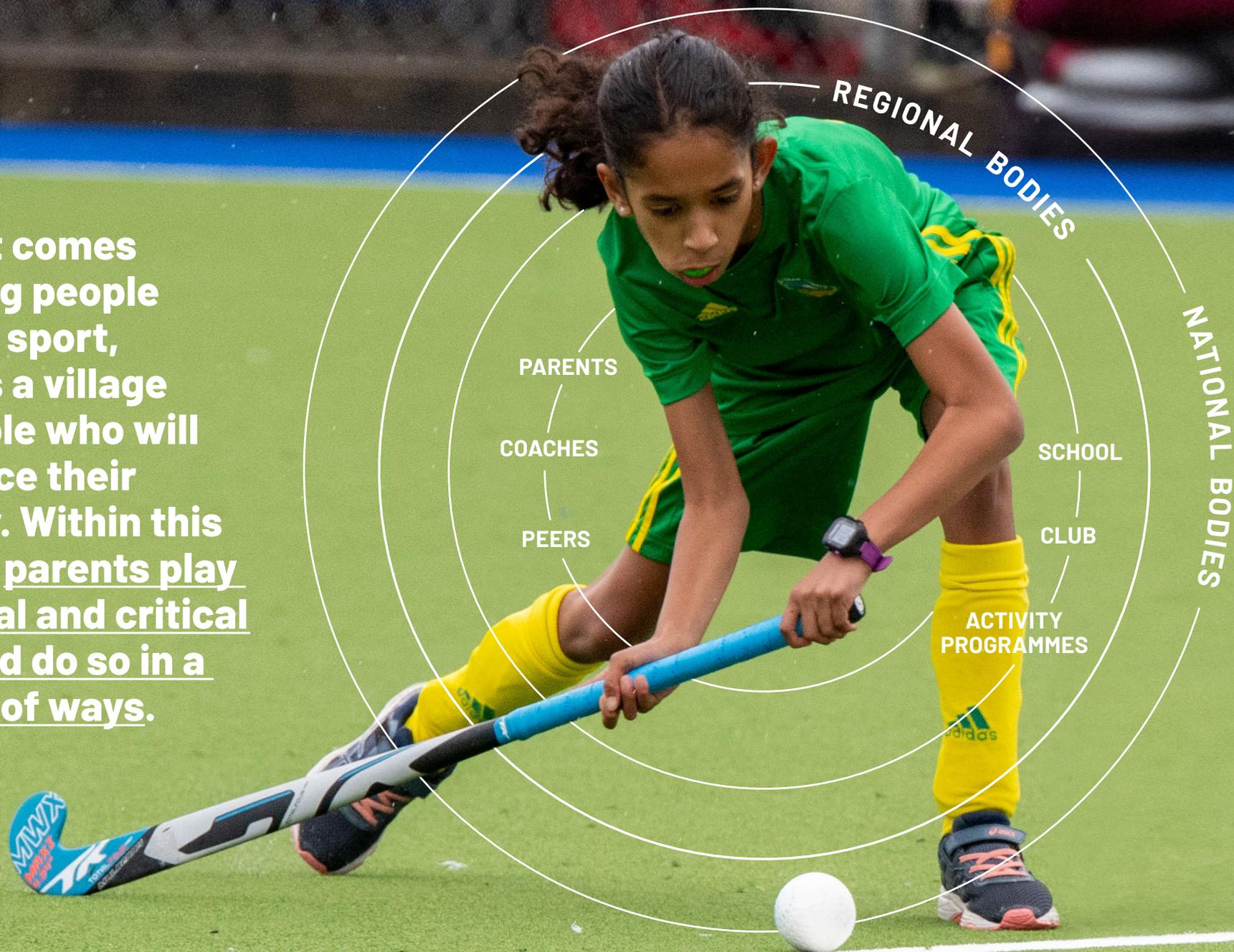


# Creating a positive parent culture

A guide for schools and clubs



**When it comes to young people playing sport, there is a village of people who will influence their journey. Within this village, parents play a central and critical role, and do so in a myriad of ways.**



# Are the parents at your sports club or school assets or allies or are they antagonists?

In this guide, we outline four areas for sports clubs and schools to consider in order to create a positive culture for (and with) sports parents and whānau.

