"What matters is that you do your best"
Moral education in parent-child sports-related interactions

Vittoria Colla*

Abstract

In recent years, children's participation in sports activities has increased, along with parental involvement. Research shows that parents across socio-economic classes enroll their children in sports activities to improve their health, social skills, and wellbeing. While parents' increasing involvement in children's sports activities and their influence on athletic experiences are well-documented, these phenomena remain less investigated from a pedagogical perspective. How do parents shape the ways in which children experience sports and what they learn from them? Presenting the preliminary results of an exploratory study based on naturalistic, video-recorded parent-child interactions during sports-related activities (e.g., watching televised sports events, driving to practice or match), the article shows that mundane family talk is a fertile arena for sports socialization and, more broadly, for moral education. Through ordinary sports-related interactions, children are socialized not only to sports rules and values (e.g., loyalty, sportsmanship), but also to culture-specific worldviews and moral concepts (e.g., commitment, responsibility), being nurtured into morally and culturally competent subjects.

Keywords: *family dialogues; socialization; parent involvement: youth sports; morality.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, children's participation in organized extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, music, arts, scouts) has steadily increased, along with parental involvement in them (Kremer-Sadlik *et al.*, 2010; Busetta *et al.*, 2019; Peng, 2024). Consistently with Lareau's (2003) notion of "concerted cultivation", children's free time has been gradually 'colonized' by a variety of extracurricular activities (Kremer-Sadlik & Gutiérrez, 2013; Wheeler & Green, 2019; Colla, 2020), which are commonly viewed as pivotal in supporting children's socioemotional development and school achievement (Metsäpelto

* University of Bologna, Italy.

Civitas educationis, a. XV, n. 1, giugno 2026 • Mimesis Edizioni, Milano-Udine
Web: universitypress.unisob.na.it/ojs/index.php/civitaseducationis • ISSN (online): 2281-9568
• ISBN: 9791222334332 • DOI: 10.7413/2281-9568160
© 2026 – MIM EDIZIONI SRL. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY-4.0).

& Pulkkinen, 2014). At the same time, expectations concerning 'good parenting' have become strictly linked to parents' ability to take part in such extracurricular activities in a variety of ways, for example by discovering and cultivating their children's talents, providing for practice and training, and offering emotional support (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2013). Among extracurricular activities, sports are prevalent, being largely viewed as beneficial for children's physical, psychological, and social development (Kremer-Sadlik *et al.*, 2010; Friedman, 2013). The idea that doing sports is good for children is supported by substantial scientific research illuminating its positive effects on health (Janssen & LeBlanc, 2010; Logan *et al.*, 2019), emotional management (Li *et al.*, 2022), cognitive and psychological functions (Bizdan-Bluma & Lipowksa, 2018; McNeill *et al.*, 2018; Eime *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, it is endorsed by the World Health Organization, which recommends an average of sixty minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per week for 5-17-years-old populations (World Health Organization, 2020). Involving and supporting children in athletic activities has become a taken-for-granted imperative, at least in Western parenting cultures: research has shown that parents across socio-economic classes enroll their children in sports activities in the aim of developing their motor competences, social skills, sense of self-efficacy, health, and wellbeing (Petitpas *et al.* 2005; Stefansen *et al.*, 2018; Miller & Swartz, 2024).

In a similar vein, pedagogical research has long argued for the educational value of sports activities, framing them as key educational experiences that deeply shape children's development and existential paths (Mantegazza, 1999; Isidori, 2009, 2017; Mari, 2017; Farnè, 2024). Far from the sole aim of turning children into professional athletes and sports champions, the educational relevance of sports activities lies in the fact that they entail highly educational factors like peer relationships, the presence of a reference adult and related power asymmetries, practices of (non-formal) teaching and learning, forms of testing of acquired competences and abilities, followed by assessment practices like selection vs exclusion, win vs defeat (Farné, 2024). Furthermore, sports activities constitute important arenas where children can experience and discover emotions, learning to manage and channel them (Mantegazza, 1999). The "extraordinary educational value of sport" (Coco, 2014) is also strictly related to the values it builds on, such as fairness, respect, solidarity, self-improvement, responsibility (Isidori & Fraile, 2008) as well as antiracism and inclusion (Magnanini, 2018; Isidori, 2009). However, research has also shown some negative effects of sport activities (Merkel, 2013; Bean *et al.*, 2014), illuminating how 'negative values' (or "disvalues", Isidori, 2009: 14) such as violence, narcissism, sexism, and racism can be subtly conveyed through ordinary sports experiences. This is exactly where sports pedagogy ('*pedagogia dello sport*', Isidori, 2009) comes into play: when intentionally and pedagogically planned, sports activities are important sites where the 'positive' values of sports (e.g., fairness, self-improvement, responsibility etc.) are cherished and can be transmitted to new generations of young athletes (Farnè, 2024, 2022).

If the coach is typically considered the main educational figure in sports, being often viewed by athletes as a mentor and even a life guide, it is undeniable that "parents play a significant role in children's early sports socialization" (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004: 145), being the ones who provide for the material, financial, organizational, and emotional support without which children's participation in sports would simply not be possible (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005; Holt & Knight, 2014). Psychological research has extensively investigated the effects of parenting behaviors and involvement styles in youth sports, showing how they impact young athletes' motivation and achievement (Holt *et al.*, 2009; Teques *et al.*, 2019). While parents' increasing involvement in children's sports activities and their influence on athletic experiences are well-documented (Stefansen *et al.*, 2018; Knight *et al.*, 2017; Elliott & Drummond, 2017a), these phenomena remain less investigated from a specifically *pedagogical* perspective, and less is known about parents' role in children's sports-related *education*. The situated, ordinary, and mostly interactive ways in which parents participate in youth sports and mediate children's sports-related educational experiences remain largely unexplored (but see Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007; Gottzén & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012; Thrower *et al.*, 2022). How do parents contribute to children's sports socialization? How do they shape the ways in which children experience sports, attach values to them, and learn from them? How do parents and children cooperatively make sense of sports activities through everyday experiences and talk?

