

## Understanding and Enhancing Parental<sup>1</sup> Involvement within English Rugby RFU Consensus Statement

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### Aim and Background

Over the last two years, the RFU has sought to better understand the influence parents have within the lives of youth rugby players and specifically to understand how we can foster high quality parental involvement within Rugby academies. This consensus statement is the culmination of two years of research conducted by Dr Camilla Knight with players, parents, coaches, academy staff, and teachers combined with her (and others') pre-existing evidence pertaining to the importance of parental involvement in sport as well as understanding what influences parents. The overall aim of this consensus statement is to highlight *why the RFU believe that parents should be considered and supported within the player pathway and to provide evidence-based suggestions to enhance parental involvement within academy rugby.*

### Influence of Parents within Rugby

Research pertaining to parents' involvement within sport has been in existence for over 40 years but attention to this area has grown substantially over the last decade<sup>(1)</sup>. Summaries of this research have clearly indicated that the ways in which parents are involved within their children's sporting lives can lead to a range of positive or detrimental consequences<sup>(2,3,4)</sup>. For instance, there is considerable evidence that the provision of tangible, informational, and emotional support to young athletes can, among others, help athletes to progress on talent development pathways, reach their potential, enjoy their participation and participate for longer, display more sporting behaviours, develop life skills and demonstrate higher quality motivation<sup>(e.g.,5,6)</sup>. In contrast, pressuring behaviours such as punishing players for losing, providing love that is conditional on outcomes, or frequently criticising performances, has been associated with increased feelings of stress and anxiety, as well as a contributing factor to fear of failure, dropout and burnout<sup>(2)</sup>.

Given the impact parents can have on the lives of rugby players, it makes sense to encourage parents to be involved in manners that lead to positive psychosocial and performance outcomes, while reducing the likelihood of detrimental outcomes arising <sup>(1,7)</sup>. Unfortunately, parental involvement is far more complex than this, with numerous factors effecting the appropriateness of parental behaviours<sup>(4)</sup>. For example, players' perceptions of different behaviours may depend upon:

- the context in which they are provided (e.g., at home, in training or on the sidelines during competitions)<sup>(8,9)</sup>
- the match score or situation (i.e., winning, losing, playing well/poorly, executing goals)<sup>(8,10,11)</sup>
- their parents' knowledge and experience of the sport
- and the quality of the relationship that exists between parents and children<sup>(10, 11, 12)</sup>.

Moreover, players can perceive certain behaviours as supportive or positive but they can still lead to certain negative feelings or outcomes<sup>(13, 14)</sup>. For instance, players may recognise that their parents are supporting their rugby involvement by transporting them to attend training and matches and buying them kit and equipment. However, even though players may see such behaviours as supportive, their desire to impress their parents and to give something back to their parents (even if this has never been raised or discussed by parents themselves) can lead to players experiencing feelings of pressure<sup>(15)</sup>. Similarly, for certain players being provided with constructive criticism after matches, being encouraged to engage in additional training, or having parents who are highly involved in their rugby career may be seen as extremely supportive and a

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document the term parent is used to refer to a child's primary caregiver and may include parents, step parents, grandparents, and legal guardians.

demonstration that their parents believe they can achieve and succeed in rugby, whereas for others these may all be seen as pressuring and a cause of anxiety.

This importance and complexity of parental involvement was clearly illustrated in the research conducted by Dr Knight and her team at the Wellington Festival in 2018<sup>(16,17)</sup>. Approximately 160 male players shared insights into their rugby development from when they first started (usually in tag rugby) to arriving at the Wellington festival.

All the players highlighted that parents were the most important influence on their rugby development and that it was only as a result of their parents' support and encouragement that they had reached this level. However, they also explained that what they wanted from their parents had changed over this time, and that they were also increasingly influenced by others (i.e., teammates, peers, coaches, academy staff) as they progressed. In general, the players explained that:

- A focus on fun and development, recognition of their ability, providing opportunities to play and train, and giving suggestions for improvement (including technical and tactical advice) during the early stages of rugby involvement were particularly important.
- As players progressed into competitive contact rugby both at clubs and schools, feedback and guidance from parents remained important but it was recognised that this should be provided within limits (i.e., only share advice if parents themselves have played rugby). At this stage, parents providing ongoing encouragement, reinforcing their child's abilities, and reducing pressure that might arise from coaches was seen as extremely valuable, as was the provision of emotional support during times of disappointment or injury.
- Finally, as players continued to progress, emotional support from parents continued to be extremely important, as well as parents helping players to manage the logistics of multiple and often competing rugby demands, alongside educational and social commitments. Providing practical support in the form of transport, kit, and food continued to be integral to players' development at these later stages.

