2.1 The family environment

Introduction

No one can deny the importance of the family environment; this is also true within the world of sports. The parents' role, in particular is a key-point during the initiation and subsequent maintenance of sporting activity. In this unit, we will review the different ways parents influence their children's involvement in sports.

We will discuss how the social support provided by family is crucial in the early years as well as in established sports careers. This social support can be given in different ways:

- Emotional: offering empathy, support and encouragement to the athlete. Let's focus especially on this very important point. Possibly no elite athlete would think it possible to reach that level without the support from their family. Beyond the stage of initiation, family members are elite athletes' main emotional support – they accompany the athlete from the stands, their presence represent a state of calmness and motivation, and they provide support for the athlete in unfavorable situations.
- Instrumental support: providing material resources and time.
- Informative or evaluative support: providing the athlete with feedback on their performance.

Social support is a vitally important factor at a young age as well as in established sports careers.

We will also analyze the family's expectations and beliefs and the impact they can have on sports practice. Expectations that are not in line with the athlete's capabilities may cause frustration and demotivation for the athlete, make practicing more difficult, and significantly increase the possibility of them quitting. Ideally, the family's expectations will be challenges that are achievable for the athlete. Fostering understanding between parents and professionals in sport will not only help families learn what it means to have a son or daughter who is an athlete, but it will also ensure that the experience is positive and enriching.

We must also remember that the family is a powerful model of behavior. Bandura's theory of social learning (1987) shows that if the family is involved in athletic activities, it will be a strong incentive for the children to do the same.

Lastly, we will look at the so-called coach-family-athlete triad. This model illustrates the relationship between these actors within the

sporting environment. If we go a step further, we will also find other models, such as the athletic square or pentagon, which include additional actors within the athlete's ecosystem (friends, managers, referees, etc.). All of these models coincide in that they emphasize that the people who surround the athlete need to work together and give them coherent messages.

The literature on this topic deals almost exclusively with the formative years, since that is when the influence of parents and family is most evident. However, the family's importance can also be extrapolated to high performance sports, when a career is already underway. In these cases, social support is especially important at an emotional level.

2.1.1 The family

The literature contends that the involvement of parents or close relatives is indispensable in the life of an individual who aspires to become a high performance athlete. Within the context of actual athletic development, parental presence is necessary if development is to be comprehensive.

Parents' participation help forming habits, achieving goals, sustaining motivation for athletic activities, acting as role models, and providing emotional support. In short, family is a pillar upon which the athlete's developmental process relies.

As Rodríguez and García (2010) state, parents are the first and most important social context for their children. Experience gleaned from the family context is applied in all of the environments where the individual later interacts. Therefore, models for success or failure which are experienced as part of family life will be applied in the sports environment.

According to the literature on this subject, the influence of the family is most significant in the early years, when the athlete starts to shape their model for sports practice and when life-long emotional and educational influences are instilled in the person. In this sense, during childhood structures start to mature and everything learned at that time will be passed on to areas of development.

During development, subjects will acquire interest in and motivation for sport, and it is exactly at this point where families must take a stance that helps sustain their children's interest. The opposite may occur in many cases: the parents are not aligned with the child's interests and therefore, over time, motivation dwindles due to a lack of encouragement. Or parents may show interest and be the main support, and their lives may be taken over by their child's sports career. Continual and consistent support is what makes the difference.

How subjects see themselves and how their parents see them

Parents' perception of their children's potential performance has a major influence on the perception that the subject will have on his or her own capabilities and later interest in playing sports.

Jacobs and Eccles (1992) discovered that a subject's perception of their abilities is related to their mother's perception of those abilities. The subject's perception of their own capabilities is related to their actual ability level and interest in playing sports. Accordingly, we see the influence of the parents' perception, since it is congruent with that of their children. It is important for parents to believe in their children' potential, since they will live up (or down) to the image their parents have of them.

