Parental Involvement, Pressure, and Support in Youth Sport: A Narrative Literature Review

The aim of this literature review is to describe and critique what is known about relations between parents and their athlete children in contemporary research. Athlete families are prevalent and in need of research based in family systems theory. I describe a typology of underinvolved, moderately involved, and overinvolved parents. I found themes of parental involvement, pressure, support, and family-level issues. I conclude with suggestions for guiding research on sports parenting with family systems theory.

Soccer mom, hockey dad—"soccer mom" might conjure an image of a woman in a minivan, spending her day chauffeuring her children and their equipment. Perhaps "hockey dad" invokes an image of a man on skates coaching his child’s team. Either term might evoke an image of a woman or man in the stands yelling—at the coaches, the referees, or the children. The images are powerful, as youth sport is so common and stories in the media about sports parents can be so alarming.

In the 2008–2009 school year, more than 7.5 million U.S. teens competed in high school sports (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2009); the National Council of Youth Sports (2008) also reported that 44 million children up to age 18 participated in youth sport organizations in the United States in 2008. Approximately 75% of 3- to 12-year-olds in the United States spend 5 hours a week participating in youth sport (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). Youth sport is a term generally used to define athletic participation in competitive sport by children up to age 18. It is key that the children physically compete, not just participate, in adult-organized sport activities. Children’s sports participation has the potential to help them develop initiative, leadership, academic achievement, and goal-setting skills, in addition to the sports experiences they gain (Gould & Carson, 2008), thus potentially affecting their family relationships and family systems as a whole.

Researchers have begun to define athlete families and to describe this family system identity. For example, an early characterization of athlete families described those family systems as ones that dedicate significant family money, time, and emotional energies to youth-sport activities (Hellstedt, Rooks, & Watson, 1988). Athlete families also include the intensive participation of parents or adult children in youth, collegiate, or professional sport (Hellstedt, 2000). Researchers are using terms such as sport parent (VanYperen, 1998), athletic families (Hellstedt et al., 1988), and athlete families (Hellstedt, 1995) to describe these family systems. Furthermore, family sport therapists (Hellstedt, 2000)—clinicians trained in family therapy and sport psychology—have begun to work with athlete families to guide them through the stressors of competitive sport. Adults have largely taken over the organization...
of the youth-sport experience, thus increasing the level of intensity and feeling of obligation while reducing negotiation and rule enforcement opportunities for the children. Families are changing in an effort to keep up. Researchers are beginning to understand this new dynamic.

The organization of youth sport, including tournaments and all-star teams, is driven by adults and is less centered on youth athletes than it was in the past (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001; Citizenship Through Sports Alliance [CTSA], 2005). Some parents of child athletes have unrealistic expectations, become overly invested, and view their worth as based on their child’s athletic success (CTSA, 2005; Gould, 2009). This rise of adult-imposed expectations in youth sport has created other problems for youth athletes, such as burnout and high rates of overuse and acute injuries—juries that often require surgery and affect skeletal growth plates (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001; Patel & Nelson, 2000). Injuries and burnout can have lifelong effects, such as chronic pain, disinterest in physical activity, and obesity.

In addition to the repercussions in physical and emotional health, researchers have examined parental behavior and involvement in youth sport. In 2005, the CTSA evaluated parents’ ability to demonstrate respect and appropriate behavior at games and parents’ ability to function as supporters rather than as unofficial coaches. These aspects of parental behavior and involvement were given a poor (D) grade (CTSA, 2005). The CTSA has called for more research examining critical issues in youth sport, because understanding children’s experiences in sport participation is necessary if sports leaders and policy makers are to make well-informed decisions (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004).

It is important for family scientists to examine what is known about athlete families and their relationship dynamics. Understanding parental involvement, parental pressure, and parental support, as well as youth athletes’ perceptions of parental involvement, family tension, and resource allocation, is key to understanding the challenges faced and the rewards experienced by these families. With all the pressure surrounding youth sport, it is researchers’ responsibility to provide guidance for those involved in youth sport, including parents and coaches, as well as family therapists, counselors, and sport psychologists.

**THE PURPOSE OF THIS REVIEW**

In this narrative review of the literature, I describe what is understood about parenting and family dynamics in families with a child athlete and discuss the research through the framework of family systems. There are not enough studies to aggregate and draw conclusions from, which makes it premature to conduct a meta-analysis on this body of literature. The primary aim of this narrative review, then, is to use family systems theory to understand the current state of research and to suggest how future research might examine families in which a child athlete participates in youth sport.

