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# Understanding the increase in parents' involvement in organized youth sports

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## ABSTRACT

As part of an ethnographic study on young people and learning (the knowledge in motion across contexts of learning project, set in Norway), we interviewed a diverse sample of parents of young teenagers, many of whom were active in organized sports. The parents described their level of involvement in sport in a way that contrasted sharply to our own experiences participating in youth sports in the 1970s and 1980s. Back then most parents were absent from the sports fields. This new role of sports in the practice of parenthood is what we investigate in this study. The purpose is to further the understanding of the cultural processes that drive what we see as a marked generational change in the relationship between organized sports and the practice of parenthood. In contrast to previous studies, we also focus on the relationship between generational change and classed patterns in parenting. Our data suggest that across social classes, parents see involvement in sports as normal, and as a way to connect to the child emotionally and to further the child's development. We interpret the significance of sports in the parent-child relationship as related both to the normalization of youth sports that the parents experienced when they grew up, and to the new cultural ideas of parenthood that they encounter as adults. We find that there are tensions embedded in this new form of parenthood that are particularly evident in what we call 'deep involvement', an intensified form of parental engagement with youth sports that is practiced primarily by fathers in the economic fraction of the middle class. We conclude that the new role of sport in the practice of parenthood is a classed as well as a generational phenomenon.

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Youth; organized sports; parenthood; social class; generation; cultural change; cultivation; Norway

## Introduction

Growing up in Norway in the 1970- and 1980s the authors of this paper were all active in different organized youth sports. Back then – at least in our experience – very few parents were actively involved in their children's sports apart from attending the occasional game or event and buying the necessary equipment. And the few who were involved most often had formal roles as coaches and team managers. From the family's perspective organized sports was constructed as a relationship between the young athlete and the sports club. While parents could be supportive of participation, being a *good* parent was not related to hands-on involvement and emotional investments in organised sports. The 'moral rationalities' (Duncan, 2005) of parenting, that is, the underlying value systems that guide parents' everyday practices, did not include sport.

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As part of a multisite three year ethnographic study on young people and learning, we have interviewed a diverse sample of parents of young teenagers. In these interviews, parents painted a very different picture of parental involvement in organized youth sports compared to our experiences 30 years or so ago. While there were differences in the parents' level of involvement, as a group they came across as deeply invested in their children's sporting activities.

The aim of the present paper is to further the understanding of why parents increasingly engage with organised youth sports, and stay engaged way past the age where children can be expected to manage the practicalities of participation themselves. We propose that a generational perspective is needed. We argue that the analysis needs to consider parents as a generation of former youth. It must also look beyond the sport context and explore how dominant cultural and class-related ideals of parenthood are implicated in parents' involvement in youth sport. We follow the lead of Elliott and Drummond (2015) who propose a broader sociological framework for the exploration of the social and cultural aspects of 'the sport-parenting paradigm' (p. 4).

Our study relates to youth sport in a particular context, Norway. Organized youth sport was established as a mass phenomenon here during the 1960s and 1970s. Both then and today child and youth sport takes place outside of schools. Still, youth sports is accessible and generally affordable and participation rates are high. A national representative survey (Seippel, Strandbu, & Aaboen Sletten, 2011) showed that 85% of Norwegian teenagers had been a sports club member, and that approximately 60% of 13–14 year olds had exercised in a sports club last week. Participation rates were slightly lower among working class and minority youth.

On the macro level, the Norwegian sport model is described as a partnership between the state and civic society; the state provides the infrastructure and the clubs are responsible for the activities (Skille, 2010). In child and youth sports parents are often voluntary coaches and team managers. Parents also raise money for the clubs and help out in organizing cups and matches. While parents have played important roles in Norwegian youth sport from the early years, the level of parental involvement has increased.

