PARENTS AND ATHLETES RELATIONSHIP: "I'm the biggest fan!"

RELAÇÃO PAIS-FILHOS NO DESPORTO: "Sou o teu maior fã!"

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Abstract
Sport represents a social and emotional learning environment in which parents play a crucial role in shaping young athletes' motivation and well-being. This paper examines the effects of parental behavior in sport and introduces the Communication Efficacy Model as a framework for understanding and enhancing parent–athlete interactions. In this model, it is proposed that positive communication profiles enhance confidence and enjoyment in sports, while negative communication profiles generate anxiety and lack of engagement. Practical recommendations are offered to promote balanced and intentional communication based on listening, emotional regulation, and reinforcement of effort rather than outcomes. Overall, effective parental communication emerges as a key factor in turning sport into a shared process of growth, where both parents and children learn what it truly means to grow together.
Keywords: Parents influence; Communication; Children's sport.

Resumo
O desporto constitui um espaço de desenvolvimento social e emocional, onde os pais desempenham um papel determinante no bem-estar e motivação dos jovens atletas. O presente artigo analisa os efeitos do comportamento parental no contexto desportivo, apresentando o Modelo da Eficácia da Comunicação como referencial para compreender e promover interações eficazes entre pais e filhos-atletas. Neste modelo propõe-se que perfis comunicacionais positivos potenciam a confiança e o prazer pela prática desportiva, enquanto perfis comunicacionais negativos geram ansiedade e afastamento. O artigo propõe ainda orientações práticas para uma comunicação parental equilibrada, centrada na compreensão, na escuta ativa e no reforço do esforço. Conclui-se que a qualidade da comunicação parental é decisiva para transformar o desporto num espaço de crescimento mútuo, onde pais e filhos aprendem, através da experiência, o verdadeiro significado de crescer juntos.
Palavras-chave: Influência dos pais; Comunicação; Esporte infantil.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Sport is more than competition: it is a space of social development and emotional education (Schwebel *et al*., 2016). Anyone who has attended a youth sports game knows the scene: parents on the sidelines, eyes following every movement, hearts racing with every mistake, every goal, every cheer. For many, it's just a match. For others is more than a game – it is a mirror of love, pride, and nervousness. They want their children to succeed, to be happy, to feel capable.

However, there's a delicate balance between the will to help and the ability to help. Parental involvement is not a problem. On the contrary, it's an essential part of young athletes' development - the real challenge lies in how parents choose to be involved. When enthusiasm turns into pressure, or when concern becomes control, the sports experience takes on a different shape. Support loses its meaning, and the playing field ceases to be a space of growth and becomes a place where affection and attention are measured through performance.

This paper dives into the (1) effects of parental behaviors in sports, (2) the Communication Efficacy Model as a background to understanding parental behaviors in sports, and (3) practical suggestions for parental behavior in sports.

2 EFFECTS OF PARENTAL BEHAVIORS

The investigation of parental influence in youth sport has expanded considerably in recent years, revealing a nuanced picture of how parents affect their children's experience in sport (Morais *et al*., 2025; Rouquette *et al*., 2021; Teixeira *et al.,* 2024). In fact, parents were both associated with positive and negative effects on athletes' well-being.

2.1 Positive Effects

When parents demonstrate warmth, understanding, and realistic expectations, athletes tend to report higher intrinsic motivation, task orientation, and enjoyment (Morais *et al*., 2025). One can say that athletes who perceive their parents as encouraging and non-judgmental are also more likely to experience sport as a context for personal growth rather than evaluation, where supportive parental behaviors are

associated with greater self-confidence, persistence, and emotional stability (Burke, 2023; Mossman; Cronin, 2019; Tamminen *et al.,* 2016). These behaviors create a sense of psychological safety that enables the young athlete to explore challenges without fear of criticism or withdrawal of approval.