The present article contributes to this underdeveloped line of inquiry by focusing on everyday family interactions about sports. It presents the preliminary results of an exploratory study involving three Italian families, based on 73 minutes of naturalistic, videorecorded parent-child interactions during sports-related activities, including watching televised sports events, getting ready for training, driving to – and back from – competitions and matches. Adopting a phenomenological approach to the study of educational phenomena (Bertolini, 1988; Caronia, 2011, 2018), the article shows that mundane family talk is a fertile arena for sports socialization and, more broadly, for moral education. Through ordinary interactive activities like commenting on athletic performances, planning future training, talking about matches and competitions, parents and children evoke, discuss, and learn about culture-specific, morally dense conceptions of values including sportsmanship, loyalty, and teamwork. They give meaning to experiences like 'winning' and 'losing', they elaborate right vs wrong ways of feeling, thinking, and talking about sports (Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007). Yet, such sports-related, educationally dense mundane conversations are rarely *only* about sports. Most of the time, what is at stake goes far beyond the specific match, coach, or teammate being mentioned. The moral values discussed in parent-child sports-related interactions transcend the single athletic event and entail morally saturated notions like authority, commitment, respect, perseverance, conceptions of 'good player', 'good child', and 'good parent'. Fam-

ily talk about sports is therefore part of the pervasive and distributed process whereby children are exposed to, elaborate, and have the chance to acquire the moral assumptions of the cultural communities they belong to, being gradually nurtured into morally competent subjects.

The article is structured as follows. In the opening sections, we review extant literature on parental involvement in youth sports (section n. 2) and present the main theoretical frameworks of the study (section n. 3). After describing the corpus and methodology of the study (section n. 4), in the analytical section (n. 5) we summarize the main, preliminary results of this exploratory study and present a series of excerpts of video-recorded, naturally occurring parent-child interactions about sports. In particular, we focus on the excerpts that illustrate how the moral imperative of 'doing one's best' is brought up and made relevant by parents in everyday sports-related talk with their children. The excerpts are analyzed by adopting a discourse analytic approach (see among others, Sacks *et al.*, 1974; Sidnell & Stivers, 2013), which has proved to be well-suited for studying mundane parent-child talks as conversational sites where cultural and moral assumptions are taken for granted, evoked in more or less explicit ways, and transmitted from one generation to the next (Duranti *et al.*, 2012; Ochs *et al.*, 1996; Caronia & Colla, 2024; Colla, 2023, 2024). The analysis shows that mundane family conversations about sports are far more than mere organizational small talks and commentaries about athletic performance. Rather, they constitute important educational events whereby children's thinking is shaped according to cultural worldviews. In the concluding discussion (section n. 6), we reflect on the crucial role that everyday conversations within the family play in children's sports socialization as well as moral education. Therefore, we argue for the need to consider sports-related education as extending beyond the athletic performance in itself, to include the larger, mainly conversational, context in which sports are practiced and lived on a daily basis. As this article shows, it is indeed (also) through everyday talk about sports that children make sense of their sports experiences and learn about their cultural and moral meanings.

2. Parents in youth sports

Parental involvement in children's sports has been extensively investigated in recent years. Research in fields as different as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and education has explored this growing phenomenon, with a particular focus on the effects of parental behaviors on young athletes' experiences and development (for a review, Dorsch *et al.*, 2021). Different studies converge in showing that parents who emphasize the need to win, use punishment, or offer harsh criticism can increase child athletes' anxiety (Elliott & Drummond, 2017a), fear of failure (Sagar & Lavallee, 2010), and lower self-confidence (Knight *et al.*, 2016). Conversely, parents

prioritizing effort and individual progress have been shown to promote children's sense of competence (Atkins *et al.*, 2013), enjoyment (Morris & Kavussanu, 2008), and self-esteem (O'Rourke *et al.*, 2014).

In the rich body of research on parental involvement in youth sports, only a handful of studies have explored real, naturally occurring conversations between parents and children during and about sports-related activities (Elliott & Drummond, 2017b; Sutcliffe *et al.*, 2021; Tamminen *et al.*, 2017, 2022; Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007; Gottzén & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012; Thrower *et al.*, 2022). Among these, Kremer-Sadlik and Kim's (2007) study has been pioneer. Focusing on parent-child interaction during active and passive, formal and informal participation in sports, the authors have shown the crucial role played by parents in children's socialization to sports-related moral behaviors and values, such as showing loyalty for one's team and complimenting the opponent team. More recently, Thrower *et al.* (2022) have conducted a conversation analysis of parent-child interactions during pre-competition car journeys, illustrating that children resisted or disengaged from the conversation when parents positioned themselves as experts about the child's upcoming performance, for example by giving instructions, advice, or asking test questions. On the contrary, when parents demonstrated their interest in children's experience and allowed them to talk about it, which was typically done by asking 'wh-questions', children produced extended sequences of affiliative talk.

The present, exploratory study adds to this line of inquiry by offering a pedagogically oriented take on parental involvement in youth sports through social interaction, as well as by focusing on the Italian context, which, at least to our knowledge, has never been the object of this kind of research.

