This Ruff Guide introduces you to the relationship between sport and the family. Families are absolutely crucial to sports development - they deliver children into the sport system at all levels, through the simple everyday acts of taking their children to sports opportunities, meeting the costs of their participation, and providing encouragement and support. If a child is talented and becomes involved in sport at high levels of performance, families' contributions can be very substantial indeed.

Yet although families are so important to sport, their role has not always been considered in much detail by sports researchers or sports policy-makers. Sport is so accustomed to relying on families that their contribution has been very much taken-for-granted. In other areas of social policy, however, there is a very strong awareness that family circumstances are important in affecting young peoples' experiences, both positively and negatively. Sports policy makers and practitioners need to be aware of this ‘family factor' too.

In 2003, Sport England commissioned a review of the ‘family factor' on sport (Kay, 2003), reflecting the growing recognition that we need to understand more about how families influence young people's access to, and experiences of, sport. Academic interest has continued to grow, and research into families and sport is now becoming a vibrant area. This Ruff Guide gives an overview of the key themes in the relationship between sport and family, from two perspectives - what role families play in sport, and what role sport plays in family life. First, however, it addresses an issue of primary importance - the need to understand the nature of family life today.

Understanding family life

If we want to make sense of the relationship between sport and the family we need to think carefully about what the term 'family' actually stands for. Over the last 30 years the changes that have taken place in family life have been among the most fundamental social changes throughout the western world, yet in sport we still tend to talk about ‘family' as if it has a single definition. In fact, families have been changing at a rapid pace and are increasingly diverse:
There have been changes in family structure. In the UK and most other western states the number of 'traditional' family households (i.e. married parents and their biological children) has fallen as levels of divorce, separation and lone parenthood have increased. One-in-four children in Britain now live in one-parent households, most of which (>90%) are headed by a mother. Many other children live in new 'reconstituted' ('step-) families, formed after the break-up of their original family unit, often dividing their time between two households.

Ideas about the nature of 'family' are also becoming more diverse. One example of this is that it has become more acceptable in many countries for families to be headed by a same-sex couple. In the UK this has been reflected in legislation governing issues such as civil partnerships and adoption. Although these changes affect a relatively small proportion of families, they are an important indication that popular opinion has shifted.

Changes in parents' working patterns have been another central development in family life. There has been an increase in dual-earner families, sometimes described as 'work-rich', with more mothers now working while their children are young. The total amount of time parents are spending in paid work has therefore increased, which can reduce the amount of time - and energy! - available for supporting children's activities. These changes have also encouraged brought new ideas about parenting roles for mothers and fathers, with more emphasis on shared parenting.

Child and family poverty is however a major social and policy problem. There are many 'work poor' families headed by parents who have little or no paid employment and rely on welfare benefits. This is a main reason why almost one quarter of children in the UK live in poverty, and a central government policy concern. Children in certain types of families are particularly at risk - for example, a higher proportion of lone parent households live below the official poverty line than any other household type, as it is difficult for lone mothers to obtain sufficient childcare to allow them to work. Families from minority ethnic groups may also be vulnerable to low income and poverty, as a result of structural discrimination in the labour market. Parents who have low levels of education also find it difficult to obtain secure, continuous employment.

All of the above factors can have significant impacts on how much support families can provide for children's sport. The rest of this Ruff Guide looks at what families do for sport, in terms of providing support, and what sport does for - and to! - families!

The role families play in sport
There is a substantial tradition of research into the significance of the family as a facilitator for sports participation. Children whose family members participate in sport are more likely to take part themselves (e.g. Jambor, 1999; Wold and Anderssen, 1992; Yang, Telama and Laasko, 1996; in Kay, 2003), and children's sports participation is particularly influenced by the participation status of their same-sex parent. Parents are particularly influential in early and middle childhood (Cote, 1999).

The family is particularly significant for primary socialisation, the initial process through which children come to define their own identity and learn the rules and norms of the society of which they are part. During primary socialisation into sport, this learning process includes the development of social skills that range from 'ideas, attitudes and body movements associated with a given sport, such as physical attributes, skills and techniques of coordination, agility, speed power and stamina', through to 'the psychological aspects of play, sport and athleticism' (Horne, Tomlinson and Whannel, 1999). The family has substantial influence on the extent to which these primary skills are acquired, and also on the extent to which sport is seen by children as part of their everyday life and an area of activity with which they feel familiar.

