

# **Understanding the Role Parents Play in Junior Tennis Success**

## **Phases 1 & 2: Perceptions of Junior Coaches**



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USTA RESEARCH GRANT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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# Executive Summary

## *Project Overview*

The role of parents in junior tennis is controversial today. USA Tennis High Performance Coaching Program participants, for example, frequently report problems with junior tennis parents and the unintentional, but negative effects their behaviors have on player development. Shying away from top competition to protect rankings, interfering with coaching, and increasing player stress and burnout are some of the parent-induced issues raised by top junior coaches. At the same time, there is recognition by the coaches that many of the United States top junior players had parents highly involved in their tennis experience who instilled in their children critical values needed for tennis success. It is felt that most players cannot make it to the top without significant support from their parents. Thus, a paradox exists with parents seen as both essential for tennis talent development and, simultaneously, a major detriment for some junior players.

Unfortunately, little scientific evidence exists relative to tennis parenting issues. A need, therefore, exists to study parental issues in tennis. Specifically, scientifically-based information is needed regarding the identification of effective and ineffective tennis parenting strategies, problems coaches perceive relative to interacting with tennis parents, and strategies for maximizing success via the identification of strategies for facilitating an effective player, coach, and parent partnership.

Recognizing the need for research on parental involvement in junior tennis the USTA Sport Science Committee funded this scientific investigation. The study was designed to better understand the role that parents play in tennis success. Specifically junior tennis coaches were sampled to identify effective and ineffective tennis parenting behaviors relative to their interactions with players and coaches, and provide strategies to facilitate effective player, coach, and parent partnerships.

The study was conducted in three phases, the first two of which are summarized in this report. In Phase 1, focus group interviews were conducted with 24 experienced junior tennis coaches attending a high performance workshop for the purposes of identifying their perceptions of the role parents play in tennis success, problems that arise, and the ways to facilitate the player-parent-coach partnership. Phase 2 involved a national survey of 300 coaches attending the USA Tennis High Performance Competition Training Center Coaches Workshop in January of 2003. The goal of this phase of the study was to generalize the findings from Phase 1 to ensure that the issues raised are relevant to junior tennis as a whole.

Major results from each phase of the study are summarized and highlighted below. Results are delineated in detail in the full report that follows.

## *Phase 1 Results: Focus Group Interviews with Top Junior Tennis Coaches*

### **Who were the 24 high performance junior tennis coaches interviewed?**

	<b>24 Junior Tennis Coaches</b>
Average Age	37 Years of Age (Range: 27-54 Years)
Gender	22 Male 2 Female
Ethnicity	White: 20 African-American: 3 (1 coach listed as 'other')
Years Coaching Experience	14.94 Years Coaching (Range: 4.5-32 Years)
Average Number of Ranked Players Coached	7.4 Sectionally Ranked Players 4.3 Nationally Ranked Players

### **Coaches' experiences with junior tennis parents**

In general, coaches felt that parents are a positive in junior tennis. Coaches speculated that 70% of parents or more are positive. However, there is a minority that creates problems and receives a great deal of notoriety.

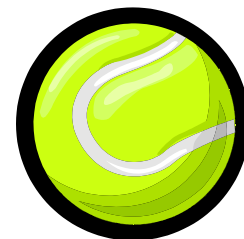
#### *Why parent problems?*

- Parents are demanding and have very high expectations because of the money they pay for their child in tennis,
- In some cultures parents are more apt to become over involved and create negative tennis experiences, and,
- Parents coach their own child.

### **Positive Parent-Player Interactions**

#### *Top antecedents to positive parent-player interactions*

- Appropriate perspective
- Emphasize child's total development



The 24 junior tennis coaches participating in focus groups felt that 70% of the parents they worked with were positive!

*Top 7 Positive interaction behaviors between parents and players*

<b>Top 7 Positive Interaction Behaviors between Parents and Players</b>
<b>1. Disciplines child for poor behaviors/handles effectively</b>
<b>2. Balanced approach, supportive but not overbearing</b>
<b>3. Financial support</b>
<b>4. Stay calm and control emotions</b>
<b>5. Sacrifice for child (time, effort)</b>
<b>6. Focus on performance, not the outcome</b>
<b>7. Unconditional love and caring</b>

*Top consequences of positive interactions between parents and players*

- Child becomes a better person,
- Enhanced friendships and social benefits,
- Take a grounded, not above others perspective, and,
- It is a positive experience for the child and the parent.