Clearly, the involvement needed from parents to help players is frequently changing, and is dependent upon a range of factors. Consequently, attempting to simplify parental involvement into a simple dichotomy of "good" or "bad" is insufficient, rather academy staff/coaches should:

- Seek to understand the types of involvement that their specific players desire from their parents (*e.g., talk to players about their parents' involvement*).
- Encourage parents and players to engage in frequent conversations regarding parental involvement (*e.g., assign players tasks that require them to talk to their parents about their behaviours for instance, before, during and after matches*).
- Facilitate opportunities to help parents and players to communicate and ensure they are on the same page regarding parental involvement (e.g., hosting meetings for parents and players to discuss behaviours and expectations)
- Ensure parent-player conversations take place at times of transition (i.e., when players are changing teams or clubs, experience shifts in school expectations, social changes etc) as players' desires for their parents' involvement may change alongside changing goals or expectations for rugby.
- **Recognise that parents need to be involved in their child's rugby life and seek strategies to help parents to do this in the ways that work for them and their child.**

## Factors Impacting upon Parents' Involvement

Beyond understanding how parents can influence players and the importance of parents' involvement in rugby, it is also necessary to recognise how the environment created at academies and within the culture of Rugby more broadly may influence parents' involvement and subsequently the quality of support they can provide to players. Although we may assume that parents should simply be able to regulate their behaviours and particularly their emotional responses, this is not always possible<sup>(1, 3)</sup>. All our behaviours are influenced by numerous factors and this is no less the case when considering parents' involvement within rugby settings:

- Individual or intrapersonal factors such as parents' socioeconomic status, work commitments, cultural norms, inherent beliefs and attitudes, family structure (i.e., relationship status, number of children etc) and experiences of sport may influence the amount of time and money parents can invest in their child's rugby, their responses to success and failure, the level of active involvement they have (i.e., volunteering, coach, providing feedback), and their ability to attend meetings, games, and training among others (e.g., 7,18,19,20). **Thus, getting to know parents as individuals and understanding their personal circumstances is extremely valuable when seeking to enhance the quality of parents' involvement within players' development.**
- Beyond individual factors, interpersonal factors will also influence parents' involvement. For instance, the quality of the relationship that parents have with their child, their child's coach(es) and academy staff, as well as other parents within the rugby environment must be considered<sup>(19,20,21)</sup>. Moreover, whether parents have access to an extended social support network, the relationships that they have with their child's teachers, and even the relationships they have with their work colleagues can all influence the ease with which parents can support their child's rugby development<sup>(22,23)</sup>. The stronger (i.e., open, honest, and understanding) the relationships between parents, players, coaches, and support staff the easier it is for parents to be involved in the ways that are preferred by the academy and players and the lower the chances of future conflict<sup>(7)</sup>. Moreover, when parents have access to a social support network (comprising individuals from within or outside of rugby) they are better positioned to manage the various demands that can arise as a result of their child's involvement in rugby<sup>(22)</sup>. **Therefore, providing social opportunities and facilitating interaction between parents within academies can be very useful for parents.**
- Finally, cultural and environmental factors can also impact upon how parents behave and their involvement within their child's rugby development<sup>(19,20,21)</sup>. For instance, parents can experience numerous challenges and stressors when supporting their children in sport, ranging from managing the time commitments and the financial investment required to facilitate participation through to concerns regarding injuries and supporting recovery, coping with their child's performance and particularly their child's reaction to this, a lack of information or guidance regarding their child's development, and uncertainty regarding their child's future within and beyond sport<sup>(24,25,26,27)</sup>. Such stressors often arise due to the environment that is created and can result in parents engaging in more negative or detrimental behaviours. **Reviewing how the broader academy environment or culture might explicitly or subconsciously impact upon parents is an important starting point to facilitating more positive parental involvement. Seeking feedback from parents regarding their experiences and suggestions for how the environment could be changed to make their involvement easier could be very useful.**

## Suggestions to Enhance Parental Involvement and Engagement

*Recognising the importance of parents being actively involved in their child's rugby development, as well as the various factors that might influence their involvement, it is extremely important that steps are taken within academies to actively encourage and support parental involvement and engagement.*

When considering how to do this there are two key areas to address:

- 1) the environment and culture that is being created
- 2) the quality of information and guidance being provided to parents.