2.2 Negative Effects

When parental involvement becomes excessive, the consequences are often detrimental. Overly critical feedback, pressure to win, or unrealistic expectations have been linked to increased performance anxiety, perfectionism, and fear of failure (Teixeira *et al*., 2024). Athletes exposed to such patterns may interpret mistakes as a personal inadequacy, which can reduce their intrinsic motivation and sense of competence (Charbonneau *et al*., 2020). They may also experience tension within the family context, perceiving that self-worth is associated with performance outcomes (Morais *et al*., 2025). Literature, therefore, converges on a central principle: the quality of the parental relationship determines whether involvement functions as a facilitator of development or as an obstacle to it.

Let's not get it wrong: most parents, probably, act with the best intentions. They give advice, make suggestions, and analyse performances, hoping to motivate and guide. Yet, for the athlete, those words often sound different. What the parent perceives as guidance, the child may interpret as pressure. What feels like support to one may feel like surveillance to the other. But where does the difference lie? Not in affection or attention - but in communication.

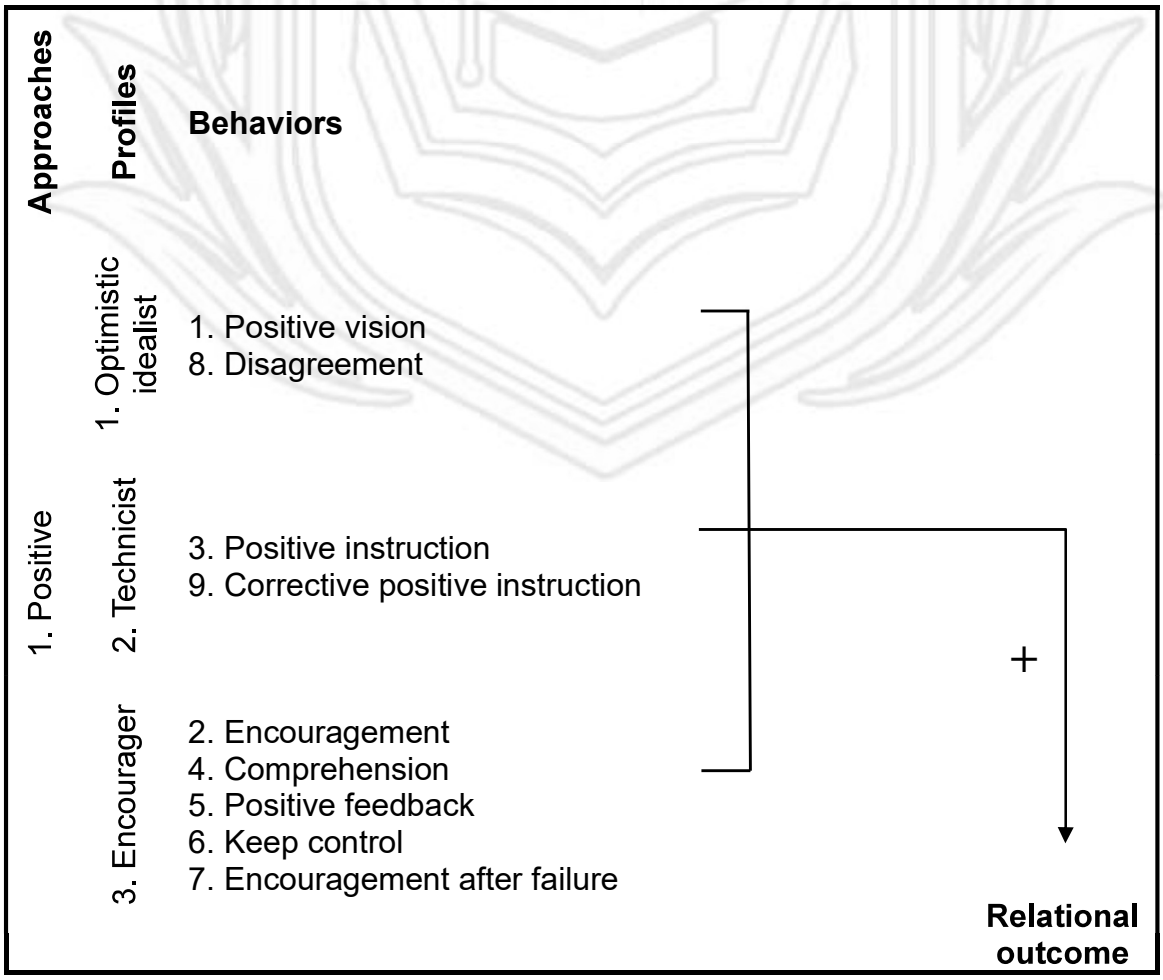
3 PARENTS IN SPORTS: THE COMMUNICATION EFFICACY MODEL

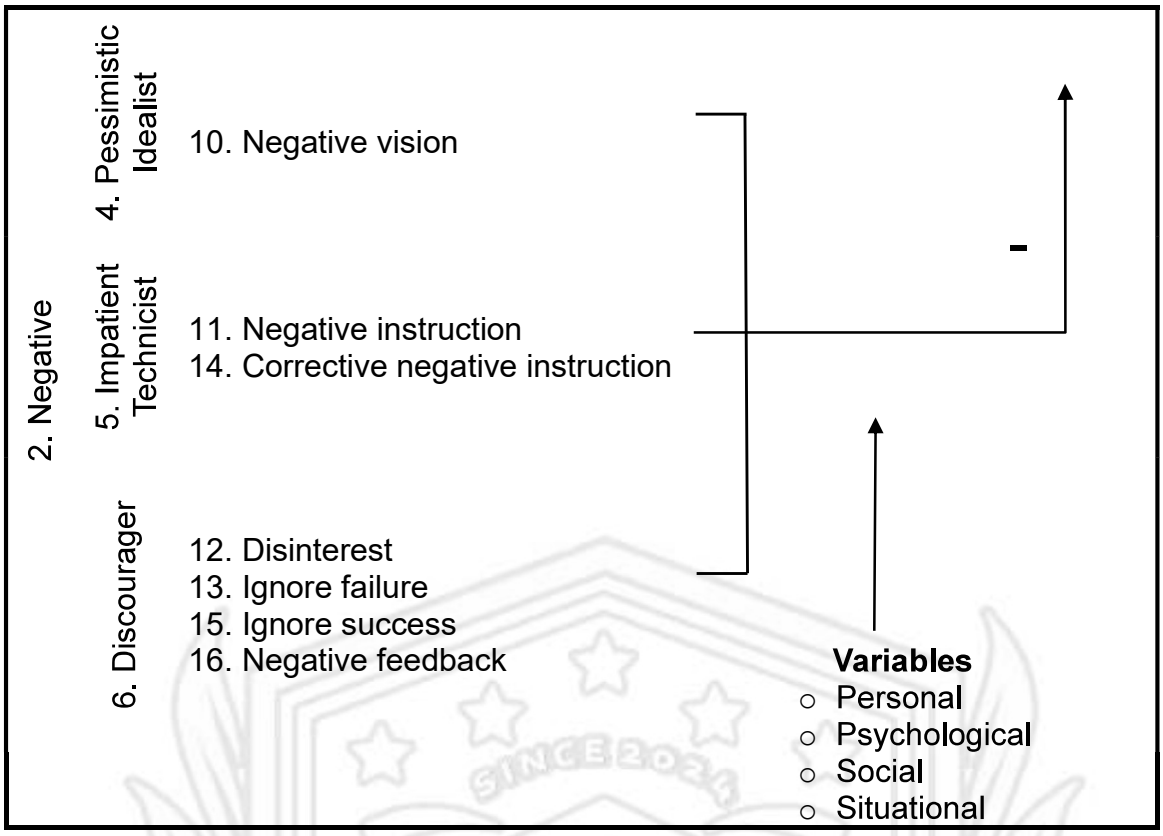
3.1 The communication efficacy model

The Communication Efficacy Model intends to understand and promote effective communication processes across developmental contexts, including sports. The model try to explain how distinct communicative behaviors can produce different relational outcomes (see Figure 1). According to the model, communication is not a passive exchange of information but an adaptive and intentional process that emerges in response to relational demands. The model identifies 16 communication behaviors