This is often manifested in the feedback that parents give to their children when they have succeeded or failed. In a study of soccer players, Babkes and Weiss (1999) established that when children received positive feedback, from their mother or their father, their level of competition improved.

Brustad (1992) asserts that family members (parents) shape a subject's perception in two directions. Firstly, parents interpret their child's achievements, and thus influence the child's perception of success or failure based on those interpretations. Secondly, parents shepherd their children toward environments where they believe they will be successful. Additionally, this author posits that there is a linear relationship between a subjects' physical perception and the amount of encouragement their parents give them.

2.1.2 Family and motivation

Duda (1999) suggests that the goals parents set for their children are one way to position them for athletic success, and that this has a direct relationship with subjects' perception of goal-setting.

In a study of 75 athletes of both sexes, Cervelló and Guzmán (1996) found a direct and significant relationship between athletes' approach to competition and how they understand the criteria their parents, coaches, and friends use to determine success in competition.

In another study, with a larger group of subjects (975), Gutierrez and Escartí (2006) found evidence of a relationship between parents' and teachers' perceptions of success in physical education at school and a subject's own perceptions.

Hellstedt (1988) shows that there is a significant relationship between the enthusiasm skiers have for their sport and their parents' active participation through motivation and pressure-free support. Van Yperen (1997 & 1998) indicates that parents who enthusiastically support their children engender an emotional response to the sport. These subjects (soccer players) have more fun when their parents provide positive support with regard to athletic activities.

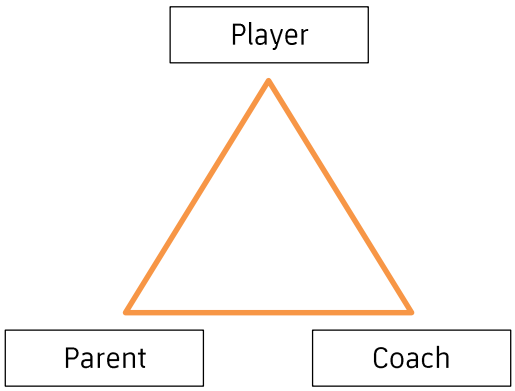
The attitude and positive and encouraging behavior of parents and family members is linked to the subject's positive experience of their sport. If parents demonstrate satisfaction with their children's effort and performance, they will be more likely to enjoy practicing sports.

Parents must strike a balance with regard to supporting their children, without increasing anxiety or stress levels. The support they provide during a sports career is a determining factor in the experience the subject has while playing. In many families, the parents (father and/or mother) live out their own aspirations through their children's athletic careers, which becomes a source of constant pressure, with parents failing to understand the damage they may be doing.

Context

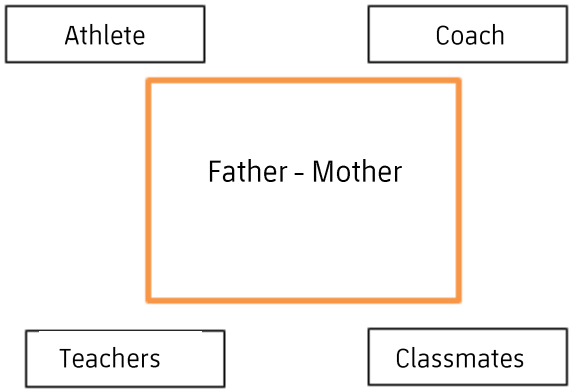
During a sports career, the family environment and other close environmental factors are what end up determining the nature of the athlete's experience. These relationships can be defined and plotted in different ways:

