# Enhancing wellbeing, long-term development, and performance in youth sport: Insights from experienced applied sport psychologists working with young athletes in the United Kingdom

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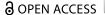
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# Enhancing wellbeing, long-term development, and performance in youth sport: Insights from experienced applied sport psychologists working with young athletes in the United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

Although applied sport psychologists are supporting young athletes drawing on experiential evidence of what works, there is a lack of understanding regarding how to effectively help young athletes enhance their wellbeing, long-term development, and performance. The aim of the current study was to gain insights into the consultancy process from accredited applied sport psychologists working with young athletes (5–18 years) in the United Kingdom, to inform the training and development of practitioners. An Interpretive Descriptive (ID) design was used to generate grounded knowledge relevant to applied practice contexts. The current study was conducted by a British Psychological Society (BPS), Division of Sport and Exercise Psychology (DSEP), research working group and consisted of two phases: First, working group members ($n = 6$) participated in two separate focus groups. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with UK-based sport psychology practitioners ($n = 9$) who had extensive knowledge and experience of working with young athletes. Reflexive thematic analysis generated six higher order themes: (a) Clear intentions, motives, and boundaries; (b) flexible and adaptable theoretical approaches; (c) seeking and securing connections; (d) multiple perspectives matter; (e) indirect interventions maximize impact; and (f) adaptation and integration determine Psychological Skills Training (PST) effectiveness. The current study offers unique and detailed insights regarding the consultancy process when working with young athletes. Such insights are crucial for applied sport psychologists to promote evidence-informed developmentally appropriate practice.

*Lay Summary*: Experienced applied sport psychologists in the UK demonstrated clear motives for working with young athletes, used flexible and adaptable consultancy approaches, secured connections, and assessed young athletes from multiple perspectives. Indirect

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interventions (delivered through coaches, parents, etc.) were considered the most impactful, but adaptation and integration determined PST effectiveness.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

- Practitioners should, whenever possible, work collaboratively with coaches and/or parents (indirectly or directly) to elicit greatest intervention effects.
- Interventions should match the demands of the sport, the young athlete's developmental stage, and their unique individual wants and/or needs.
- PST in youth sport should be simple, adaptable, and where possible integrated within a young athlete's training and competition context.

The growing demands and expectations associated with increasingly professionalized youth sport environments (i.e., training, competition) and talent development pathways in the United Kingdom, has meant that young athletes are now an important client group for the sport psychology practitioner. As a result, there is additional importance placed on the quality and scope of scientific research with young athletes to inform the work of the sport psychology practitioner (Harwood & Thrower, 2019). To date, applied researchers have outlined the developmental considerations when working with young athletes (see Kipp, 2018; Visek et al., 2013), created consultancy models for service delivery (i.e., Blom et al., 2013; Visek et al., 2009), examined the effectiveness of Psychological Skills Training (PST) interventions (see Harwood & Thrower, 2019; Tremayne & Newbery, 2005), explored the role of psychological skills in long-term athletic development (see Dohme et al., 2019), and offered personal accounts of working with young athletes (e.g., Foster et al., 2016; Henriksen et al., 2014; Orlick & McCaffrey, 1991; Weiss, 1991).

For applied sport psychologists, working with young athletes requires an understanding of the developmental changes that young people navigate from early childhood to adolescence (see Kipp, 2018; Visek et al., 2009, 2013). Key cognitive developments during childhood and adolescence include transitioning from concrete to abstract thinking, expansion in the self-perception system, and changes in conceptions of effort and ability (Kipp, 2018). Furthermore, this transition is also marked by physical (i.e., puberty, production of sex hormones), social (i.e., importance of peer groups, need to belong), and emotional changes (Visek et al., 2009, 2013). To accommodate for these complex developmental changes and guide the unique aspects of service delivery with young athletes, existing sport psychology consultancy models (i.e., Keegan, 2015; Poczwardowski et al., 2004; Wylleman, 2000) have been adapted for use when working with young athletes. For instance, the Youth Sport Consultancy Model (YSCM; Visek et al., 2009) was designed to assist practitioners consulting with youth sport teams and athletes, and focuses on six phases of consultation: (a) practitioner considerations (e.g., boundaries and philosophical approach); (b) initiating contact; (c) doing sport psychology (e.g., confidentiality, assessment, game and practice observation, selecting, implementing and processing skills, and time-outs in sport psychology); (d) wrapping up the season and