**METHOD**

**Search Methods**

In this article I use a narrative literature review approach, integrating research in other fields with the conceptual framework of family systems theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006), using the Family and Society Studies Worldwide, Sport Discus, PsycINFO, and MEDLINE databases. Search terms included parent-child relations and sport or athlete, athlete and family, sport and family, and sports families; I conducted my searches during the summer of 2005 and again during the summer of 2009. In addition to professional journals, I searched book and textbook chapter reference lists, as well as the references in retrieved published articles (Green et al., 2006). Twenty-three articles from 13 journals that met the criteria described here were used in this review.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Inclusion criteria were focus on youth athletes (approximate ages 3–19) participating in competitive sport, themes of parent-child or family relations, and publication dates after 1990 and up to mid-2009. Although important and related to the topic, specific areas of research were excluded from this review, including studies of children in general physical activity or extracurricular activities; research that specifically studied parental influence of youth athletes’ moral development or athletes’ state or trait anxiety, which are their own specific fields of study; and family systems theory used in sport psychology with team sports.
Evaluation

For each study that met the inclusion criteria the following factors were reviewed: study design, sample, age, sport and level of play, number of respondents providing data, statistical analysis, and major findings. I reviewed articles to understand how definitions and measurements were used and to examine overall conceptual elements.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RELEVANT CONCEPTS

Family Systems Theory

A review of the literature on the relationships of parents with their athlete children requires an explanation of the theoretical framework that encompasses both family systems and sport psychology. Hellstedt (1987, 1990, 2000) adapted family systems theory to include the sport context, which has resulted in a descriptive model of underinvolved, moderately involved, and overinvolved athlete families. This work has been developed largely through Hellstedt’s clinical experience rather than through empirical research, which invites testing and empirical investigation, opens new research questions, and provides opportunities for researchers to explore the dynamics of families who have a child or children competing in sport.

Conceptual model. The conceptual model was based on two family systems concepts: boundaries and subsystems. Boundaries define who participates in the system and how they participate (Minuchin, 1974). Boundaries reflect the behavioral and emotional individuation among family members and operate on a continuum from disengaged to enmeshed (Hellstedt, 1987). Disengaged families have little personal involvement with one another and much personal separation. Disengaged athlete families might have members involved in separate teams or sports with little overlap, or they might have one child involved without the expressed interest of parents or siblings. Conversely, enmeshed families have difficulty knowing where one person begins and the other person ends, and they often feel, think, and behave as one person. When enmeshed, the whole family might be heavily involved in the same team or sport (Hellstedt, 1987).

Boundaries also address the degree of overlap or separation between subsystems and the family unit, and between the family unit and the outside world (Hellstedt, 2000). A subsystem includes some members of a family while excluding others, and it can consist of the same level of the family hierarchy (i.e., marital or parental). Subsystems can also consist of different levels of the family hierarchy, such as a parent and a child (Minuchin, 1974). For instance, some families with child athletes have healthy, functioning sibling subsystems, whereas other families might have children who compete in sport in their own subsystem that excludes their siblings who do not compete in sport, or a single child athlete might be triangulated with the parents (Bowen, 1978), thus leaving out other children in the family. Boundaries might be permeable or impermeable, and in this case, organized sport exists in the outside world so the family can have a range of interactions within their own unit and with the outside world of youth sport (Hellstedt, 2000).

By adapting these family systems concepts to athlete families, Hellstedt (1987) created a model describing three styles of involvement: underinvolved, moderately involved, and overinvolved. Although he refers to them as families, he essentially described the behaviors of parents. Underinvolved families (Hellstedt, 1987) show little to no interest in the child’s sport, talent, or progress. Underinvolved parents lack investment of emotional, financial, or practical energy in the child’s activities and do not spend much effort guiding their child athlete in sport. Moderately involved athlete families balance firm parental direction with the child’s power to make her or his own decisions about goals, participation, and commitment (Hellstedt, 1987). Moderately involved parents provide financially but may also have their child contribute to expenses through means such as extra chores. Moderately involved parents frequently attend competitions but leave the coaching of their child up to the coach.

Overinvolved parents are emotionally overly involved with the child’s athletic experiences and performance, and they tend to live vicariously through their child’s sport successes (Hellstedt, 1987). Parental behaviors include having dreams of fame and seeing their child’s talent as an investment in the future (to win an Olympic gold medal or to “go pro”), as well as being overbearing with coaches; attending
practices excessively; and focusing on wins rather than on the child’s skill development, happiness, or health.

Developmental tasks and family stressors. Another family systems framework adapted to athlete families is a developmental model (Hellstedt, 1995) based on the work of Carter and McGoldrick (1989). Hellstedt suggested that there are developmental tasks specific to the athlete family that need to be mastered as families move through stages of raising small children to launching those children into adulthood (Hellstedt 1995, 2000, 2005). Of importance here are the developmental tasks that the athlete family must master at two stages: the family with young children (ages 4–12) and the family with adolescent children (ages 13–18) (for a description of all stages, see Hellstedt 1995, 2000, 2005).

The tasks families with young children need to master are (a) introducing children to sporting activities, both individual and team sports; (b) providing a safe sport environment with good coaching; (c) emphasizing fun and skill development and minimizing winning; (d) allowing for sport time as well as for nonsport individual and family time; and (e) modeling family values of hard work and goal attainment by parent example and not just verbalization (Hellstedt, 1995). Essentially, this developmental stage is the time to introduce children to sports and for them to have fun in sport.

