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"I even called him coach at home": A qualitative study on role conflict and coping in parent-coached elite athletes

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Abstract

This study explores the dual role of parent-coaches and its impact on elite athletes' professional and emotional experiences, with a particular focus on role conflict. Drawing on a qualitative phenomenological approach, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 elite athletes (Mage = 26.8, SD = 5.28) competing in Taekwondo, Judo, and Karate —all of whom were coached by a parent. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Thematic analysis identified role conflict as a central and multifaceted theme, comprising four subdimensions: (1) Dual Role Conflicts, (2) Athletes' Coping Strategies, (3) Parent-Coaches' Role Conflicts, and (4) Parent-Coaches' Coping Strategies.

The findings illustrate that the parent-coach relationship is often described as a complex and paradoxical dynamic, creating tension between emotional intimacy and professional expectations. Across participants' accounts, success as a filial duty emerged as the central organizing concept, shaping how athletes interpreted their struggles and coping mechanisms. Athletes reported struggles with blurred boundaries, feelings of entrapment, and a perceived obligation to achieve as a form of filial duty. According to athletes, parent-coaches experienced internal conflicts and fairness-related concerns, often managing these tensions through compensatory behaviours. Despite these tensions, both athletes and parent-coaches developed various strategies to manage conflicting roles. This study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the psychological and relational complexities of dual-role dynamics in elite individual sports.

Keywords

Coach-athlete relationship, combat sports, coping strategies, fairness, family, filial duty

Introduction

The dynamic relationship among parents, athletes, and coaches within the sporting environment is commonly conceptualized as the "athletic triangle".[1] Interactions within this triadic structure play a crucial role in shaping athletes' psychological development, motivation, and long-term participation in sport.[2,3] Within this system, parents can influence the quality of the coach-athlete relationship, which is often defined by dimensions such as closeness, commitment, and complementarity.[4] Likewise, coaches may act as intermediaries who channel parental expectations and support in ways that facilitate athletes' growth.

In certain cases, however, the traditional triangle collapses into a dyadic structure when one person assumes two roles—as both parent and coach. This dual-role relationship introduces a unique dynamic, challenging the established separation between emotional caregiving and professional instruction. Individuals occupying this dual role are commonly referred to as "parent-coaches," and the configuration is often labeled in the literature as a "familial coaching relationship" or "coaching dual relationship".[5] While some parent-coaches prepare for this role through formal training, others rely on existing sport-specific expertise, often coaching within their own facilities. The implications of this role overlap on athletes' development, well-being, and motivation are still underexplored, especially in elite sport contexts.

Prior research has identified both advantages—such as increased trust, emotional closeness, and logistical support —and challenges, including communication breakdowns, role ambiguity, and perceived favoritism.[6–8] One of the most recurrent difficulties reported in these studies is role conflict, which emerges when the emotional and relational

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demands of parenting are at odds with the objectivity and discipline expected from coaching.[9,10] Furthermore, other stakeholders in the sporting environment—such as athletes, parents, and club staff—often perceive parent-coaches with ambivalence or suspicion, particularly in relation to issues of fairness and impartiality.[11,12]

Despite a growing interest, existing research on the dual-role dynamic has predominantly focused on youth or amateur athletes, whose sporting careers are often shorter in duration, situated in less pressurized environments, and shaped by developmental goals rather than long-term achievement. However, these findings may not fully capture the complexity of elite athletes' experiences, where dual-role relationships extend across many years, are embedded within professional and institutional structures, and are intensified by heightened expectations of success. In particular, elite athletes may experience the dual role not only as a relational challenge but also as a cultural and institutional burden—where success is framed as a filial duty. This distinction underscores the need to investigate the phenomenon specifically from the perspective of elite athletes themselves.

Moreover, limited attention has been paid to the lived experiences of elite-level athletes in individual sports, where emotional intensity and performance pressure may further exacerbate role tensions. Additionally, the strategies employed by both athletes and parent-coaches to manage these tensions remain insufficiently examined. Taken together, these gaps highlight the need for a study that specifically examines elite athletes' lived experiences of role conflict in parent–coach relationships.

Accordingly, the research was guided by the following two questions:

(a) What are elite athletes' thoughts and experiences regarding having a parent-coach?
(b) How does having a parent as a coach make elite athletes feel?

To address these gaps, this study investigates how elite athletes experience and interpret role conflict within parent-coach relationships, with particular emphasis on the psychological consequences and coping strategies. Based on in-depth interviews with 11 elite athletes, thematic analysis identified four core subdimensions of role conflict: (1) Dual Role Conflicts, (2) Athletes' Coping Strategies, (3) Parent-Coaches' Role Conflicts, and (4) Parent-Coaches' Coping Strategies.