organized by the communication approaches (e.g., positive and negative) and by the communication profiles (e.g., optimistic idealist, technicist, encourager, pessimistic idealist, impatient technicist, and discourager). Specifically, it is proposed in the model that the use of positive communication behaviors produce positive relational outcomes (or, in the worst hypotheses, neutral relational outcomes), while negative communication behaviors produce negative relational outcomes (or, in the best hypotheses, neutral relational outcomes). Also important, the relationship between communication behaviors and relational outcomes depends on several variables, namely personal (ex: personality), psychological (ex: self-confidence, self-esteem), social (ex: peer pressure), and situational (ex: opportunity to debate ideas) characteristics that identify the communication process. In this sense, positive communication tends to generate positive relational outcomes, whereas negative behaviors tend to create conflict or distance.

Figure 1 - Communication Efficacy Model





Source: Elaborated by the author, 2025

3.2 So, i take initiative and then it has an impact!

Within the model, communicative behaviors are operationalized along two main axes – Initiative and Impact – encompassing four main categories with 16 distinct behaviors: (1) Positive Spontaneous: positive vision, encouragement, positive instruction, comprehension; (2) Positive Reactive: positive feedback, Keep control, encouragement after failure, disagreement, corrective positive instruction; (3) Negative Spontaneous: negative vision, negative instruction, disinterest; and (4) Negative Reactive: ignore failure; corrective negative instruction, ignore success, and negative feedback (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 - Communicational Behaviors

		Axis: Initiative	
		Spontaneous	Reactive
Axis: Impact	Positive Beneficial	1. Positive vision 2. Encouragement 3. Positive instruction 4. Comprehension	5. Positive feedback 6. Keep control 7. Encouragement after failure 8. Disagreement 9. Corrective positive instruction
	Negative Harmful	10. Negative vision 11. Negative instruction 12. Disinterest	13. Ignore failure 14. Corrective negative instruction 15. Ignore success 16. Negative feedback

Source: Elaborated by the author, 2025

The combination of these behaviors defines the impact of communication: whether it fosters engagement and trust or, conversely, provokes withdrawal and insecurity. In the context of parent-athlete relationships, spontaneous positive behaviors - such as encouragement or empathetic understanding - are particularly important, as they strengthen the child's perception of support and autonomy.

Reactive negative behaviors, such as critical feedback or disregard for effort, are frequently linked to frustration and reduced motivation. By identifying these defined behaviors, we are able to better understand the patterns that communication follows, as well as the impact on the parent-athlete relationship. These patterns allow us to create communication profiles, as explained below.

3.3 What kind of cheerleader am I?

In the Communication Efficacy Model it is identified six communicational profiles, reflecting consistent patterns of behavior and their relational effects, are divided into (1) positive profiles (e.g., optimistic Idealist, technicist, and encourager) and (2) negative profiles (e.g., pessimistic idealist, impatient technicist, and discourager).

Figure 3 presents the communicational profiles applied to the specific relationship between parents and athletes. Applied to the parent–athlete relationship, these profiles reveal that effective parental communication is not defined by the amount of feedback given, but by the balance between initiative and impact.

The "Optimistic Idealist", the "Encourager," and the "Technicist" profiles represent the most adaptive forms of parental interaction: they combine positive attitudes towards sports, and emotional attunement with constructive guidance. In contrast, the "Pessimistic Idealist", the "Impatient Technicist", and the "Discourager" profiles may unintentionally undermine the child's values, autonomy, and intrinsic motivation.

Figure 3 - Communicational Profiles: Application to Sports

Positive profile	***Communication behaviors***	***Application to sports***
Optimistic Idealist	Combines positive vision with disagreement.	• Parents believe in the benefits of sports to general development of athletes and reinforce the positive values of sports in their children. • Parents do not allow that their children assume inappropriate behaviors in sports, and respectfully disagrees, while inviting reflection: *"What could you do differently next time?"*
Technicist	Focus on positive instruction and corrective positive instruction.	• Parents analyze key moments of the game, reinforcing the progress of athletes while not interfering in the technical instructions of coaches. • Parents analyze using calm tone failures and mistakes of athletes during training and competitions, providing useful feedback to improve these aspects but without interfering in the technical instructions of coaches. • Parents monitor pre and post-game routines (e.g., equipment, nutrition, rest).