## Parenting in sports studies

Research has documented parents' many and important roles in organized youth sports. Studies have found parents to be initiators of sport participation and motivators for further activity (MacPhail & Kirk, 2006; Wheeler, 2012). They contribute as providers of resources and transport, as role models and interpreters (Smoll, Cumming, & Smith, 2011). Studies have documented how family life changes when children participate in sports (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009, 2015), how parents' approaches differ (Bhalla & Weiss, 2010; MacPhail & Kirk, 2006; McMahan & Penney, 2014) and are shaped by their children's personality and needs (Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009; Trussell & Shaw, 2012). Studies have also aimed to identify positive and negative parenting behavior (Knight & Holt, 2014; McMahan & Penney, 2014; Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, & Power, 2005), the optimal role of parents (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Smoll & Smith, 2012) and the benefits of sports participation for low-income families (Holt, Kingsley, Tink, & Scherer, 2011).

The question of *why* parents engage in sports seems however largely to be taken for granted. Notable exceptions are studies of sport as a context for gendered parenting (Coakley, 2006; Gottzen & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012; Kay, 2007). Studies that aim to understand generational change in parents' involvement in organised youth sports are few. One exception is Wheeler and Green's (2014) study from the UK. This study focused on middle-class families and the data suggested that middle-class parents are '[...] "investing" earlier and more heavily in their children's sports participation than their parents had done with them' (p. 267). Wheeler and Green link their findings to a sociological research tradition following from Lareau's (2003) seminal work on classed childrearing logics that we will engage with as well. Compared to Wheeler and Green's (2014) study we have interviewed parents from a broader social spectrum. Building on their study, we may therefore explore the increase in parents' involvement in sports on a general level and not restricted to the middle classes.

## A broad contextual approach

Our study deals with change over time in parents' relationship to organised youth sports. Research on parents relationship to organized sports has dealt with change related to identification of the different phases in sports participation that children and parents pass through (Côté, 1999; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008). In this research parents' roles are described as progressing 'from a leadership role during the sampling years to a following and supporting role during the specialising and investment years' (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008, p. 647). Change has also been studied related to parents' different roles before, during and after the game (Elliott & Drummond, 2015). These strands of literature are important contributions to a nuanced understanding of parental involvement in youth sports. In this article, however, our main interest lies not in the stages of sports participation and the accompanying parental roles. Instead, we are interested in parents' roles in sports in a wider contextual frame of social and cultural change. More specifically, we propose to investigate parental involvement in sports in light of the concept of 'cultural generation'. Building on Rudie (2001), we take cultural generation to refer to a cohort of people born in the same period and thought to share some similar cultural experiences – in this case growing up with sports as an expected and normalized part of everyday life in a culture that places high value on sports (Helle-Valle, 2008). The parents in question here were young in a period of cultural and institutional change that led them to engage with the field of sports and hence to acquire a specific form of 'sport capital'. Drawing on Bourdieu, sport capital can be seen as a specific form of embodied cultural capital that entails a 'strong taste for physical activity pursuits' (Dowling, 2015, p. 8) that can be transmitted through the practice of parenthood. We use the notion sport capital as a sensitizing concept – as researchers linking Bourdieu's notion of capitals to other fields or activities (for instance Sandberg, 2008).

The parents we have interviewed make up a cultural generation also in the sense that they are faced with the task of parenting in a particular time and cultural context. Researchers describe a growing 'responsibilisation' of parents related to children's development and life chances (Vincent & Maxwell, 2015). On this note, Coakley (2006) links parents increased involvement in sports to 'new expectations that connect the worth of parents to the success of their children' (p. 153). In his portrayal, involvement in youth sports becomes a tool for displaying moral worth as a parent.

What we propose then is that the increase in parental involvement in youth sport is fuelled both by parents' childhood experiences and by the parenting ideas they encounter and negotiate as adults. Given that parenting ideals are grounded in class cultures (Lareau, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2007) it is important to explore both differences and commonalities between parents in different social classes related to parental engagement in youth sports. Our analysis attempts at dealing with the issues of generational change and classed parenting simultaneously.

## The study

We draw on data from a qualitative study called *knowledge in motion across contexts of learning* (KNOWMO). The study is school based and set in a medium sized Norwegian town. The two particular schools that were recruited were chosen to ensure variation in the pupils' socio-demographic backgrounds. One of the schools draws pupils from the more educated and wealthy areas of the town, while the other has a more mixed group of pupils. Both schools have few pupils from immigrant backgrounds.

