



Navigating Early Specialization Sport: Parent and Athlete Goal-Directed Processes

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The purpose of this study was to describe the relational processes that exist between parents and athletes when engaged in an early specialization sport. Using an instrumental case study design, 5 parent–athlete ($M_{\text{athlete age}} = 11.40$ years) dyads in Canadian competitive figure skating represented cases for individual and collective analysis. Contextual action theory and the action-project method were used to identify and describe the naturally occurring projects (i.e., joint actions over time) of parents and athletes as they engaged in the transition together. Data were collected longitudinally over a total of 10 months and included video-recorded parent–athlete conversations, video feedback-supported recall of thoughts and feelings, and 6 months of biweekly self-report data collected through telephone interviews. Data analysis occurred simultaneously over the course of the study using transcripts, a coding system, and a form of member reflection. Final cross-case analyses highlighted pertinent themes across cases. Parent–athlete dyads’ joint projects were grouped based on three common themes: negotiating school, sport, and extracurricular commitments; progressing toward skating goals; and maintaining a developmental focus, including tailoring involvement in skating to accommodate growth and development and prioritizing well-roundedness and personal development. The joint projects were embedded in the broader parent–child relationship project. This study presents a goal-directed and relational perspective on the transition to specialized training in Canadian competitive figure skating. Together, parents and athletes not only focused on negotiating the various commitments, demands on time, and expectations for progress in figure skating, they also accommodated and fostered nonsport development.

Keywords: parenting, dyadic, early specialization, transition, qualitative

Supplemental materials: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/spy0000187.supp>

Parents and youth face numerous decisions that have the potential to influence athlete development (Côté, 1999; Wuerth, Lee, & Alfermann, 2004). One such decision is whether and

how early to commit and invest resources toward the development of elite-level sport performance (Harwood & Knight, 2015). A popular assumption in sport is that the earlier athletes

This article was published Online First September 5, 2019.
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This study was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Insight

Development Grant 430-2015-00356 and Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship 767-2014-2416, and the Sport Participation Research Initiative, Doctoral Award Supplement 862-2014-0012.

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commit to and invest in a single sport, the greater the likelihood of developing elite status (Baker & Young, 2014). As a result, there is an increased number of athletes specializing at younger ages (e.g., 10 to 14 years old; Buckley et al., 2017) to promote expert development. Early sports specialization was recently defined as (a) involving intensive training and practice for more than 8 months per year, (b) limiting participation to a single sport, and (c) involving prepubertal children (i.e., around 12 years old; LaPrade et al., 2016). Empirical evidence, however, suggests that early specialization is associated with negative consequences such as burnout, dropout, injury, and psychosocial concerns (i.e., maladaptive perfectionistic tendencies and greater risk of disordered eating; see LaPrade et al., 2016).

National and international sport bodies (e.g., International Olympic Committee; Bergeron et al., 2015; Sport Canada, 2016) increasingly advocate for youth to sample multiple sports to gain a diversity of experiences, to foster a sense of fun, and to develop fundamental skills prior to specializing in one or two selected sports. *Early specialization sports* (Sport Canada, 2016), such as gymnastics and figure skating, are an exception to this movement, given that peak performance is attained before physical maturation (Law, Côté, & Ericsson, 2007). According to national sport models of athlete development (Skate Canada, 2010), youth and their families are often faced with the decision to specialize in a single sport as early as 9 years of age. The salience of early specialization has implications not only for youth in relation to their development (Bergeron et al., 2015) and parents in terms of family resources (Harwood, Drew, & Knight, 2010; Harwood & Knight, 2009), but also affects the interactions and relationship between parents and athletes (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Clarke, Harwood, & Cushion, 2016).

Given that involvement in competitive youth sport has been described as a journey shared by children and their parents (Knight & Holt, 2014), it is surprising that few studies adopt dyadic perspectives for understanding athlete career development and transitions. Rather, much of the literature has relied on retrospective accounts of transitions frequently gathered through individual interviews (Côté, 1999; Gledhill & Harwood, 2015; Kristiansen & Sten-

srud, 2017; Pummell, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008). Although studies include parent, coach, and athlete perspectives on career development and transitions (Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005), the majority prioritize analyses at the individual level, that is, on individual perceptions and behaviors, to the exclusion of understanding the interpersonal nature of transitions.

The dynamic and reciprocal nature of parent and athlete interactions in the sport context has been highlighted (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009, 2015; Lauer et al., 2010), and recently studies have emerged that attend to relational phenomena (i.e., communication, conflict, and interactions) that occur between parent and athlete (Clarke et al., 2016; Dorsch, Smith, & Dotterer, 2016; Prewitt-White, Fisher, Odenheimer, & Buchanan, 2016). For instance, Clarke et al. (2016) explored eight parent–child dyads' ($M_{\text{athlete age}} = 14$ years) experiences of their interactions and relationships in elite youth football. Clarke et al. found that the parent–child relationship constituted a sense of closeness through the dyad's interactions in sport and that the sport context, including upcoming transitions such as whether academy contracts would be renewed, also affected parents' and athletes' interactions. These findings suggest that exploring parent–child interactions amid other transitions in youth sport may be a fruitful avenue for further research. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand the naturally occurring relational processes that exist between parents and athletes when engaged in early specialization sport. The research question guiding the inquiry was *How do parents and athletes jointly navigate the transition to (or not to) higher levels of training and commitment in competitive figure skating?*

Theoretical Framework

To date, transitions related to specializing are typically conceptualized using theoretical frameworks that define athlete development as proceeding through normative stages and transitions. These include, for example, Côté's (1999) developmental model for sport participation (i.e., within the specializing stage; Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Harwood et al., 2010) or Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) holistic athletic model (i.e., the transition from initiation to

development stage; Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2017; Pummell et al., 2008). Despite a breadth of knowledge based on these frameworks of athletes' careers, other studies have highlighted that these normative stages and pathways to expert performance were not applicable for all athletes (Storm, Henriksen, & Christensen, 2012). Instead, Stambulova and Ryba (2013) suggested that athlete career development is idiosyncratic and involves diverse career trajectories that are culturally situated (i.e., inclusive of sport, country, gender, and ethnicity). Transitions within these diverse career trajectories are considered turning phases or shifts in an athlete's development, both sport and nonsport related, that involve increasing demands that the athlete must adapt to continue in their sport (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014). To capture the ideographic and relational nature of transitions, contextual action theory (CAT; Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996) was used to conceptualize specialization broadly as a transition process. Specifically, the transition to higher levels of commitment and training is a process that involves intentional, goal-directed actions undertaken by athletes individually and jointly with significant others in their lives. Thus, the focus of this study was on the joint actions of athletes in competitive figure skating in Canada and their parents.