3. Meaning making and socialization in ordinary interaction: Theoretical frameworks

In the aim of exploring ordinary family interactions around sports and identifying their educational value, the present study adopts the theoretical framework of phenomenological pedagogy (Bertolini, 1988; Caronia, 2011, 2018). Viewing everyday activities and interactions as rooted in "common sense" (Schutz, 1967[1932]), phenomenological pedagogy acknowledges the educational value of mundane talk, considering it as the fundamental means through which the world we inhabit is not only described and communicated, but also and above all understood and lived by the subjects (Duranti, 2007). As pedagogical research within this framework has illustrated, it is in and through language-in-interaction that the canonical versions of reality and the moral orders of the interactants' lifeworld are constantly reproduced, negotiated, and passed on to younger generations (Caronia, 2002, 2012; Caronia *et al.*, 2021; Caronia & Colla, 2024; Colla, 2024). From a phenomenological perspective, the conversa-

tions that punctuate and support daily family life are constitutive of subjects' educational path, shaping how parents and children experience reality and learn from it.

A further theoretical approach upholding the present study is the paradigm of "language socialization" (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Consistently with the phenomenological approach to education, this paradigm elaborated in the field of anthropological studies highlights the indissoluble link between cultural socialization and the acquisition of linguistic and communicative competences. According to this paradigm, the development of linguistic and interactive skills is strictly linked to the acquisition of cultural competences: children internalize value systems, assumptions, and cultural norms as they gradually develop the linguistic and communicative competences allowing them to effectively participate in social interactions. In this perspective, mundane conversations between children and adults, novices and experts, constitute essential *loci* of socialization and, as such, fundamental objects of analytical focus to discover and describe how children become culturally and morally competent subjects (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007; Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono, 2007).

Drawing on these theoretical approaches, the present article investigates parent-child conversations about sports which occur in the unfolding of ordinary family life, revealing to what extent and how, despite their apparent irrelevance, they work as socialization means, educating children to culture-specific moral beliefs systems.

4. Data and methodology

The data presented in this article are drawn from an observative, exploratory study conducted in 2023-2024 in three middle-class Italian families living in the North of Italy, sampled through the researcher's work connections. Each family included two parents (mother and father) and one or two children aged 7-12 years old[1]. More specifically, the study involved three boys practicing soccer, basketball, swimming, and two girls practicing horse riding. The corpus consists of 73 minutes of video-recorded parent-child interactions occurring during ordinary sports-related activities like watching televised sports events, getting ready for training, driving to/from sport matches and competitions. The participants, particularly the parents, were in charge of video-recording their naturally occurring conversations, without the researcher being present on the field. This data-collection procedure was chosen as it maximized the chances of capturing sports-related talk happening in everyday family life while at the same time reducing the potential impact of the observing researcher on participants' talk. The par-

1 No other demographic or socioeconomic information was collected as the study aims to analyze instances of everyday parent-child talk about sports without ascribing interactive practices to variations in demographics or other values.

ents administered the video-recording process according to the researcher's guidelines, i.e., they turned on the camera during sports-related activities and video-recorded both themselves and their children, without modifying the schedules and habits typical of their ordinary family life. Participants' consent was obtained according to Italian law n. 196/2003 and EU Regulation n. 2016/679 (GDPR 2016/679), which regulates the handling of personal and sensitive data. For the sake of anonymity, all names have been fictionalized and other personal information (e.g., names of sports clubs) has been removed.

The collected data were repeatedly observed by the researcher, with particular attention devoted to understanding how parents contributed to children's sports-related education by co-constructing meanings and attributing values to sports activities in the unfolding of social interaction with their children. Through such repeated observation, 22 sequences of moral talk were identified, i.e., strings of talk where "implicit and explicit messages about right and wrong, better and worse, rules, norms, obligations, duties, etiquette" (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007: 5) were either implied or clearly stated. Then, through empirical post-hoc categorization, these sequences have been regrouped into clusters based on the moral messages they evoked. The following moral messages were identified, and related clusters were created: 1. School and homework are important (5 sequences), 2. Do your best (6 sequences), 3. Respect coach and referees (2 sequences), 3. Accept defeat (4 sequences), 4. Respect teammates and opponents (5 sequences); 5. Take part in competitions (3 sequences). For clarity reasons, this article focuses solely on the sequences belonging to cluster 2, i.e., the excerpts where parents evoke the moral imperative of doing one's best in sports. The excerpts presented in the analysis section (n. 5) have been chosen as they constitute clear and representative examples of the excerpts in this cluster[2].

The analysis of the selected sequences has been conducted by adopting a discourse analytic approach. In particular, the excerpts presented here have been transcribed using conversation analysis conventions (Jefferson, 2004; for transcription conventions see the Appendix). In line with the multimodal approach to social interaction (Goodwin, 2000), transcripts

2 It is important to stress once again that the present study adopts a phenomenological theoretical framework (see Section 3) and an ethnographic approach. As such, it aims at discovering and describing the "emic perspective" (Pike, 1966), i.e., the worldviews and moral ideologies of the actors involved, inscribed in and subtly conveyed through the micro-details of their interactions. In other words, the moral messages identified and illustrated in this article (particularly in Section 5) are not representative of all possible parent-child sports-related conversations, nor are they the values that the author believes to be 'positive' and deserving to be promoted through sports. Rather, they are the values that the parents in the study demonstrated to assume and evoked in ordinary sports-related conversations, socializing their children to them. The present study therefore does not mean to provide a list of 'positive' values to be promoted through sports education; rather, it aims at showing the interactive, intrinsically conversational, dynamics of sports socialization occurring in ordinary parent-child talk.

have been enriched with notations for gaze, gestures, and body movements when ostensibly relevant for the participants. The original conversations included expressions and/or extended sequences of talk in regional dialect. For the sake of clarity, these have been translated in Italian. Transcripts are presented in two lines: the Italian transcript is followed by an idiomatic translation in American English.