The tasks of families with adolescent children are (a) to encourage and support the child athlete’s commitment to sport generalization or specialization, depending on the child’s skills and desires; (b) to provide financial and emotional support without putting a strain on family financial and emotional resources; (c) to encourage healthy boundaries for the family and the child athlete to have social and intellectual involvement outside of sport; (d) to allow for the child athlete to have more independence in decision making; (e) to provide a safe sport environment with good coaching; (f) to allow teachers and coaches to have increasingly more influence on the child athlete; (g) to model family values of hard work and goal attainment by parent example and conversations; and (h) to maintain a spousal relationship and subsystem independent of the child athlete’s sport participation (Hellstedt, 1995). As children mature, parents work with them to help them gain independence in their sport, to let them decide to play multiple sports (generalization) or to focus on one (specialization), and to both model and discuss the family’s chosen values.

This is a lot to accomplish for families who also must accomplish the same developmental tasks as nonathlete families and often have stressors that make the process difficult. There are two types of stressors particular to family developmental stages—horizontal and vertical—that affect a family’s ability to proceed effectively through the different developmental stages. Horizontal stressors are challenges that families face over time (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989; Hellstedt, 2000), especially during times of transition. Families may experience horizontal stressors during expected transitions, such as when athletic children move from sampling a variety of sports to specializing in one sport, or during unexpected transitions, such as being cut from a team or having a season-ending injury. Families who have more than one child participating and families who have long-term participation in competitive sport are more often affected by horizontal stressors because of the transitions each athlete makes from age-group to high school sports and potentially to college sport and beyond.

Vertical stressors, in contrast, are psychological issues that are passed down in families through generations, such as unresolved grief, family secrets, alcoholism, and mental illness (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989; Hellstedt, 2000). An athlete family might experience a vertical stressor if a parent who strived to “make it” in sport when he or she was younger, but did not, displaces that desire onto his or her athletically talented child. Vertical stressors also include patterns that families develop through the years in how they relate and function and in the values they share, including expectations, attitudes, and taboos (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). Consequently, child athletes might play even though they are injured, or they may continue playing a sport when they want to quit because of generational family expectations. When horizontal and vertical stressors intersect, the potential for conflict is greater, and it is harder for the family to successfully meet the demands and tasks of each stage of development.

Additional family systems concepts. There are many other elements addressed by family
systems theory left untapped by previous work on families with a child who competes in youth sport that could prove fruitful in understanding the relationships and dynamics in these families. Applicable concepts include family communication, subsystems and triangulation, the reciprocal nature of relationship dynamics (Becvar & Becvar, 2009), and the influence of extended family (Milardo, 2010); I discuss these in more depth in the section “Discussion.”

RESULTS

The majority of studies reviewed focused on three aspects: parental involvement, parental pressure, and parental support (articles reviewed are marked with an asterisk in the references list). Most participants were approached through elite gyms or club teams, tennis academies, and soccer schools, and studies used the child athlete or the sports parent and child athlete as the unit of analysis. The child athletes studied ranged in age from 6 to 18. Tennis, soccer, gymnastics, and swimming were the most common sports included in the research. The majority of investigations were descriptive and correlational; authors reported the perceptions of parents and child athletes on such things as parental involvement and parental pressure, as well as the degree to which parent and child perceptions were consistent with or discrepant from each other. Some studies also described the situation of the whole family or members of the family other than the identified child athlete; these studies are discussed together with respect to family tensions and resource allocation.

Parental Involvement

Authors in the literature posited two constructs within involvement: (1) level of involvement, operationalized as the time, energy, and money that parents invest in a child’s sport participation, and (2) degree of involvement, operationalized as the amount of involvement desired by the athlete (the child’s perception), ranging from too little to too much (Stein, Raedeke, & Glenn, 1999). Parental directiveness, related to parental involvement, is also included. Directiveness focuses on the active instruction that parents give to their child athletes about their sport achievement, emphasizing areas in which the athlete needs the most improvement (Power & Woolger, 1994).

The effect of parental involvement and directiveness on child athletes varied among studies. Three studies indicated positive, linear relationships between parent involvement or directiveness and positive sport experiences for their children. Results included a positive association between mothers’ and fathers’ high level and degree of involvement and the enjoyable experiences of the child athletes (Stein et al., 1999), a positive association between mothers with high performance goals and the child athlete’s intrinsic motivation (Woolger & Power, 2000), and a positive association between mothers with high performance goals and the child athlete’s enjoyment of soccer (Averill & Power, 1995). In terms of linear relationships, parental involvement—through parent directiveness or performance goal expectations—had positive relationships with variables that influenced child athletes’ enjoyment of the sport experience.