Building on these findings, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how role conflicts are experienced, negotiated, and regulated within this unique relational context. Furthermore, this study pays particular attention to the concept of "success as a filial duty"—a theme that inductively emerged from athletes' narratives—situated within the socio-cultural context of Turkish elite sport. By framing role conflict through this lens, the study highlights how athletes' experiences of obligation and entrapment are shaped not only by family dynamics but also by broader institutional and cultural forces.

Materials and methods

Approach

This study is grounded in an interpretivist phenomenological stance, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through individuals' lived experiences. Within this framework, we employed an inductive and interpretive qualitative design. The inductive design enabled themes and patterns to emerge directly from the data rather than being shaped by predefined theoretical frameworks.[13] Qualitative research aims to understand "how people interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and attribute meaning to those experiences."[14] Accordingly, a phenomenological design—deemed particularly suitable for exploring "intense, emotional, and often profound human experiences"[14]—was adopted. In phenomenological studies, participants are encouraged to reflect on their lived experiences and articulate them in their own words.[15] This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' emotions, thoughts, and the meanings they attach to their relationships with their parent-coaches, situated within broader social and cultural contexts.

Participants and recruitment

In total, 11 elite athletes (4 females, 7 males) who either currently compete or have competed at high levels in taekwondo, judo, and karate were interviewed. Among them, one athlete was coached by their mother, nine by their fathers, and one by both parents during their professional careers. The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 37 ($M = 26.8$, $SD = 5.28$), and their athletic experience spanned from 11 to 23 years ($M = 15.5$, $SD = 4.22$). Detailed demographic information is presented in Table 1. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality and protect the identities of the participants.

In purposive sampling, sample size is typically guided by theoretical saturation, also referred to as data saturation. This refers to the point in data collection where no new insights relevant to the research question emerge.[16] Similarly, Lincoln and Guba[17] emphasized that sampling should continue until redundancy is achieved. Following these principles, data collection ceased once saturation was reached, without targeting a specific sample size in advance.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of ****** University/Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (Approval No. 466641).

Table 1. Participant demographics and medals. (or optional figure).

	Age-Sex	Years in Sport	Parent-Coach	Branch	National Level	Balkans-Europe Level	World and Olympic
Ebru	21–25 F	13	Father	Judo	1 G/3 S/2 B	1 G/2 B	
Haluk	21–25 M	13	Father	Karate	7 G	6 G/5 B	1 G/3 B
Sevin	26–30 F	13	Father	Taekwondo	10 G/1 S/7 B	3 G/2 S/1 B	
Ozan	26–30 M	13	Both	Taekwondo	9 G	3 G/2 B	1 S
Mahir	26–30 M	18	Father	Taekwondo	8 G	4 S/5 B	
Fatih	36–40 M	20	Father	Taekwondo	2 G/1 S/3 B	1 B	
Duygu	26–30 F	11	Mother	Taekwondo	6 G/4 S/1 B	2 G/2 S/1 B	
Bilge	36–40 F	23	Father	Karate	1 G/1 S/1 B	2 B	
Turgut	26–30 M	21	Father	Karate	15 G	13 G	1 G/1 S/2 B
Yaman	21–25 M	11	Father	Judo	5 G	1 G/2 B	1 S
Akin	21–25 M	15	Father	Taekwondo	13 G	3 G	3 G/1 B

* Pseudonyms were used instead of real names to protect athletes' personal information and demographic details about age have been generalized (e.g., "21–25" instead of "21").
** G: Gold, S: Silver, B: Bronze.

In qualitative research, Sampson[18] recommends refining research instruments through pilot testing and evaluating potential researcher bias to ensure procedural rigor. Accordingly, a draft interview protocol was developed and tested through a pilot study, which helped expand and improve the question pool. The revised interview guide was then evaluated by three academic experts specializing in qualitative research and sports sciences. Based on their feedback, the final semi-structured interview form was finalized (see Figure 1). A semi-structured format was chosen to give participants the flexibility to elaborate on issues they considered important, while also allowing the interviewer to pursue additional insights through probing questions.[19] Interviews were conducted face-to-face when possible; otherwise, they were held via platforms such as Zoom or Skype. All participants were informed in advance, and their informed consent was obtained prior to audio recording.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure anonymity. Each interview lasted an average of 43 min.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely adopted method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes in qualitative data.[20] This method enables researchers to distill the dataset into smaller units and provide a detailed account of its content. Themes in thematic analysis may emerge inductively (from specific to general) or deductively (from general to specific). In this study, an inductive approach was used: codes led to categories, which in turn led to broader themes.[13] Although our coding began inductively, the interpretive process also reflected an abductive logic,[21] moving iteratively between participants' narratives and existing theoretical frameworks.