5. Doing one's best: Moral imperatives and limits in parent-child talk about sports

When talking about sports with their children, parents frequently evoked the need to do their best. Interestingly, this moral imperative was rarely used to push children to give all they could and pursue the win in a competition at all costs. Rather, it was typically evoked when children voiced some concern about their upcoming or past athletic performance, anticipating the risk of failing or complaining about the suffered defeat. By pushing children to do their best in these interactional and emotional environments, parents achieved two goals. First, they set a standard of commitment, urging children to work hard despite the anticipated concerns or the difficulties encountered. Yet, parents also subtly reassured their kids, conveying that doing their best was all that mattered, regardless of the outcome. Thus, the imperative of "doing one's best" was used by parents as a means to strike a balance between pushing children to take sports seriously and make an effort on one side, and reducing performance-related stress and dissatisfaction on the other. "Doing one's best" emerged as both a standard and a limit: it was something expected of children, yet also a limit to their responsibilities for the final result.

The following excerpt provides an example. This exchange occurs before a basketball match, when Franco (seven years old) and his parents are sitting in the car, driving to the game location. In the previous turns, parents and child have talked about the opponent team, anticipating that it could be stronger than Franco's team. They have also acknowledged some limits of Franco's team, particularly the small number of players present at the match. At this point, the mother invites father and child to express their feelings about the upcoming game.

Ex. 1 – "Try to do your best"

1	MOM	siamo fiduciosi? *are we confident?*
2		(1.0)
3	DAD	eh::m (.) səh: mai visti giocare, *ehm ye: never seen them play*
4	MOM	vabbè l'importante è che voi vi divertiat[e::= *well what matters is that you have fun*

5	FRANCO		[°sì sì°
			yes yes
6	MOM	=e basta.	
		that's it	
7	FRANCO	*((nods))*	
8 ⇒	MOM	e:::h cerca di fare del tuo meglio	
		eh try to do your best	
9	FRANCO	sì sì	
		yes yes	

After a few minutes of conversation devoted to the analysis of the opponent and Franco's teams (not transcribed), the mother moves the interaction toward more 'introspective' topics. Through her question in line 1, she invites both dad and Franco (see the use of the first-person plural, "*Are we* confident?") to express their prospects and feelings about the upcoming game. It is worth noting that the question format (i.e., a 'yes-no' question) subtly conveys the mother's expectations, framing its propositional content (i.e., 'being confident') as the expected response (see Heritage, 2009). In other words, this question implicitly invites the addressees to state their confidence and positive expectations about the game. Clearly enough, this question format allows the mother to stage herself as an optimistic supporter of Franco's team, inviting her son and husband to share her positive outlook. Yet, no reply comes for about one second (line 2), which suggests that a dispreferred response is on the way. Indeed, dad's response in line 3 does not endorse the 'confident attitude' proposed by the mother's question. Rather, dad resists expressing confidence – or lack thereof – ("ehm ye:") and accounts for his missing response by declaring his lack of knowledge about the opponent team ("never seen them play", line 3). Vis-à-vis the father's difficulty in showing confidence and optimism for the match, as well as Franco's silence, the mother presents "having fun" as the main objective (lines 4 and 6). At this point, Franco finally intervenes by multimodally confirming the mother's statement ("yes yes", line 5; he nods, line 7). At this stage of the interaction, the upcoming match has been framed as probably tough and hard to win, and having fun during it has been constructed as the most important goal. The conversational sequence could end here, yet the mother takes the turn again, setting another goal for Franco: "try to do your best" (line 8). Although formulated in a mitigated form (see the conative form "try to"), the mother's turn makes relevant a moral standard of conduct, particularly the need to strive to do the best, thus framing the upcoming game as something more than mere leisure and fun, i.e., as an activity to which the child must commit, regardless of the final result. In response, Franco expresses his agreement, confirming that he will try his best (line 9). Doing one's best is thus evoked as a moral imperative to be abided by during the game, even with few chances to succeed. A balance between playfulness and seriousness, fun and focus,

commitment to the endeavor and detachment from the final result is thus achieved and conveyed to the child in the unfolding of this ordinary, parent-child pre-game talk.

The next example shows a similar exchange in another family. The mother is driving her child Federico (8 years old) to a soccer match in a nearby town. During the ride, they notice that a strong wind is blowing. This causes Federico to doubt his athletic performance, particularly his own and his teammates' abilities to shoot on goal.

Ex. 2 – "What matters is that you do your best"

1	FEDERICO	>non possiamo tirare da- (.) se- se *we can't shoot from- if-if*
2		tiriamo da lontano,< non::- non entrerà mai *we shoot from afar it won't-won't ever enter*
3 ⇒	MOM	no Federico. l'importante è far sempre del tuo MEglio *no Federico what matters is always doing your best*
4		e non ti preoccupare. *and don't worry*

In lines 1-2, Federico voices his concern about his team's performance in the upcoming soccer match, due to the high wind. The child's turn features a series of multimodal aspects and disfluencies that convey his worry: it is uttered at a quick pace (lines 1-2), it presents a self-interruption ("we can't shoot from-", line 1) followed by a formulation (lines 1-2), some hesitations ("if-if", line 1; "won't-won't", line 2) as well as an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986), which emphasizes the child's negative view of the upcoming performance in the match ("it won't-won't *ever* enter", line 2). It is also interesting to note that the child uses the first-person plural "we" in describing the match strategies (lines 1-2), thus conveying his view of the team as a cohesive group. Furthermore, in this turn the child demonstrates his competence in game strategies, reflecting on the consequences of weather conditions on the effectiveness of specific ways of playing. In particular, Federico excludes the possibility of shooting the ball from afar, as it would cause the ball to "never enter" the goal due to the wind.