consultation; (e) assessing the consulting relationship; and (f) termination and continuation (Visek et al., 2009). Similarly, Blom et al. (2013) Youth Sport Psychology Consultation Triangle (YSPCT) was intended to help practitioners navigate the uniqueness of multiple relationships in youth sport (i.e., young athlete, practitioner, coach, and parents) and illustrate the role each dyad plays in addressing the overall wellbeing and interests of young athletes (Harris et al., 2018). In doing so, these models highlighted the nuances and complexity of working with young athletes and the need to develop healthy working relationships with parents and coaches to provide effective services. Such adaptations also suggest that working with young athletes requires approaches to service delivery which are different to those provided to adults (Harris et al., 2018).

Drawing upon these models, researchers have explored different aspects of the consultancy process with young athletes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, to date, most attention has focused on the selection, implementation, and process of PST (i.e., phase three of the YSCM; Visek et al., 2009). PST refers to the learning and implementation of mental techniques that assist individuals in the development of mental skills to achieve performance success and wellbeing (Vealey, 2007, p.288). As such, there is a distinction between psychological techniques/strategies (e.g., imagery, self-talk, goal setting, routines, etc) and psychological skills (e.g., capacity to regulate one's own cognitive, affective, and behavioral states; see Holland et al., 2018). To date, studies fall within four main clusters: (a) single strategy PST interventions (i.e., imagery, self-talk, goal setting, and relaxation), (b) multimodal PST interventions, (c) alternative single strategy interventions (e.g., self-modeling, mindfulness, music), and (d) alternative multimodal interventions with young athletes (see Harwood & Thrower, 2019; Tremayne & Newbery 2005 for reviews). Collectively, findings provide initial evidence to suggest that imagery, self-talk, goal setting, and relaxation interventions can improve psychological skill use, athletic ability, and performance with young athletes (e.g., Munroe-Chandler et al., 2012; Meggs & Chen, 2019). In addition, research has also provided strong support for the efficacy of PST packages on performance enhancement across a range of sports, levels, and developmental stages (e.g., Bell et al., 2013; Fournier et al., 2005; Sharp et al., 2013). However, apart from a few areas (e.g., imagery), there remains a lack of systematic depth of research on a specific psychological strategy that may inform age and stage appropriate guidelines for practitioners working with young athletes in specific contexts (Harwood & Thrower, 2019). Furthermore, the well-controlled experimental designs used in these studies are often far removed from the reality of working in the field with young athletes (Henriksen et al., 2014).

Beyond exploring PST and performance enhancement, research has also illustrated the role that psychological skills can play in facilitating long-term athletic development. For instance, studies have shown how goal setting, self-talk, imagery, relaxation, self-evaluations, social support seeking, and pre-performance routines (e.g., Butt et al., 2010; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Holland et al., 2010; MacNamara et al., 2010a, 2010b) help young athletes cope with the growing demands and expectations associated with increasingly professionalized youth sport environments (i.e., training, competition) and talent development pathways (see Dohme et al. 2019 for a review). In addition, there has been a growing importance placed on young athletes also developing (transferable) life skills through sport to facilitate positive youth development and promote mental

health/wellbeing (see Holt et al., 2017). This body of literature has played a key role in the recent diversification of applied sport psychology practice in youth sport, with an emphasis on competencies relating to positive youth development, promoting life skills, and mental health/wellbeing provisions (Sly et al., 2020).

In light of these considerations, researchers have started to explore the broader context-ual "craft knowledge" of experienced practitioners and their own accounts (e.g., Foster et al., 2016; Henriksen et al., 2014), personal experiences, and reflections of working with young athletes (e.g., Barker et al., 2011; Howells, 2017; Orlick & McCaffrey, 1991; Weiss, 1991). These articles suggest that practitioners typically deliver a holistic skills package that includes, but also goes beyond, sport-specific mental skills to foster the long-term develop-ment of young athletes (Henriksen et al., 2014). Acknowledging developmental considera-tions (see Visek et al., 2009), practitioners also adjust PST for children and adolescents by using simpler strategies (i.e., characteristics of the individual athletes rather than develop-mental stages; Orlick & McCaffrey, 1991; Foster et al., 2016), integrate interventions within athletes' daily training environment (e.g., during practice sessions), and involve coaches, family, and peers as much as possible (Foster et al., 2016; Henriksen et al., 2014; Orlick & McCaffrey, 1991). Nonetheless, by focusing primarily on intervention delivery, these studies have only given passing mention to other key aspects of the consultancy process (e.g., pro-fessional boundaries and philosophy, building rapport or relationships, assessment with young athletes; see Keegan, 2015; Visek et al., 2009) which are likely to underpin and deter-mine intervention effectiveness.