From the two schools four school classes at grade 8 were chosen for the study, comprising approximately 100 pupils. As part of the study, the pupils were filmed at school during sessions, and subsamples were observed in leisure activities. Interviews were conducted with the pupils, their teachers, sport coaches and parents, and for this paper the interviews with parents are our core empirical material. These interviews were conducted in 2013/14. The pupils were then in grade 9 and aged 14, and with few exceptions their parents were between 40 and 55 years old. With one exception we conducted one interview with each family, either with one parent

(27 interviews) or both (17 interviews) – whatever suited the family. In one family, the parents were interviewed separately for practical reasons. The number of interviews is therefore 44, while the number of families (and children) is 43. The total number of parents interviewed is 61 (24 fathers and 37 mothers). How parents talked about sport involvement did not differ between couple and individual interviews. Thirty-four of the families were drawn randomly from class lists provided by the schools while 9 families were recruited because the child was part of the subsample that was observed at sport activities. These interviews do not stand out from the ‘main’ sample and we therefore treat the interviews as one sample.

In all families except one, the interview was conducted by one interviewer. The first and second author of this paper conducted the interviews with the ‘main sample’, while the third author conducted the interviews in the added sample. The interviews lasted on average 1.5 hours and we used a thematic interview guide covering the following broad topics: school, leisure and family life. The interviews had an associative approach where we tried to follow the lead of the interviewees, aiming to access their motivations, ideas, hopes and worries on the one hand and concrete everyday parenting practices on the other. We recorded the interviews and transcribed them verbatim.

### Data analysis and class categorization

The analysis proceeded as a circular process of moving between interview transcripts, categorizations, interpretations and theoretical concepts. The analysis is what Creswell (2007, p. 150) calls ‘custom-built’, specifically designed for this paper with the aim of finding the best utilisation of the data for the specific purpose (Haavind, 2000, p. 21).

Initially and during the interview phase, the authors met often and discussed the interviews at length. Our talks revolved around similarities and differences between families, and the complex layers of meaning related to sports and parental involvement.

The structured phase of the interpretative process involved reading and re-reading the interview transcripts with a particular focus on how parents articulated the role of sports for children and the role of parental engagement in sports for the child and the parent–child relationship. Through these readings, four broad themes emerged; mandatory participation, normalised involvement, emotional closeness and cultivation through sports. Their core meanings were discussed collectively. The interviews were then re-read to identify statements and sections that related to each theme and we developed and used descriptive matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify general patterns.

We allocated the families to three broad social-class categories and looked for patterns in the types and levels of parental involvement each family described. We have applied a pragmatic approach to class categorization here – in concordance with qualitative sociological research on parenting and social class (Gillies, 2005; Lareau, 2003; Stefansen & Farstad, 2010). The categorisation is based on information about the parents’ education and type of work.

Consistent with the notion of (classed) ‘family cultures’ (Aarseth, 2015), we have categorized families and not individual parents. Parents in families designated to the *middle-class group* ( $n = 16$ ) had long university educations and ‘professional’ jobs: They worked as doctors, consultants, company directors, higher-level teachers and so on. The *working-class group* ( $n = 9$ ) comprises of families with parents without higher education and who worked in skilled or unskilled manual jobs or routine office or service work. Parents in the *intermediate group* ( $n = 19$ ) of families either worked in ‘semi-professional’ jobs, for instance as nurses, physiotherapists, in social work and formal day care or occupied different class positions (working class and middle class).

### Common themes

We will expand on the three themes that relate directly to parental involvement and that resonated across the sample. The theme of mandatory participation is in a sense the basis for the other themes. In short this theme revolved around sport as fun for children and as a self-evident part of a healthy

and happy childhood. Most parents demanded that the child ‘did something’ – what they did was not important. In our interpretation, the parents produced and reproduced a strong ‘norm of activity’ for children and youth (Wheeler & Green, 2014).