Given how influential parents and whānau are to their children's sport experiences, and how impactful they can be within the sport community, it is important that schools and clubs consider how best to engage with them.

The information in this guide is intended to support schools and clubs consider their approach to parent engagement. We have broken it down into four main categories:



It is important to note that addressing the areas identified in this document doesn't need to translate to a big increase in time or resources. Small day-to-day changes can make a big difference to parents, the schools and clubs, and ultimately the young people playing sport.

From talking to many sport leaders and administrators, we acknowledge that some parents can (at least on face value) be the instigator of challenges and the source of emotional calories. We believe however that, through establishing a positive culture, clear and transparent processes and positive lines of communication clubs and schools can support sport parents to better understand their role.

The purpose of this guide is to share some simple tools and discuss what sport clubs and schools can do to support positive engagements with parents and whānau.

# 1. Language

## How do we talk about parents?

Language is important. Language cues those around us to how we should and shouldn't think and consequently act. So, when it comes to parents, we (sport leaders, administrators and coaches) need to think about how we talk about parents.

We know it seems parents at times can be the cause of some the challenges and issues that sports clubs and schools face (and at times they are!). During these times, take a breath and think how you might frame the subsequent thinking, conversations, and actions. By choosing to frame with "how can we work with parents", you're already on the path to thinking about how you can make parents allies and assets to your wider sporting community.

### Consider...

1.

#### Internal communications

(to coaches, committee and other administrators)

What's the tone of communications about parents - is it positive, does it promote working together with parents? Do you communicate ways of engaging with parents to coaches?

2.

#### External communications

(to parents and whānau)

Is the tone welcoming, supportive? Consider phrases like "working together" and "we value everyone's positive contributions".



**When it comes to how sports clubs and schools talk about parents, the conversation for everyone shouldn't be about how we "deal with parents", but rather, how we "work with parents".**

## 2. Communication and Information

### Giving the appropriate information and guidance

Communication is key to building trusted and supportive relationships with parents and whānau.

Parents want to provide the best quality support to their tamariki and rangatahi but can only do this if they have been given the appropriate information and guidance. From our own research conducted with parents we know that:

- They want more informative opportunities, particularly at their children's sporting events, and for everyone to speak with the same voice.
- They welcomed and have an appetite to learn more about how to better support their children's sporting experiences – they want to provide the best support they can.

We also know that parents benefit from understanding purpose and process. Often, they're not in a position to see the big picture from the perspective of your organisation. Help them to understand this perspective. Likewise, when it comes to process, while they might not agree on everything schools and clubs do, they will appreciate the transparency and clarity you are able to provide.

**There are a variety of ways to provide information to parents and whānau and below are a couple of quick 'do's' and 'don'ts'.**

#### **Do**

- Provide small amounts of relevant information regularly – provide information that will help parents support their child's sport.
- Ensure that messages and information being given to parents are consistent from coaches and administrators.
- Consider the timing and channels of information. Schedule regular communications (in small amounts) and do so through a variety of channels (gatherings and workshops, relaying through coaches, newsletters, handouts and guidebooks, emails etc.).
- Ensure that key information on your school or club's website is up to date and includes policies and procedures (i.e. safeguarding information, season dates or events).
- Identify areas where parents may benefit from formal learning (e.g. nutrition, managing injuries, selection processes, etc.) and engage in experts to share their knowledge in these areas. This could be done in person (e.g. a workshop) or online (e.g. a webinar) at a time suitable to parents. For online sessions or webinars, consider recording these sessions so that parents may rewatch or access it at a time suitable.
- Support some of the more experienced sports parents to share their own knowledge and experiences with less experienced parents.
- Communicate early! Importantly, communicate any changes to programmes or schedules as soon as possible.
- If you're planning on holding face to face sessions with parents remember, food brings people together!