The analysis steps followed are shown in Figure 1, which was designed by the researcher.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, several techniques were employed. Prolonged engagement was ensured by spending extended time in the field to minimize researcher influence on the data[22] and strengthen credibility.[17] The researcher interacted with participants both in and outside competitions and conducted interviews with new participants to foster trust. Triangulation was applied to reduce bias, with two additional researchers reviewing the findings,[13] and source triangulation was achieved by including athletes from different disciplines. Peer debriefing was implemented by presenting the study at a congress where experts provided feedback.[17] Reflexivity was maintained by acknowledging how the researcher's experiences shaped interpretations, transparently documented under "The Role of the Researcher".[23,24] Member checking was conducted by sending findings to participants for validation.[23] Additionally, the researcher kept a reflexive journal to record observations and reflections, contributing to the data analysis process.

Role of the researcher

The researcher is a former national taekwondo athlete and currently serves as a coach in school competitions across various disciplines. Through long-term involvement in sport, she has observed the dynamics of parent-coaches both as an athlete and a coach. Her curiosity about how these dynamics are experienced from the athlete's perspective formed the basis for her master's thesis topic. To minimize the influence of personal biases and ensure objectivity, expert consultation was sought throughout the analysis phase. The researcher has also attended qualitative research workshops and conducted related studies previously.

Limitations

This study was conducted with elite athletes in individual sports disciplines. Although the participants included

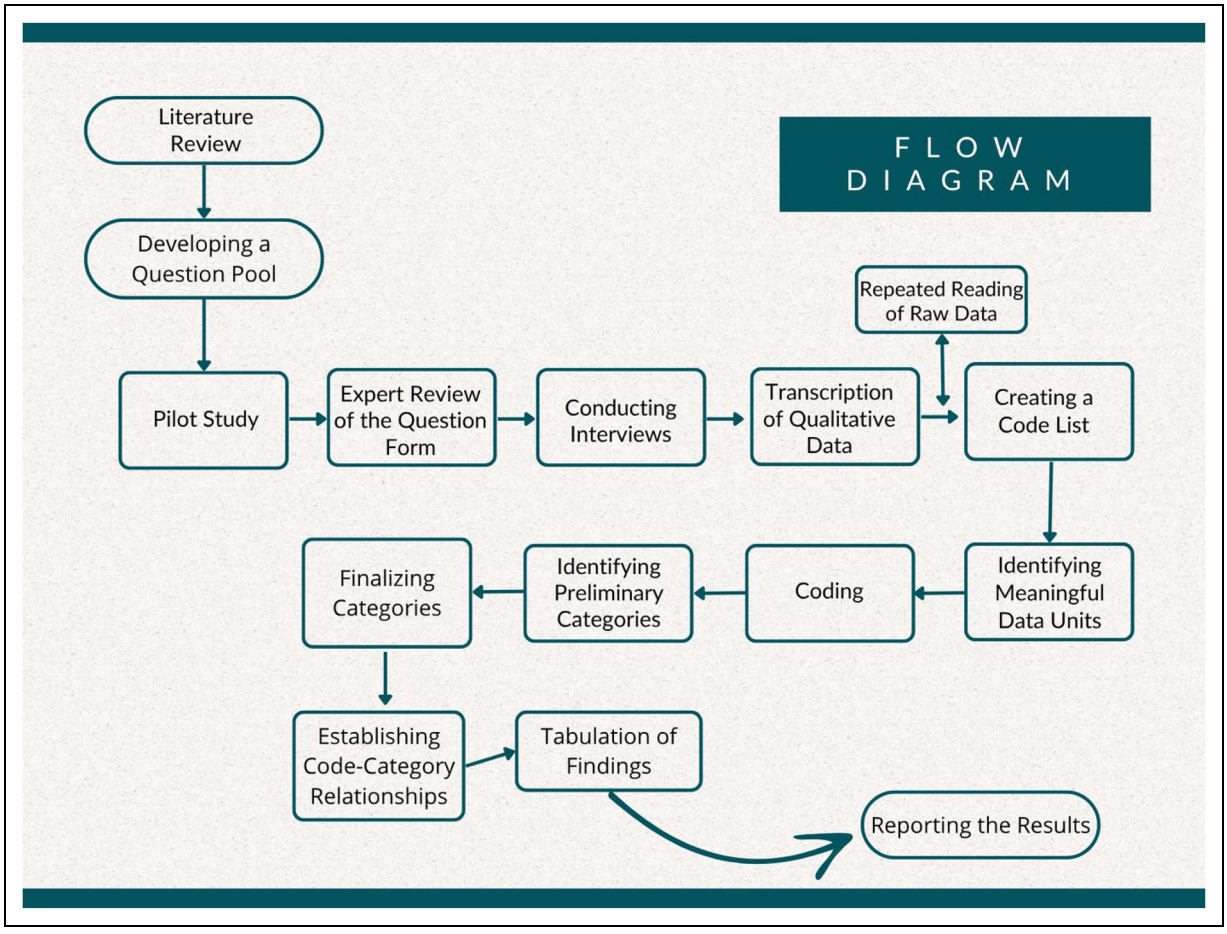


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the qualitative data collection and analysis procedure.

athletes coached by either mothers or fathers, the majority had fathers as coaches. This imbalance, while reflective of the target population, limits the generalizability of findings to mother-coach contexts. Additionally, some participants were actively competing, while others had retired, which may have influenced their perspectives. These factors represent limitations of the study.