CAT is an integrative framework that privileges action, and in particular joint action, as a central construct and unit of analysis. This framework has been used in the counseling, career/vocational, and family literature to conceptualize the interactive and joint actions engaged in by people, specifically in transitional and developmental processes (Young et al., 2008). Reflecting a social constructionist epistemology, the focus of CAT is on the ways that actions are constructed between people over time. Action is conceptualized as a goal-directed phenomenon, although not necessarily rational, that encompasses manifest behavior, internal cognitive and affective processes, and social meaning, that is, the understanding an individual, and the associated community, attributes to the action. When individual actions are linked or interrelated with another person, they form a series of actions referred to as *joint actions*, such as a conversation between parent and child about the training schedule. Several

joint actions over weeks, months, or years, constructed around a common goal or meaning, are considered a *project* or *joint project* (Wall et al., 2016). An example of a joint project may be negotiating educational options in the context of sport participation and family expectations. The focus of the present investigation was on the joint projects of parents and athletes related to the transition to higher levels of training and commitment in competitive figure skating.

Method

This study was situated within a constructivist paradigm that adhered to a relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology (Young, Valach, & Domene, 2005). An instrumental case study design (Stake, 2000) organized each parent-athlete dyad as a case for individual and collective analysis. Instrumental case study designs enable in-depth exploration within and across cases to develop an understanding of a larger phenomenon (Stake, 2000). In this study, this phenomenon centered on the jointly enacted process of transition to higher levels of commitment and training in competitive figure skating. Consistent with CAT, the action-project method (APM; Young et al., 2005) was used to identify the naturally occurring joint project of the parent-athlete dyad within each case. APM is a comprehensive, team-based, qualitative method that follows an interpretive hermeneutic or cyclical process between the data and the CAT framework. The unit of analysis within each case in this study was action and joint action investigated dyadically through conversations between the parent and athlete. Specifically, actions were analyzed at three levels (Wall et al., 2016; Young et al., 2005), including behavioral *elements* such as verbal and nonverbal behaviors (i.e., a parent nodding to acknowledge what their daughter said), *functional steps* or the means used in moving toward the goal (i.e., asking a question about the athlete's practice session), and *goals* or the meaning of the action processes (i.e., to monitor their daughter's training).

Sampling and Participants

The study was approved by Jessie M. Wall's institutional review board. Participants were re-

cruited by contacting club directors from figure skating clubs in Western Canada that were primarily focused on the competitive stream. The competitive stream, referred to as “CompetitiveSkate,” is a Skate Canada program for skaters wishing to compete in provincial-, national-, and international-level competitions. Participants interested in the study were asked to complete a screening questionnaire to ensure they met the inclusion criteria.

A purposive recruitment strategy was used to select five parent–athlete dyads currently engaged in the transition to higher levels of commitment and training as indicated by Skate Canada’s long-term athlete development model (Skate Canada, 2010). The long-term athlete development model’s stage of “Learning to Compete” was adopted as a guideline for the beginning of specializing in competitive sport. According to Skate Canada (2010), in the Learning to Compete stage (9–13 years for females; 10–14 years for males), it is suggested that a “metamorphosis from participant to athlete occurs” (p. 27). Proposed training time typically increases from 2 to 4 hrs per week to upward of 15 hrs per week including off-ice training. A provincial chair of skater development also served as a key informant who identified the prenovice level as representing an important time of transition to higher levels of commitment and training. Prenovice is the first level of skaters who take part in national-level competition. Thus, general inclusion criteria included skaters at the prenovice level or those about to compete in prenovice in the next year, chronological age of 9–13 years, and a self-identified parent who was actively involved in their son or daughter’s figure skating. Participant demographic information is provided in

Table 1. A sample of five dyads was determined to be sufficient to facilitate an in-depth exploration of each case over time while also enabling comparison between cases. The rationale for the study sample size was based on considerations of feasibility and accessibility, as well as previous studies using APM that had a sample of five dyads (Klaassen, Young, & James, 2015).

Data Gathering and Analysis

Data gathering and analyses occurred concurrently for each dyad. The detailed description of procedures and analyses that follow are organized chronologically to aid the reader in understanding how earlier analyses informed subsequent data collection. Figure 1 provides an overview of APM procedures and analyses. Data gathering took place over ~10 months, from January to November 2016, for each dyad and involved four phases including three face-to-face meetings and 6 months of biweekly telephone monitoring (Wall et al., 2016). The APM involves multiple procedures to access information about individual and joint actions over time. Specifically, sources of data gathering corresponded with three perspectives of action; this included video-recorded conversations between dyads to get at *manifest behavior*, video playback of the conversation (i.e., video-recall interviews) to access *internal processes*, and systematic analyses using the video-recorded conversations and video-recall interviews to get at *social meaning*. In addition, a longitudinal component involved telephone monitoring to track the *joint project* across time. An outline of the purpose, duration, and number of each of the data gathering

Table 1
Participant Demographic Information

Dyad	Parent age range	Parent birthplace	Parent work status	Skater age	Skater birthplace	Years skating	Training (hrs/wk)	Extra-curriculars
1	39–48	Canada	Full-time	12	Canada	6	16	No
2	39–48	China	Unemployed	12	China	8	5 ^a	Yes
3	39–48	China	Full-time	11	Canada	7	13.75	Yes
4	39–48	Canada	Self-employed	12	Canada	9	12	No
5	29–38	Canada	Part-time	10	Canada	5	22	No

Note. All dyads except Dyad 3 were mother–daughter dyads; Dyad 3 was a father–daughter dyad. All parents were married. All skaters were competing at the prenovice level.

^a Training hours per week were temporarily reduced to study for an entrance exam to a private school.