**Negative Parent-Player Interactions**

*Top 5 antecedents to negative parent-player interactions*

<b>Top 5 Antecedents to Negative Parent-Player Interactions</b>
<b>1. Want a return on their tennis investment (financial &amp; time)</b>
<b>2. Hold unrealistic/inappropriate expectations</b>
<b>3. Adopt an outcome orientation</b>
<b>4. Are competitive and make social comparisons of child</b>
<b>5. Live through their child's tennis</b>

*Top 7 Negative interaction behaviors between parents and players*

<b>Top 7 Negative Interaction Behaviors between Parents and Players</b>
<b>1. Exhibit an outcome orientation</b>
<b>2. Are negative and overbearing</b>
<b>3. Apply pressure to win or perform</b>
<b>4. Make tennis too serious</b>
<b>5. Are over involved and controlling</b>
<b>6. Compare child to other players</b>
<b>7. Distract child during the match</b>

*Top consequences of negative interactions between parents and players*

- Increased pressure,
- Development of player inhibited,
- Lack of motivation, and,
- Distracted on-court.



**Positive Parent-Coach Interactions**

*Top 3 ways parents facilitate coaches' practice*

- Trust the coach,
- Support the coach in general, and,
- Provide positive logistical and environmental support (e.g., scheduling, transportation, picking up balls).

**Negative Parent-Coach Interactions**

*Top 6 ways parents inhibit coaches' practice*

<b>Top 6 Ways Parents Inhibit Coaches' Practice</b>
<b>1. Interfere with coach-player interactions</b>
<b>2. Distract coach</b>
<b>3. Undermine coach</b>
<b>4. Change coaches</b>
<b>5. Problems in communicating with coach</b>
<b>6. High demands place pressure on the coach</b>

**Core Principles Relative to the Role of Junior Tennis Parents**

*Top 4 Parent-Centered Core Principles Related to Role of Junior Tennis Parents*

<b>Top 4 Parent-Centered Core Principles Related to the Role of Junior Tennis Parents</b>
<b>1. Need to implement optimal parenting strategies</b>
<b>2. Parent involvement in tennis is needed and important</b>
<b>3. Each parent is different and approach tennis differently</b>
<b>4. Parents placing trust in the coach to work with their child is very important</b>

*Other Important Core Principles Related to the Role of Junior Tennis Parents*

- The coach-parent relationship depends on the age, experience, & maturity of the coach (older coaches were better able to develop good relationships with parents),
- Need to focus on total child development and life skills,
- Coaches need to have empathize and understand the parent, and,

- Coaches should set roles and boundaries for parents and players.

### Optimal Parent Push

*Does optimal push exist?*

Optimal push does exist but only when done right and it is a fine line between optimal pushing and pressuring/over pushing.



*What does Optimal Parent Push Involve?*

Positive Push	Negative or Insufficient Push
1. Reinforcing preparation and hard work	1. Being under involved
2. Making the child responsible and live up to tennis commitment	2. Being over involved with an outcome focus
3. Pushing core values	3. Hesitating to push

*What factors influence optimal push?*

- Child's age, gender, and goals,
- Finding the middle ground between pushing and supporting, and,
- Depends on the parent and his or her personality.

Optimal parent push was considered a tricky notion by the coaches in the study. It was considered to be important and difficult to achieve. And, a fine line exists between optimal push and pressuring or overpushing.