Consequently, although the aforementioned literature collectively offers a useful start-ing point for sport psychology practitioners working with young athletes, this body of literature has overlooked the subtleties of how practitioners deliver interventions differ-ently based on cultural differences, developmental stages, or contextual factors (e.g., individual vs. team sport, culture of the sport, level, point in a season, working privately vs. for a club). In addition, there is an absence of coherent sport-specific research to allow practitioners or coaches from a specific sport (e.g., tennis, soccer) to follow evidence-based scientific advice in a sport across the developmental spectrum (e.g., chil-dren, early, mid, late adolescents, etc). As a result, although experienced practitioners may serve young athletes with anecdotal and experiential evidence of what works, there is a lack of clear evidence to inform the training and practice of applied sport psychologists regarding how to help young athletes enhance their well-being, long-term development, and performance (Harwood & Thrower, 2019).

The absence of clear evidence-based guidance or recommendations for organizations responsible for training pathways (e.g., British Psychological Society [BPS], American Psychological Association [APA]), also means that practitioners are often left to "learn on the job" and can struggle to understand how best to apply such knowledge in youth sport contexts and with different audiences (Knight et al., 2018). This is a particular area of concern to the field, and its long-term future, considering that young athletes are often the first clients that many practitioners work with, and early experiences of sport psychology will be largely influenced by the quality of delivery from these practitioners (Bell et al., 2022). Taking these points into consideration, the purpose of the current study was to gain insights from experienced applied sport psychologists working with a range of young athletes in the UK, to inform the training and

development of practitioners. Specifically, the current study aimed to answer the following research questions: (a) What are practitioners' consulting philosophies when working with young athletes?; (b) What are the most effective ways to understand, assess, and build working relationships with young athletes?; (c) What are the most effective psychological techniques, strategies and skills when working with young athletes?; and (d) How are these psychological techniques and strategies delivered when working with young athletes? Developmental and contextual factors (e.g., individual vs. team sport, culture of the sport, level, point in a season, working privately vs. for a club) were also explored in relation to each of these research questions.

## Methods

### Research design

To address the applied and exploratory nature of the research questions, the current study used interpretive description (ID; see Thorne, 2016). ID was originally developed within the discipline of nursing to meet the need for a pragmatic and highly contextualized qualitative approach that draws on practitioners' experiences and translates this back into the applied setting (Kahlke, 2014). As such, Thorne (2016) has cautioned against the use of apriori theory that is selected in advance of data collection and used as a prescription for understanding the data. Therefore, ID draws upon various theoretical approaches, considers expert knowledge as the basis for new inquiry, uses multiple and diverse data collection approaches, and adopts an inductive analytical approach that goes beyond description by exploring meanings and explanations that lead to changes in practice (Hunt, 2009; Thorne, 2016). ID therefore departs from what convention in the social sciences might consider genuinely interpretive, toward processes that will more effectively illuminate possibilities for thought and action (Thorne, 2016). Consistent with this positioning, the current study was conducted from a pragmatic philosophical perspective. Pragmatists emphasize the practical problems experienced by people, the research questions, and the consequences of inquiry (Poucher et al., 2020). Specifically, pragmatists adopt a relativist ontological position (i.e., truth is what works at the time) and consider shared beliefs and agreement within a community as a way for a practical level of truth to exist (Giacobbi et al., 2005).

### Research context: BPS research working group

The current study was conducted by a British Psychological Society (BPS), Division of Sport and Exercise Psychology (DSEP), funded research working group. The working group was titled: "Psychological Skill Use for Performance Enhancement and skill Refinement in YOUth" (PSUPER YOU) and brought together practitioners and applied researchers with extensive knowledge and experience of working with, and/or researching, young athletes to generate high quality research regarding psychological skill use for wellbeing, long-term development, and performance in UK youth sport. The working group included 10 (seven males, three females) youth sport psychology practitioners and/or researchers from England ($n = 5$), Scotland ($n = 2$), and Wales ($n = 3$). The working group met five times over a 2-year period between January 2021 to December 2022.