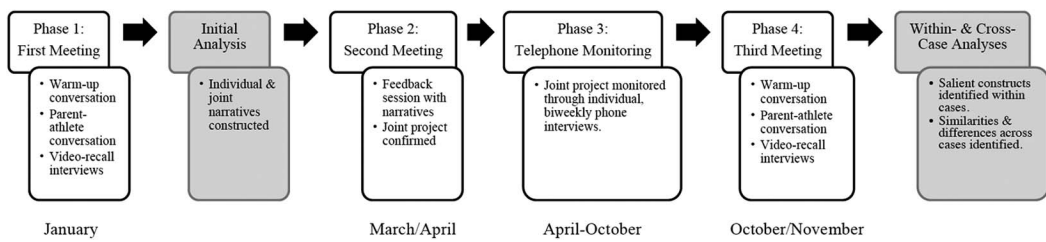


Figure 1. Chronological overview of concurrent data collection and analysis. Shaded boxes denote analysis.

procedures is provided in Table 2, and the detailed data collection and interview protocol is included as [online supplemental materials \(S1\)](#). The three meetings took place at the participants' training centers. Each participant received an honorarium of \$20 for each in-person meeting (\$60 total). A pair of researchers was assigned to each dyad and conducted all the interviews and initial analyses for that dyad. For consistency, the first author (Wall), a doctoral student with 6 years of experience in qualitative research and background in competitive figure skating, was involved in all data collection and analyses for the five dyads. The second and third authors (Pradhan & Baugh) assisted with data collection. The research team (Wall, Pradhan, Baugh, Marshall, & Young) involved in the analyses consisted of three graduate students and two researchers with extensive experience studying parent-child relationships. All authors were familiar with the philosophical underpinnings of CAT and careful attention was given throughout the study to ensure consistency with the social constructionist paradigm.

Phase 1: First meeting. After informed consent from parents and assent from youth were obtained, the first interview began. The interview was video and audio recorded and started with a warm-up conversation with the two participants and two researchers. The participants were then invited to have a conversation ($M = 11.69$ min) together about their involvement in figure skating. At the end of the conversation each participant met separately with one of the researchers for a video-recall interview. During the interview the conversation was played back to the participant and stopped at 1-min intervals. The participant was

invited to share what they were thinking and feeling at the particular moment in the conversation segment that they had just watched. To help the athletes understand the concept of reflecting on their thoughts and feelings, a drawing of a person was presented with thought balloons. This stimulus assisted participants in understanding that there may be differences between what was manifest in the conversation and what was occurring internally for them. The researcher used probing and follow-up questions to clarify the participant's responses. The average lengths of the video-recall interviews were 34.69 min for parents and 28.80 min for athletes.

Initial analysis of Phase 1. The purpose of the analysis was to identify a tentative joint project between the parent and athlete that would be reviewed by the participants in Phase 2. The four interviews from Phase 1 (warm-up, conversation, and two video-recall interviews) were transcribed verbatim by a transcriptionist unaffiliated with the study. The two researchers who conducted the interviews carried out the initial analyses following APM procedures (for a detailed description, see Wall et al., 2016). Analysis proceeded line-by-line with the levels of action (elements, functional steps, and goals) in the conversation systematically identified in 1-min intervals. The procedure involved collectively coding, from an APM a priori list of codes for verbal interaction (i.e., asks for information, clarifies, encourages, describes self), the specific elements or units of behavior that make up the action for each participant. Next, the functional steps that each participant engaged in to reach the goal were identified and informed by the video-recall interview data. The coded elements and functional steps were then used to describe the individual goal(s) and

Table 2
Phase, Purpose, and Duration of Research Procedures

Phase	Procedure	Purpose	Duration		
			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
1. First meeting	Warm-up conversation	Set participants at ease and to identify a potential topic for the parent–athlete conversation.	31.12	5.62	5
	Parent–athlete conversation	Record manifest action via a conversation that captures the typical actions and goals participants engage in together.	11.69	2.63	5
	Parent video-recall	Collect data on the parent’s internal processes during the conversation.	34.69	7.07	5
	Athlete video-recall	Collect data on the athlete’s internal processes during the conversation.	28.80	8.33	5
2. Second meeting	Parent narrative feedback	Provide parents with their individual actions and goals in the parent–athlete conversation.	11.72	5.05	5
	Athlete narrative feedback	Provide athletes with their individual actions and goals in the parent–athlete conversation.	10.43	2.77	5
	Joint narrative feedback	Provide parent and athlete with their joint actions and goals in the conversation and identify the joint transition project.	13.14	3.82	5
3. Telephone monitoring (TM)	Parent TM	Monitor project, actions, and internal processes.	13.54	4.25	12 ^a
	Athlete TM	Monitor project, actions, and internal processes.	11.68	2.65	12 ^a
4. Third meeting	Warm-up conversation	Collect information about current activities and how the dyad’s joint project progressed, and identify a potential topic for the conversation.	19.51	8.60	5
	Parent–athlete conversation	Same as first meeting.	8.98	1.91	5
	Parent video-recall	Same as first meeting.	21.58	8.04	5
	Athlete video-recall	Same as first meeting.	23.62	3.84	5

Note. *M* = mean duration in minutes; *n* = number of dyads, unless noted otherwise.

^a Average number of telephone monitoring calls.

joint goal(s) for each minute of the conversation. Based on this systematic analysis, an overall joint project was inferred from the individual and joint goals (i.e., what the dyad members were doing together over time in relation to the transition to higher levels of commitment and training).

Compiling narratives for Phase 2. The analyzed data record was then compiled into two individual and one joint narrative (three in total)

descriptions of the conversation. Each narrative was approximately two pages in length, double-spaced, and written using plain goal-directed language that described what the participants were doing in the conversation. For example, one of the narratives for a skater included the following description:

One of your goals in the conversation was to update your mom about your skating. You did this by re-

sponding to your mom's questions about the status of your new program. You were relaying conversations you had with your coaches and expressing your opinions about the choreography.

The joint narrative identified the functional steps, joint goals, and joint project engaged in by the dyad. For example, the joint narrative for one dyad included the following description of a joint goal in the conversation:

Another joint goal seemed to be to help [Daughter] develop and maintain friendships in and outside of skating. [Mother] did this by encouraging [Daughter] to be social with skaters from other clubs and assuring her that befriending skaters from other clubs is okay to her coaches. [Daughter] participated in this by updating her mom about her communication with a skater from another club and describing her "embarrassing" experience sitting with friends from different clubs.