### Recommendations

*Top 4 Recommendations to Coaches on Working with Tennis Parents*

Top 4 Recommendations to Coaches on Working with Tennis Parents
1. Identify and convey clear expectations and goals with parents and players
2. Should educate parents and hold parent education meetings
3. Need to openly and effectively communicate with parents
4. Need to involve the parents

*Top 4 Coach Recommendations to Tennis Parents*

Top 4 Coach Recommendations to Tennis Parents
1. Talk less to your child about tennis off the court
2. Voice negative issues to the coach not the child
3. Control your reactions to the outcome of the match/treat wins and losses the same
4. Develop the view that my sacrifice for my child's tennis is normal/don't expect a

return (or at the least don't express it to your child)

*Top Coach Recommendations to the USTA*

#### Top Coach Recommendations to the USTA

1. Educate coaches on working effectively with tennis parents

2. Disseminate tennis parent education information to parents via meetings and newsletters/articles

Focus group coaches felt that although some parents create problems, coaches can successfully work with junior tennis parents. Their best recommendations for doing this is to have clearly stated expectations for parents and players, holding education meetings for parents, involving them in the development of their child, and effectively and openly communicating with parents.

### *Phase 2 Results: National Parental Behavior Survey of Junior Tennis Coaches*

**Who were the 132 junior tennis coaches surveyed?**

132 Junior Tennis Coaches	
Average Age	Male: 40.5 Years of Age Female: 39.0 Years of Age
Gender	125 Male    7 Female
Ethnicity	White: 84.0%    African-American: 7.0% Asian: 3.1%    Hispanic: 3.1%
Years Coaching Experience	17.3 Years Coaching (Range: 1-50 Years)
Average Number of Ranked Players Coached	12.1 Sectionally Ranked Players 4.0 Nationally Ranked Players

#### **Importance and Role of Parents in the Development of a Junior Player**

- Coaches reported that parents are very important to junior tennis success ( $M = 4.56$ ).
- 35.86% of parents were perceived as actually hurting their child's tennis development.
- 58.58% of parents were perceived as having a positive influence on their child's tennis development.

## Perceptions of Parent Behaviors in Tennis

### Parent-Child Interaction Problem Behaviors

#### *The 7 Most Extensive Parent Problems*

<b>7 Most Extensive Parent Problems</b>	<b>Mean</b>
<b>Overemphasizes winning</b>	3.54
<b>Expectations unrealistic</b>	3.50
<b>Coaches child</b>	3.45
<b>Criticism child</b>	3.43
<b>Pampers child too much</b>	3.41
<b>Push child to play tennis</b>	3.32
<b>Tells child not to lose against less skilled opponent</b>	3.22

*Note: An extent rating of 1 = not at all, 2 = infrequently, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, and 5 = all the time.*

#### *The 6 Least Extensive Parent Problems*

<b>6 Least Extensive Parent Problems</b>	<b>Mean</b>
<b>Uninvolved in child's tennis</b>	2.22
<b>Frequently argues with officials</b>	2.21
<b>Doesn't allow child to play in doubles</b>	2.18
<b>Involved in confrontations with other parents</b>	2.15
<b>Unconcerned with the child's development</b>	2.12
<b>Withholds love when child performs below expectations</b>	2.05

*Note: An extent rating of 1 = not at all, 2 = infrequently, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, and 5 = all the time.*

#### *The 7 Most Serious Parent Problems*

<b>7 Most Serious Parent Problems</b>	<b>Mean</b>
<b>Overemphasizing winning</b>	3.79
<b>Criticism of child</b>	3.77
<b>Lack of emotional control</b>	3.71
<b>Parent's ego determined by child's performance</b>	3.67
<b>Expectations unrealistic</b>	3.59
<b>Pressure child in practice by sitting on-court and making comments</b>	3.57
<b>Reacts to mistakes by yelling at the child</b>	3.55

*Note: A seriousness rating of 1 = not serious, 2 = slightly, 3 = somewhat, 4 = serious, 5 = extremely.*

### The 5 Least Serious Parent Problems

5 Least Serious Parent Problems	Mean
<b>Doesn't allow child to be involved in other sports/ activities</b>	2.93
<b>Unconcerned with child's development</b>	2.85
<b>Enters child into too many tournaments</b>	2.84
<b>Doesn't allow child to play doubles</b>	2.64
<b>Uninvolved in child's tennis</b>	2.53

*Note: A seriousness rating of 1 = not serious, 2 = slightly, 3 = somewhat, 4 = serious, 5 = extremely.*