This article draws from a broader data set collected for the first author's PhD thesis. While the thesis identified multiple themes relating to the parent-coach dynamic, this manuscript focuses specifically on role conflict. Other themes will be explored in separate publications to avoid content overlap.

Results

The theme of role conflict emerged as a central issue in the experiences of elite athletes coached by their parents. Within this overarching theme, participants predominantly described their struggles through the lens of "success as a filial duty", which functioned as the central organizing concept connecting the following four subthemes:

1. Dual Role Conflicts,
2. Athletes' Coping Strategies,
3. Parent-Coaches' Role Conflicts, and
4. Parent-Coaches' Coping Strategies (see Table 2).

These subthemes reflect the emotional and relational complexities that arise when parental and coaching roles overlap within elite sports settings.

Dual role conflicts

Participants reported confusion and emotional strain caused by the overlapping boundaries of being both an athlete and a child within the same relational framework. In many cases, the parent remained in the role of "coach" even outside the sporting context, which left little space for emotional intimacy or ordinary parent-child interactions.

> "Sometimes I didn't like it; after a match, when I lost, my father would reflect the analysis of the match on the TV and we would watch it together. It used to really annoy me. I hated it sometimes. I'd say, 'Wait, let me cry first and then we'll watch it.'

Table 2. Coding framework illustrating filial duty as the central concept underlying the theme of role conflict.

Codes	Categories	Theme	Central Concept
Acting as a coach at home	Dual Role Conflicts	Role Conflict	Filial Duty*
Ignoring the parent-coach			
Feeling trapped as an athlete			
Inability to experience a parent-child relationship			
Feeling of success as a filial duty			
Not listening to the parent-coach	Athletes' Coping Strategies		
Striving for success			
Engaging only in training			
Not allowing a parent to be a coach during a match			
Concern for justice	Parent-Coaches' Role Conflicts		
Experiencing contradictions			
Feeling torn in two			
Validation through athlete's achievements	Parent-Coaches' Coping Strategies		
Treating everyone equally			
Establishing balance			
Punishing their own child more			

Note: "Filial Duty" functions as the central sociocultural concept that underpins and connects all categories, reflecting how moral obligations toward the parent-coach shape both athletes' and coaches' experiences of role conflict.

He would immediately start it, and the whole family would watch." (Ebru)

"Normally, if it were another coach… I would listen a bit more, yes, but because it's my dad, sometimes I can just pretend to listen." (Haluk)

"When I win, I'm really happy because I get to experience that pride and joy. It's like I've done my filial duty. (…) Once I accidentally called my dad 'dad' during training, and he kicked me out of training. After that, I even called him 'coach' at home. I was scared. I couldn't really experience the typical father-son relationship with him. He was always my coach." (Ozan)

"Because the emotional bond was so strong, I carried a heavy sense of responsibility. Especially during important matches, I kept thinking, "I must win, I must win for my father." … That was the hardest part. Whenever I lost, it felt as if all the effort he had invested in me up to that point had been in vain." (Sevin)

"We are generally a close-knit family. Naturally, I want to achieve success for myself as well. When I am not, I feel disappointed, because they dedicate extra effort and time to me. For instance, they might have given up this sport by now, but because of us, they continue with it. They are still investing their effort, and I wanted to succeed so that their commitment would not be wasted." (Mahir)

"At the end of training, I'd feel a lump in my throat trying not to cry—because I felt completely drained, like I had nothing left. I've cried so many times during training. He used to say, 'Crying is allowed.' But it was like—'No pain, no gain!' You're my father—show a little compassion. When training ended and I took off my gear, I'd say, 'That's it, I'm not coming tomorrow.' But then in the evening, I'd fold my clothes and show up again the next day." (Bilge)

Participants expressed feelings of being "trapped," likening their dual-role environment to a "prison" or "training camp," where even the home setting became an extension of the sport context.