### Normalised involvement

The strong norm of activity on the part of the child was mirrored by a similar strong norm of support and involvement on the part of the parents. Parents talked about how they followed-up on the child’s activity, bought equipment and generally were engaged. Support was presented as a natural part of being a responsible parent who wants to partake in the child’s life:

As long as it makes her happy, because it does cost money and [her sport] is not cheap. We do not have a lot of money either but this is what we have chosen to use our time and money on. (Mother, working-class, interview 26)

In most of the families one or both of the parents had been active in sports growing up and had good memories from doing sport. The contrast between their parents’ involvement and their own was often brought up in the interviews:

I think from my own childhood it was almost like Christmas Eve when my parents came to see me play handball. Because it happened so seldom. It wasn’t very common back then. But that one time I remember it was great. (Mother, intermediate, interview 16)

Overall, the parents painted a picture of sports back then as children’s own project and the absence of parents as normal. At the same time, parents who had experienced close follow-up from their own parents talked about this as positive and something that set them apart from other children.

My father came with me and waxed the skis. A lot of children did not have their parents there. But we had fibre-glass skis and my father waxed them. Sometimes my uncle came too. (Mother, middle-class, interview 37)

Later in the interview, this mother referred to a friend who rode his bike alone to the national championship in his sport while his parents stayed at home – as a contrasting story to her own, and how things are today, and a bit sad. This sadness comes through as well in the following quote from her husband, reflecting on the meaning of having and being engaged parents:

It’s about being acknowledged sort of. To be praised and to be able to talk about [the game] later. [ ... ]. And to share experiences. For instance when [our son] played football when he was eight and we could see him score a goal, or [our daughter] for that matter and enjoy that experience then ... yes. I played football all through my childhood and youth, but my parents did not attend one match. Not one. (Father, middle-class, interview 37)

Such stories of parental absence may be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, they indicate a felt longing for parental involvement that motivates involvement in their own child’s activity: The parents know first hand how it feels to not be ‘seen’ by their mother and father. On the other hand, they also relate to parents’ own experiences as parents here-and-now. Many parents, especially parents with a general interest in sports, talked at length about their joy of being with the child and to see him or her participate in sports.

No, I think it’s really fun (laughs)! I would rather watch them [daughter’s football team] than the national team on TV to put it like that. It is just as fun. (Father, intermediate, interview 36)

In light of this, the stories about parental absence are also about how their parents missed out on a genuinely fun and meaningful experience – that they are experiencing now, as involved parents.

### Emotional closeness

The stories about parental involvement often revolved around emotional closeness. Parents talked about ‘being there’ for the child, in the general sense and if the child should need assistance. Parents also talked about the arena of sport as a site for fostering and maintaining a close relationship

to the child in a life phase associated with increasing independence and detachment. Sport was something they could share with the child and to be involved in sport was a way for them to feel connected to the child and part of his or her life world. In two families, the parent had even started doing the child's sport in an effort to have a common interest. Some talked explicitly about how the shared interest fostered emotional closeness:

It's not always that his world connects with me. It's a bit difficult sometimes to identify with his world with computers and games and all that. So I feel quite a distance there. It's more an irritant that creates a bit of distance between us I feel. But now that I have been at his training I experience somehow that we have more rapport. When we have been to trips and done things together, it's been more chummy. (Father, intermediate, interview 40)

The theme of emotional closeness came across also in parents talk about practical tasks of involvement, such as driving the children to and from training and matches:

You get to talk a lot with them [in the car]. And also you hear a lot of dialogues between friends and when you drive they forget that you are there and driving. [...] And then they pull you into the conversation and they ask you about your opinion about things. So, for me the driving is more positive than negative. (Mother, intermediate interview 40)

For many parents the practicalities of the children's sporting activities were simultaneously viewed as opportunities for relation-work or bonding, and monitoring. The mother quoted above, for instance, talked at length about how she could access her son's emotional state because she followed up on the sport activity.

Parents' experiences with sports growing up meant that they could talk about the sport in a knowledgeable way with the child, and that they could become engaged as coaches and so on if needed. In this way their sports capital was utilized both to pass on a culturally valued physical culture, and as an investment in the parent-child relationship. In some families the parents involvement in the child's sporting activity was linked to a genuine interest in sports – usually this meant football. In these families parents and children spent a lot of time together watching football on TV and going to matches.