The family is not only significant, however, for its role in transmitting values and providing role models. Although encouraging and approving children's participation is important, so too is the practical support that accompanies it. Many researchers have highlighted the extent to which children's sport participation at all levels is dependent on the family's ability to invest the necessary resources of money, time and personal involvement. This is why sports policymakers and researchers need to the patterns of family income and household employment patterns which we have discussed above. These can have very direct effects on parents' ability to support their children's sport.

Parents may also make a practical contribution to running their child's sport (De Knop et al, 1998), e.g. by organising activities, officiating at events, coaching, providing group transport, and contributing to fundraising events. Bass (2009) has also recently concluded a very interesting study on the role of parents in the coach-athlete-parent triangle that supports young people's sports development.
The role sport plays in family life

As our knowledge of what families contribute to sport has grown, an increasing number of researchers have begun to look at the relationship between sport and family from the opposite perspective, focussing on the role that sport plays in family life. In an early example, Hellstedt (1995) referred to sport as the focus of a distinctive family system in the United States - one that is organised around children and young people's sports participation. Coakley (2009) suggested that this form of parental support for sport was associated with particular views on what constitutes 'good parenting', and underpinned by a specific ideology of family and parenthood. Harrington's (2003) empirical investigation of sport in Australian families revealed a more mixed picture, however, showing that families valued time spent together as an important element of family life, but varied in the extent to which they considered sport contributed to this. Some saw sport as detracting from family unity, by absorbing children in individual activities.

Some of the most detailed accounts of how sport affects family life come from studies of parental support for elite performers (e.g. Kirk, Carlson, O'Connor, Burke, Davis and Glover, 1997). At this level family life as a whole can be quite dramatically affected by the level of support that sport requires (Kay, 2000). Daily routines become shaped by training schedules; shared family leisure time decreases; holidays are rearranged - and sometimes cancelled - to fit round competition schedules. Many parents adapt their work commitments to meet the time or money demands of sport, some changing jobs, becoming self-employed, or even giving up work completely. Some families move house to be nearer specialist training facilities while others remortgage or move to a smaller property to be able to meet the financial costs of support. A 2005 study found that a third (36%) of families described their child's sport as the 'main' influence on family life and another 49% as a 'large' influence on it (Kay and Charlesworth, 2005). Sport may no longer be an 'add-on' to family life, but its defining feature: families refer to sport as 'a way of life' and to themselves as 'sporting families'. As one parent put it, 'Swimming used to take up a few hours a week but now without realizing it, it takes up most of our lives' (Kay, 2000).

Trussell's (2009) doctoral research has recently shown, however, that young people do not have to be participating at a high level for sport to permeate family life as a whole. Her study of sport among rural families in Canada showed how young people's involvement in competitive sport at community level was a shared enterprise. Trussell coined the term 'Team Family' to capture the central role that sport took in defining family life as a whole and providing a basis for parents and children to relate to each other. Other researchers have also shown that sport is a site through which 'family' is reproduced. Coakley (2009), Such (2009) have both highlighted how we are now in an era of 'intensive parenting', when mothers and fathers are expected to be more actively involved in their children's activities than ever before. Parents' support for their children's involvement in sport therefore allows them to meet prevailing societal expectations...
about what 'good parenting' should be. Kay's (2009) recent international edited collection on 'Fathering through sport and leisure' shows that sport may be particularly suitable for helping men meet current ideologies of 'involved fatherhood' that emphasise men's being direct engagement in their children's activities (e.g. Harrington, 2009). In this collection Jenkins’ chapter on non-resident (i.e. divorced/separated) fathers throws a useful light on sport in a growing but under-researched family structure.

Conclusion: the family factor in sport

'Sport' and 'family' are closely intertwined: some families even define themselves as 'sporting families'. There has however been a tendency for sport to treat 'family' uncritically, rather than as a complex and dynamic social institution. This is greatly at odds with the diversity of contemporary family life, and contrasts with the more sensitive construction of 'family' in other social policy areas. It is important for sports researchers to address this, not just for reasons of academic rigour, but because of its practical relevance to sports participation. As in other areas of life, access to sport is heavily influenced by the say-to-day experiences of family life. Recognising how complex and diverse this is can help sport address its 'family factor' in the most effective way.

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