## Participants

The inclusion criteria for the current study required participants to be a BPS and/or British Association for Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) accredited sport and exercise psychologist, registered with the Health Care Professional Council (HCPC) in the United Kingdom, and have experience of working in at least one of the following approximate developmental stages: mid-to-late childhood (5–11 years), early adolescence (12–15 years), or mid-to-late adolescence (16–18 years; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Kipp, 2018). Criterion-based sampling (Patton, 2014) was subsequently used to recruit 15 participants from England ($n = 8$), Scotland ($n = 2$), and Wales ($n = 5$). Participants were aged between 28 and 50 years ($M_{age} = 41.92$, $SD = 6.53$) and had between five to 26 years of applied experience working with young athletes ($M_{expereince} = 12.63$, $SD = 6.52$; see Supplementary Material 1). Participants had the experience of working with young athletes across a range of sports, including but not limited to soccer ($n = 12$), rugby ($n = 7$), swimming ($n = 7$), cricket ($n = 6$), golf ($n = 6$), tennis ($n = 6$), athletics ($n = 5$), and gymnastics ($n = 5$). It is important to note that practitioners fulfilled varied and differing roles (e.g., independent practitioner, consultant for a youth sport organization, full or part-time practitioner at a professional club's academy) when delivering their services to young athletes.

## Procedure

Following institutional ethical approval, the current study was divided into two phases. During the first phase, members of the PSUPER YOU research working group who met the inclusion criteria ($n = 6$) participated in two separate exploratory focus groups, which lasted 127 and 193 minutes ($M_{length} = 160.00$, $SD = 46.67$). Following this, a further nine applied sport psychologists (not part of the working group), who met the inclusion criteria and were considered "information-rich cases" by the working group (Patton, 2014), were recruited via personal contacts to participate in semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 66 and 82 minutes ($M_{length} = 77.08$; $SD = 9.08$). Interviews were chosen as the most appropriate method during phase two due to the length of the focus groups and the absence of existing relationships among participants to facilitate open, honest, and free-flowing discussion. During both phases, participants provided informed consent and were asked to complete a reflexive timeline prior to participating in their focus group or interview (see next section). All focus groups and interviews were conducted online (via Zoom) by the first author due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the geographical spread of participants. It is important to note that interviews and focus groups focused on practice both within and mostly beyond the pandemic.

## Data collection

### Pre-interview/focus group timeline
Pre-interview/focus group timelines were used to collect demographic information (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, training pathway, years of experience) and as an "elicitation tool" (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) to encourage participants to reflect on their current and past experiences of working with young athletes (see Supplementary Material 2). Participants

were asked to summarize their previous and current involvement as an applied sport psychologist in youth sport, describe their consulting philosophy, and briefly describe their primary objectives when working with young athletes. Participants were then encouraged to reflect and write brief notes regarding: (a) The most effective ways to understand, assess, and build working relationships, as well as (b) the most effective psychological techniques, strategies, and skills to enhance wellbeing, long-term development, and performance when working with young athletes during childhood (5–11 years), early adolescence (12–15 years), and mid-to-late adolescence (16–18 years). Participants were asked to only answer questions if they had worked with young athletes in that specific developmental stage. The written notes from each participant's pre-interview timeline were used to tailor each individual interview guide and were also integrated into the data analysis process.

### Interview/focus group guides

Given the exploratory nature of the current study, a semi-structured interview guide was developed by the working group to allow probing of further views and opinions, generate in-depth answers, and create a consistent level of depth across the interviews (Patton, 2014). In line with ID, *analytic frameworks* were drawn upon as lenses to explore the sport psychology consultancy process (i.e., Blom et al., 2013; Keegan, 2015; Visek et al., 2009) alongside young athletes' development over time (i.e., process-person-context-time; Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Specifically, the interview guide was divided into three main sections. Section one explored the participant's consultancy approach (e.g., *you wrote on the demographic form that your consulting philosophy was [blank], can you explain what you mean by that?*) as well their primary aims/motives/objectives when working with young athletes. Section two focused on how practitioners build relationships, assess, and understand young athletes (e.g., *how do you build a rapport/relationship with young athletes?*). Section three examined the psychological techniques and skills that are most effective or ineffective when working with young athletes (e.g., *what psychological techniques or skills do you turn to time and time again that you know are impactful with young athletes?*). Probing questions were used to explore differences across developmental stages and contextual factors which may influence effectiveness (e.g., individual vs. team sport; culture of the sport; level; working privately vs. for a club/organization; working proactively vs. reactively; working directly with athletes/indirectly via parents/coaches; time constraints; Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