In response to such concerns voiced by the child, the mother replies with a reassuring turn. First, she openly rejects the child's negative prediction, drawing his attention through the marked use of his first name ("no Federico", line 5; Pauletto *et al.*, 2017). Then, she presents "doing his best" as all that that "matters" (line 3) and explicitly reassures her child ("don't worry", line 4). In this turn, the mother does not follow on the child's athletic performance, thus treating this issue as irrelevant. Rather, she discursively constructs the value of doing one's best, framing it as the most important

matter in the child's game performance. In this way, striving to do the best is constructed as a moral imperative but also, at the same time, as a limit to the child's responsibility for his upcoming athletic performance. Doing one's best thus works as a form of reassurance (as also demonstrated by the following "don't worry", line 4), relieving Federico from his concern about his team's (in)ability to score goals.

The next example is slightly different from the previous ones, as it captures a father-child conversation after the match, particularly after the child's team defeat. In this case, the child (Franco) expresses his dissatisfaction and even grief about the match result. In this case too, the imperative of doing one's best is evoked by the father and presented as the only fundamental responsibility of the child, independently of the game result. We join the interaction when teary-eyed Franco is silently listening to his father.

Ex. 3 – "You have to take the field to give your best"

1	DAD	però non bisogna (.) buttarsi giù per sta- *but you must not get down for this-*
2		per una cosa del genere *for such a thing*
3		(2.0) *((Franco remains silent, looking down))*
4	DAD	<se no,>- cioè tu devi andare in campo *otherwise- I mean you have to take the field*
5 ⇒		per dare il meglio che puoi. l'hai fatto?= *to give your best. did you do that?*
6		=↑basta. *that's it*
7		(.)
8	DAD	cioè quello che succede dopo non ha importanza *I mean what happens afterward doesn't matter*

In this excerpt, the father is visibly oriented to comforting Franco, who is on the verge of tears due to the defeat in the match. By making relevant the obligation "not to get down" and by calling the defeat "such a thing" (lines 1-2), the father downgrades the relevance of the negative result in the match and, relatedly, evokes a typical rule of sports culture, i.e., do not let defeats get you down. Vis-à-vis the child's lack of response and evident distress (line 3), the father evokes another moral imperative: giving one's

best. This is formulated by the parent as an obligation ("*you have to* take the field to give your best", lines 4-5), something that the child needs to make sure to have done ("did you do that?", line 5). The father's words in lines 5-6, especially the 'check question' ("did you do that?") can be viewed as a post-match self-assessment resource, offered to the child as a means to reflect on his athletic performance and assess his own responsibility – or lack thereof – for the final result. Yet, the imperative of doing one's best is also presented as all that matters ("that's it", line 6) and, relatedly, as a limit to the child's responsibility for the final result ("what happens afterward doesn't matter", line 8). In this way, the father reaffirms the importance of giving one's best in the sports activity, while comforting Franco by treating him as not responsible for the defeat. Similarly to the previous examples, in this excerpt the imperative of doing one's best is used to reassure the child, being presented as all that matters, in spite of the final result in the match. Yet, it is also presented and conveyed as a cogent obligation, an imperative the child needs to take into account and comply with when practicing sports.

6. Concluding discussion

Focusing on naturally occurring, everyday conversations between parents and children about sports, this paper has illuminated a relatively underexplored topic within research on parental involvement in youth sports, i.e., how parents contribute, day by day, one interaction at a time, to shaping children's sports socialization. In particular, the paper has illustrated that and how parents evoke the moral imperative of doing one's best when talking with their children about practiced sports and, particularly, competition results. As the analyzed excerpts have shown, this imperative is evoked as a 'double-edged sword', as a means to both push children to take sports activities seriously and do their best as well as, at the same time, to reassure them by downgrading their personal responsibility for their athletic performance (ex. 2) or the match final result (ex. 1 and 3), especially when these could be (ex. 1 and 2) or actually were (ex. 3) disappointing. The concept of 'doing one's best' thus served a dual purpose for parents. It acted as both a benchmark for their children's effort in sports activity and a safeguard against excessive performance-related pressure. This imperative represented a compromise, demanding effort while partly relieving children of the responsibility for the outcome. It was both a requirement and a limit, defining the scope of children's athletic obligations and responsibilities.

Despite being few, the examples presented above illustrate that parents play a constitutive role in children's education to sports values. This role goes far beyond promoting children's acquisition of athletic skills, and it shapes the ways in which they think of, feel about, and behave during sports activities. The fabric of seemingly mundane, everyday conversa-

tions within the family constitutes a meaning-making resource whereby parents and children cooperatively elaborate their experiences in the light of shared cultural and moral horizons, holding a profound influence on what children learn about sports and how they feel about their own athletic experiences, performances, and results. Yet, there is even more than this. Indeed, it is important to stress that, despite revolving around sports events and topics, the ordinary family conversations analyzed in this paper are not *only* about athletic values. Rather, they encompass larger assumptions and worldviews concerning morality, duty, and responsibility, educating children to culture-specific moral systems. By evoking the need to do one's best, parents introduce their children to the concept of "virtue" (MacIntyre, 1984), conveying the value of making an effort and committing to the activities they are involved in. Furthermore, they discursively construct individual effort and commitment as all that matters, being more important than the final result they lead to. Sports as well as, by generalization, other ordinary activities are thus constructed as important and worthy of commitment, regardless of their outcome. Through such daily dialogues, parents also evoke the notion of responsibility, socializing their children to hold themselves accountable only for what lies within their own possibilities, and to accept the fact that the final outcome may be out of their control.

To conclude, this paper has shown that ordinary family dialogues constitute fundamental, yet largely unnoticed, pieces in the puzzle of children's education. This makes relevant for educational research to take into account such ordinary dialogues as constitutive moments of children's developmental process (see Colla, 2020, 2021, 2024). In a similar vein, we believe that studies on youth sports experiences and socialization would benefit from extending their focus beyond the athletic performance in itself, to investigate the sports-related educational events that occur not only on the field, involving athletes and coaches, but also those that occur in the surrounding context, especially through daily social interactions within the athletes' families.