"It really becomes a kind of depression after a while. Because it's like an endless cycle. (…) It was always like a camp. Even when we were at home, it was like that. At 5 AM, he'd be standing by my head saying, 'Get up, we're going.' It was like a camp. Actually, we were always in the athlete-coach relationship." (Fatih)

"She didn't focus much on my injuries because she didn't want me to feel the pain. When my foot swelled up, she'd just say, "Put some ice on it, it'll pass." She wouldn't say things like "Oh, my dear girl" or show concern. It was always just: "Put some ice on it, it'll pass." Her focus was more on success. She had to set aside her role as a mother — but let me put it this way: all parents, guided by the instinct that comes with motherhood, tend to turn that emotionality into stress. They become more anxious, more tense. (…) (Gym to home) You enter one set of four walls and then you go into another set of four walls. Do you understand what that feels like? It's the same, it feels like imprisonment." (Duygu)

"You don't usually see your coach outside of training. But since we lived together at home too… I mean, when I say "Dad, I'm going out," it's actually my coach I'm talking to. He might respond like, "Hey, where do you think you're

going?" So sometimes I actually get a bit nervous when I'm heading out." (Akin)

Athletes' coping strategies

Many athletes developed strategies to manage this role confusion. These included mentally distancing themselves during interactions, striving for success to reduce pressure, or avoiding parental presence during matches. As a result of the confusion caused by the parent-coach dynamic, elite athletes have ensured that their parent-coaches do not stand behind them on the tatami as their coaches.

"I drank my water before going to the match and my dad, with trembling hands, was giving me the mouthguard. I said, 'Dad, what are you doing?' I said, 'Give me the mouthguard, you're shaking it.' I never let my dad be behind me again after that. Let him watch from the TV. He doesn't need to be behind me." (Akin)

"By just doing the training. There's no escape. You have to put this at the top of your life… So what do you do? You start to love the training." (Duygu)

Others noted that the parent-coach dynamic became less stressful once success was achieved, which reduced the emotional burden of performance.

"I couldn't handle it. I always told my family to I'll drop sports. Of course, due to my age, my parents told me, "You can't quit, you'll keep going." After a while, when I achieved success, became more known and liked, this pressure decreased. After I achieved success, the chaos disappeared." (Ozan)

Parent-coaches' role conflicts

Participants observed that their parent-coaches also experienced significant internal conflict, particularly around fairness and objectivity. This was often due to pressure from the wider sporting community and concerns about being perceived as biased.

"The biggest issue he faces is trying not to favour me extra just because I'm his son at the club. He tries to show others that he doesn't give me any special treatment. I can see it, he even does it a lot of the time. He's trying to say, 'Yes, he's my son, but I never favour him.' But sometimes, unintentionally, he does end up favouring me. After all, we live in the same house, and he struggles with that confusion." (Haluk)

"We're about to compete, I'm supposed to take the stress off, but as a coach, she also has to stay calm. She was split in two and it was very hard for her. Maybe she lived it more than I did. (…) She's more of a coach at home than in the gym." (Duygu)

"After I drop taekwondo, I had a conversation with my dad. He said, 'Son, I had to do it.' From that sentence, we can infer that they were conflicted internally. 'I have to do this, no matter how painful it is, I have to impose strict rules on my son.' I think that's how they might have conflicted." (Ozan)

This statement illustrates that athletic success could temporarily reduce relational tensions and restore a sense of normalcy in the parent–coach dynamic. Importantly, Ozan's account also highlights the dual function of success: while framed elsewhere as a filial duty, it was simultaneously interpreted as a coping mechanism, underscoring the complex and sometimes contradictory meanings attached to achievement in this context."

Parent-coaches' coping strategies

In response to this internal conflict, parent-coaches adopted various strategies to maintain fairness and emotional control. Some imposed stricter discipline on their own children, while others established clear behavioral boundaries within the training environment.

"They thought there was favouritism. But of course, we didn't think that. Why didn't we think that? Because when everyone else had to do 20 push-ups as punishment, I had to do 40." (Duygu)

"He never addressed me as a son. He would say, 'Once you step on the mat, there is no brother, father, uncle, or son. Remember this rule.'" (Yaman)

My parent-coach never treated me differently from other athletes. During training or competition, I never felt like I was the 'coach's daughter.' For instance, there were times when I was being punished in training, or I was getting scolded after a match just like the other athletes. (Sevin)

Ultimately, participants believed that the stress experienced by their parent-coaches was often validated by their sporting success, which provided emotional relief and retroactive justification for earlier strictness.

"As I became more successful, they might have found satisfaction in their actions. Perhaps they thought, 'We may scold or restrict our child, but in the end, the results are gold.'" (Ozan)

Discussion

This study reveals the complex and multidimensional nature of role conflict experienced by elite athletes who are coached by their parents. Participants frequently described how the overlapping roles of parent and coach led to confusion, emotional distress, and identity conflicts. They shared how their parents often maintained the

coaching role even at home, which made it difficult to engage in a typical parent-child relationship. Some athletes felt trapped within a never-ending sports context, and many associated their achievements with a sense of filial obligation. Several participants even described their experiences using a "prison" or "training camp" analogy, emphasizing the inescapability of the dual-role environment. This imagery illustrates how the home itself was perceived as an extension of sport, leaving little space for ordinary parent–child interactions. These insights echo earlier findings by Ormond and Holt,[25] who highlighted the persistence of the coach role in non-sport settings.