### Data analysis

ID favors ways of thinking about and organizing insights that develop as the researcher works iteratively with the data (Thorne et al., 2004). As a result, data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis aims to ensure that the final analysis of any data results from a deep and prolonged immersion in the data itself (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The six-phases of reflexive thematic analysis were conducted by the first author using NVivo 12. During phase one, interviews were professionally transcribed and then read and re-read to promote familiarity. Through this initial phase, points of interest in relation to the research questions

were noted down. Phase two involved inductively coding the timelines and sections of the transcripts that were pertinent to the research questions. In line with the aims of ID, the focus was on generating a broad understanding of the data, rather than overly detailed line-by-line coding (Hunt, 2009). In the third phase of analysis, the coded data were grouped into sub-themes (e.g., "building knowledge and self-awareness" and "connecting scenarios, skills, and strategies") and themes (e.g., "adaptation and integration determines effectiveness"). These initial themes were discussed with the working group who offered initial thoughts and insights (i.e., *meeting three*). In phase four, the themes were viewed as a whole data set to determine whether they formed a coherent pattern and whether all coded extracts related to their themes. At this point, the research working group acted as "*critical friends*" (Smith & McGannon, 2018) and encouraged reflexivity by challenging the first author's interpretations (i.e., *meeting four*). Phase five involved further reflecting on the themes with the research working group and refining the focus of each theme and thematic labels (i.e., *meeting five*). Consistent with the ID approach, during the analytical process, particular consideration was given to additional layers of interpretation to facilitate application (e.g., subtle differences across developmental stages). Finally, phase six involved selecting appropriate quotes to support each theme and using those to write up the results section. It is important to note that minor edits were made to verbatim quotes (e.g., removing partial words, repetition, "*ums*" and "*ahs*" etc) and ellipses were used to remove redundant words to improve readability and understanding, not to change the meaning (see Thorne, 2020). For example, "*performance side of their – of their – of their identity*" was changed to "*performance side of their identity*".

## Quality criteria

Drawing upon a "relativist" approach (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), the current study can be evaluated using existing criteria for judging the quality of ID (i.e., *epistemological integrity, representative credibility, analytic logic, interpretive authority,* and *contextual awareness*; see Thorne, 2016). First, the current study demonstrates *epistemological integrity* through clear and transparent reporting of the research questions, philosophical position (i.e., pragmatism), methodological approach (i.e., ID), data collection methods (i.e., semi-structured focus groups, interviews), and data analysis process (i.e., reflexive thematic analysis). Second, *representative credibility* was achieved through recruiting diverse "information-rich" participants from across the UK and using both focus groups and interviews, which enabled in-depth data to be collected through shared discourse as well as individual experiences. Participants were also given the opportunity to review the results, provide feedback regarding their interpretations of the data, and offer additional insights, which resulted in minor changes to some quotations to clarify meaning (i.e., member reflections and ethical practice; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Third, *analytic logic* was attained by engaging with theory (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Keegan, 2015) as well as research on this topic which helped to influence both the pre-interview booklet and interview guide. Finally, both *interpretive authority* and *contextual awareness* were achieved through ongoing and extensive critical discussions with the other members of the research working group (i.e., "*critical friends*"; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

## Results

The analytical process generated six higher order themes: (a) Clear intentions, motives, and boundaries; (b) flexible and adaptable theoretical approaches; (c) seeking and securing connections; (d) multiple perspectives matter; (e) indirect interventions maximize impact; and (f) adaptation and integration determines PST effectiveness. These themes, and further sub-themes (see Supplementary Material 3), are illustrated below.