The research team then discussed these narratives until consensus was reached about the identified joint project. The narratives were presented to participants during Phase 2.

Phase 2: Second meeting. Approximately 2 months after the first interview, the participants returned for a second interview. The first part of this interview involved a researcher meeting separately with each participant to review the participant's individual narrative. The second part of the interview involved the researchers and both participants meeting together to review the joint narrative, including the identified joint project. In the first and second part of the interview, participants were given a paper copy and the researchers read the narratives aloud to the participants. Participants were invited to give feedback and make changes to the narrative and joint project if the description was not consistent with the participants' memory of the conversation. Two dyads shared recent changes related to the joint project that resulted in slight revisions to the project for each of these dyads. All dyads agreed with the identified joint project.

Phase 3: Telephone monitoring. Following the second interview, each participant was contacted individually on a biweekly basis to monitor their joint project. During the telephone conversation, participants were asked about whether they had any project-related activities, the nature of these activities, what they were thinking and feeling during the activities, and if there were any barriers to the project. The total

number of telephone monitoring calls to parents ranged from 9–13 ($M_{\text{call length}} = 13.54$ min) and, to athletes, 10–13 ($M_{\text{call length}} = 11.68$ min).

Phase 4: Third meeting. The final interview closely paralleled the first meeting. Parent-athlete dyads met with the same researchers; after a brief interview about current activities and how the dyad's joint project had progressed, the researchers left the room while the parent and athlete had a conversation related to their project ($M = 8.98$ min). Following the conversation, each participant met with a researcher for an individual video-recall interview. Mean interview lengths were 21.58 min for parents and 23.62 min for athletes. The participants then met once again with the researchers to debrief the meeting and the study as a whole.

Within-case analysis. The same analytic process as described for the initial analyses earlier was followed for the interviews in Phase 4. The analyses of the conversation were compared for similarities and differences to the joint project in previous phases. A final case summary was prepared, collating all analyses, and then circulated to the research team. The research team met to discuss each case separately and to identify emerging constructs, which served as the basis for comparison in the cross-case analysis.

Cross-case analyses. The research team conducted cross-case analyses to identify potential similarities and differences across the cases. Three cross-case analyses, as opposed to comparing across the five cases once, were conducted to identify salient constructs (Yin, 2013). That is, the five cases were randomly grouped in two sets of three and one set of four, so that each case was discussed twice. This procedure in APM is modeled after the technique of *triading* (Kelly, 1955), which enabled the researchers to ask, "how are two cases alike and different from the third?" In the cross-case analysis that involved four cases, the researchers modified the technique, asking, "what is common with three cases and different from the fourth?" Common themes across constructs were identified, and the research team discussed how best to cluster the projects for reporting.

Reflective journals were kept by the researchers involved in data collection and initial anal-

yses to track personal experiences, reflections, and analytical decision-making during the study. The primary purpose of the reflective memos was to bring transparency to the research process. There were no changes to the research design as a result of keeping the researcher journals.

Rigor

As is typically the case in APM, Lincoln and Guba's (2000) suggestions for evaluating quality were used, which included the rigor of the method and trustworthiness of the interpretations. With respect to rigor, the APM involves a systematic and comprehensive procedure for collecting and analyzing data longitudinally. Multiple data gathering methods were used to access different perspectives on the same action. For example, video recording was used to observe manifest behavior, the video-recall interview accessed internal processes, and naïve observation by participants and researchers during the video-recall interview, and by researchers during the analyses, focused on social meaning. In addition, the longitudinal design enabled prolonged engagement with the participants. With respect to trustworthiness of interpretations, participants had the opportunity to react in detail to their data through the video-recall interviews and to comment, add to, or make changes to our interpretations during the second meeting. This ensured that the researchers' interpretations adequately represented the experience and actions of the participants (Young et al., 2005). The detailed analysis, involving pairs of researchers, and the continuous discussion of emerging findings until consensus among the research team, working as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018), further contributed to trustworthiness by ensuring multiple perspectives on the data.

Results

The aim of this research was to describe the joint goal-directed projects of parents and athletes as each athlete transitioned to higher levels of training and commitment in figure skating. Based on initial analyses and narrative feedback with each parent-athlete dyad, five distinct projects were identified and followed using 6 months of telephone monitoring. These projects

represented several joint actions constructed around a common goal or meaning. The repeated and systematic analysis of the data set described in Table 2 led to the grouping of the projects based on common themes, namely, negotiating commitments ($n = 4$), progressing toward skating goals ($n = 4$), and maintaining a developmental focus ($n = 3$). These three themes represent commonalities across the five dyad's projects. For each dyad, primary and secondary themes were identified. Primary themes captured what the dyad was primarily focused on together, whereas secondary themes represented the dyads' joint actions that were present and a part of the project, but less salient (see Table 3). As a result, the total number of projects across the thematic clusters exceeds five.

It also became clear that the transition projects were embedded in a broader parent-child relationship project, that is, the joint actions that parents and children enact together, which spans years. The parent-child relationship served as an important context for the joint actions related to the transition projects, and in turn, the joint actions enacted affected the relationship between the parent and athlete. The three clusters of transition projects and parent-child relationship projects are described in the following sections.

Negotiating Commitments

Projects focused on negotiating commitments involved actions and goals related to balancing training, school, social, and other extracurricular activities. Negotiating commitments was a primary theme for Dyads 2 and 3, whereas for Dyads 1 and 4 this was a secondary theme. Central to these projects was the process of growing responsibility for the athlete. The negotiating involved a back and forth dynamic that looked different in each dyad. In some cases, the athlete asserted themselves, expressed their desires, and pulled for decision-making power related to their commitments. For others, the athlete vied for less parental involvement in their activities. For instance, for one athlete (Dyad 1) growing responsibility meant beginning to take public transit to skating and signing up for her own school courses. The parents' functional steps, in turn, involved trying to respect their daughter's desire for greater