## Cultivation through sports

Many parents also talked about involvement in sport linked to a theme of sports as an arena for the cultivation of the self. A common theme was the transferability of skills and competencies from the arena of sports to other arenas:

I think what she will benefit the most from [at other life arenas] it is her confidence. Because it is quite high but not nauseating, it's related to the fact that she copes very well with what she does. She is really good. [...] So I think that confidence, that is what she will benefit the most from the rest of her life. The faith in her own ability. Not everyone gets to have that. (Mother, working-class, interview 34)

Also I think what he gains from both doing handball and [music] is stamina. Year after year after year. To give that endurance and really concentration. And to be on that track is valuable especially in terms of school and further studies. But also for work later on. (Mother, middle-class, interview 42)

For some parents life was seen as a genuinely competitive arena for which sport could and should prepare children. One middle-class father talked about how doing sports is something you will benefit from in work life. He related this to the competitiveness of sports and how athletes are trained to perform under pressure and 'to deliver something people expect you to deliver'. These responses reflect a view of sport as a character building activity (Coakley, 2006). Many parents also talked warmly about traits associated with sportsmanship as something valuable children can learn from sports.

And you have to help everyone to achieve together. You are good together, and it is ... we win as a team and lose as a team and we help each other to do well. (Father, middle-class, interview 5)

One interpretation is that the cultivational aspect of sports relates not only or primarily to accruing skills for the purpose of comparative advantage and future returns, but to an acquisition of a certain

mindset – focused, responsible, and so on. In light of this it makes sense that parents are highly involved even if their ambitions for the sport may be modest:

He sets the bar high. We try to communicate that handball is not that serious. We want him to have fun with it. And he has. [...] Even if we are engaged and eager and think it is fun it is not like we think that they have to make the national team any of them. It is not like that. (Mother, intermediate, interview 44)

Connected to the theme of the child's development in sports, many parents talked about their own engagement in sports, in their childhood and as adults, as highly valuable. They described how they utilized their sports capital in many ways, both by investing in the clubs as coaches and administrators and as a form of 'personal trainers' or co-interpreters of development and training regimes, and achievements.

For some parents, sport was a means for dealing with specific worries, for instance that the child was shy and had few friends. One middle-class mother for instance talked about how she had enrolled her son in sports to help him to open up towards his peers. In a similar vein a working-class father talked about his son's sport activity as an arena where he – in sharp contrast to school – could feel that he mastered something. In these stories parents' engagement in sports reflects a deep commitment to 'see' the child and his or her needs and to orchestrate a setting in which development is stimulated. To be knowledgeable about sports could be helpful in such instances.

### Classed patterns

The analysis above suggests that parents across social classes see organized sport as a self-evident part of children's everyday life, and as an important context for parenting practices. This does not mean that parental involvement is not related to social class. We analyzed the material looking for classed patterns both in the commitment to sport and the intensity of parental involvement. Among working-class families half of the families took a more relaxed approach to sport and did not demand that the child participated. Among middle class and intermediate families this was more rare, although there were examples.

When the child participated in sport however, almost all parents and also in the working-class group talked about themselves as involved. Across social classes we found what could be seen as a *standard norm of involvement* that stands out from the descriptions parents gave of parental involvement when they grew up. This norm refers to parents showing an interest in the child's activity, follow-up on the practicalities of participation, to pay for fees and equipment and to try to attend games and if needed do some voluntary work for the clubs. The following quote is an apt illustration:

It is quite demanding [to follow up the children's sports]. But then I think most of it is fun. To watch is really fun, and then there is the kiosk and a lot of driving and things like that. But we are there and we want to be there and then it is ok. (Mother, intermediate, interview 30)

Some families, and particularly fathers belonging to the 'economic fraction' of the middle class, engaged in a practice we suggest to label *deep involvement*. These fathers worked in the private sector, as company directors, in investment, shipping and engineering. The families were generally well off financially and part of a local economic elite.

Deep involvement exceeds the standard norm of involvement by far. While the standard norm of involvement is indicative of the ongoing intensification of parental responsibility that we discussed earlier, deep involvement epitomizes this development. Deep involvement entails attending most or all games, engaging in one-to-one 'coaching', post-game debriefing and talk of individual strategies for further development and opportunities, and essentially to use the arena of sports as the primary context for being and bonding with the child. It also entails a particular attentiveness to the child's athletic development and needs as illustrated by the following quote where a father reflects on the benefits of playing for two teams for his son's development as a football player:

[He plays on the older team also] because his development is good and he can do a good job there, but also to strengthen his talent and develop further. He has played there since summer and played half the matches I think. It's [important] that the total burden of training is not too great, it's for the fun of it and for the development, but we have to monitor it so that the burden is not too great, but I think it is quite balanced. (Father, middle-class, interview 10)

This form of involvement and careful monitoring of development and wellbeing is highly demanding in terms of time and emotional investments. The father quoted above for instance followed up on both his teenaged children – in two different team sports, and he was there for most practices and all matches year round.