While the overarching theme of role conflict was evident across participants' accounts, their narratives consistently revealed "success as a filial duty" as the central lens through which this conflict was understood. This concept functioned as an organizing thread, binding together the four subthemes presented earlier and highlighting how athletes interpreted their dual roles not only as sources of tension but also as moral obligations to repay parental investment. By situating these experiences within the socio-cultural context of Turkish elite sport, the findings extend current understandings of parent–coach dynamics and demonstrate how role conflict is intensified by cultural expectations of filial duty.

In the Turkish context, notions of filial duty are deeply intertwined with a broader piety culture (referring here to respect, gratitude, and obedience toward parents and elders rather than religiosity), where respect toward parents, gratitude, and moral obedience are framed as virtuous behaviors reinforced by family and social expectations. Within this moral framework, athletic success is often interpreted not only as personal achievement but also as a form of moral obligation toward one's parents. As Sevin, one of the female athletes, reflected: "Because the emotional bond was so strong, I carried a heavy sense of responsibility. Especially during important matches, I kept thinking, 'I must win, I must win for my father.' … That was the hardest part. Whenever I lost, it felt as if all the effort he had invested in me up to that point had been in vain." This quote exemplifies how piety culture shapes the psychological landscape of filial obligation—where athletic performance becomes a means of moral repayment, binding the athlete's self-worth to both familial and cultural expectations.

In contrast, Schmid et al.[10] interviewed seven female NCAA Division I tennis players who, by the time of the study, were no longer coached by their parents. Having transitioned into college sports, they were trained by non-parent coaches, which may have reduced the intensity of the parent–coach dynamic. By comparison, our participants reported a more enduring sense of entrapment, as the presence of their parent as coach continued throughout both home and sport settings. This contrast suggests that dual-role relationships at the elite level may create a uniquely persistent form of role conflict.

A unique contribution of this study is the identification of the code "feeling of success as a filial duty." It is important to note that this theme was not formulated as an a priori focus of the research but rather emerged inductively from participants' narratives. This reflects the exploratory nature of qualitative inquiry, where unanticipated yet theoretically meaningful insights can surface through the analysis of lived experiences. To our knowledge, this theme has not been explicitly articulated in previous literature. This finding may be particularly relevant in contexts where parent-coaches own or operate private sports clubs and invest heavily in their child's success. In such cases, sporting achievements are experienced not only as personal milestones but also as compensation for the sacrifices made by parent-coaches. Schmid et al.[10] have shown that parental sacrifices may foster a sense of psychological obligation in athletes, often resulting in cognitive dissonance and long-term emotional strain. Our study extends this line of research by showing how these obligations are intensified in dual-role relationships, where the overlap between parenting and coaching makes the notion of success as a filial duty especially salient. This interpretation also resonates with previous work—including our own[26]—which highlights how elite athletes internalize perfectionist tendencies and fear of failure under intense parental expectations.

The findings align with Eliasson,[9] who identified coping strategies among coach-children, including defense mechanisms (e.g., resistance, anger) and distancing strategies (e.g., separating family and sport roles). Athletes in this study used both: some avoided listening to their parent-coach, while others intentionally excluded them from competition settings. Unlike previous studies, this research found a new strategy: using success and performance as a coping mechanism to alleviate emotional tension and justify the dual-role confusion.

The parent-coaches themselves were not immune to this confusion. Participants noted their coaches' internal struggles to appear fair and avoid perceptions of favoritism. This often led to overcompensation—such as stricter discipline toward their own child—which sometimes resulted in additional emotional burdens for the athlete. These practices mirror the findings of Elliot and Drummond,[11] who described how parent-coaches strategically emphasized fairness to prevent social backlash from other athletes and parents.

Contrary to Ormond and Holt,[25] this study did not find consistency in parent-coach behavior to be a mitigating factor in reducing role conflict. Rather, in some cases, consistency reinforced the perception that the athlete was constantly in a competitive environment. Fatih's account —that his home life resembled a perpetual training camp —emphasizes how consistency in coaching behavior can perpetuate stress rather than alleviate it.

These findings should also be understood within the broader cultural and institutional context of Turkish elite

sport. In Turkey, strong collectivist family values mean that children are often expected to reciprocate parental sacrifices through achievement, reinforcing the sense of success as a filial duty. Moreover, many parent-coaches operate within private club structures where family resources and reputations are heavily invested in athletic success. National federations further amplify this dynamic by placing high performance expectations on athletes, often framing international achievement as both a family and national responsibility. This socio-cultural and institutional context helps explain why participants in this study experienced a heightened sense of entrapment and obligation compared to findings in other settings.