#### **Don't**

- Assume a large one-off information dump (e.g. a long email or a single information evening) will allow you to comprehensively communicate with parents. Often things will get missed or retention will be limited.
- Tell parents how to parent! Be careful trying to tell parents what's best for their tamariki or rangatahi and avoid using the term 'parent education'.
- Assume that if parents don't attend face to face hui or workshops that they aren't interested in the content. They may be juggling multiple priorities. Try and offer information in a variety of ways.

**Read: [Promoting Balance is Better messages](#)**

### 3.

## Culture and Environment

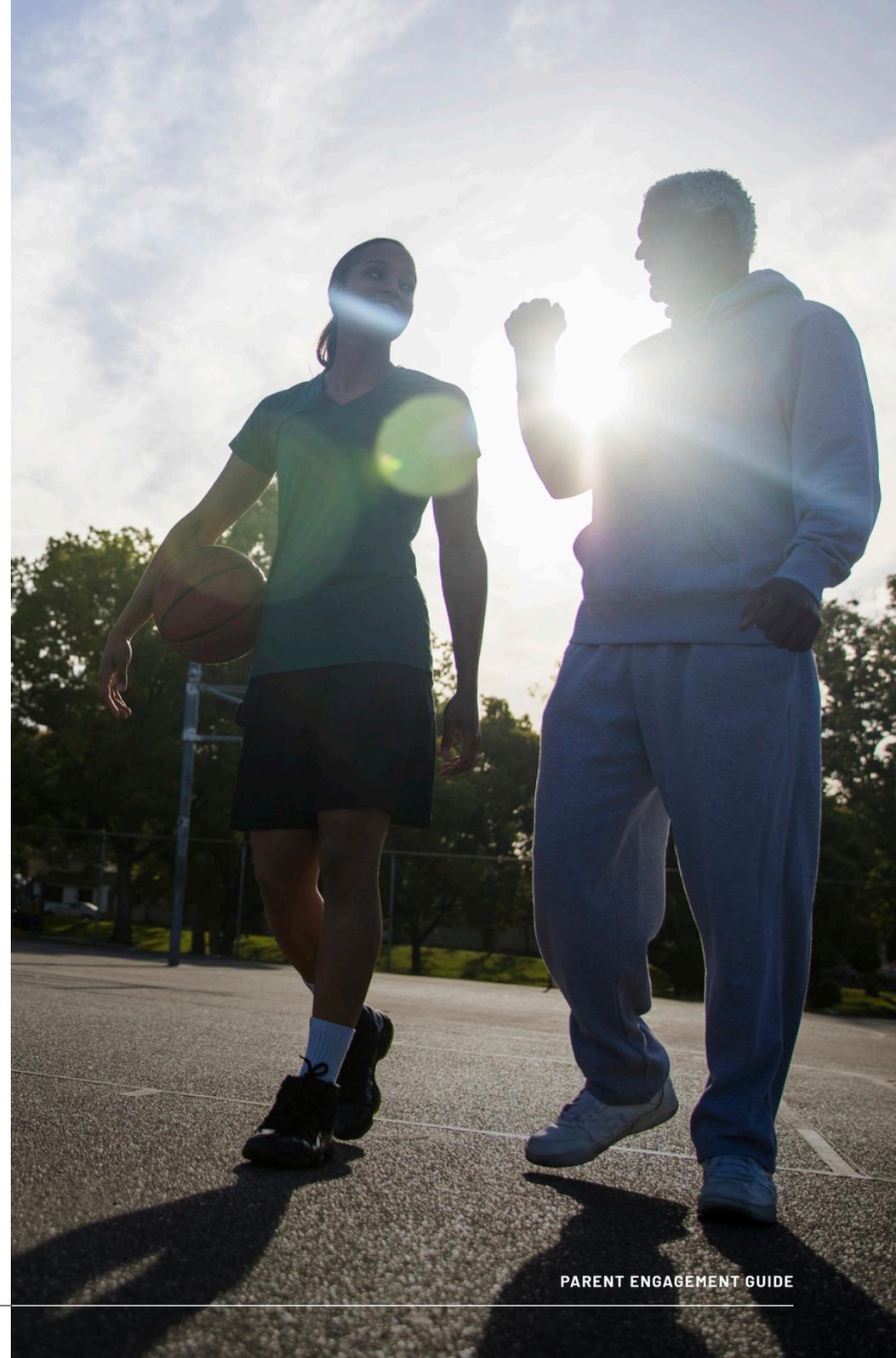
Creating an environment where parents and whānau feel welcomed, valued and supported means they are more likely to contribute positively to school or club sport. As we discussed above, parents should be viewed as allies and a positive partner in supporting young people's sporting experiences.