### Positive Parental Behaviors in Interactions with Their Child

#### The 7 Most Extensive Positive Parent Behaviors

7 Most Extensive Positive Parent Behaviors	Mean
<b>Provide financial support</b>	4.43
<b>Provide logistical support</b>	4.32
<b>Provide tennis opportunities</b>	3.81
<b>Provide socio-emotional support</b>	3.79
<b>Provide unconditional love and support</b>	3.72
<b>Make sacrifices so child can succeed</b>	3.65
<b>Emphasize hard work</b>	3.64

*Note: An extent rating of 1 = not at all, 2 = infrequently, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, and 5 = all the time.*

#### The 5 Least Extensive Positive Parent Behaviors

5 Least Extensive Positive Parent Behaviors	Mean
Provides positive feedback following matches	3.00
Exerts little pressure to win	2.99
Push child in a positive way	2.97
Use motivational techniques	2.90
Showing an understanding of the sport	2.89

*Note: An extent rating of 1 = not at all, 2 = infrequently, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, and 5 = all the time.*



According to survey results with 132 junior tennis coaches, positive parents provide frequent support for their child financially, logistically, and emotionally.

*The 7 Positive Parent Behaviors with the Greatest Impact*

7 Positive Parent Behaviors with the Greatest Impact	Mean
Provide unconditional love and support	4.54
Provide logistical support	4.36
Hold child accountable for behavior on-court	4.33
Provide financial support	4.28
Emphasize positive attitude	4.20
Model values	4.18
Provides appropriate discipline for poor sport personship	4.13

*Note: An impact rating of 1 = no impact, 2 = little impact, 3 = some impact, 4 = much impact, 5 = extreme impact.*

**Problems/Roadblocks Parents Create for Coaches**

*The 5 Most Extensive Problems/Roadblocks Parents Create for Coaches*

5 Most Extensive Problems/Roadblocks Parents Create for Coaches	Mean
Parent lives through child's tennis	3.08
Parent goals for child are not the same as the coach	2.91
Parent result-focused because of high financial costs of game	2.91
Parent knows little or nothing about the game	2.88
Parent ignores coach's request	2.83

*Note: An extent rating of 1 = not at all, 2 = infrequently, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, and 5 = all the time.*

*The 5 Least Extensive Problems/Roadblocks Parents Create for Coaches*

5 Least Extensive Problems/Roadblocks Parents Create for Coaches	Mean
Parent complains about/ critiques coach	2.04
Parent undermines coach's discipline of child	2.02
Lack of respect for the coach	1.86
Parent doesn't trust the coach	1.79
Parent and coach don't know each other	1.78

*Note: An extent rating of 1 = not at all, 2 = infrequently, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, and 5 = all the time.*



*The 7 Most Serious Problems/Roadblocks Parents Create for Coaches*

7 Most Serious Problems/Roadblocks Parents Create for Coaches	Mean
Parents lives through child's tennis	3.92
Parent goals for child are not the same as the coach	3.52
Parent philosophy and values are not consistent with values of the coach	3.51
Parent undermines coach's discipline of the child	3.49
Lack of open and honest communication between parent and coach	3.48
Parent result-focused because of high financial costs of the game	3.44
Parent doesn't support coach's decisions	3.44

*Note: A seriousness rating of 1 = not serious, 2 = slightly, 3 = somewhat, 4 = serious, 5 = extremely.*

*The 3 Least Serious Problems/Roadblocks Parents Create for Coaches*

3 Least Serious Problems/Roadblocks Parents Create for Coaches	Mean
Parent never attends practices and games	2.69
Parent calls coach at inappropriate times	2.60
Parent knows little or nothing about the game	2.45

*Note: A seriousness rating of 1 = not serious, 2 = slightly, 3 = somewhat, 4 = serious, 5 = extremely.*

*The 5 Most Important Ways to Foster Good Coach-Parent Relationships*

5 Most Important Ways to Foster Good Coach-Parent Relationships	Frequency
Communication	104
Trust	53
Cooperation/common realistic goals	38
Respect	31
Honesty	26

*Note: A total of 348 themes were offered by coaches, which were grouped into 28 separate ways to foster coach-parent relationships.*

According to the junior tennis coaches completing the survey, the best things a parent can do for their child is to love them unconditionally, provide logistical and financial support, and hold them accountable for poor behaviors on the court.