Figure 1: Context Models



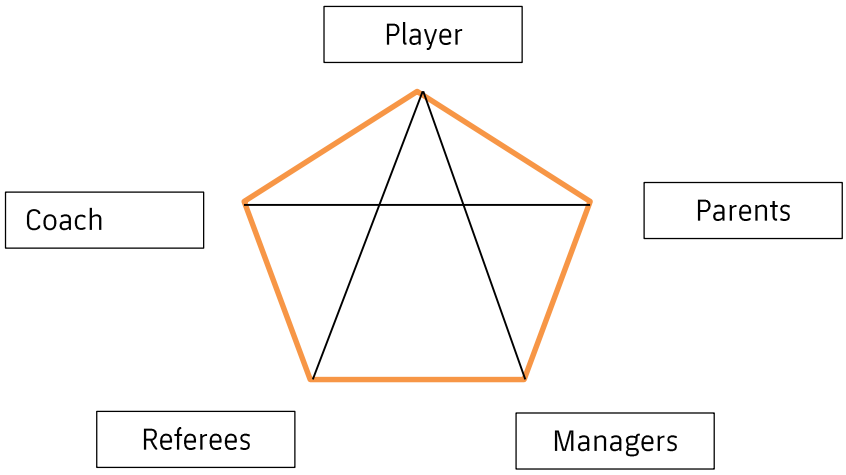
Source: Dosil (2008).

Figure 2: Ortin's Model



Source: Ortin (2009).

Figure 3: Smoll's Model



Source: Smoll (1991).

The triangle figure was proposed by Smoll (1999), the square by Ortin (2009), and the pentagon by Dosil (2009).

Each geometrical figure illustrates a model for a subject's framework of influence during their sports career. It is worth noting that parents appear in each of the three frameworks, which demonstrates how important they are to their children's athletic careers.

Said context influences athletes' behavior patterns in terms of their own models for behavior and relationships. Namely:

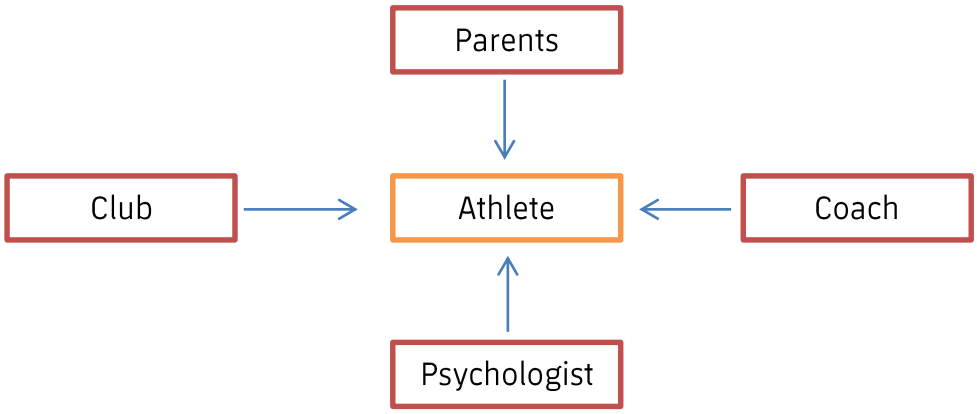
- The social and relationship habits created by parents, both for their children as well as others. The way parents make decisions, express themselves, solve problems, show their emotions, etc. All of this has an influence on their children's way of being.
- Types of expectations parents have for their children. In this case, when parents have expectations that are way beyond the child's actual potential, the effect is highly discouraging and can even lead the child to abandon the sport. The same thing happens in the opposite case; when expectations are well below a child's capabilities it can lead to the previously-mentioned outcome.
- Motivation and pressure. Parents should provide optimum motivation levels in relation to sports practice without adding excessive pressure that could actually work against the child (Ortin, 2009)
- Attitudes. The set of beliefs that parents hold regarding the subject, can predispose children to engage in sports in a positive or negative manner, or predispose them to believe in their abilities, or not. Parents' attitude regarding the context that surrounds sport is a source of motivation for the subject (Dosil, 2003)

Gordillo (2000) suggested a set of ideal characteristics that parents should adopt when providing support during the training and development process:

- Control their own emotions so as not to influence the subject.
- Understand that coaches are the leaders of sports the programs.
- Understand that success and failure are part of the athletic process.
- Reach agreements with coaches; understand their goals and respect any differences.