It's important to acknowledge that parent behaviors can be informed by the structure and systems around them. Often, we find negative parent and whānau behaviour is more prevalent where there is a greater emphasis on winning, and/or a highly competitive selection and deselection environment. This is particularly evident when these types of structures are not appropriate for the age and stage of the young people. Ultimately, while it is expected that adults should be able to regulate their behavior, particularly their emotional responses, it doesn't always play out like that.

### What are some of the implicit and explicit messages?

Taking a critical look at what implicit and explicit messages are being sent to parents is an important step in understanding what kind of culture or environment is being created.

- Are there whānau or social events early in the season that give everyone the opportunity to get to know each other and sets the tone for the season ahead?
- Are there opportunities for parents and whānau to contribute to the club or school environment as a volunteer?
- Are parents and whānau aware and do they understand the school or clubs' philosophy or approach to sport for tamariki and rangatahi? Are parents provided key messages around what positive youth and athlete development in and through sport looks like?
- Do you discuss with parents what success in youth sport looks like (if you don't - short term measures such as points tables and results will fill this void!).
- Are the structures in your club or school sending parents contradicting messages (e.g. you share messages with parents about encouraging their children to play multiple sports, but your sport's programming doesn't allow young people to take a break from the sport / overlaps into other sport seasons).



**Some tactics clubs and schools might want to consider for building a positive culture and environment with parents includes:**

- Language (we know talked about it earlier but it's that important) - consider the language and tone used when talking about parents (dealing with parents vs engaging or working with parents). Is it positive or negative?
- Establish a whānau liaison or key contact in the club or school that is proactively engaging with parents.
- Provide learning opportunities for parents. Importantly, these environments should be inclusive, safe and supportive. The focus should be on ongoing connections and support rather than simply transmitting information.
- Establish clarity around roles and responsibilities for everyone involved (coaches, parents, administrators). This could include specific rules or guidelines regarding engagements following on from things like selections/de-selections. Often, this might need to be communicated in a number of ways (see above sections on Language and Communication).
- Role model positive match day and training environments and clearly communicate what is expected from everyone involved.
- Create social events (such as BBQ's and quiz nights) at the start and/or through the season where parents, coaches and children can interact and get to know each other better. This has the added benefit of parents getting to know each other and providing additional support networks.
- Review how your programmes impact parents, explicitly and implicitly - seek feedback from parents on their experiences and gather suggestions from them around improvements.
- Show gratitude to parents. Explicitly thank them for their support and what they do to facilitate their child's involvement.



## 4.

# Understanding parents and whānau

There are many different ways parents interact within youth sport (i.e. the role/s they play) and many different people parents will interact with (e.g. other participants, coaches, sport administrators). Importantly, the drivers of these interactions (i.e. parents' motivations) also vary.

**It's important to understand how parents differ when it comes to youth sport and consider different approaches to get the most out of our engagements with them.**

Parents own attitudes, knowledge, and assumptions about sport (whether explicit or subconscious) will have a significant influence on young people's experiences in sport and can also impact a club or school's wider sporting community. For example:

- How might a parent's definition of success in youth sport impact the way they support (or hinder) your sport programmes?
- How a parent views the role of sport within their whānau and the implication this might have on their child's involvement within your sports programme?