Although most studies in the literature suggest that separating parenting and coaching roles and redefining relational identities is beneficial,[6,9,27] Zehntner and colleagues[28] argue that this is neither as simple nor as practical as it is often portrayed. Using a longitudinal diary approach, they examined the nuanced realities of role-management strategies from the perspective of parent-coaches "on the job." They challenged the recommendations of Holt and Knight[29] and Schmid et al.,[10] who advocated for maintaining distinct and clearly defined roles, suggesting instead that the deep-rooted history and emotional entanglement of the parent-child relationship makes such separation unfeasible in practice. Moreover, they argued that compartmentalizing roles may add to the complexity of role navigation rather than reduce it. Role ambiguity, they concluded, is an inherent feature of parent-coach dynamics and should be expected rather than avoided.

While much of the existing research focuses on the experiences of parent-coaches, this study foregrounds the voices of elite athletes, offering an alternative perspective on the debate. Participants generally expressed the belief that distinguishing between the roles of parent and coach would be—or would have been—beneficial for both themselves and their parent-coaches. These findings point to a significant asymmetry between how roles are perceived by children-athletes and how they are intended or interpreted by parent-coaches.

Indeed, prior research has demonstrated that children often interpret their parents' behaviors and intentions differently than their parents do. Babkes and Weiss[30] emphasized that children's perceptions of parental influence—rather than parents' own reports—are more closely associated with children's self-perceptions, emotions, and motivation. Similarly, Smith et al.[31] found that athletes' evaluations of coaches' behaviors tend to be more accurate than coaches' self-assessments. These findings underscore the importance of centering athletes' perspectives in efforts to address relational conflict and promote well-being. Moreover, more recent studies have shown that athletes' perceptions of coaching behavior often diverge from coaches' self-reports and even from direct third-party observations[32,33] suggesting that athletes may provide a more accurate lens into relational dynamics.

By foregrounding success as a filial duty as the central concept and situating it within the socio-cultural context of Turkish elite sport, this study extends current understandings of role conflict in parent-coach relationships. In doing so, it highlights how individual narratives of entrapment and obligation are shaped not only by family dynamics but also by broader institutional and cultural forces.

In response to these challenges, this study proposes the Hourglass Model as a conceptual tool for parent-coaches seeking to manage the dual demands of parenting and coaching in a flexible and context-sensitive manner.

The hourglass model in parent-coaching

Parenting and coaching are two distinct but deeply impactful roles, each capable of shaping an athlete's development and emotional well-being. The key challenge for parent-coaches lies in maintaining a dynamic balance between these roles—shifting fluidly from one to the other depending on context and need. Within the home environment, the parental role should take precedence, fostering emotional connection and support. Conversely, in training and competitive settings, the coaching role must be foregrounded, offering technical guidance and performance-oriented structure.

If this balance is disrupted—particularly if the parenting role is consistently neglected in pursuit of success or recognition—the consequences may be long-lasting. The collapse of the parent-child bond in the face of athletic failure could result in emotional harm that is difficult, if not impossible, to repair. The Hourglass Model (see Figure 2.) provides a metaphor for this delicate balancing act: much like sand flowing through an hourglass, the dominant role at any given moment should be the one best suited to the immediate emotional or developmental needs of the athlete.

By allowing the "right role" to emerge in the "right moment," parent-coaches can preserve the integrity of both the coach-athlete and parent-child relationships. Ultimately, this model aims to protect not only athletes' well-being during their competitive careers but also the long-term emotional resilience of both athlete and parent.

Implications for future studies

Future research could expand on the current study by including athletes competing in team sports who are also coached by a parent. In-depth interviews across different individual disciplines may also reveal sport-specific dynamics in how athletes experience the dual role of parent-coaches. Furthermore, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, it is recommended that future studies incorporate the perspectives of parent-coaches themselves, as this may provide a broader and more nuanced picture of the parent-athlete relationship.

While this study focused exclusively on elite athletes who have achieved success in their sports careers, similar