As mentioned before, parents are part of the framework for coaches and sporting institutions, because of the degree of influence they have in the lives of the athletes. That is why, when working with a subject, a multidimensional approach is needed, given that parents must be active participants alongside others in close proximity to the athlete.

Figure 4: Multidimensional Framework:



Source: Prepared by the author

Given the importance of improving a subject's athletic performance, clubs must integrate parents within their program, given that everything that happens in the familial microsystem has a direct impact on performance. The presence of a sports psychologist becomes important. For example, in the case of child or teenage athletes whose parents are recently divorced, emotional support and understanding on the part of the club during the process is critical. If these variables are not addressed promptly, they can undermine athletic performance as well as the relationship to the sport itself.

2.1.3 The initiation phase

Initiation corresponds to extra-curricular sporting activity, which is the subject's first experience with this type of practice. Gimenez (2000) refers to initiation as the first period of the athlete's development.

Generally speaking, the initiation stage in sports practice starts at an early age, between 7 and 8, where their greatest interest is shown – both in terms of playing, as well as the sport itself. Beginning at 9 or 10 years of age, children begin to show more interest in the sport itself. This is related to maturity levels and an understanding of certain social behavior, such as trends or fashions depicted in the media.

At this stage, parents should teach their children that athletic activities are enjoyable, and take care to uphold the playful, fun, and obligation-free aspects. The main difference between athletic activity and education is obligation or a lack thereof. The child is supported in their desire to play a specific sport or to stop. A sport is chosen based on multiple stimuli: parental influence, classmates, media, sports stars that the child admires, etc. The point is that during the early years, children and their parents should explore sports experiences without the need to make it a permanent part of their lives.

Some parents think that their children should dedicate themselves exclusively to playing a sport that they themselves played earlier in life; this is another one of the issues that arises in the initiation stage. Sport should be a rewarding experience and should not become a forced or coerced task. This is not the function that sports should serve in society. Sport should have an educational role, and parents should work alongside other members of the sports community to accomplish this.

Below, we will mention some examples that come from different experiences accumulated over years spent in the sports world, not only as psychologists and coaches, but also — and above all else — as parents and fans.

Example: it is interesting to look at how some parents behave with their children each weekend at sporting events. In soccer, some parents act as though they were the coach, psychologist, fan, referee, and manager while in the stands watching the match. Suddenly they are blessed with a multifaceted understanding, while they place themselves in a position of moral superiority with regard to all opinions that differ from theirs. They argue with each and every decision made in a soccer match between 8-year-olds where there are no rules, points, or championship in play; the sport is only meant to be a tool for socializing and learning. This example, with this specific type of parent, is very common to see at any sporting event.

We need to take special care with regard to this issue, since often times parents do not understand the degree of influence they have over their children's athletic careers, and they do irreversible damage. The club, with its multidimensional point of view that positions the parents as educational actors within the athletic development process, is responsible for creating a set of standards with regard to parental participation in athletic programs. Given clear participation criteria, any subject can enjoy a harmonious introduction to their sport.

Fathers and mothers are not responsible for not knowing how initiation processes work. Clubs should have well-prepared, trained individuals who can lead and guide the process.

On occasion, the sports psychologist works more with the family unit than the athlete. When an unstable family situation is identified, the club needs to mediate between the parties so that the athlete's development is not at risk, especially in the initiation phase.

An athlete should develop within a framework that teaches values. Below we will identify what types of families are common among children who play sports, so that we can then understand how to intervene in each case.

According to Romero (2002) child athletes have different types of parents:

- Parents with personal experience in high performance sports.
- Parents with personal athletic experience but did not achieve high performance.
- Parents that are fans of the sport.
- Parents that are not interested in the sport.
- Parents that are interested in the athletic training as a life habit for their children.
- Parents that are interested in the athletic participation of their children as a way to achieve good health.
- Parents that are interested in the connection to the sport as a social reference point.
- Parents that are coaches, directors, managers, or have a job related to sport.