They may also wear a variety of hats when it comes to youth sport - they might be the taxi driver, the nutritionist, PA of their children's sport schedules, confidant for their child's highs and lows, cheerleader, back-up coach, the list goes on. Importantly, these roles should shift over time as their children become more independent. Schools and clubs can help parents to understand their changing role and how they support their tamariki and rangatahi.



## Helping parents to understand themselves

### Motivation

There are various motivations at play underpinning sport parents and their interactions in youth sport. Some of these motivations are obvious to both parents and others, and some are more subtle, nuanced and hidden (parents might not even be consciously aware of them).

So, how can we support parents to understand these motivations?

#### **Help parents become more aware of their own motivations, especially hidden motivations.**

We find many parents haven't had an opportunity to properly reflect on the 'why'. E.g. Why do they support their children in sport? Why do they want their children to play sport? Why do I value sport as a parent? Prompting parents to think about the 'why' often helps them evaluate (or reevaluate) what and how they support their children in sport. Prompting questions in communications to parents is one tactic sports clubs and schools can use to support parents to reflect on the 'why'. Even more effective, is hosting reflective sessions and conversations with parents. This could be done informally (e.g. through the messaging a coach gives to parents after a training session) or formally, by facilitating a workshop or hui with parents.

#### **Help parents understand their children's motivations?**

It seems simple, but often is missed. Facilitating ways for young people to share with their parents, what motivates them to play sport is an important way to help parents be on the 'same team'. This can be achieved as simply as cueing parents to ask their children "why do you play?", "what's your favourite things about playing...?". Importantly, during times of transition for children (e.g. changing clubs or teams, moving to a different school, starting high school), young people's motivations around sport may shift. Parents should be encouraged to revisit conversations with young people around their motivations (and young people encouraged to share with their parents) during these periods.

**Read: Parents: [Time to talk about your child's why](#)**



## Understanding the parents and whānau in your environment and the role they play

We find the sports clubs and schools benefit from taking the time to think about who their parents and whānau are, what and how they are motivated, and what roles they play in the youth sport environment.

**Firstly, it's important to recognise and respect that aroha (love) is a main driver for sports parents and how they support their children.**

Interactions with parents need to be sensitive of this. Even if there are other motivations at play, we all need to be mindful that parents love for their child will be a key motivating factor for some of the behaviours we might see (good and bad). During challenging interactions with parents, sport leaders, administrators and coaches should first seek to understand the parent. Learn about their perspectives, expectations, and awareness about the sport. Often, it will become obvious that parents want the best for their child (even if how a parent supports their child might be inhibiting what is best, particularly long term; or the parents wants for their child conflict with the goals of the wider programme).



When it comes to understanding and supporting sports parents in their roles, here are some simple tactics sports clubs and schools can explore.

## Provide Connections

### ***Facilitate meaningful connection between parents and your club/school.***

Consider hosting sessions at the start of the year to connect with parents or at the end of the season providing parents with the opportunity to give feedback about their experience or have input into how the environment could be changed to make their involvement easier. Noting that the tone, framing, and facilitation of this kind of session or opportunity is important to think through. This isn't intended to be an opportunity for parents to feedback on what they think their children need or complain about selections etc. This also provides the opportunity to identify potential new volunteers that may be able to provide other types of support.

### ***Facilitate informal and regular social connection between parents within the same team.***

Parents will share with each other logistics and coordination, will share knowledge and can also be a part of setting culture. For new parents, consider how they might be integrated into a wider group - how can a club, school, or what cues can be provided to a coach to support this. Establishing informal sessions to allow parents to meet, greet and talk is a great way to do this. Typically, with a group of parents around a team or programme, there will be self-driven parents who will continue to coordinate connection between parents.