Table 3
Joint Projects and Arrangement Into Clusters

Dyad	Project	Primary theme	Secondary theme
1	To engage together about skating while athlete is entrusted with more independence and parent’s concerns for well-roundedness are monitored and met.	Maintaining a developmental focus	Progressing toward skating goals; Negotiating commitments
2	To negotiate parent’s involvement and athlete’s independence in her commitments and responsibilities.	Negotiating commitments	—
3	To reconcile different expectations for athlete’s athletic, academic, and social development in the context of their relationship with each other.	Negotiating commitments	Progressing toward skating goals
4	To work together to fine tune athlete’s training schedule and to manage the tension around athlete’s needs and personal development while connecting through skating.	Maintaining a developmental focus	Progressing toward skating goals; Negotiating commitments
5	To work as a team to support athlete’s progression toward her dreams/goal of becoming an Olympian.	Progressing toward skating goals	Maintaining a developmental focus

Note. A secondary theme was not applicable for Dyad 2.

independence and responsibility by discussing and collaborating with them about the extracurricular activities. However, in all cases, the parent ultimately had the final say and oversight. In these projects, the beginning of governance transfer (Young et al., 2008) was taking place, where the dyad was working out between them who had decision-making power (related to scheduling and engagement in activities).

For example, one athlete (Dyad 4) used the first conversation to initiate talking about her desire to change schools. She wanted to move to the local sport academy where other skaters attended and enroll in the stream that accommodated sport training:

Mother: Why don’t we just wait for now though because I think it [current school] is a good school (**Daughter:** I know), and they have . . . wait until we run into problems (**Daughter:** I know, but . . .) because I can always switch you.

Daughter: . . . but the reason why I was telling you now even though we’re only halfway done the school year is . . . “why are you worrying about that now you still have like many

months until that,” but it’s like I do not want to be like first day of school “Mom I want to change schools.” Like end of August I feel like this is going to be the time to discuss things . . . that’s just why I’m saying this now.

The daughter expressed in the video-recall interview, “I know it seems really early to be talking about next [school] year but I feel like . . . I don’t want to be rushing my parents.” During the conversation the parent listened and tried to understand her daughter’s desire to switch schools while reminding her that the current school was working well. Toward the end of the conversation the parent stated, “Well I’m not really willing to change anything just yet. I want to see how things go.” However, during the narrative feedback session the dyad reported that they had decided that the athlete would change schools at the start of the next academic year.

Negotiating commitments also involved different personal investments within the dyad, and at times, these investments were in conflict as was the case for Dyads 2 and 3. For instance, at the start of the study, one athlete (Dyad 2) shared that her goal was to compete internationally in both skating and horseback

riding. This surprised her mother. During the first conversation the mother brought it up:

Mother: You¹ skating for six days. You spend so many hours and timing on it. You do not even dream for to be a really good . . . for yourself. I never thinking you are to be the horseback riding Olympics (laughing). (**Daughter:** I'll show you . . .). But how's your . . . if you do that that means you have to spending time on it, and . . .

Daughter: And not do school then.

Mother: No do school?!? (**Daughter:** laughing) Are you kidding?

Daughter: No (laughing). Only just kidding. Joking. It'd be awesome.

Mother: It's not possible, but you know? So are you going to choose between skating and horseback riding?

Daughter: Yep one day.

By the second interview the athlete had decided to discontinue her involvement in skating. Much of the negotiating between this dyad related to whether the athlete would return to skating, the parent's desire for her daughter to attend a private school and prioritize academics over skating and horseback riding, and the daughter's growing involvement and interest in spending more time with her horse. The mother's personal investments related first and foremost to ensuring a solid education for her daughter with the long-term perspective of university, as well as, her personal interest, love, and connection to the sport of figure skating. On the other hand, the daughter was invested in her new horse and was trying to negotiate as much time at the barn as possible. She respected her mother's emphasis on academics and followed her lead regarding school-related commitments but also asserted herself about what she wanted.

Progressing Toward Skating Goals

Progressing toward skating goals refers to projects that focused on moving toward and

attaining short- (i.e., specific skating elements or competition results) and long-term (i.e., making the Olympics) goals. Dyad 5's project was primarily focused on a long-term goal of making the 2022 Olympics and involved weekly ritualized activities between mother and daughter. For three dyads, progressing toward skating goals was a secondary theme. Aspects of these dyads' projects involved working toward progress in skating but it did not have the same specificity. Rather, in these cases the dyads were working out between themselves, implicitly and explicitly, expectations for progress.

For Dyad 5, progress was explicitly identified through joint actions, such as formal goal setting practices, and involved both present and future foci. The joint goals included setting clear goals for the season and brainstorming and negotiating weekly goals and incentives. For example, in the final conversation, the dyad was negotiating goals for the week:

Mother: Ok, so what are we, what are our goals? (**Daughter:** I do not know). One clean program a day? (**Daughter:** Sure. No, no, no . . .) A clean program, frozen yogurt?

Daughter: No . . . One clean program and I get to have a bath bomb again . . .

Mother: Ok, so, we'll go the mall and you get a bath bomb if you have two clean programs? (**Daughter:** Um-hmm). They have to be consecutive days, they do not have to be on the same day but they have to be like one one day, one the next day (**Daughter:** Ok).

Although the athlete established her long-term goal, the mother steered the project, providing structure and emotional support to guide her daughter's training. For instance, the mother commented in the video-recall interview, "lots of times I have to coax her into the right goals that are going to push her towards developing, cause sometimes her goals . . . don't make sense." The mother's functional steps included

¹ English as a second language. Transcribed verbatim.

observing most of her practices, helping with her daily routine (e.g., meals, doing her hair), talking to her about her lessons, and gauging her understanding of her skating (e.g., program requirements). A primary goal that weaved throughout the project for the mother was to determine the degree of her input in her daughter's training, that is, knowing when to push and guide and when to let her daughter take the lead. This mother was intentional about seeking support from other parents and the coaches to help her navigate her involvement. She described herself as mindful of her limited knowledge of skating, noting in the video-recall interview that the technical aspects of skating are between her daughter and the coach. In her interactions with her daughter she frequently checked her understanding by asking for clarification or more information and acknowledged and paraphrased what her daughter had to say.

The daughter followed her mother's lead but also took an active role in the project by negotiating weekly goals that involved setting more challenging goals, identifying incentives that further assisted her toward her goals such as healthy treats, and tracking her activities. A primary goal was to challenge herself to incrementally improve her skating skills.