6.1. *Limitations and directions for future research*

The main limitation of this study consists in the fact that it involved only three families, living in one Italian region, and it is based on a relatively small corpus (i.e., 73 minutes of video-recorded interactions). A further, related limitation concerns the quite limited variety of values evoked and conveyed by parents in the recorded conversations. Presumably, a larger corpus would have featured a wider variety of topics, rules, expectations, and values evoked by the parents, possibly including what in sports pedagogy is typically viewed as "disvalues" (Isidori, 2009: 14). This would have granted a richer view on the dynamics of moral socialization occurring in mundane sports-related family talk. However, despite these limitations related to the corpus dimensions and the exploratory

character of the study, this article points toward more general results. Indeed, its main contribution consists in shedding light on the crucial role played by ordinary family interactions in children's sports education. As this article has shown, mundane parent-child interactions about sports are firmly anchored to culture-specific expectations and sets of moral values, which are explicitly evoked or implicitly conveyed in the unfolding of ordinary life experiences. What may seem casual and irrelevant conversations are in fact powerful educational resources that build on, ratify, and "talk into being" (Heritage, 1984: 290) taken-for-granted assumptions, conveying them to new generations. As such, and despite the limited number of data and participants, this study makes relevant for future research on sports socialization to extend its scope and analytical focus far beyond the spatial dimension of the sports field as well as beyond the temporal window of practice and match, to take into account how the environment and particularly the social interactions with family members and significant caregivers shape children's sports-related experiences and learning.

7. Appendix

°word°	talk that is markedly quieter than the rest of the talk
WORD	talk that is markedly louder than the rest of the talk
[word]	overlapping talk
(.)	pause shorter than 0.2 seconds
(1.5)	pause measured in seconds and tenths of a second
=	absence of any discernable silence between two turns
-	prior word or sound is cut off
((word))	description of nonverbal events (e.g., gestures, gaze direction)
wo:rd	prolongation of the sound
,	slightly rising intonation
?	strongly rising intonation (typical of questions)
.	falling intonation
↑	higher pitch
↓	lower pitch
^	moment when nonverbal event begins with respect to uttered words
*	translator's notes

8. Acknowledgments

The author is particularly grateful to Alex Pelà for his contribution in data collection and for his inspired insights in interpreting the data.

Bibliography

Atkins, M.R., Johnson, D.M., Force, E.C., & Petrie, T. A. (2013), "Do I Still Want to play? Parents' and Peers' Influences on Girls' Continuation in Sport", in *Journal of Sport Behaviour*, vol. 36, pp. 329-345.

Bean, C.N., Fortier, M., Post, C., & Chima, K. (2014), "Understanding How Organized Youth Sport Maybe Harming Individual Players within the Family Unit: A Literature Review", in *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 11, n. 10, 10226-68.

Bertolini, P. (1988), *L'esistere pedagogico. Ragioni e limiti di una pedagogia come scienza fenomenologicamente fondata*, Firenze: La Nuova Italia.

Bidzan-Bluma, I., & Lipowska, M. (2018), "Physical Activity and Cognitive Functioning of Children: A Systematic Review", in *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 15, 800.

Busetta, G., Campolo, M.G., & Di Pino, A. (2019), "Children's Use of Time and Well-Being in Italy", in *Child Indicators Research*, vol. 12, pp. 821-845.

Caronia, L. (2002), *La Socializzazione ai Media. Contesti, Interazioni e Pratiche Educative*, Milano: Guerini e Associati.

Caronia, L. (2011), *Fenomenologia dell'educazione. Intenzionalità, cultura e conoscenza in pedagogia*, Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Caronia, L. (2012), "Texts-in-Dialogue. The Communicative Constitution of Media Ideologies through Family Ordinary Talk", in *Language and Dialogue*, vol. 2, n. 3, pp. 427-448.

Caronia, L. (2018), "The Phenomenological Turn in Education: The Legacy of Piero Bertolini's theory", in *Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica/Journal of Theories and Research in Education*, vol. 13, n. 2, pp. 1-22.

Caronia, L., & Colla, V. (2024), *I compiti a casa: linguaggio e apprendimento quando la scuola entra in famiglia*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina.

Caronia, L., Colla, V., & Galatolo, R. (2021), "Making Unquestionable Worlds. Morality Building Practices in Family Dinner Dialogues," in L. Caronia (ed.), *Language and Interaction at home and school*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 87-12.

Coco, D. (2014), "Lo straordinario valore educativo dello sport", *Formazione & Insegnamento*, vol. XII, n. 3, pp. 119-132.

Colla, V. (2020), "'You Should Have Done It Earlier': The Morality of Time Management in Parent-Child Homework Interactions", in *Civitas Educationis. Education, Politics and Culture*, vol. 9, n. 2, pp. 103-120.

Colla, V. (2021), "Pedagogia della vita quotidiana in famiglia: l'inattesa rilevanza educativa delle interazioni ordinarie tra genitori e figli", in *Studium Educationis*, vol. 22, pp. 103-112.

Colla, V. (2023), *Education in Everyday Family Life: Language, Culture, and Morality in Homework Interactions*, Pisa: Edizioni ETS.

Colla, V. (2024), *La cultura nelle parole di tutti i giorni: per una pedagogia della vita quotidiana*, Como – Pavia: Ibis.