### ***Facilitate and encourage connection between coaches and parents.***

Consider encouraging coaches to connect meaningfully with each of the parents at least one to two times per season to provide an update on how their child is progressing - this could be a conversation after practice, an email, or a phone conversation. Consider what other tools your club or school can provide your coaches to work with parents. Are there opportunities in coach inductions or coach development to include information on parent engagement.

Also, encourage coaches to invite parents to be part of feedback sessions to athletes (either as a team or individually). This helps parents to understand the key teaching points that coaches are trying to deliver to their athletes.

**Watch:** [Setting our kids up for success](#)

While there are many different types of parents and interactions with young people in sport, there are a range of questions we can ask ourselves so we can better understand the parents around the school or club.

- 1.** Who are the parents and whānau in your school or club? What do they do outside of the sports settings? Do they have a skillset that can contribute to the school or club?
- 2.** What does their family dynamic look like - including gender roles?
- 3.** Have they got multiple children playing sport? In the same or different settings?
- 4.** What are their goals or aspirations for their child from sport AND what do they know about their child's aspirations?
- 5.** What connection opportunities can we provide for parents to get to know each other, the coaches and the club or school?

## Safeguarding

First and foremost, parents play an important role in protecting and safeguarding their children. As such, it is important the sports clubs and schools communicate clearly their relevant safeguarding and child protection policies and processes to parents, including:

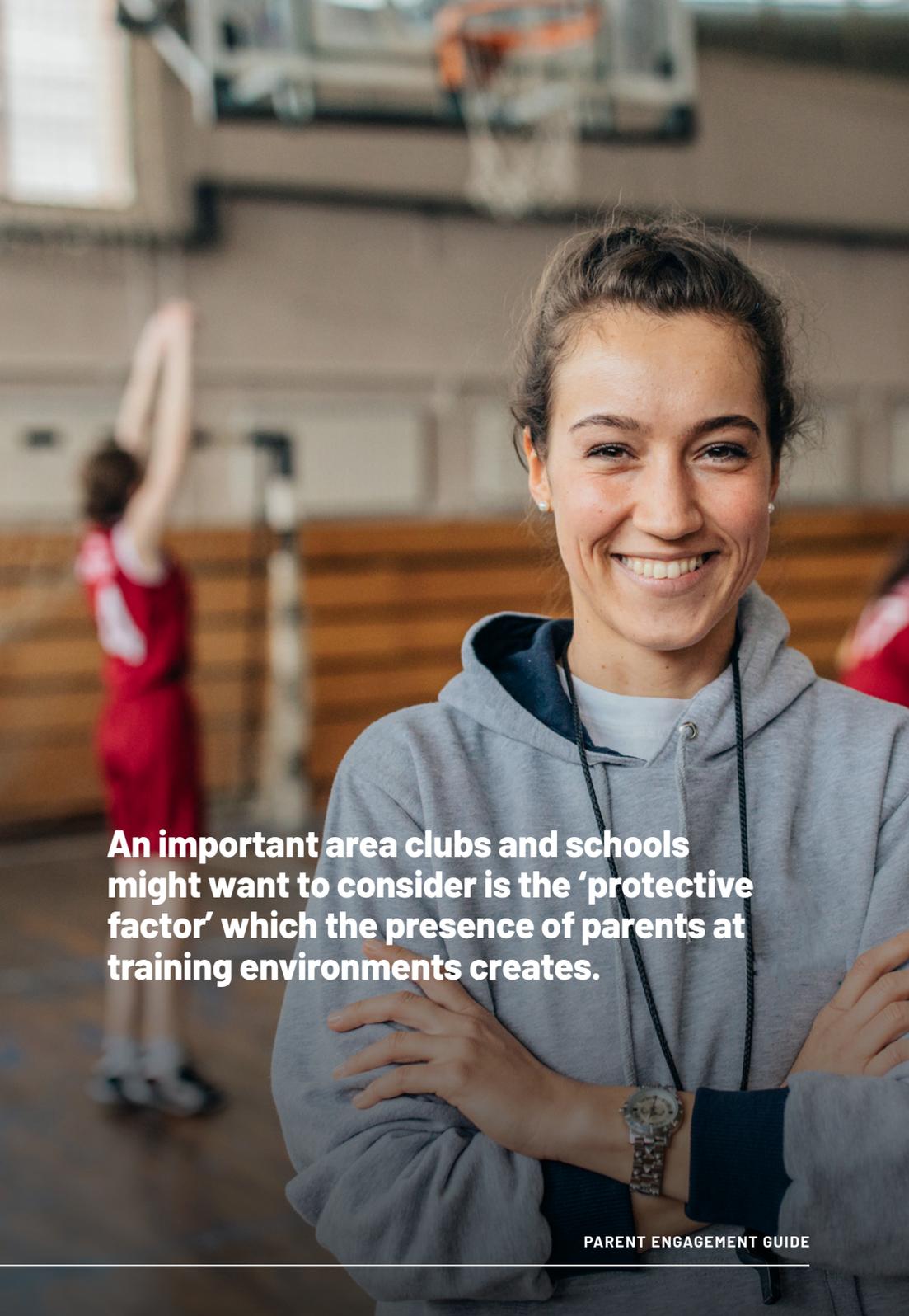
- Child protection incident reporting processes.
- Identifying who the Child Safeguarding representative is in the club or school.
- Providing access to education and training for parents.
- Distributing a code of conduct which sets the standards of behaviour that are expected.