Comparatively, the other three dyads had a more implicit focus on progress. There was a shared assumption between parents and athletes that improvement, and in some cases achievement, were a part of their involvement in competitive sport. However, these dyads did not engage together in formal goal setting. Rather, the dyads were working out between themselves expectations for progress in skating.

In Dyads 1 and 4, the athletes' personal expectations were observed implicitly in their conversations with their mothers. Both athletes sought emotional support from their parent for the challenges and setbacks faced in skating (i.e., a "bad" training session [Dyad 4] or other skaters staying in a level so they could win [Dyad 1]) through which their high personal expectations were revealed. The parents each acknowledged in the video-recall interview that their daughters had high personal standards. In the conversation, the parents engaged with their daughters, provided emotional support, and worked to offset the high expectations through listening, sharing observations, reframing per-

ceptions, and redirecting the focus toward what was in the athletes' control.

For Dyad 3, the parent set expectations for skating progress that were not shared by the athlete. One of the goals enacted by the father was to hold his daughter to a certain standard in skating and to see improvement and progress. For example, he questioned his daughter about her progress on her double axel as illustrated by the following exchange in their final conversation:

Daughter: I am rotating my double axel.

Father: Is it landing? (**Daughter:** Yeah). Fully rotated? (**Daughter:** No). That's the problem.

The father's functional steps also included redirecting the conversation to what he thought she needed to do more in training. The father also challenged his daughter's reasons for not meeting his expectations. The daughter highlighted and restated the progress she had made on her double axel, defended against comparisons her father made with other skaters, and provided external reasons for why she did not meet her father's expectations (i.e., the ice conditions). She disclosed in the video-recall interview that she wanted "to impress" her father with her skating. Her goals included to be heard by her father and to receive validation from him about the progress she had achieved.

Maintaining a Developmental Focus

Developmental focus refers to projects that involved actions aimed at the physical and psychological needs of the athlete, given their age, and emphasizing a holistic perspective with regard to personal development. Goals focused on (a) tailoring involvement in skating to accommodate growth and development and (b) developing the person and being well-rounded. These projects were predominantly steered by the parent, but the value of maintaining balance alongside skating was shared by the athletes. For Dyads 1 and 4, developmental focus was the primary theme. Both of these dyads also engaged in negotiating commitments and progressing toward skating goals; however, the emphasis on holistic development was foregrounded. For Dyad 5, developmental focus

was a secondary theme, subsumed under progressing in skating.

All three dyads, in their own way, were working together to tailor the athletes' involvement in skating to accommodate growth and development. For some this meant ensuring there was time for the athlete "to be a kid" (Dyad 5) or to have time together as a family that did not involve skating (Dyad 1). For others it meant being mindful of development such as growth spurts and the importance of developing self-confidence (Dyad 4). A primary functional step for parents involved monitoring the athletes' training including their schedule, emotional (i.e., managing stress/pressure) and physical (i.e., nutrition, injuries) health, and relationships (i.e., with coaches and friends). Through the video-recall interviews, it became clear that parents used different markers to assess whether changes or adjustments were needed. For Dyad 1, the mother used her daughter's level of enjoyment and happiness, whereas, in Dyad 4 the mother relied on expressed and observed energy levels. The parents collaborated with the athlete to adjust the training schedule as needed. One parent (Dyad 4) commented in the telephone monitoring that they were "restoring some normalcy to the schedule, bringing the speed down a notch" and "taking it day by day in the busy season."

Setting limits and educating the athlete about the importance of health and rest were other functional steps used. The parent from Dyad 1 noted in the telephone monitoring that she's "got to make sure [she's] the parent and [her daughter] is the child still." Although she collaborated with her daughter, there were times she set limits to ensure there was balance in her daughter's life. The athletes (Dyads 1, 4, and 5) followed their mothers' lead, responding to questions and updating them about their training and how their bodies felt. One athlete (Dyad 4) also took initiative herself, focusing on staying on top of her health and setting appropriate boundaries so she would not overwork herself in skating. This included, for example, taking time off to recover when she hurt her back.

Developing as a person and being well-rounded were also goals for Dyads 1 and 4. This was a central focus of Dyad 1's project. As the dyad engaged together about different skating topics (i.e., choreography, competitions, training), it became clear that the mother highlighted

"teachable moments" to facilitate her daughter's personal development such as independence, responsibility, and understanding of social interactions. For example, in the first conversation, the dyad talked about replacing a piece of equipment that the daughter lost:

Mother: You left it there?

Daughter: I think I do not know . . . we . . . dad . . . we even looked and we didn't see anything but I think what happened was it was on my chair and when I got up the chair folded and it probably got caught in between and we didn't see it.

Mother: Yeah so one thing you have to remember to do is always (**Daughter:** Look in the chair [laughs]) Yeah but check everywhere. Do not leave your stuff lying around because a lot of it's equipment that you need.

The mother encouraged, and at times advised, her daughter to be more disciplined and take ownership of aspects of her training, as well as to focus on what was in her control. The daughter tried to demonstrate to her mother that she was responsible and that she deserved more independence. In the video recall, she shared that she felt frustrated that her mother continued to remind her about her lost notepad; she expressed that she was "being responsible but everyone forgets things from time to time."

For Dyad 4, a part of being well-rounded meant ensuring that skating was not the sole focus for the athlete. The athlete shared during the warm-up conversation that she does not like to make long-term goals as "anything can happen." Although the dyad connected through skating, particularly given the mother's knowledge of skating, they were also intentional about finding ways to connect outside of the sport together. Functional steps included ensuring they have time together in the evening as a family, picking berries and harvesting apples, going sightseeing while in a different city for a competition, and sewing together. The mother noted in the telephone monitoring that she

thinks it's important that her daughter is reminded that "[she] is not defined by her performance as an athlete" and that there are other things in her life.

Parent-Child Relationship

For all five dyads the skating-related projects were enacted within the broader parent-child relationship project, that is, the series of joint actions that construct the relationship beyond skating. For four dyads, their shared involvement in skating was a means of personal connection and enjoyment with one another. Important functional steps included collaborating and working together as a team and emotional support and regulation.