Dorsch, T.E., Elliot, S., Eckardt, V., Wright, E., Thrower, S.N., & Knight, C.J. (2021), "A History of Parent Involvement in Organized Youth Sport: A Sco-

ping Review", in *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, vol. 10, n. 4, pp. 536-557.
Duranti, A. (2007), *Etnopragmatica. La forza nel parlare*, Roma: Carocci.
Duranti, A., Ochs, E., & Schieffelin, B.B. (eds.) (2012), *Handbook of Language Socialization*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
Eime R.M, Young, J.A., Harvey, J.T., Charity, M.J., & Payne, W.R. (2013), "A Systematic Review of the Psychological and Social Benefits of Participation in Sport for Children and Adolescents: Informing Development of a Conceptual Model of Health Through Sport", in *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, vol. 10, 98.
Elliott, S.K., & Drummond, M.J.N. (2017a), "Parents in Youth Sport: What Happens After the Game?", in *Sport, Education and Society*, vol. 22, n. 3, pp. 391-406.
Elliott, S.K., & Drummond, M.J.N. (2017b), "During Play, the Break, and the Drive Home: The Meaning of Parental Verbal Behaviour in Youth Sport", in *Leisure Studies*, vol. 36, pp. 645-656.
Farné, R. (2024), *In-ludere. Gioco, sport e formazione*, Bologna: Zanichelli.
Farné, R. (2022), "Gioco e sport: quale educazione?," in L. Grion (ed.), *Il senso dello sport: valori, agonismo, inclusione*, Milano-Udine: Mimesis, pp. 57-70.
Fredricks, J.A., & Eccles, J.S. (2004), "Parental Influences on Youth Involvement in Sports", in M.R. Weiss (ed.), *Developmental Sport and Exercise Psychology: A Lifespan Perspective*, Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology, pp. 145-164.
Friedman, H.L. (2013), *Playing to Win. Raising Children in a Competitive Culture*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press.
Goodwin, C. (2000), "Action and Embodiment within Situated Human Interaction", in *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 32, pp. 1489-1522.
Gottzén, L., & Kremer-Sadlik, T. (2012), "Fatherhood and Youth Sports: A Balancing Act between Care and Expectations", in *Gender & Society*, vol. 26, n. 4, pp. 639-664.
Heritage, J. (1984). *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
Heritage, J. (2009), "Questioning in Medicine," in A.F. Freed & S. Ehrlich (eds.), *"Why Do You Ask?": The Function of Questions in Institutional Discourse*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 42-68.
Holt, N.L., & Knight, C.J. (2014), *Parenting in Youth Sport: From Research to Practice*, New York: Routledge.
Holt, N.L., Tamminen, K.A., Black, D.E., Mandigo, J.L., & Fox, K.R. (2009), "Youth Sport Parenting Styles and Practices", in *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, vol. 31, pp. 37-59.
Isidori, E. (2009), *La pedagogia dello sport*, Roma: Carocci.
Isidori, E. (2017), *Pedagogia e sport. La dimensione epistemologica ed etico-sociale*, Milano: FrancoAngeli.
Isidori, E., & Fraile, A. (2008), *Educazione – Sport e Valori. Un approccio pedagogico critico-riflessivo*, Roma: Aracne.
Janssen, I., & LeBlanc, A.G. (2010), "Systematic Review of the Health Benefits of Physical Activity and Fitness in School-aged Children and Youth", in *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, vol. 7, 40.

Jefferson, G. (2004), "Glossary of Transcript Symbols with an Introduction," in G.H. Lerner (ed.), *Conversation Analysis. Studies from the First Generation*, Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing Company, pp. 13-31.

Knight, C.J., Berrow, S.R., & Harwood, C.G. (2017), "Parenting in Sport", in *Current Opinion in Psychology*, vol. 16, pp. 93-97.

Knight, C.J., Dorsch, T.E., Osai, K.V., Haderlie, K.L., & Sellars, P.A. (2016), "Influences on Parental Involvement in Youth Sport", *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, vol. 5, n. 2, 161.

Kremer-Sadlik, T., & Gutiérrez, K. (2013), "Homework and Recreation," in E. Ochs & T. Kremer-Sadlik (eds.), *Fast Forward Family. Home, work and relationships in middle-class America*, Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, pp. 130-150.

Kremer-Sadlik, T., & Kim, J.L. (2007), "Lessons from Sports: Children's Socialization to Values through Family Interaction during Sports Activities", in *Discourse & Society*, vol. 18, n. 1, pp. 35-52.

Kremer-Sadlik, T., Izquierdo, C., & Fatigante, M. (2010), "Making Meaning of Everyday Practices: Parents' Attitudes toward Children's Extracurricular Activities in the United States and in Italy", in *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, vol. 41, n. 1, pp. 35-54.

Lareau, A. (2003), *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Li, J., Huang, Z., Si, W., & Shao, T. (2022), "The Effects of Physical Activity on Positive Emotions in Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis", in *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 19, 14185.

Logan, K. *et al.* (2019), "Organized Sports for Children, Preadolescents, and Adolescents", in *Pediatrics*, vol. 143, n. 6, 1.

MacIntyre, A. (1984), *After Virtue*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Magnanini, A. (2018), *Pedagogia speciale e sport. Modelli, attività e contesti inclusivi tra scuola ed extrascuola*, Dolo: InContropiede.

Mantegazza, R. (1999), *Con la maglia numero sette. Le potenzialità educative dello sport nell'adolescenza*, Milano: Unicopli.

Mari, G. (2017), "Sport e educazione del carattere", in *Pedagogia e Vita*, vol. 1, pp. 63-71.

McNeill, J., Howard, S.H., Vella, S.A., Santos, R., & Cliff, D.A. (2018), "Physical Activity and Modified Organized Sport among Preschool Children: Associations with Cognitive and Psychosocial Health", in *Mental Health and Physical Activity*, vol. 15, pp. 45-52.

Merkel, D.L. (2013), "Youth Sport: Positive and Negative Impact on Young Athletes", in *Open Access Journal of Sports Medicine*, vol. 4, pp. 151-160.