Some of the linear relationships were qualified by stronger quadratic, or curvilinear, relationships. Child athletes reported the most enjoyment in their sport when their fathers were moderately involved, and they experienced the most stress when they perceived the degree of their mother’s involvement as either too little or too much (Stein et al., 1999). A moderate amount of parental directiveness and performance goal expectations contributed to an optimum degree of child athlete enthusiasm and the child’s intrinsic motivation for his or her sport as well (Power & Woolger, 1994; Woolger & Power, 2000). In these cases, moderate behaviors from parents, rather than extreme ones, resulted in the best situation for child athletes.

Instruction and striking a balance were themes of parental involvement in child athletes’ sport experiences in a study using the mixed methods of qualitative interviews and extended observation (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn, & Wall, 2008). Instruction—described as commentary by parents during competition intended to change their child’s behavior on the soccer field—is closely related to the concept of directiveness. Striking a balance was a theme that described parents’ struggle to use a positive tone when they recognized that they had recently used a negative tone with their child athlete. Both themes were prominent in parents’ behaviors in the study and appeared to indicate metacognition by the parents about their own act of parenting (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn et al., 2008).
Pressure was defined as parental behaviors that symbolize high or even unattainable expectations in the minds of the child athletes (Leff & Hoyle, 1995). Pressure can manifest in overt behaviors, such as parents pushing their child athlete to practice more or to play at a more advanced level, or it can manifest in covert behaviors, such as parental looks of disappointment after a poor performance (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). In one qualitative study, youth athletes experienced pressure from parental overinvolvement and parental expectations. One parent reported, “I am hard on him; I find it quite effective to swear at him. If he’s played badly then I give him a right going over” (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005, p. 120). Such overinvolvement was found to be most problematic at competitions, where it created tension between the athletes and their parents.

The effect of parental expectations was found to depend on athlete’s perceptions of parents’ expectations and on whether the athlete felt that he or she was living up to the perceived or the expressed parental expectations (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Parental overinvolvement was described in another qualitative study as being a common experience for child athletes, and it was a source of diminished enjoyment in sport; this finding was highlighted by athletes’ comments about parents shouting at them during competitions, which increased pressure on the child athletes (McCarthy & Jones, 2007).

Negative and derogatory comments were themes of controlling parental behavior found in one mixed-methods study (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn et al., 2008). Negative comments were found both in observations at tournaments and in audio diaries of participants. Derogatory comments were considered potentially damaging to the child athlete, were a small percentage of the kinds of comments recorded by the researchers, and added to the pressure child athletes’ experience (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn et al., 2008). A controlling parenting style, found in a related study, consisted of parents who were highly involved in their child athletes’ sport participation in a way that undermined child athletes’ autonomy (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandingo, & Fox, 2009). In their parenting approach, controlling parents were unable to read their child athlete’s moods, provided control instead of structure, and were not successful in having open bidirectional communication with their child athlete (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandingo et al., 2008). Two other qualitative studies found multiple sources of stress from parents on child athletes, including lectures from mothers before competition (Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1991), lectures from fathers after competition (Gould, Wilson, Tuffey, & Lochbaum, 1993), general parental criticism after competition, and trying to and failing to meet parental expectations (Scanlan et al., 1991).

Parental pressure and support were examined in a pair of studies; child athletes reported that they perceived more pressure from their fathers than their mothers, and male athletes perceived more pressure from parents than did female athletes (Leff & Hoyle, 1995). With a smaller sample, however, girls reported more parental pressure than boys (Hoyle & Leff, 1997).

In the first study of the development of the Parental Involvement in Sport Questionnaire, child athletes reported experiencing too much pressure and directive behavior from parents (Lee & MacLean, 1997). In the follow-up study, beginner athletes experienced more parental pressure and directive behavior than the more skilled athletes (Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004). In addition, those child athletes who disliked parental pressure tolerated less directive behavior from their parents, and child athletes who liked more parental pressure could accept much more directive behavior, which illustrates the salience of child athletes’ perception in their experiences (Lee & MacLean, 1997). When the child athletes and both of their parents were surveyed, it was the fathers who perceived that they were putting the most directive behavior and pressure on their child athletes, more than either the child athletes or the mothers perceived (Wuerth et al., 2004). In a separate study, the child athletes perceived more pressure from their parents than the parents perceived of their own behavior (Kanters, Bocarro, & Casper, 2008).

**Parental Support**

Two definitions of parental support were provided in the literature: (1) unconditional warmth toward and acceptance of a child athlete by their parents (Power & Woolger, 1994) and (2) parental behaviors that child athletes perceive as assisting both their sports participation and their sports performance (Hoyle & Leff, 1997). Therefore, supportiveness by parents of child athletes is shown in affect and
behaviors, can be emotional and instrumental, and is perceived by the child athlete.