### Clear intentions, motives, and boundaries

Practitioners spoke at length about how working in youth sport requires clear intentions, motives, and age-related boundaries. Specifically, their personal values and core beliefs regarding the importance of sport in young peoples' development informed their strong motives to work with and help support young athletes. Practitioners fundamentally believed in the importance of "getting it right" from the start and creating youth sport environments that facilitate enjoyment, fun, and long-term involvement. Practitioners also believed that in the need to prepare young athletes to manage the demands of their sport as well as preparing them for upcoming challenges and transitions within (e.g., injuries, moving up age groups, being released) and outside of sport. This typically resulted in practitioners prioritizing young athletes' personal growth and development, moving beyond narrow athletic identities, and developing transferable life skills. Ensuring young athletes both enjoyed and gained a "psychological return" on their sport experience (i.e., growth as an athlete and person) led to careful management of the interplay between wellbeing, long-term development, and performance across all developmental stages. As one participant explained:

> It's a holistic philosophy. It's about focusing on the personal growth, identity, and psychosocial skills of the athlete and their wellbeing as well as the athletic development and performance side of their identity. Those to me reflect the internal personal values and drivers about how sport and psychology can help this young person (Participant 2).

For some participants, their fundamental beliefs about the importance of fun and enjoyment in youth sport, alongside its role in the development of young people, created an internal conflict when asked to work directly with children (under 11 years of age). For example, one participant said:

> For me a nine-year old is a child who should be enjoying their sport and it should be about fun, excitement, friends, and being active. And these young gymnasts are doing things that are frightening them and accepting money to help them overcome that fear … I feel uncomfortable about that (Participant 4).

This led to a small number of practitioners creating age-related boundaries regarding how they practiced and/or only working with young athletes if they felt it was in the child's best interest. These boundaries varied depending on the situation (e.g., overcoming fear vs. improving performance) and the sport type (e.g., early vs. late specialization sports). As one practitioner, who worked primarily in an elite soccer academy, outlined:

> When I'm working with young athletes, there is not definitive cut-off point for direct one-to-one work, but I have done less one-to-one work with athletes under the age of around

14-to-15. The younger a player is, the more I'd likely be emphasizing indirect work and assessment, through other people, for example their parents, coaches, or MDT team, because the young person will often struggle to articulate things themselves, or may be less aware of what's going on for them, due to their developmental stage. So, I'd be looking at helping that group around the young person understand what's going on for them (Participant 7).

Although these decisions were largely based on young athletes' cognitive development (e.g., ability to think abstractly and self-reflect), working indirectly with key stakeholders was also viewed as a way in which practitioners could support young athletes whilst also avoiding the stigma (or labelling) sometimes associated with working directly with a sport psychologist.

### Flexible and adaptable theoretical approaches

Despite similar underpinning motives and beliefs about youth sport, practitioners' core theoretical approaches ranged from being client-centered (e.g., humanistic) to more practitioner-led (e.g., CBT, REBT, ACT, Psychodynamic). For some, their core approaches had remained relatively stable, although for others it had evolved over time. As one participant explained:

I started my training as CBT, but I learnt in a sport that [only] gets you so far when you're in the field of play you don't have time to stop and start disputing thoughts, you just actually need to get on with whatever's important. So the ACT framework just fits that much better … so I sort of shifted my philosophy (Participant 14).

Although these core approaches were the foundations of their applied work, participants felt they had to be flexible with their approach based on young athletes' cognitive development. For example, one practitioner said:

I see it [as] behavior cognitive with young kids and cognitive behavior with adults and adolescents. I think when the behavior has actually helped them to understand, which then reinforces their behavior, with the younger ages. Whereas that way does work with the adolescent, but I also think with the adolescent, you can help them to understand how their thoughts impact their behavior and show them how that behavior then impacts their performance (Participant 2).

Although some practitioners remained close to their core approach when working with young athletes, the majority described how they used an "eclectic", "pluralistic", "pragmatic", or "integrated" approach. As one participant explained: "I would define myself as cognitive behavioral insomuch that I would utilize techniques and that's the paradigm I adopt. But there is so much of the person-centered element that feeds into my work" (Participant 3). By drawing carefully upon different modalities, these practitioners could adapt and meet the wants and needs of coaches (e.g., psychoeducation) and/or the young athlete(s) in front of them. They could also be flexible in different situations (e.g., young athletes wanting a quick fix vs. longer-term solution) and subtly adjust their approach depending on developmental differences (e.g., more practitioner-led approaches during childhood). The following timeline extract captures these points and explains why working in youth sport favors more integrative approaches:

> Having been fortunate enough to train under a humanistic practitioner, this immediately sat well with my own core values and heavily influenced my practice philosophy … I would very much see the athlete as a human first and use an approach of listening to their story and facilitating them to understand themselves and their emotional responses better. That said, my work and approach to an individual will be based on their needs at the time. Taking this into consideration first and foremost I will be guided as to how I facilitate my work with them. This means that I am adaptable to their needs and will incorporate different styles of practice to increase the impact of the work, including CBT, ACT etc when it fits well with the work I am doing with that individual (Participant 11).

