age Left = 9.4 Range = 8-11	Phase 2: The Middle Years M Age Began = 10.1 Range = 8-12 M Age Left = 14.5 Range = 13-17	Phase 3: The Elite Years M Age Began = 15.0 Range = 14-18 M Age Left = NA
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Patterns of Positive and Negative Behaviors

Early Years

Three Important Negative Parental Behaviors in the Early Years Were Negative, Yelled, or Angry Placed Too Much Pressure on Child, Over Pushed Lost Healthy Perspective (sometimes over involved)

➤Note: Not all categories are listed, only those that were cited frequently and were triangulated by triad members. Themes are not listed in any hierarchical order.

WHAT DID THE STUDY FIND?

Eight Important Positive Parental Behaviors in the Early Years Provided Transportation Provided Emotional, Logistical, and Financial Support Provided the Opportunity and Resources Provided Push to Play, but Did Not Pressure Exhibited Emotional Control Emphasized Fun Stressed Good On-court Conduct Helped Develop Child's Talents by Hitting with Child (and sometimes coaching)
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"I think one of the reasons I ended up being successful professionally was because it was fun (in those early years)... I wasn't starting like a lot of players, parents got involved with their kids...dragging them out there. The initial, whatever, spark, was that it was just fun..."
(Elite female tennis player)

Middle Years

Eight Important Negative Parental Behaviors in the Middle Years Too Much Tennis Talk Emphasized Winning/Results Pressured Child (often perceived by the child, but not the parent) Reacted Emotionally at Matches Restricted Player's Social Life Were Negative/Critical Were Over-involved (Didn't give enough space to player) Moved for Player's Tennis Development which Negatively Affected Him/Her and the Family
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"There were times that (the player) did not want to go to practice as he got older and we said no you are going. This is a commitment. You made a commitment. And if you don't want to commit to something then you don't do it. But we told him, life is full of commitments. So I mean if you got out of this commitment, what else are you going to get out of?"
(Parent of a successful male tennis player)

Ten Important Positive Parental Behaviors in the Middle Years Provided Transportation Provided Emotional, Logistical, and Financial Support Provided the Opportunity for Involvement and Resources Provided the Right Amount of Push to Practice/Held High Expectations Provided Push to Play, but Did Not Pressure Child Exhibited Emotional Control Stressed Good On-court Conduct Provided Supplemental Coaching/Instruction Kept Tennis in Perspective Ensured/Facilitated Good Coaching Stressed/Instilled Hard Work
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Elite Years

Six Important Negative Parental Behaviors in the Elite Years Emphasized Winning Were Negative/Critical or Lacked Communication with Child Did Not Allow Player to be Independent Over-involved with Player's Tennis Controlling of Player Had Problems with Coach
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"A top-level coach should know how to motivate, encourage, discipline, they need to be the parent of their (the player's) tennis. And the parent needs to be more love, support, and backbone and friend. And finding those (boundaries) is the key and never crossing, never crossing...and knowing what your role is and doing it."
(Elite male tennis player)

"...I feel very strongly about the pursuit of excellence in something...I think it is a tough world we live in, a tough world for children, to be excellent in something is like wearing a suit of armor, it protects you against so many things going on in the world that tear you down and make you feel less than good about yourself. And so in that sense, since it appears tennis was the thing (that his daughter was motivated to pursue), I did believe and I encouraged her to feel that it was a worthwhile pursuit to pursue excellence in her tennis, but it wasn't that it had to be tennis."
(Parent of a successful female tennis player)

RESULTS, CONT.

Nine Important Positive Parental Behaviors in the Elite Years Provided Emotional, Logistical, Managerial, and Financial Support Provided the Opportunity and Resources Exhibited Emotional Control Stressed Good On-court Conduct Lessened Involvement/Pulled Back Purposefully Allowed Child Independence Kept Tennis in Perspective Provided Consistent and Stable Parenting Helped with Professional Career Decisions Helped to Make Good Decisions (Gave Advice)

Optimal Parent Push

- Optimal push was defined by the participants as the practice of parents at certain times needing to motivate a player because he or she is being lazy or is not doing what is needed to be successful, while at the same time not pressuring or inappropriately making the child do things against their well-being.
- 76% of the participants agreed that optimal push existed for them at some point.

Optimal Parent Push Involves: Balance - Walking a Fine Line in One's Parenting The Development of the Whole Person Balancing Fun and Discipline Parental Involvement and Commitment Focusing on Development, Not Winning Requiring Child to Follow Through on Commitments Holding Child Accountable for Actions Motivating the Child Giving Opportunities and Pushing to Take Advantage of Them Emphasizing the Discipline Needed to Practice
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COACHING IMPLICATIONS

- Each and every parent and child has a unique history with unique personalities that make it impossible to provide a 'recipe' to parenting one's child successfully. Thus, *there is no one correct way to parenting one's child in junior tennis.*
- Parents who had good relationships with their child at the end of the developmental years had a few core characteristics that made them successful including:
 - A healthy perspective of tennis where developing the child and having fun was always more important than winning.
 - the use of many types of support and a great deal of it,
 - and the ability to understand their shifting parenting role.
- Parenting a child in junior tennis is a very difficult and complex process requiring the parent to make sound decisions based on what is best for the child, even when there is pressure to win or to keep up with the rest of the tennis world.

Top 9 Recommendations Coaches made to Junior Tennis Parents 1. Look Very Hard, Diligently, and Carefully for a Coach and Stick with Him/Her 2. Help with Off-Court Stuff (e.g., stringing, taking care of details) 3. Important to have a Life Outside of Tennis 4. Stay Positive, Be Careful with Criticism (must be thought out and done with a purpose) 5. Push to Practice and Don't Go to All of the Matches 6. Trust the Coach to Do His or Her Job 7. Maintain a Strong, Stable Family Life 8. Become Less Involved and Allow Expert Coaches to Take Over Child's Development in Tennis 9. Teach Child to Learn Lessons from Losing
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YEAR PERFORMED 2003