Emotional, tangible, and informational support were all themes found in a qualitative study (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Emotional support came from both parents and was defined as the provision of security and comfort to the child athlete during stressful times in the sport. Tangible support from parents included financial support and transportation. Informational support consisted of general, noncoaching advice, such as advice on how the child athlete could balance tennis with the rest of his or her life (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Supportive behaviors such as encouragement and performance-contingent feedback (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn et al., 2008) and autonomy-supportive parenting styles (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo et al., 2008) have also been found. Autonomy-supportive parents are highly involved but are different from controlling parents in that autonomy-supportive parents provide structure instead of control and put little pressure on their child athlete. They also are good at altering their own behavior on the basis of the moods of their child athlete, and they have open, bidirectional communication with their child athlete (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo et al., 2008).

Child athletes’ perception is key; in a study of athletes’ perceptions and parental self-reports, the athletes who perceived more support from their parents were happier and more motivated than those who perceived less support. Indeed, athletes’ perceptions of parental behaviors were more important to their well-being than the actual behaviors that the parents reported (Babkes & Weiss, 1999). In addition, parents perceived themselves as providing more support than their child athletes perceived from them (Kanters et al., 2008). These examples demonstrate that the perceptions of parents of child athletes and their child athletes do not always match.

Positive correlations have been found between perceived parental support and player enjoyment in studies of highly competitive tennis athletes (Hoyle & Leff, 1997; Leff & Hoyle, 1995). Tennis self-esteem and global self-esteem were both associated with perceived parental support as well (Leff & Hoyle, 1995). In addition, parental support was associated with athletes’ enjoyment of tennis and the level of importance tennis held in their lives (Hoyle & Leff, 1997). Such results echo those from a study about swimmers in which parental support was positively associated with athlete enthusiasm for swimming (Power & Woolger, 1994).

In a study of boys in a tennis boarding school, the buffering effects of perceived availability of parental support on the athletes’ psychological well-being in the face of potential school dismissal yielded instructive results (VanYperen, 1995, 1998). First, no relationship was found between perceived parental support and perceived parental pressure; these two concepts were found to be independent of each other. Second, athletes whom coaches identified as having low performance, and who also perceived low availability of parent support, experienced more stress than those low performers with higher perceived availability of parental support (VanYperen, 1995). Third, the predictors of psychological health symptoms at follow-up were the initial psychological health symptoms and the interaction between chance of dismissal and perceived availability of mother and father support (VanYperen, 1998). Interestingly, the number of siblings in the athlete’s family covaried with less perceived support from both parents, which indicates that resources are perceived by the child athletes differently depending on the number of children in the family (VanYperen, 1998).

**Family Tensions**

Some of the research on athlete families was not so easily related to involvement, pressure, or support; instead, it was related to the parent and child athletes’ perspectives on the meaning of sport in their lives. For example, one study of tennis players measured the importance of winning and losing, sustained effort during competition, and existence of embarrassing behaviors exhibited by both athletes and parents during competition (DeFrancesco & Johnson, 1997). The majority of athletes and nearly all parents said that winning was important to them, but only a small percentage of athletes and parents reported feeling upset after the child athlete lost a match if the athlete put forth considerable effort during that match. In other words, sustained effort mitigated the experience of negative feelings after a loss. Half the athletes surveyed reported that they had at some time done something to embarrass themselves on the court (e.g., yelled, threw their racket), whereas one third of athletes reported that a parent had
embarrassed them (e.g., yelled at them, screamed out loud, walked away from the court). An interesting result was again found regarding perceptions. After a loss, athletes reported being more upset than parents thought they were, and at the same time, athletes perceived their parents as more upset with them after a loss than parents actually were (DeFrancesco & Johnson, 1997), thus indicating a lack of understanding of each other’s experiences.

Resource Allocation
The literature showed that the entire athlete family is involved in youth sport, even if only one child participates (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Family-level sacrifices occur in athlete families, including sacrifices by child athletes, such as missing out on fun with friends; sacrifices made by the mothers, including giving up personal time; and sacrifices made by the whole family, such as not having family vacations. For example, elite tennis players received preferential treatment over siblings from their parents, with an imbalance of time and resources allocated to the tennis players. Respondents also reported giving up family summer holidays for the child athletes’ participation and experiencing jealousy from other siblings. In addition, parents used a divide-and-conquer method, with one parent spending time with the tennis player while the other parent spent time with the remaining children (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). The latter behavior is in alignment with the problem of sharing parental resources found by other authors (VanYperen, 1998).

Others have studied the impact of being an athlete family not on the child athlete but on the parents themselves (Harwood & Knight, 2009; Lally & Kerr, 2008). Parents reported having “paid the price” in their marriages for their daughters’ elite gymnastics careers, for example. They also retrospectively had regrets about whether they should have done anything to intervene on their daughters’ behalf in the culture of elite gymnastics, wondering whether such serious participation resulted in psychological harm to their daughters (Lally & Kerr, 2008). Parents lived with concerns about the long-term effects of injury as well (Harwood & Knight, 2009; Lally & Kerr, 2008). Parents were concerned about the stability of their families because they had privileged one child for so many years, highlighting the impact that one elite athlete can have on the whole family system (Harwood & Knight, 2009; Lally & Kerr, 2008). Parents struggled with watching their children experience emotional distress in tennis matches and did not know how to talk with their children after a bad loss (Harwood & Knight, 2009).