Encourager	Emphasize encouragement, comprehension, positive feedback, keep control, and encouragement after failure.	• After mistakes, parents offer encouragement and comprehension ("I'm proud of how you kept going, you did great!"). • Parents emphasize fun and enjoyment over competition outcomes.
Negative profile	***Communication behaviors***	***Application to sports***
Pessimistic Idealist	Demonstrates negative vision.	• Parents do not believe in the positive effects of sports or are against the will of their children to practice sports.
Impatient Technicist	Prioritizes negative instruction and corrective negative instruction	• Parents interrupt or correct from the stands: *"Focus! You're doing it wrong again!".* • Parents conduct detailed post-game analysis in a critical tone without considering the role of the coach. • Parents dismiss emotions "*Stop being upset, that's why you don't win*".
Discourager	Exhibits disinterest, ignores success and failure, and assume negative feedback.	• Parents rarely attend games or express interest. • Parents respond minimally to failures or achievements: *"That's nothing special*". • After mistakes, parents focus on the error: *"You played terribly today."*

Source: Elaborated by the author, 2025

4 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: "HOW CAN I TAKE ACTION?"

As previously stated, sport is a space for growth and development. This development is extremely influenced by parental behavior because what the children see, they do, according to Bandura's social learning theory (Bandura; Walters, 1977). In this sense, it's important to constantly remember that the athlete is also the child, the son, the daughter.

So, what kind of behavior should parents have in the sports context? From a practical standpoint, parents should encourage sports participation while understanding and positively aligning themselves with the athlete's goals for the sport. Parents should also collaborate with the club and staff (e.g., coaches) without interference, by ensuring the conditions offered by the club and by providing the club with information about the child's condition and health.

This also means to let coaches handle technical aspects while parents focus on emotional and motivational support. Everyone has a job to do, and parents' job is to reinforce the athlete's commitment to the sport, assign responsibilities, praise evolution, progress, and effort without comparison to others.

In other words, parents should balance ambition with understanding, by maintaining expectations grounded in care and understanding, where support should mean challenge, not pressure. It's about being a positive role model, showing appreciation, support, and optimism, and avoiding negative comments, advising, or directing others (e.g., coaches and other athletes). Winning is nothing but a long-term goal. Seeing the child evolves as a person and athlete is the everyday process.

5 CONCLUSION

Communication is never neutral; it either strengthens trust or weakens it. The Communication Efficacy Model reminds us that conscious interaction is a form of education. It is not about doing more, but about doing better: listening with curiosity, speaking with kindness, and acting with intention. Promoting effective communication in sports requires parents to move from reacting to interacting.

The Communication Efficacy Model provides practical guidance for this shift – where parents should communicate with clear purpose, focusing on the athlete's needs rather than their own expectations. When parents interact with intention, they transform their presence from supervision to collaboration, promoting an environment of shared responsibility and mutual growth, helping their children internalize life lessons that no medal can replace: resilience, self-awareness, empathy, and respect.

A young athlete who hears "I'm proud of how you handled yourself" after defeat, learns that effort is valued above result. When a parent addresses the emotions instead of correcting them, the child learns that emotions are part of growth, not signs of weakness. And when both can talk openly about the experience - not only the score — sport becomes a shared language of connection, where competition ceases to divide them. It becomes a meeting point, a shared process of learning.

The impact of these small moments is profound. Years later, the child may forget the tournament result but will remember the feeling of safety that allowed them to play freely, in every run, every look. In every action. That sense of freedom is what sustains motivation, confidence, and long-term engagement in sport - and in life.

In the end, sport is only the stage. The real performance happens in the relationship. Every practice, every conversation, every shared emotion contributes to a deeper script: the story of two people learning, through sport, what it truly means to grow together.

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