Alongside adopting an integrative approach, practitioners often had to prioritize young athlete's intervention goals and objectives (e.g., performance improvements) over their own priorities (e.g., help optimize the wellbeing of young person through their enjoyment, engagement, and development within sport). However, this was typically justified on the basis that wellbeing, development, and performance are all interlinked. As one practitioner stated: "If you perform better you enjoy it more, and if you enjoy it more you probably will perform better … they're all sort of inherently linked" (Participant 1). Similarly, another participant added: "If wellbeing is improved then performance improves as well, they're not standalone things, they interlinked" (Participant 9).

## Seeking and securing connections

Practitioners felt building relationships were vital for being effective when working with young athletes and often began by showing an interest in their sport as well as them as a person. As one participant explained: "[When] you read the literature, the only consistent thing that comes through as being effective in terms of our practice is the relationship between the practitioner and the client" (Participant 9). Some participants, who worked within youth sport academies spoke about the value of being able to spend time in the environment and getting to know young athletes prior to working with them through informal chats, being inquisitive about their experience, talking about their favorite athletes, sharing sporting experiences, and/or getting involved in training and warm-ups. The following quote captures the importance of seeking connection points with young athletes:

> Just trying to connect with the individuals and then you adapt your approach to the age and the developmental level within that. There's obviously a range of the typical 8 and 9-year-olds and the level of self-awareness but it's about trying to understand the individual and connect to them I guess first and foremost. And talking about the sport is obviously a nice way to connect and to chat to them about how their training is going and any sort of athletes they look up to. So trying to find that connection is important (Participant 6).

Participants felt that, no matter the age of the participant, an informal approach was beneficial. However, what this approach specifically looked like varied depending on the individual athlete's needs. An informal approach was also used as an entry point when working with young athletes in more private and individual settings. As one participant explained:

> It helps you connect with the kids … I won't ever start with, "Why do you think your mum wanted you to see me?" or, "What's holding you back?", we always start with, "What

do you love about your sport? What does it give you? And what are your friends like in your sport?" And it'll be half an hour through the session before we start talking about what might be holding them back or what they are worried about (Participant 8).

Practitioners felt more comfortable and found it easier to build rapport or gain "buy-in" quickly when they had a background or prior experience of working in the sport. This was considered to be most important with younger athletes, as one participant explained: "You get better "buy in" straight off the bat from the sports you know better … especially with the younger kids, they buy in more quickly" (Participant 1). However, when this was not the case practitioners also viewed early interactions as an opportunity to understand the sport through the lens of the athlete:

I definitely try to understand their sport as much as possible. Yeah, absolutely. That would be in that sort of initial intake. There's lots of questions around that and sometimes it's helpful having no understanding of the sport, because then you ask more questions, you don't go in with assumptions about what it's going to be like. So yeah, I think it's really important to try and understand the sport, but through their lens, not my understanding of the sport, and then asking them questions about it from my point of view, if that makes any sense. Sort of getting them to tell me how they see the sport and what it's like and what's important (Participant 14).

Beyond spending time with young athletes in the environment and/or showing an interest in their sport to connect with young athletes and build a sense of familiarity, participants also highlighted the importance of being genuine, authentic, trustworthy, and honest with all young athletes. However, trust and confidentiality were considered to be particularly important for those working with older athletes on talent development pathways, due to the constant judgment and evaluation they experience. As one practitioner said: "I think it is around trust, particularly in elite academy setting … it's like I am not part of the coaching staff. I do not impact your selection" (Participant 3). These characteristics were considered crucial for building and maintaining the relationship and was achieved through being consistent with young athletes and maintaining professional boundaries. As one participant summarized:

Practicing what you preach in terms of empathy and non-judgmentally, warmth, openness, etc. They [children] need to know that if they say something … it can't find its way back to the coach but also that you're not gonna react in kind of a judgmental, hostel way, that kind of gives them the unconditional positive [regard] they're not getting anywhere else (Participant 9).