Parents guided and steered the dyads' projects by monitoring and inquiring, whereas the athletes reinforced by "doing," updating, and vocalizing their wants and needs. Some dyads had a complementary style of relating with one another. Their conversations flowed, often with the parent taking the lead and asking questions and the athlete responding and providing information. They switched topics with ease, finished each other's sentences, and were comfortable disagreeing and expressing their own perceptions. These dyads worked together as a team.

Emotional support and regulation involved athletes expressing and processing their emotions including frustration, uncertainty, and worry with their parents. The parents, in turn, listened, empathized, acknowledged their daughter's concerns, and at times offered encouragement or an alternative perspective. In the telephone monitoring the dyads described frequent connecting points about skating including conversations in the car, texting throughout the day, and the parent being present and observing training sessions. The athletes noted particular difficulties when their mothers were away. For example, one athlete (Dyad 4) shared in the telephone monitoring:

My other coach was in a bad mood and "freaked out" at me . . . it was really hard because I had no one to talk to. Normally I would text my mom, and I tried to text my mom but the message was too big, greater than 500 words, and wouldn't send. I went and talked to the off-ice coaches . . . it seems resolved now.

Skating used to be a way of connecting for Dyad 2; however, the athlete discontinued their

involvement in skating while participating in the study and increased her involvement in horseback riding. As the dyad engaged together primarily around negotiating commitments, with the daughter desiring to have more independence and the mother trying to navigate her involvement and input in her daughter's activities, they were also finding new ways of connecting together. Tension in their relationship was evident as a result of their conflicting goals as demonstrated in their conversation:

Mother: (Laughs). Do you miss skating?

Daughter: No. I do not.

Mother: I miss it.

Daughter: You do not even skate, you miss it. (Laughs).

Mother: I miss when you are on the ice.

Daughter: You do not like me horseback riding?

Mother: I like it, I like [horse name].

In contrast, for Dyad 3, their involvement in skating seemed to contribute to disconnection in their relationship. As the dyad worked together to reconcile different expectations for the daughter's athletic, academic, and social development, their conflicting goals resulted in tension in their interactions. The parent viewed skating as "an investment that won't have any return" and as taking away from the daughter's development in other areas, particularly academics, and not contributing to opportunities for a future career. Skating for the daughter was an outlet to gain parental approval and prove she could do something well, given her father's high expectations for her and her commitments. The dyad's interactions during the conversations were strained. The father took the lead, he asked questions, tried to elicit responses, and gave input and advice. The daughter provided minimal responses, often used nonverbal responses, and at times changed the topic. In response, the father countered with a demand or challenged his daughter's assertion (i.e., thinking it was an excuse), or continued giving his input with minimal acknowledgment of what

his daughter was sharing. Both expressed frustration with the other in the video-recall interviews. In this dyad, rather than the relationship in the background, providing a foundation to work together from as a team, the relationship was foregrounded. Although the dyad was reconciling their differing expectations for the athlete's commitments, they were negotiating how they connected with one another as part of their broader parent-child relationship project.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to investigate how parents and athletes engaged together when transitioning to (or not to) higher levels of commitment and training in the context of early specialization, competitive sport. The findings revealed that each dyad engaged in unique projects, and subsequently unique pathways (Phillips, Davids, Renshaw, & Portus, 2010), as they navigated the transition to, and in the case of one dyad, not to, more specialized training in skating. Three thematic clusters of interrelated joint projects were identified in the data. Athletes and parents were negotiating commitments, progressing toward skating goals, and maintaining a developmental focus as they engaged together in the transition process. Also, not surprisingly, most projects involved a focus on future-oriented goals and progress in skating, which supports existing literature that underscores the importance of shared goals between parents and athletes (Harwood & Knight, 2015; Knight & Holt, 2014). Extending this literature, the findings demonstrated some of the processes through which parents and athletes arrived at implicit and explicit shared goals. Specifically, this included how parents and athletes engaged together in formal goal setting practices and how parents and athletes worked out between themselves expectations for progress.

In addition, as elaborated in the following text, this study supports existing notions of transitions as a dynamic and interactive process (Wylleman & Rosier, 2016), and furthers our understanding by highlighting the nuanced processes of the joint actions as they take place between parent and athlete over time. A main finding from this study corresponded to how parents and athletes prioritized a developmental focus and how nonsport development was embedded within the transition processes. The em-

phasis on well-roundedness and a holistic perspective for personal development is consistent with previous research in tennis and gymnastics (Burgess, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2016; Harwood & Knight, 2009) that showed that parents experience stress related to their child's development (i.e., educational and social), given the all-consuming nature of their sport. Parents in this study adopted similar strategies, previously identified in the literature, to manage the developmental demands of sport and maintain balance, such as ensuring the athlete had time away from sport and reiterating the importance of education (Burgess et al., 2016; Harwood & Knight, 2009). Additional strategies also emerged, such as highlighting "teachable moments" (Neely & Holt, 2014) within the sport context to foster independence, responsibility, and social skills. In addition, this study detailed the interactive process related to maintaining a developmental focus. That is, the athletes, in turn, provided updates to their parents about their training and how their bodies felt, pulled for greater responsibility, and in some cases engaged in their own boundary-setting related to their training. These findings are timely considering Harwood, Knight, Thrower, and Berrow's (2019) commemorative article that suggested that the literature on parental involvement and positive youth development in sport has largely neglected the role of parents in nurturing their child's psychosocial development. The findings of this study add to the literature by describing the *interactive and joint goal-directed processes* that parents and athletes engaged in together related to some aspects of athlete psychosocial development (i.e., independence, social skills, responsibility, and emotional well-being).

Furthermore, beyond a focus on well-roundedness and balance, these findings showed that some parents also attended to important aspects of growth and development, such as tailoring training schedules around growth spurts. This was a relatively novel finding that aligns with a recent study by Gould, Pierce, Wright, Lauer, and Nalepa (2016), where expert coaches in U10 tennis recommended that parents gain more knowledge about the principles of child growth and development. This study adds to the extant literature by describing how some parents translate such knowledge into practice. For example, monitoring was one of

the most frequent functional steps engaged in by parents toward the goal of having a developmental focus, which included observing and keeping track of the athlete's schedule, emotional and physical health, and social interactions with coaches and friends. Parents used different markers to assess whether changes or adjustments were needed such as their daughter's energy levels or enjoyment. Moreover, parents seemed to be socializing their daughters to have a developmental focus for their own involvement in skating. This was observed in the ways they collaborated and shared information with their daughters, and in turn, how the daughters took initiative themselves with monitoring their own health. Parents, however, also engaged in limit setting when they felt it was necessary to pull back or modify training (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2008). Recommendations by the American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine suggest that children who participate in early sport specialization should be closely monitored for burnout, injury, or overtraining (LaPrade et al., 2016). Although the recommendations do not specify who should do the monitoring, these findings suggest parents, in this early specialization sport context, engage in such behaviors.