In addition, in families in which the elite athlete was a younger sibling, the older siblings were found to have acted as role models of work ethic. As the elite athlete grew older, however, the parents behaved differently toward each child, and siblings younger than the elite athlete tended to show bitterness and jealousy toward the child athlete’s achievement (Côté, 1999).

The bidirectional influences between parents and their child athletes in elite gymnastics is also an area of study. Athletes reported that about half of parents rearranged family schedules for the athlete’s gymnastics, whereas most parents reported that home life and their personal lives revolved around gymnastics. In addition, athletes reported that most fathers and mothers did not make them feel nervous or uptight about their gymnastics, and the younger the athlete, the more the parents cheered and gave instruction at meets (Weiss & Hayashi, 1995). Parents reported personal benefits from their child’s involvement in gymnastics, including a sense of pride, enjoyment or pleasure, and a better relationship with their child. Furthermore, one quarter of parents reported that parenting their child athlete was made easier by the child’s participation in gymnastics. This was because they perceived their child as more disciplined and goal oriented as a result of their participation in the sport (Weiss & Hayashi, 1995).

Discussion
The aim of this narrative literature review was to describe what is known about parenting and family dynamics in families with a child athlete. Several main themes were identified in the sports parenting literature: parental involvement, parental pressure, and parental support; family tensions; and resource allocation. In addition, the authors pointed to the importance of recognizing child athletes’ own perceptions, the value of supportive parents, and importance of recognizing optimum levels of parent behaviors in constructs that show curvilinear relationships between child athletes and their parents.
Integration of the Research Within the Athlete Family Typology

Researchers’ conceptualization of parental involvement, parental pressure, and parental support complement Hellstedt’s descriptive model of underinvolved, moderately involved, and overinvolved athlete families. Hellstedt (1987, 1990, 2000) used involvement in an overarching manner to classify parents, to describe a typology of parenting approaches. Authors reviewed in this article, in contrast, operationalized parental involvement as consisting of level and degree of involvement (Stein et al., 1999) or as directiveness (Power & Woolger, 1994), simply to understand parental involvement from a child athlete’s perspective and to determine the impact of the parenting behaviors that reflect involvement or directiveness on child athletes’ outcomes. On the basis of this literature review, I found considerable evidence for a curvilinear relationship between elements of parental involvement and positive child athletes’ outcomes. Hellstedt’s emphasis on the benefits of moderate parental involvement is supported. Curvilinear results demonstrate that a medium amount of a given parent behavior (e.g., involvement, directiveness, performance outcome goals) brings the best results for the child athlete in terms of his or her levels of stress, enthusiasm and enjoyment of sport, and intrinsic motivation (Power & Woolger, 1994; Stein et al., 1999; Woolger & Power, 2000).

The parental pressure that child athletes experience is related to the parental behaviors that Hellstedt (1987, 1990, 2000) used to describe overinvolved parents. For example, authors vividly described the pressure experienced by elite tennis players as coming from parental overinvolvement and high parental expectations of their performance (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). In addition, parental overinvolvement, such as parents shouting as their child athletes during competitions, detracts from the joy child athletes felt in sport (McCarthy & Jones, 2007).

For both parental involvement and parental pressure, there are conceptual issues in the operationalization of constructs that family researchers can address. Specifically, both the concepts of degree of parent involvement (Stein et al., 1999) and the description of covert parental pressure that child athletes can imagine (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005) are more about the child athletes’ impressions than about parents’ actual behaviors. It is clear from the literature reviewed here that child athletes’ perceptions are key to understanding family dynamics in athlete families, and yet there is still refining to be done to operationalize some constructs.

Parental support is a construct not as easily connected to the framework of underinvolved, moderately involved, and overinvolved parents. Hellstedt’s (1987, 1990, 2000) description focused on instrumental behaviors like providing a balance of parental direction and child athlete independence rather than on providing emotional support. The studies reviewed here addressed parental support and its role in the lives of child athletes but defined parental support differently (Hoyle & Leff, 1997; Power & Woolger, 1994); this creates opportunities for researchers to clarify the concept. Support can be given through parents’ affective or instrumental demonstrations: emotional support, such as security and comfort during stressful times; tangible support, such as financial and transportation; and informational support, such as guidance on the balance of sport, life, and school (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005) are all possibilities.

There is evidence from a qualitative study that parents who are highly involved in their child athletes’ lives can concurrently be supportive (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo et al., 2008). Autonomy-supportive and controlling parents are both highly involved, but an important distinction is that autonomy-supportive parents provide structure rather than control, put little pressure on their child athletes, and communicate with and understand their child athletes better than controlling parents do (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo et al., 2008). These distinctions problematize Hellstedt’s (1995, 2000, 2005) position that moderately involved parents are optimal and give family researchers a specific area to investigate further.