Metsäpelto, R., & Pulkkinen, L. (2014), "The Benefits of Extracurricular Activities for Socioemotional Behavior and School Achievement in Middle Childhood: An Overview of the Research", in *Journal for Educational Research Online*, vol. 6, n. 3, pp. 10-33.

Miller, M., & Swartz, T.T. (2024), "'Getting Moving' and Being 'Active Fit': Class Differences and Similarities in Health-promoting Parenting through

Children's Organized Athletic Activities", in *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 347, 116776.

Morris, R.L., & Kavussanu, M. (2008), "Antecedents of Approach-Avoidance Goals in Sport", in *Journal of Sports Sciences*, vol. 26, pp. 465-476.

O'Rourke, D.J., Smith, R.E., Smoll, F.L., & Cumming, S.P. (2014), "Relations of Parent and Coach-initiated Motivational Climates to Young Athletes' Self-esteem, Performance Anxiety, and Autonomous Motivation: Who Is More Influential?", in *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, vol. 26, pp. 395-408.

Ochs, E., & Kremer-Sadlik, T. (2007), "Introduction: Morality as a Family Practice", in *Discourse and Society*, vol. 18, n. 1, pp. 5-10.

Ochs, E., & Schieffelin, B.B. (1984), "Language Acquisition and Socialization: Three Developmental Stories," in R.A. Shweder & R.A. LeVine (eds.), *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 276-320.

Ochs, E., & Tamar Kremer-Sadlik, T. (2013), "The Good Enough Family," in E. Ochs & T. Kremer-Sadlik (eds.), *Fast-Forward Family: Home, Work, and Relationships in Middle-Class America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 232-252.

Ochs, E., Pontecorvo, C., & Fasulo, A. (1996). "Socializing Taste", in *Ethnos*, vol. 61, pp. 7-46.

Pauletto, F., Aronsson, K., & Galeano, G. (2017), "Endearment and Address Terms in Family Life: Children's and Parents' Requests in Italian and Swedish Interaction", in *Journal of Pragmatics*, n. 109, pp. 82-94.

Peng, Y. (2024), "Gendered Parenting and Conjugal Negotiation over Children's Organised Extracurricular Activities", in *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 45, n. 1, pp. 23-40.

Petitpas, A.J., Cornelius, A.E., Van Raalte, J.L., & Jones, T. (2005), "A Framework for Planning Youth Sport Programs That Foster Psychosocial Development", in *The Sport Psychologist*, vol. 19, n. 1, pp. 63-80.

Pike, K. L. (1966), "Etic and Emic Standpoints for the Description of Behavior," in A.G. Smith (ed.), *Communication and Culture: Readings in the Codes of Human Behavior*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, pp. 152-163.

Pomerantz, A. (1986), "Extreme Case Formulations: A Way of Legitimizing Claims", in *Human Studies*, vol. 9, n. 2-3, pp. 219-230.

Pontecorvo, C., & Arcidiacono, F. (2007), *Famiglie all'italiana. Parlare a tavola*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina.

Sacks, H., Schegloff, E.A., & Jefferson, G. (1974). "A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation", in *Language*, vol. 50, n. 4, pp. 696-735.

Sagar, S.S., & Lavallee, D. (2010), "The Developmental Origins of Fear of Failure in Adolescent Athletes: Examining Parental Practices", *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, vol. 11, pp. 177-187.

Schutz, A. (1967[1932]), *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Sidnell, J., & Stivers, T. (eds.) (2013), *The Handbook of Conversation Analysis*, Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Stefansen, K., Smette, I., & Strandbu, Å. (2018), "Understanding the Increase in Parents' Involvement in Organized Youth Sports", in *Sport, Education and Society*, vol. 23, n. 2, pp. 162-172.

Sutcliffe, J.T., Herbison, J.D., Martin, L.J., McLaren, C.D., Slatcher, R., Benson, A.J., van Woezik, R., Boardley, I.D., Carre, J.M., Cote, J., & Bruner, M. W. (2021), "Exploring Parent-Athlete Sport Related Communication Outside of the Sport Environment with the Electronically Activated Recorder", in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, vol. 54, 101919.

Tamminen, K.A., Poucher, Z.A., & Povilaitis, V. (2017), "The Car Ride Home: An Interpretive Examination of Parent–Athlete Sport Conversations", in *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, vol. 6, n. 4, pp. 325-339.

Tamminen, K.A., Bissett, J. E., Azimi, S., & Kim, J. (2022), "Parent and Child Car-Ride Interactions Before and After Sport Competitions and Practices: Video Analysis of Verbal and Non-verbal Communication", in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, n. 58, 102095.

Teques P., Calmeiro, L., Rosado, A., Silva, C., & Serpa, S. (2019), "Perceptions of Parenting Practices and Psychological Variables of Elite and Sub-Elite Youth Athletes", in *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 10, 1495.

Thrower, S.N., Hamann, M., Stokoe, E., & Harwood, C.G. (2022), "Examining Parent-Child Interactions in British Junior Tennis: A Conversation Analysis of the Pre-competition Car Journey", in *Psychology of Sport & Exercise*, vol. 60, 102166.

Wheeler, S., & Green, K. (2019), "'The Helping, the Fixtures, the Kits, the Gear, the Gum Shields, the Food, the Snacks, the Waiting, the Rain, the Car Rides…': Social Class, Parenting and Children's Organised Activities", in *Sport, Education and Society*, vol. 24, n. 8, pp. 788-800.

Wolfenden, L.E., & Holt, N.L. (2005), "Talent Development in Elite Junior Tennis: Perceptions of Players, Parents, and Coaches", in *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, vol. 17, pp. 108-126.

World Health Organization (2020), *WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour*, retrievable at https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240015128, access March 7th, 2026.