The fathers generally saw their role as vital for the children's development of an athletic habitus, essentially an understanding of what it requires to succeed on a competitive arena. This take on the cultivational approach, as geared towards self-investment on a competitive arena, resonates well with these fathers own biographies and life projects as they described them in the interviews. Our findings are also consistent with Aarseth's (2015) analysis of modes of socialization practiced among the financial elite in Norway. Aarseth argues that, compared to the cultural elite, the financial elite places higher value on nurturing competitiveness in the children – alongside a focus on security and a safe home base. One interpretation could be that deep involvement in sport mirrors this double aim of fostering an 'urge to succeed' both at and off the sports field and of providing a safe emotional space as a buffer against the negative aspects of competition.

What also seems to play a vital role in the fathers' desire to invest in sports is their sports capital. Importantly, all the fathers who engaged in deep involvement had done sports growing up. This background seems to be a necessary condition for their involvement. The fathers utilized their sports capital in many different ways – for instance in formal roles such being the coach or doing administrative work for the club. Their sports capital could also lead them to refrain from being the coach, acknowledging that their level of expertise was not high enough for sport at this level. Some of the fathers were involved as well in the everyday running of the club.

Also, in direct interaction with their child, the fathers' background from sports made them able to monitor and comment on their child's development, give advice on strategies related to training, matches and transfers between teams, and generally participate in meaningful communication about the sports. In this sense, talk about sport could be interpreted as a form of 'enriching intimacy' (Stefansen & Aarseth, 2011) related to sports.

For some fathers however the practice of deep involvement seemed to involve a shift in perspective, where the fathers came to treat the child's sporting activity as a primary life project for themselves. This could happen even if the child had a more moderate interest in going 'all in' with regards to the sport, sometimes resulting in tensions and conflicting emotions for the child. Deep involvement could also trap fathers in negative investment logics. One father explained for instance how he had invested a lot in his daughter's talent in handball. He used to be the coach and he had been there for all her practices and games. The daughter had always been 'promising' but had never really blossomed. When the development had been good, she had become injured. At the time of the interview the father was feeling lost – not able to stop his intensive support but at the same time questioning if the daughter perhaps should give up handball because of the injuries. The practice of deep involvement thus balances a very thin line between intrusion or pressure and support.

## Discussion

Our study confirms the marked generational change in parental engagement with organised sport that other studies have indicated. In our context of study, this change has happened across classes and could be regarded as a generational phenomenon. Parents' talk about their involvement provides insight into the cultural ideas that appear to draw parents towards sport. On the general level parents seem to think about sports participation as a right for the child and their own involvement as a corresponding moral duty. It is a right for the child because sports represent experiences and values intrinsic to ideas of a good childhood: Sports is fun, healthy and genuinely social. Through sport, children also acquire skills and competencies that are beneficial on other arenas and later in life. It follows that the responsible parent makes participation possible.

In her study on parenting in different social classes in the US, Lareau (2003) links the parenting ideal of 'accomplishing natural growth', to the working class. This is a form of parenting that sees

development as occurring when basic needs are met – for love, play and security. Children’s activities are seen as children’s stuff. They are valuable for children, but not a main concern for parents. The widespread support for the standard norm of involvement in sport suggests that working-class parents in our context of study as a general rule do not engage with this version of parenting. Our interpretation is rather that parents across the class spectrum see cultivation as the core task for parents, a development that Putnam (2015) suggests has taken place in the US as well.