These two areas will likely overlap and addressing one can help with the other and vice versa but considering them both will help to increase the effectiveness of work with parents<sup>(28)</sup>.

**Importantly, addressing these areas does not have to be hugely expensive or demanding of staff time, nor does it require an extensive investment into external speakers or guidance. Rather, small day-to-day changes such as considering the language used when talking about and with parents, the approach taken to receiving and responding to parents' feedback, and the general value placed on parents' engagement can all have a substantial impact upon parents' experiences and involvement and cost very little.**

Below are some evidence- and experience-based strategies to enhancing parental involvement and engagement (e.g., 1,2,3,4,10,11,22,23,28). The suggestions are not exhaustive and academies are encouraged to develop strategies that best work within your setting and with your parents and players.

### **Cultural/Environmental Considerations**

Creating an academy environment in which parents feel **welcomed, valued, and respected** will mean they are more likely to enjoy their time there, want to attend events, and take an active interest in what is happening at the academy. Parents will have more opportunities to learn about their child's experience and the demands they are facing, and are also more likely to feel comfortable to ask questions, raise concerns, or seek additional information. When parents enjoy their involvement, feel better informed, and have a greater understanding of their child's experience, they will be better positioned to provide appropriate support to their child <sup>(7,28)</sup>. In a more open and welcoming environment, parents are also more likely to develop better relationships with coaches and academy staff, as well as other parents and players<sup>(10)</sup>. Consequently, the chances for miscommunication or conflict to arise will be reduced, and parents will have access to a greater support network which will subsequently enhance their ability to manage the challenges and demands associated with supporting their child's rugby development.

Feedback from players, parents, coaches, teachers, academy staff, and previous research has highlighted the following as important for creating an environment in which parents feel welcomed, valued, and respected:

1. Focus on creating a "parent positive culture," whereby parents are viewed as assets to help with the development of players rather than problems to be dealt with.
  - Reflect on the language that used when talking about parents within the academy: is it positive or negative?
  - Use parents as another member of the team and recognise that they know players the best
  - Understand that as parents have their own lives that extend beyond their child's rugby, as well as expertise and experiences that could be of use within the academy and their child's rugby life.
  - If parents are thought of as an additional hassle, an "add-on" to the job, or a cause of frustration they are never going to feel welcome or valued in the environment.
2. Coaches and academy staff should actively seek to develop relationships with parents.
  - Regularly (e.g., start, middle, end of season) host social or informal sessions where information regarding individual parents and their personal circumstances can be gained and consequently accounted for when providing support or guidance.

- Learning parents' names is a very important but simple first step to facilitate such relationship development.
  - If there are too many players/parents for all coaches and staff to develop quality relationships with parents, allocate specific coaches to different groups of players and parents to be a key contact for parents if they have any issues or concerns to raise and also provide an important link between parents and the academy.
3. Plan ahead and provide information to parents as soon as possible (with minimal changes).
    - Parents are extremely busy and managing lots of demands both in relation to and beyond their child's rugby. One way to demonstrate that this is understood and respected is to share information regarding training, competitions, and other commitments as early as you can and minimise any changes.
    - If changes do have to be made explain the reason behind this.
  4. Coaches and academy staff need to be available to parents and publicise where and how parents can contact them.
    - This does not always have to be through formal sessions, arriving at training sessions or matches 15 minutes early or staying a little late on occasions so that parents have an opportunity to informally ask questions or provide feedback may be sufficient.
    - Staff should also take turns at different sessions to rotate around the edge of the field or the café (wherever parents are located during training) to check in, see how parents are doing and ask if they have any questions.
    - Even simply saying "hi" to parents and asking how they are when they arrive with their child for sessions helps to create a more welcoming environment.
  5. Host sessions to actively seek parents' feedback and input and subsequently share information with parents regarding how this feedback has been considered and, where possible/appropriate, used to implement change.
    - Actively seeking feedback or insights helps to prevent future issues but seeking feedback and then giving no indication of how it has been used or applied can be even more frustrating than not seeking feedback at all.
  6. Alongside seeking parents' feedback and input, ask parents what they want from the academy and what they are expecting from the season.
    - Ask how all of you (players, parents, and coaches) can work together to create a season that is successful (whereby success is defined by the key stakeholders) for all parties involved.
    - Recap on these expectations throughout the season to see what might have changed and gain insight into how everyone thinks the season is going.
  7. Consider parents' commitments when creating schedules for training or additional sessions for players.
    - For instance, while it might be easy to schedule training sessions during the days in school holidays, if parents are working they might find it challenging to facilitate their child's attendance.
    - Anticipate potential issues and help parents by, for instance, organising life shares, considering extending start and end times outside of work hours, or providing alternative options for those who cannot attend will all help to show parents that they are understood and respected.
    - Identify a nominated staff member to be aware of parent commitments and ensure the message is shared.
  8. **Consistently thank parents for everything they do to facilitate their child's involvement in rugby, because without their involvement it's unlikely their child would be in an academy.**