Within these parent profiles, Roffe (2003) divides parent attitudes into three categories:

- Indifferent or uninterested parents. The child is the one who expresses interest in sports.
- Balanced parents (according to Roffe, the ideal type of parent).
- Overprotective parents.

Having described these types, it can be seen how each athlete's family background has an impact on his development. For informational purposes, as coaches and sports psychologists, it is important for us to establish a family profile to understand the athlete's environment: what the parents do, what they think of sports as a developmental and educational endeavor, what they think of high-performance sports, how they support their child during the process, etc. This information will help establish family profiles that can be used when elaborating action plans for the athlete as well as for the family unit.

An athlete's commitment to practicing sports is directly related to the family profile, because understanding said profile will provide insight into how committed the subject may or may not be.

Based on experience and training, in most cases there is a linear relationship between athletes that are interested in sports and families that are committed to the sport and their children's training and development in the sport. The same applies in the inverse situation, that is, disinterested and unwilling athletes usually have parents that are not worried about their children and who do not demonstrate much interest in becoming involved in their training and formative process.

Relationship between parents and coaches during training and competition

There are many parents who interject during training and competition to provide guidance to their children. In a study performed by Granados, Guzmán and Sánchez (2009) in a district in Seville, athletic activities were analyzed in order to gather data with regard to parental participation. Information was collected through questionnaires, and the first findings suggested that parental participation is related to the type of sport played. The study involved coaches, parents, and athletes responding to a questionnaire. The sports studied were: 7-on-7 soccer, futsal, basketball, volleyball, handball, badminton, and tennis.

The sport where the parent interacted the most with the coach and with their child during games and matches was 7-on-7 soccer (more than half of the parents interviewed). On the other hand, tennis was the sport in which parents engaged the least with the coach and with their child during matches and competitions.

The study revealed contradictions, in that parents said that they did not interact often with coaches, while coaches said the opposite. 70% of coaches said that parents spoke with them, while only 30% of parents reported speaking to coaches.

7-on-7 soccer was also the sport in which parents were likeliest to attend practices and stay throughout. It was also the sport with the best attendance during competition.

As can be seen, there is more active participation in team sports than in individual sports. This information is of the utmost importance when dealing with athletes' family relationships. We need to study further how differences in the type of sports career impact whether or not parents are supportive.

Figure 3: Parents who speak with coaches

Table 1 Sport the child plays; whether I know and speak with my child's coach					
	No, never	Occasionally	Sometimes	Often	Yes, always
Futsal	14,1%	35,2%	21,4%	14,8%	14,5%
7-on-7 soccer	12,5%	20,8%	12,5%	22,9%	31,3%
Basketball	8,8%	30,9%	25,8%	20,3%	14,3%
Volleyball	33,3%	24,6%	10,5%	10,5%	21,1%
Handball	9,6%	37,0%	34,2%	9,6%	9,6%
Badminton	24,2%	39,4%	6,1%	15,2%	15,2%
Tennis	35,6%	44,4%	15,6%		4,4%
TOTAL	15%	32,4%	21%	15,7%	15,9%

Source: Granados, Guzman, and Sánchez, 2009.

Figure 4: Parents who attend competitions

Table 7 Sport the child plays; whether I stay to see how my child plays during games/matches					
	No, never	Occasionally	Sometimes	Often	Yes, always
Futsal	10,1%	16,7%	16,0%	21,2%	36,1%
7-on-7 soccer	5,2%	8,3%	12,5%	14,6%	59,4%
Basketball	13,7%	9,4%	7,1%	21,7%	48,1%
Volleyball	28,9%	18,4%	10,5%	21,1%	21,1%
Handball	9,6%	28,8%	24,7%	20,5%	16,4%
Badminton	51,5%	27,3%	6,1%	9,1%	6,1%
Tennis	15,8%	28,9%	10,5%	10,5%	34,2%
TOTAL	13,4%	15,9%	13%	19,4%	38,3%

Source: Granados, Guzman, and Sánchez, 2009.