*The 5 Most Important Junior Tennis Parent Behaviors*

5 Most Important Junior Tennis Parent Behaviors	Mean
Provides unconditional support for the child	4.75
Models sportspersonship	4.50
Recognizes importance of long-term goals	4.49
Respects other parents, coaches, and players	4.47
Communicates tennis concerns directly and privately to the coach	4.47

*Note: An importance rating of 1 = not important, 2 = slightly, 3 = somewhat, 4 = important, and 5 = extremely.*

*The 5 Most Frequent Recommendations to Inexperienced Coaches for Developing Relationships with Parents*

5 Most Frequent Recommendations to Inexperienced Coaches for Developing Relationships with Parents	Frequency
3-way communication	23
Honest but sensitive	23
Establish expectations and boundaries	21
Develop sound foundation with family	18
Have a written developmental plan	16

*Note: A total of 261 themes were offered by coaches.*

*The 5 Most Useful Strategies for Working with Junior Tennis Parents*

5 Most Useful Strategies for Working with Junior Tennis Parent	Mean
Being honest and open	4.76
Building trust	4.68
Listen to the parent	4.58
Defining the parent's roles and responsibilities	4.40
Educate on positive parental behaviors	4.38

*Note: A usefulness rating of 1 = not at all, 2 = slightly, 3 = somewhat, 4 = useful, and 5 = extremely.*

*The 4 Most Frequent Recommendations to the USTA to Facilitate Coach-Parent Relationships*

4 Most Frequent Recommendations to the USTA to Facilitate Coach-Parent Relationships	Frequency
Workshop on relationship skills	15
Consistent, simple, specific information	12
Videos	12
Seminars	11

*Note: A total of 174 themes were offered by coaches which were grouped into 57 separate recommendations.*

## ***Practical Implications and Results Dissemination***

There are numerous practical implications coming from this study. First and foremost, the coaches indicated that junior tennis coaches need to develop excellent lines of two-way communication with parents. Coaches must also receive education relative to the most effective ways to work with parents of junior players. In turn, the coaches must make concerted efforts to inform and educate the parents of the young players they work with. Finally, the specific parental behaviors and actions that were identified by the coaches as both positively and negatively influencing developing players should be disseminated to parents of developing players.

To accomplish this task we recommend that when Phase 3 of this study is completed that a “role of parents in tennis self-assessment” be developed using the core principles and knowledge gleaned from this investigation. As part of this self-awareness and parenting education effort, parents could rate their own behavior on factors identified to enhance and/or inhibit player development. This could also serve as a way to monitor one’s own parenting behavior and actions. Finally, developing a list of parental behaviors that have been identified as enhancing player development (tennis parenting do’s) versus those identified as inhibiting development (tennis parenting don’ts) should be made available and used to educate tennis parents.

When all three phases of this investigation are completed results will be disseminated in several ways. First, several articles summarizing the project and its implications for coaches will be written for *Sport Science for Tennis*. Second, results will be presented at the 2005 USTA Area Training Center workshop. And, third, a ‘working with tennis parents’ brochure will be written and given to USA Tennis Coaching Development for dissemination and placement on the high performance website.

## ***Conclusion***

The results of this study showed that parents play a critical role in the development of junior tennis players. Moreover, while many parents do an excellent job in this regard, the experienced coaches we studied also felt that a significant number of parents are unknowingly interfering with their child’s tennis development and, more importantly, damaging the parent-child relationship in the process. This is not surprising given the fact that sport parents receive little or no training about how to help their child develop and are exposed to a youth sports environment that is increasingly professionalized. It also must be remembered that parents do not purposely interfere with the child’s tennis development. They feel they are doing what is in the best interest of their child. However, many do not have extensive knowledge and experience in competitive tennis and do not understand what is needed for the long-term development of a player and act on misinformation or the emotion of the moment. The time has come to better equip sport parents in general and tennis parents in particular through extensive educational efforts. The findings of this investigation provide important information that can serve in this regard. We recommend that the USA Tennis High Performance Program continue to make efforts to do so.