Templates for some of the above can be found at:

[Code of Conduct People Working or Volunteering with Children](#)  
Sport New Zealand - Ihi Aotearoa ([sportnz.org.nz](http://sportnz.org.nz))

[Child safeguarding policies and procedures](#)  
Sport New Zealand - Ihi Aotearoa ([sportnz.org.nz](http://sportnz.org.nz))

An important area clubs and schools might want to consider is the 'protective factor' which the presence of parents at training environments creates. In many sports there has been a trend to introduce policies of 'blocking' out parents from spectating/attending trainings to circumvent issues arising from parents. Unfortunately, the removal of parents from training environments, also removes the safeguarding presence that parents have. If your organisation has a 'no parents at training' policy we would encourage you to review why and consider amending it or undertaking other ways of enabling parents to contribute to safe environments.



**An important area clubs and schools might want to consider is the 'protective factor' which the presence of parents at training environments creates.**

# Summary

Parents and whānau often feel that they are able to support their tamariki and rangatahi in sport better when they are supported, have less stress to deal with and when they feel that they are valued. By targeting parents and giving them more positive experiences in sport they in turn are in a better position to support their children.

## Remember

1. What tone are we using? Shift from “dealing with parents” to “working with parents”.
2. Provide regular and consistent communications.
3. Create a positive culture where parents are able to contribute and feel valued.
4. Get to know the parents and whānau in your club or school.
5. Help parents understand how they can best support their tamariki and rangatahi.

**In a more open and welcoming environment, parents and whānau are more likely to develop positive relationships with coaches, administrators and other parents.**

**We all have a role to play in contributing to positive sport experiences for our tamariki and rangatahi.**

# Further Reading

[Understanding and Enhancing Parental Involvement within English Rugby](#) by Dr Camilla Knight and Donald Barrel

[Understanding the Balance is Better philosophy](#)

[www.balanceisbetter.org.nz](http://www.balanceisbetter.org.nz)

# Glossary

## Tamariki

In the context of Sport NZ, tamariki refers to children 5-11 years.

## Rangatahi

In the context of Sport NZ, rangatahi refers to young people 12-18 years.

## Youth sport system

Set of interdependent persons (i.e. coaches, administrators, referees) and contexts (i.e. competition, trainings, social participation) that influence and are influenced by a young person in sport.

## Balance is Better

Balance is Better is an evidence-based philosophy to support quality sport experiences for all young people, regardless of ability, needs and motivations. It is about young people staying involved in sport for life and realising their potential at the right time.



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