## **Information and Guidance**

*As players have indicated, parents are their main source of support throughout their rugby journey and, no matter how much time players spend in academy settings, they will still be spending more time with their parents and being influenced by their comments and behaviours.*

If parents are better informed about the types of experiences their child and they will have, the different expectations they may encounter, as well as other pertinent information such as managing injuries and concussions, supporting life skill development, nutritional considerations, and match-day support then parents can reinforce academy messages, engage in the best ways for their child, and ultimately help to provide their child with the best experience (e.g.,29,30). Parents want to provide high quality support to their children, but they can only do this if they have been given the appropriate information and guidance.

Parents have indicated that they would like to receive information and guidance on numerous topics, including (but not limited to)(16,17):

1. **The player pathway:** including the various twists and turns and how to balance to different commitments of club, school, county, academy rugby. Indications of how players can enter and exit the pathway is particularly desirable. Given the complexity of the pathway, presenting this once at the start of the season is unlikely to be sufficient.
2. **Selection and deselection:** with a particular emphasis on how to provide appropriate support to their child if deselected. Providing parents with examples of players who left the pathway and returned may be useful, but also consider providing examples of players who left the pathway and did not return but succeeded in other areas of life. Sharing insights into the experiences of parents during this time can also be particularly useful.
3. **Managing and balancing school expectations:** both in relation to rugby but also educational demands. Additionally, parents are interested to learn about the schools their children should attend to facilitate rugby development.
4. **RFU policies regarding player load, concussions, and the competition calendar:** recognise that parents have substantial concerns regarding the injuries their children might experience and thus, have a desire to understand the RFU strategies being implemented to minimise injuries. Information on who to approach if policies are not being met or implemented appropriately is also desired.
5. **Managing injuries:** Guidance and support for parents and players as well as helping parents to prepare their children for the physicality of the game.
6. **Balance between a developmental versus outcome focus:** with an emphasis on when the focus on short and long-term development might shift. Greater clarity regarding what is seen as success and failure within the different stages of the player pathway and how this links to selection/deselection is desired.
7. **How parents can best support their child to develop as a player:** parents are also keen to receive clarity around the expectations that are going to be placed on them and their child each season
8. **Emphasis on personal development:** information on what academies are doing to help players develop as people and how parents can support in this area.
9. **Demands and challenges parents might encounter:** specifically, how these might change each season and throughout their child's rugby development. Parents would also like opportunities and information to help them develop strategies to cope with these challenges/demands.

There are a variety of ways to provide the above information to parents, but prior to deciding how to share information there are two important considerations:

1) Providing information as a one off, particularly if a large amount of information is shared in one go (i.e., at an induction meeting), will likely limit retention. Drip-feeding information, sharing the same information in different ways (i.e., in a presentation, leaflet, online, and through activities), and providing information when it is most important (rather than all at the beginning of the season) may help with retention and understanding.

2) Recognising parents as people beyond just their child's rugby life is pivotal; parents are managing a range of demands outside of supporting their child's rugby development and often have to balance rugby commitments with work demands and other children/family life. For some parents it will not be feasible to attend meetings in person (even if they are scheduled during training sessions or festivals) nor may they have the inclination to sit through extensive presentations after a day at work (especially if they had negative educational experiences). Thus, although it may seem easiest to schedule a series of formal parent workshops to deliver information, it is important to realise that these will only appeal to or be accessible to all parents. Utilising more creative methods for sharing information may be more beneficial.