Family groups are a source of research in the field of sports psychology, since their influence on the subject's athletic performance is significant.

The coach's role in the relationship between the parent and the sport is to guide the parents down a path that allows for performance to flow optimally. Parents exercise a negative influence when they bring concepts such as winning and success to the sport, instead of emphasizing fun, socialization, and the acquisition of physical, emotional, and social skills. This is when the coach needs to intervene to reorient the priorities of those parents who do not understand the goals of the sport, the club, and the coach.

As stated by Tardy (1985), family support can be broken down into three categories: emotional (empathy), instrumental (material and economic resources used for the athlete's benefit) and evaluative or informative (parents, coaches, and other actors provide information to athletes about their performance).

In the Autonomous Community of Castilla and León, a survey was carried out where athletes were directly interviewed about the support they receive from their family, coaches and peer groups. 338 interviews were carried out with male and female athletes from various athletic disciplines. Based on the results received, 77% of the athletes say that they receive emotional support from their family members (i.e., father, mother and siblings). In terms of the differences between fathers and mothers, fear was expressed by mothers of athletes in high-risk sports, but also high percentages of participation and support. From the 77% that say they receive family support, 64.7% of them indicate that the support is from both parents, whereas for the rest, the support comes from only one parent.

High performance athletes have a higher rate of family support than those who are not yet competing at that level. Evidently, the pressures of high performance naturally demand affective support. To the extent that an athlete becomes a professional, the family's support and commitment also increase. It is important for the club, the coaching staff and sports psychologists to let parents know about the commitment levels to expect as the athlete grows as a professional. Commitment is proportional to growth as an athlete.

The aforementioned study showed that conflicts between family members, coaches, and athletes originated with the parents and occurred most often with athletes who were not yet high performance. The majority of cases are related to poor academic performance as a result of the hours spent training. Of course, when they reach the formative stages of a sport, an athlete will find that they have two parallel lives: their sport and their education. In these cases, parents must understand how to manage their child's workload and identify

educational institutions that will support this situation at a curricular level. On the other hand, increased commitment levels for subjects will cause conflicts to arise, above all else a decrease in academic and athletic performance.

With regard to the relationship between athlete and coach, 75% of high performance athletes said that they had a good relationship with their coach, while 84% of those who were not yet performing at a high level reported a good relationship with their coach. The percentage is higher among those who do not yet have many demands placed upon them, as this is a source of conflict with coaches.

Smith (1999) maintains that socialization factors are indispensable for maintaining motivation levels in sports. With regard to family participation, athletes value emotional support more than they do financial support. During the first years of training, athletes need their families to be physically present at competitions and to provide direct emotional support. As they develop, this becomes less important. The need for support in the early years is evident, when they do not yet have the emotional and psychological capacity to handle the demands of competition.

There are so many different sports, both individual and team. Each one has its own characteristics which will determine a family's level of involvement based on financial and emotional need, among other factors.

Families accompany the athlete through the process and assist with continued active participation in the sport, more so than improvements in performance. The athlete will improve as long as they train, commit themselves, and understand how to manage psychological variables. If their family is present throughout this process, they will see improvement in their athletic performance because they are able to train. Everything is related.

2.1.4 Educating athletes' parents

Healthy habits

- Food

Eating habits play an important role in the athlete’s performance and well-being, both during the initiation stage as well as at higher levels. In the latter case, they are key. In addition to educating athletes in this regard, it is critical that parents also receive advice and guidelines on how best to support their children. This is important both to develop healthy eating habits both on a general level and with regard to sports in particular, as well as to prevent and detect possible eating disorders.