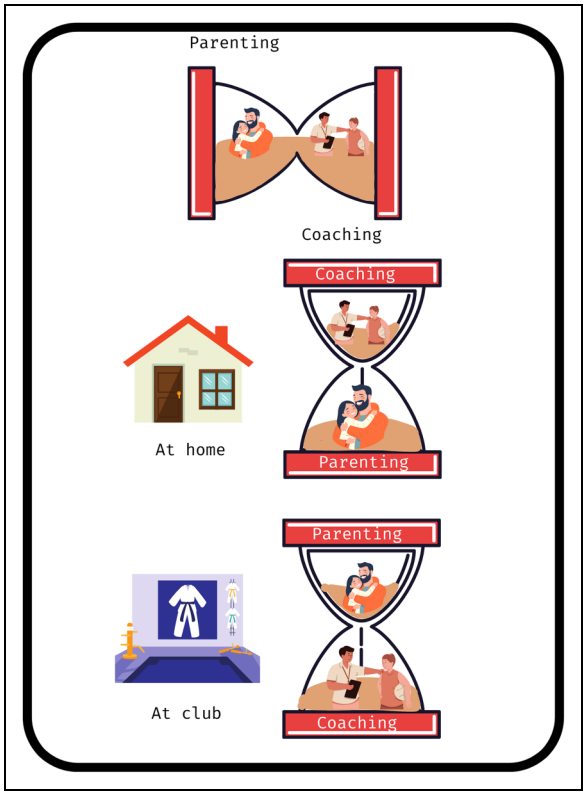


Figure 2. The Hourglass model illustrating the flexible navigation between coaching and parenting roles based on time and context (e.g., home vs. club).

research could be conducted with athletes who were coached by a parent but did not reach elite levels or experience notable success. Comparative analyses between these groups could offer valuable insights into how performance outcomes might shape the psychological and relational dynamics of parent-coaching.

Implications for practice

One participant emphasized that parent-coaches who assume the dual responsibility of parenting and coaching should receive formal training to manage this process effectively. Based on this suggestion, educational seminars or informational workshops could be developed in disciplines where parent-coaching is particularly prevalent.

Based on the findings of this study, the following practical recommendations are offered for parent-coaches:

- Do not neglect or suspend your parental role, especially not as a form of punishment. Remember that your child is more than an athlete and has emotional needs beyond sports. Maintain strong communication and actively listen to your child's perspectives and needs.
- Avoid over-penalizing your own child in an attempt to appear fair to others. Do not assume unlimited authority over your child just because you are their parent. Show the same emotional sensitivity to your child as you would to other athletes in your care.
- Refrain from thinking "they're my child; they'll understand." Keep in mind that your child-athlete's current emotional state can impact both their athletic performance and your long-term relationship.
- Even if you believe you are acting in your child's best interest, harsh or overly strict behavior cannot be justified. Instead, strive to involve your child in decision-making, set shared goals, and find enjoyment in the journey together.
- Avoid bringing negative experiences from the gym or competition into the home environment. Allow your child to be a child—not just an athlete—at home.
- Support your child's need for socialization and rest, especially during intense training or competition periods. Make space for them to engage with peers and recover physically and mentally.
- Establish clear boundaries around sport-related conversations in the home. When you notice that your involvement in their sport is becoming excessive, consciously return to your parenting role. Talk about non-sport topics and ensure that family time is not dominated by sport-related discussions.

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Appendix

A) Semi-Structured Interviews Question

1. Could you tell us a bit about yourself? When and how did you start your sports career?
2. How does your parent react to an upcoming important competition?
3. How do you prepare for a competition with your parent/coach?
4. How does your parent/coach react when you win?
5. How does your parent/coach react when you lose?
6. What do your parent's emotions mean to you?
7. How do you think your sport career would have been if your coach had not been a family member?

- If you had the chance to go back to the beginning, would you choose to start and continue your sports career in a different discipline?
- If you had the chance to go back to the beginning, would you prefer to start your career with a different coach?

11. Does having a family member as your coach ever create confusion or internal conflict for you? If so, how? Could you provide an example?
- If you experience such conflicts, how do you cope with them?
- In your opinion, what would be the best way to manage this situation?

12. Do you think your family member, as both a parent and a coach, experiences any internal conflicts? If so, how? Could you provide an example?
- If they experience such conflicts, how do they cope with them?
- In your opinion, what would be the best way to manage this situation?

13. To what extent does your parent-coach influence decisions related to your sports career (e.g., choice of sport, career direction, etc.)?

14. If you wanted to quit sports, how do you think your parents would react? Have you ever encountered such a situation?

15. To what extent is your parents involved in shaping your dreams and goals in your sports career?

16. How do you feel when your parent, as your coach, criticizes or corrects you?
- How does this situation affect your personal life?

17. Do you think your parent-coach's behaviour in the training environment carries over into the home environment?
- If so, to what extent?
- How does this affect you?

18. How have other athletes in your sports environment treated you due to your parent also being your coach? What do you think their perceptions of you were?
- Have you experienced any peer bullying or similar situations? How did you respond?
- If so, could you provide examples?

19. How has having a parent-coach affected your relationships with other athletes?
- Have you ever engaged in any form of peer bullying yourself?
- If so, could you provide examples?

20. If you were to compare your parent-coach with the parents of other athletes, what would you say?
- Would you consider coaching your own child in the future?

21. Overall, how does it feel to have your parent as your coach?

22. Is there anything else you would like to add on this topic?