In parents talk about their involvement different ideas of cultivation are played out and negotiated. At the one hand, parents connected their involvement in sports to future outcomes – a certain posture or attitude towards the world and a furthering of the child’s physical capital. This theme links to the parenting ideal of ‘concerted cultivation’ that Lareau (2003) has described as a middle-class logic of childrearing. Concerted cultivation represent a strategic effort from parents to ensure optimal development and that the child requires skills and competencies that is valued in school and on other formal arenas. On the other hand, parents also viewed organized sports as an arena for acknowledgement and support of the child, and an arena for maintaining a close relationship to the child in a phase associated with increasing independence and distance in the parent–child relationship. This theme links to the parenting ideal of ‘concerned cultivation’ a term coined by Maxwell and Aggleton (2014) to capture a more nurturant and present oriented type of cultivation that middle-class parents also engage in (Irwin & Elley, 2011).

The notion of deep involvement that we have coined for the particularly intensive form of parental involvement in sports – exemplifies the need for class and gender to be included in the analysis of parental involvement in sport. In this paper, we have primarily drawn out the ideas of parenthood that seem to guide this practice: We interpret deep involvement as a practice that accentuates the cultivational approach to parenting and hence as a particular salient example of the dilemmas that the practice of parenthood entail today.

Surely, cultivation can take place on other arenas than organized sports. A key question is therefore why parents are drawn to sports to the degree we have described. Relating to the US context, Coakley (2006) attributes generational change in parental involvement to changes in the organization of youth sports. He describe how youth sports have become privatized, regionalized, expensive, performance-oriented and with strict demands of participation. Children are therefore increasingly dependent on their parents to participate. While we see some indications of such changes in our context of study, our interpretation is that they play a minor role here. In Norway the situation is different. Our suggestion is that the attraction of sports as an arena for cultivation in part has to do with the fact that the parents we have interviewed belong to the first generation of parents that have first-hand experience with organized sports as a mass phenomenon. They were born in the 1960s and 1970s – a period marked by increased governmental support for sports and a general increase in participation in organised sports in the population. Hence, when parents engage in sports *as parents* they are so to speak re-entering a familiar terrain – that links to their own childhood and youth, and for some a connection to a life-long passion. We propose therefore that the attraction of sports relates to sports as an arena where parents can put their resources to use. This point has been made by Coakley, referring primarily to fathers: ‘For many fathers, organized sports [...] provide a setting in which they feel comfortable and competent as a parent. Their knowledge of sports and their past experiences serve as a basis for fathering’ (Coakley, 2006, p. 155). In this perspective, the cultural shift we are dealing with here relates in part to a process of ‘cohort replacement’ (Ellingsæter & Gulbrandsen, 2007), or following Rudie (2001), the replacement of one cultural generation with another. The successive replacement of parents lacking sport capital with parents that possess such capital can thus be seen as a facilitating mechanism for the general increase parental involvement in organised sports. In this sense sports capital is a resource that enable involvement and a passing on of a taste for sport. The pattern we described related to deep involvement suggest that when sports capital merges with the middle-class culture of the economic elite, sport becomes a particularly relevant vehicle for cultivation. Engaging in this practice however also

increases the risk that acts of support transform into negative pressure that may threaten the emotionally close parent–child relationship that this practice also aims to build.

## Conclusion

Our study extends previous research on generational change in parenting in relation to youth sports. We have shown that the increase in parents' involvement in sports relates to parents in general, not only the middle classes. Across social classes, parents see organized sports as an important part of a proper childhood. And as parents, they see it as their role to follow up and to be there for the child. We see furthermore parental involvement in sports as part of an on-going negotiation of normative parenthood. This negotiation seems to revolve around different constructions of cultivation – termed concerned and concerted cultivation by other researchers. These ideas of cultivation are part of the cultural backdrop for parents increasing engagement with sport.

The practice of deep involvement is a particularly salient demonstration of the different ideas of cultivation and parental responsibility that parents encounter and navigate today. It also underlines the role of parents own 'sports capital' for the generational change we have explored here. Fathers who engage in deep involvement use their knowledge of sports both as basis for intimacy and in strategic efforts to enhance the child's possibilities to get the most from his or her sport. In our sample, the practice of deep involvement came across as both gendered and classed, performed for the most part by fathers in the economic fraction of the middle class. Further research is needed to substantiate this finding. An important question for sport studies is also how this form of parental involvement may affect the field of organised youth sports.

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