The understanding of support has been investigated through the perceptions of the child athlete—how much the child athlete perceives that his or her parents facilitate their own athletic and emotional adjustment and the degree to which parents help the child’s performance and participation (Hoyle & Leff, 1997; Leff & Hoyle, 1995). All these contributions can aid in the investigation of athlete families from a family systems framework. Whether studying involvement, pressure, or support from parents, examining the child athletes’ and parents’
perceptions is important; both are needed and can be discrepant (Kanters et al., 2008).

Family tensions including bitterness of siblings (Côté, 1999) and concerns about troubled marriages and family stability (Lally & Kerr, 2008), as well as imbalances in resource allocation (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005), surfaced in this literature review. Although Hellstedt (1995, 2000, 2005) theorized about these concepts, he has not empirically investigated them, and the advent of research from a family systems conceptual framework to investigate such rich research areas would greatly benefit athlete families.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

On the basis of this review of the body of literature on the relationships between parents and their child athletes, I offer several recommendations in the areas of study conceptualization and research design.

**Use of theory to guide research questions and design.** The conceptualization of variables through a family systems lens will be beneficial for studies of parent-child, sibling, spousal, and extended-family relationships in families with child athletes, especially because sport competition is so predominant that families often reorganize themselves around those competing in sport.

Hellstedt’s (1995, 2000, 2005) clinical-experience-driven athlete-family typology is an area that needs research. For instance, some authors’ findings supported the concept of moderately involved parents (Power & Woolger, 1994; Woolger & Power, 2000), but others’ findings did not (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo et al., 2008; Stein et al., 1999). Consequently, researchers cannot assume that the moderately involved parent or family is the model family for good health and well-being. Therefore, the typology must be evaluated and family members’ opinions, perceptions, and attitudes must be examined.

In addition, the developmental stages of families with child athletes as described by Hellstedt (1995, 2000, 2005) is a rich area of investigation. The utilization of family systems theory to ground research on these families could aid researchers in understanding the complexities of families in different developmental stages and how families with child athletes meet the tasks of each stage, such as families with adolescent athletes who need to gain independence and rely more on coaching staff than on parental influences, or parents who find that their child’s sport participation makes parenting easier because of their child’s discipline and goal orientation (Weiss & Hayashi, 1995). Together with research on developmental stages, it would be sensible to investigate the impact of horizontal and vertical family stressors on child athletes. Child athletes make many transitions, normative (e.g., moving up an age group) and nonnormative (e.g., being injured or cut from a team); although some research has been conducted on transitions for the child athletes themselves, investigating transitions through the lens of vertical stressors would reveal more about family dynamics. At this time there is a gap in understanding how the messages passed through generations (vertical stressors) affect child athletes or their families as a whole. This is another area in which family researchers could examine the impact of extended family on families with child athletes. For instance, in families in which child athletes are pressured to compete in a specific sport, close relationships with aunts or uncles could be explored. Aunts and uncles can both explain any potential family legacy (vertical stressor) in that specific sport and help the child athlete cope with family expectations—and family researchers could study the relationship between child athlete and aunt or uncle (Milardo, 2010).

There was only one study in this review that specifically addressed communication between child athletes and their parents (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo et al., 2008). Thus, communication patterns are another gap in the literature on families with child athletes. Researchers could investigate how parents communicate with their children about their sport participation and whether that differs from how they communicate about other tasks, such as chores or schoolwork. A particularly illuminating study would be an observation of how parents communicate with their children during competitions and immediately afterward, when arousal from the performance is still high. In addition, much would be gained from investigating child athletes’ communication with parents, siblings, and extended family about their sport experiences—both positive and stressful experiences, such as having a good game or playing through injury.

Subsystems and triangulation within the family could be studied to gain a more complete
picture of different athlete-family experiences. Families with healthy functioning share a hierarchy of subsystems: the spousal, parental, and sibling subsystems (Minuchin, 1974). When there are problems or persistent sources of stress, triangulations are often formed with someone outside the hierarchical subsystems (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974). In families with child athletes, these family systems concepts could be expressed in a number of ways. One is when the parents experience difficulty in their marriage and a child athlete’s talent takes the pressure off of the marriage, so triangulation occurs with that child athlete. Another is when the parents’ identity is defined by the child athletes’ successes and failures, at which time the parents could become triangulated with the child athlete, or one parent and the child athlete could become triangulated with the child’s coach or sport (Hellstedt, 1987)—either way the subsystems would be disrupted.

In addition, there is potential for disruptions in the sibling subsystem, depending on the children’s dynamic relationships surrounding their sport experiences. For instance, in some families children close in age and of the same gender might compete with one another in the same events or for the same position on a team, or a younger sibling might prove more talented than the older, more experienced (as in the case of the figure skaters Karen Kwan and Michelle Kwan). The stress experienced in these situations could negatively affect the sibling subsystem. All these issues show great potential for investigation from a family systems conceptual framework.