It is important to note that eating habits must be approached from a cross-disciplinary perspective. First of all, it is key for all actors in a high performance athlete's environment (coaches, families, managers, physicians, etc.) to have accurate and adequate information on the topic. Moreover, action will be led by professionals, both in the areas of sports psychology and nutrition. The former will be responsible for examining and gathering information about an athletes' eating habits, as well as informing the actors involved about the importance of this subject. Nutritionists will be in charge of providing guidelines and practical recommendations specific to each case, taking into account the athletic activity and the athlete's own needs.

- Sleep and Rest

Rest and recovery also play a key role in performance. Athletes obviously need to be informed and aware of this; however, we should not forget to involve their families so that they can help to facilitate rest.

Workshops for parents can be organized in which existing habits and routines with regard to sleep and rest are first examined, and then guidelines on optimal sleep hygiene are provided.

Parents are important for modeling habits within the family, which is why we emphasize that they should also follow our recommendations. We can provide materials that include basic information about the guidelines for encouraging sleep, so that they can always have it at hand, and the entire family's sleep habits will benefit. Below we will share an example of an informational handout.

- Autonomy and Responsibility

Sports in and of themselves promote making commitments, and encourage players to work on developing responsibility. In order to reinforce these values, it is critical that autonomy is also promoted within the family environment. Sometimes, parents may become over involved with everything related to their children's athletic activities, preventing the children from assuming age- and ability-appropriate responsibilities.

Let's take the example of a 12-year-old swimmer who trains four days a week after school. She arrives home, picks up the bag that her mother has packed, and goes to the pool. When she returns home, she leaves the bag in the kitchen and her mother is again responsible for emptying it. In this case, it could be suggested to the parents that they decide what each person's responsibilities should be. The swimmer can take responsibility for packing their bag each day and letting her parents know when she needs new equipment. Parents should ensure that the assigned tasks are completed and will enforce consequences if they are not. As Ortín (2009) explains, these details are important so that the young athlete takes responsibility for the things that they do and internalizes the importance

of preparing for an activity, thinking it through, and having control over their own behavior.

Another area to work on is establishing boundaries and rules. Boundaries serve as guidelines for behavior; they show us how we should act at any given time and are a way to maintain our integrity and well-being. They foster autonomy and security, helping us to understand how to behave at any moment. It is sometimes challenging to establish boundaries for our children and apply them consistently. When educating parents, a workshop dedicated to this topic can be held so that information about the usefulness and importance of boundaries and rules can be shared.

- Time management

Good time management is vital for elite athletes. In many cases, they must fit hours of training in with school, work, or family life. If parents are well-informed on this topic, they can serve as facilitators so that the athlete is able to manage their time successfully and participate in activities in each area of their life. They will also be able to better organize their own time and activities, which will benefit the entire family and encourage them to serve as a model for their own children when developing time management skills that are efficient and adapted to their needs. For example, let's look at the parents who complain repeatedly about the amount of time their children spend on the phone. They often argue with them to get them to stop using the phone and start spending more time on schoolwork. However, they themselves spend at least two hours a day on social media, answering emails, or surfing the Internet. If they are able to achieve better time management in this sense, their message will be more powerful, and their children will be able to see that there is consistency between what their parents do and what their parents ask of them.

We can begin by creating a log that documents daily activities and the time each person spends on them. This exercise will encourage participants to take note of the time they spend on each task. We often hear the phrase "I don't have time," and by creating such a log, the person may be surprised to see that they have more free time than they expected or that commuting to work takes up 7 hours each week.

Below, we have included an example of a log in which the individual can record in different colors the hours spent on each one of their activities (sleep and rest, work or studies, meals, commuting, socializing, sports, etc.). After that, they total the hours spent weekly on each task so as to increase awareness. Based on what is recorded in this log, guidelines for how to improve time management will be proposed, as well as resources and tools for doing so. It is important to recognize the main “time thieves” so as to be aware of them and avoid them (distractions such as the

phone, TV, music, or PlayStation). When possible, we will try to adjust these recommendations for each specific case.