Approaches to sharing information may include:

1. Traditional presentations scheduled during training sessions or festival days that focus on specific topics.
  - If these sessions are being provided, it is useful to include some discussion as well as dissemination of information so that parents have a chance to talk through the information which increase chances of retention.
  - It is also useful if sessions can be recorded or streamed to share with parents who might not be able to attend in person. If this is not possible, short summary videos of the key content could be recorded and subsequently shared online.
2. Develop an online platform that includes a specific section for parents and contains all the key information detailed above, as well as a mechanism for parents ask questions or to engage in discussions with each other and staff.
  - Posting information as infographics, animations, short videos etc on this site and also on social media and academy websites can also be useful.
3. Create short handouts or leaflets to share with parents and players on specific topics.
  - Include tasks for players to discuss with their parents (and subsequently feedback) to increase the chances of both players and parents reading them.
4. Provide key information on whiteboards posted at the side of pitches during training or matches.
5. Host bi-weekly/monthly drop-in or q&a session for parents.
  - These should be informal and simply provide an opportunity for parents to ask questions.
  - Ensuring different staff (e.g., coaches, physios, nutritionists etc) host these sessions increases the chance of parents being able to seek specific information they need.
  - Changing the days these are held will increase accessibility to parents who may not be able to attend on certain days.
6. Host facebook live events or webinars for those parents who might not be able to attend sessions in person. These can subsequently be saved and posted online for parents to refer back to.
7. Record parts of sessions/matches and share these with parents, along with feedback on performances or summaries of the session aims so parents develop an understanding of what their children experience and how information is shared with players.
8. Invite parents to take part in a session or to stand alongside coaches as feedback is provided to players so they can understand teaching points and how information is being shared. Also invite external stakeholders (e.g., teachers) to sessions to share insights and information with parents.

## Some Examples of Current Good Practice

<i>Cultural and Environmental Changes</i>	<i>Provision of Information and Guidance</i>
<i>Academy BBQ/social event early in the season to provide a chance for parents, players, coaches and staff to meet and get to know each other. Facilitating opportunities for parents from similar areas to meet so they can arrange life shares etc can be extremely useful at these events. Mid-season events for parents to reinforce relationships and to share feedback are also used successfully.</i>	<i>Setting short, fun tasks for parents to complete on the sidelines during training that they can then discuss with their child after training to help facilitate communication and understanding of their child's demands. E.g., asking parents to think of the things their child particularly likes about their involvement and then comparing this to what children have recorded.</i>
<i>Schedule of social events for parents and players that coincide with training or festivals/competitions and encourages parents to spend time within the environment and get to know each other. These social events can also include informal discussions around specific topics if seen as appropriate or necessary.</i>	<i>Sharing clips of training/competitions with parents that detail expectations at the next level (i.e., showing DPP parents what the players in the EAP demonstrate) along with selection criteria so parents are better informed of where their child might currently sit in terms of standards and opportunities for progression.</i>
<i>Getting to know the staff videos, which are subsequently shared online. These videos provide some personal insights into staff and help players and parents to know who they are working with.</i>	<i>Parent handbooks that cover key information for the season and include activities for parents to encourage engagement and reflection around different topics</i>
<i>Specific rules/guidance regarding engagement after emotive experiences (e.g., selection /deselection or poor performance) to minimise risks of conflict. For instance, a 24-48 hour rule whereby parents are requested not to get in touch within 24 hours but need to have raised it within 48 hours for it to be addressed.</i>	<i>A programme of parent information sessions that cover key information that is also being shared with players. For instance, including topics such as nutrition, life skills, education demands, conversations after games etc. By hosting these sessions for players and parents, opportunities for discussion are increased.</i>
<i>Providing parents with a choice or at least a chance to input into how and when their child is provided with information about their selection or deselection. This demonstrates to parents that you understand they know their child best and that other factors outside rugby might need to be considered. It also takes account of different logistical demands that might influence attendance at a meeting in which this information might be shared.</i>	<i>A clearly communicated programme focused on holistic development that is shared alongside training schedules. By highlighting to parents the different life/psychosocial skills being developed each session/week/month in training they can anticipate how sessions are being run and also reinforce these messages. Supporting this with videos, animations, or handouts for parents that are focused on these skills further encourages reinforcement.</i>
<i>Clear reviews of expectations of players, parents, coaches, and academy staff at the start of the season, which is subsequently revisited throughout the season. This helps to hold all parties accountable and ensure everyone is on the same page.</i>	<i>Clear reviews of expectations of players, parents, coaches, and academy staff at the start of the season, which is subsequently revisited throughout the season. This helps to hold all parties accountable and ensure everyone is on the same page.</i>
<i>Mentor coaches for players and their parents who are responsible for learning about just a few players and parents in their group. These coaches explicitly seek to understand the demands parents and players are facing and can subsequently adapt expectations if/as necessary.</i>	<i>Hosting sessions with current/former players and parents to share insights into the particulars of the rugby journey, especially around selection /deselection and progression. Sharing stories in written or video form can also be useful if people cannot attend in person.</i>



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