There has been a charge to those who study parent-child relationships to examine the dynamics on those relationships through a bilateral model. This includes concepts such as a bidirectional influence in parent-child relationships in which both parents and child have equal agency, a context that assumes both that interactions are within the relationship rather than the parents and child interacting as individuals and that there is an interdependent asymmetry of power in the relationship (Kuczynski, 2003). These guidelines could be used to provide a greater depth of understanding when researching the dynamics in relationships between parents and their child athletes.

For many families sport is a way of life; this means both for parents with child athletes and for generations of extended family. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles, for instance, attend competitions and help induct children into the extended family’s sport(s) of choice. In addition, aunts, uncles, or other relatives might help out with child care of siblings during the parents’ and child athletes’ travel for extended competitions. They also often provide one-on-one time with child athletes and their siblings. It would be useful to investigate to what degree the children in athlete families feel more comfortable confiding in an aunt or uncle than in their parents about difficulties in sport or in sport-related sibling problems (Milardo, 2010). Again, the guidelines provided by Kuczynski (2003) could be used to frame research questions to uncover the dynamic relationships in families with child athletes and their extended families.

Study elite and nonelite athletes competing in individual and team sport. Most of the studies in this review focused on highly competitive athletes in individual sports. Though important, it is also essential to study everyday athlete families. The pressure of performance and the individual influence of parents might be greater in an individual sport, but many sport-family experiences are not being recorded because of this individual-sport and elite focus. For instance, it is not yet understood whether there are differences in parental support or parental pressure according to type of sport, such as individual focused (e.g., tennis, gymnastics) or team focused (e.g., football, softball). Also, as most of the studies in this narrative literature review focus on elite athletes, there is a gap in knowledge about the millions of everyday child athletes who play high school junior-varsity and varsity sports and their families. There could well be differences or important similarities between child athletes from environments such as restrictive elite tennis camps and high school track-and-field teams (track and field is noted for being a welcoming sport in which nearly any child can compete).

Most studies reviewed found that most parents of elite athletes support their children and do not put excessive pressure on them, yet evidence of problematic sports parents persists in the media and in clinicians’ personal and professional experiences. It is possible that without studying nonelite athlete families, we may never know what the lives of most athlete families are like or which family aspects distinguish elite athletes from those who never reach that status. Now is the time to study
families in community and high school youth sport.

Use mixed research methods. Of the 20 studies examined, only Holt and colleagues (Holt Tamminen, Black, Sehn et al., 2008; Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandingo et al., 2009) used mixed-methods designs. Hanson, Creswell, Plano Clark, Petska, and Creswell (2005) recently made recommendations about the use of mixed methods. Mixed methods can be complementary to each other, such as using qualitative interviews to give a richer picture to survey results. The combination permits the focus both on life stories, in a case-centered approach, and on group descriptions, in a variable-centered approach. Such studies can lead to a more complete understanding of the complex, dynamic relationships in families in which one or more children compete in sport. In addition, it has been suggested that one way to get a better-quality assessment of what is actually happening in athlete families is to use observational studies (Vanden Auweele & Rzewnicki, 2000; Wyller, 2000). One way to improve the accuracy and quality of athlete family studies could be to observe the interactions between athletes and their parents, siblings, and other subgroups, as well as use self-report, such as the study by Holt, Tamminen, Black, Sehn et al. (2008).

Finally, it is not yet known what life is like for athletes and their parents throughout their years of youth-sport participation. Because of this, longitudinal research on athletes, their parents, siblings, and extended families could be used to illustrate the ages at which different themes are salient and the adjustment that families make over time. Longitudinal research could also develop greater understanding of the horizontal and vertical stressors that these families face over time and how these families adapt to and cope with stressors.

CONCLUSION

There are millions of child athletes competing in youth sport in the United States, which affects their family relationships and family systems as a whole. This population of everyday families is not yet well understood and is fertile ground for researchers to gain a more complete understanding of their interaction and communication patterns, adaptation to stressors and tensions, relationship dynamics, and extended families. The research in this narrative literature review has provided a foundation for family researchers to use in order to provide a fuller understanding of their experiences through the application of family systems theory. In fact, “perhaps not in any other therapeutic situation are the dynamics of systems so pronounced as in youth sport. A visit to a neighborhood field or gymnasium to study the interactions of youngsters, parents, and coaches will illustrate that point. The face validity of systems theory constructs becomes readily apparent” (Stainback & La Marche, 1998, p. 19).

In addition, the beauty of a systems theory perspective is that it is flexible and can work with wide-reaching topics. For example, although this review has been specific to families in which one or more children compete in sport, the suggestions here might well be as applicable to any talent-based pursuit that children have, such as music, theater, pageants, or dance.

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