Similar to previous research on adolescents' within-career transitions (Gledhill & Harwood, 2015; Pummell et al., 2008), an important part of some participants' projects was negotiating commitments, that is, balancing the demands of sport, school, and private life. A novel contribution of the present study, however, is an increased understanding of the ways in which youth development was embedded within this transition process. Consistent with action perspectives on human development (Brandtstädter, 2006; Brandtstädter & Lerner, 1999), parent-athlete dyads in this study were engaged together in developmental processes. Specifically, the results of this study described the nature and importance of increased adolescent responsibility and decreased parental control through governance transfer (Young et al., 2008), while maintaining and renegotiating connection in the parent-child relationship (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Governance transfer is the process of shifting responsibility over different domains (i.e., schoolwork, sport, extracurricular activities) from parental control to youth (Young et al., 2008). In this study, the beginning of gov-

ernance transfer took place for some dyads as they negotiated decision-making power related to commitments such as school and training schedules.

Furthermore, in line with existing research on the parent-child relationship, sport was found to be a means of connection for participants (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Clarke et al., 2016). For most of the dyads, skating was a medium through which parents and athletes shared experiences, fostered a shared love of the sport, and connected daily with one another. An important functional step for closeness and connection in the parent-child relationship was emotion regulation and emotional support. This finding is consistent with previous research on emotional support in the parent-athlete dyad (Hassell, Sabiston, & Bloom, 2010; Wuerth et al., 2004) and links to more recent studies that recognize the social and interpersonal nature of emotion regulation (Tamminen et al., 2016) and communal coping (Neely, McHugh, Dunn, & Holt, 2017). However, with growing independence for the athlete, some dyads renegotiated how they connected in their relationship; as such, a dialectic between autonomy and connection was observed. Although it is widely referenced that parents' involvement in sport decreases throughout the athletic career (Côté, 1999; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), recently scholars have challenged this conception (Harwood & Knight, 2016). The dialectic observed in the parent-athlete relationship in this study offers one possibility for understanding the continued involvement of parents in sport while youth-athletes take on greater responsibility and independence.

Finally, the CAT framework offered a lens for conceptualizing the transition to higher levels of training and commitment as a relational and goal-directed process engaged in by athletes and their parents. By using this conceptualization, the findings move beyond research that contextualizes parents and athletes as individuals in interaction by attending to the dyadic level in the transition process. This study also extends knowledge related to athlete development that has largely relied on retrospective qualitative research methods to understand transitions (Gledhill & Harwood, 2015; Pummell et al., 2008). Most of the data were composed of conversations, in real time, between parents and athletes themselves. This allowed for the ac-

tions of both athletes and their parents, as well as the relational nature of transitions, to be captured. Furthermore, the longitudinal component of APM enabled an understanding of the transition process over time.

From an applied perspective, the findings of this study point to implications for practice that highlight the value of the parent–child relationship in youth sport participation, particularly in the context of specializing in Canadian competitive figure skating. Practitioners may consider helping parents and athletes identify their joint projects and ways they could more effectively engage together toward their shared goals. Young and colleagues (Young & Domene, 2018; Young, Domene, & Valach, 2015) previously developed an intervention based on the APM used in this study that may be applicable toward this end. Focusing on the parent–child relationship in this way is compatible with family systems approaches (Holt & Knight, 2014) and has the potential to aid practitioners in fostering an understanding emotional climate for athletes' sport participation (Knight & Holt, 2014). These findings also offer guidance for the delivery of parent education and support programs (Dorsch, King, Dunn, Osai, & Tulane, 2017; Lafferty & Triggs, 2014), such as integrating education related to child growth and development and helping parents approach their child's sport with a developmental focus. This may include joint action practices such as both parent and child monitoring the child's sense of enjoyment and energy levels, as well as joint appraisals of training (load) for indicators of burnout (i.e., decreased motivation, lack of enjoyment, fatigue) or overuse injuries. In addition, this might involve educating parents about the ways that they can promote child well-roundedness and personal development through sport. For instance, parents could be encouraged to help their son or daughter interpret their experiences in sport, highlight teachable moments, and ensure there is time for school, social, and family activities.

Despite the strengths of the study, there are some limitations to consider when interpreting the findings. First, participants in this study were self-selected and provided with a small monetary incentive for their participation. Second, inherent to the research procedure, gathering data based on 10–15-min conversations between parents and athletes may or may not be

reflective of their ongoing engagement and relationship. In addition, the telephone monitoring relied on participants recollecting what had occurred since the last phone interview, and so there could have been some selectivity in terms of what they remembered or chose to share about their activities. Third, the sample consisted of primarily mother–daughter dyads. The joint projects of father/mother–son dyads or additional father–daughter dyads may differ from those described in this study. Finally, this study took place in a Canadian context of figure skating where parents are typically involved in their child's sport. These findings may not be replicated in other cultures, contexts, or countries.

Potential avenues for future research include systematically exploring the role of gender and culture in the parent–child relationship, particularly as it pertains to the transition to higher levels of commitment and training in early specialization sport. In addition, further investigation related to how parents and athletes proceed with early specialization in other sports (e.g., gymnastics) while monitoring and accounting for important developmental considerations, may extend (or complement) the current study findings.

In conclusion, despite the potential negative consequences of early specialization, athletes and their parents continue to invest and commit to trajectories of sport participation aimed at high-level performance in early specialization sports. This study provides insight into the specific goals and strategies that parents and athletes use as they move forward with more specialized training in Canadian competitive figure skating. Parents and athletes not only focused on negotiating the various commitments, demands on time, and expectations for progress, they also accommodated and fostered nonsport development, a process steered by parents but equally engaged in and shared by the athlete.

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Received March 1, 2019

Revision received July 30, 2019

Accepted August 5, 2019 ■