### Multiple perspectives matter

Beyond ways to connect with young athletes, understanding and assessing their more specific needs was also discussed as a continuous, ongoing, and dynamic process. Practitioners spoke about this process typically starting with the person who contacted the practitioner and often led to interactions with other stakeholders (e.g., parents, coaches, support staff, and host families). One participant explained the importance of multiple perspectives (aka team formulation) and insights to formulate a greater understanding with young athletes:

So we'll do this at [Premier League Club Name] Academy a lot. We'll get parents, maybe some people from school potentially, maybe host family, but often coaches, some staff, and parents in a room to ask questions about what's going on for the player. And then trying to make sense of that – so actually he really struggles in this situation because he's got a real strong footballing identity, he's feeling the pressure, whatever it is. Right, now we understand that, what are the interventions we are gonna put in place? (Participant 7)

Practitioners also spoke about how secure connections with young athletes paved the way for open and "free flowing" conversations which typically started by discussing the psychological demands of their sport, discussing case studies or media articles, and exploring stories/descriptions of their own experiences (e.g., best vs. worst performances), before narrowing down to identify what they would like to improve on or specific difficulties/challenges they were facing. These conversations were facilitated using counseling skills (e.g., reflection, summarizing, paraphrasing) and did not differ based on athletes' developmental stage. However, some participants asked younger athletes to bring sporting items (e.g., medals, kit) or used activities (e.g., drawing) to help facilitate these conversations and give insights regarding their motives (e.g., winning, participation). As one practitioner explained:

[I] look to unpick or explore that picture to a greater or lesser degree based on their age and their ability to be self-aware and reflect. And then almost compare that picture in my head to the one that the parents have described – and maybe the challenge of the coach –just to start to create sort of colorful narratives and understand, that is extremely useful. If it's to do with for example nerves or butterflies before a competition or an event, we might do some pencil and paper stuff to sort of get them to sketch out the timescales or some very brief temporal phrases. So it's a variety of different techniques and modalities (Participant 5).

Practitioners who were embedded within youth sport academies or clubs also spoke about the additional opportunity to observe young athletes during training and competition. The following quote highlights the value of these somewhat unique observation opportunities:

When you have more time and you're more embedded, that's where I think observation and relationship building forms part of the needs analysis. You might see that the behaviors they're exhibiting don't match up with what they're saying to you, if you have a relationship with them, you can ask them why that's the case. And then that might reveal their needs. I think that's ideal, you know, that triangulation is obviously better. But the constraints of service delivery, I mean, you don't always have that (Participant 13).

As a final point, practitioners working in youth sport academies were often expected (or required) to use questionnaires, performance profiling, or rating systems to "objectively" measure young athletes over time. Although participants had differing views about this, they were generally considered to generate a useful "information bank" which could be used to either track development, highlight discrepancies (e.g., coach score vs. athletes score) or interesting cases (e.g., athletes showing high social desirability bias), and/or provide a basis for more in-depth conversations. As one participant stated:

I think it is useful, it provides a good starting point to be able to understand an athlete and I use that to inform where they are, but I've found with the golfers in particular it's

only one tiny, small part how I might assess them and understand their needs. It's a brilliant stimulus for conversation, but it's not something I would hang my hat on with 100% certainty that it's ringing true with that athlete (Participant 12).

### Indirect interventions maximize the impact

Alongside the multiple perspectives used to understand young athletes' wants and needs, participants felt their most effective interventions when working in youth sport environments were often through working indirectly with coaches, parents, and support staff to help young athletes to manage the demands of the sport, the pressure of academies, transitions, etc. Although creating a coherent and aligned youth sport environment depended on buy-in from key stakeholders, practitioners' starting point was often to consider which stakeholder was "best positioned" to support a young athlete and then to work with them through the process. As one practitioner explained:

I work heavily with coaches, parents, and other practitioners. I always try to educate all those groups on the adolescent brain and development side of things, so that they understand what's really going on. If there's an intervention often it will involve more than just me and the athlete, it will often involve the coach or someone else, the parents as well. But yeah, the intervention is not necessarily just with the athlete. And sometimes it's rarely with the athlete, sometimes it's the environment around them that needs to change and adapt (Participant 14).

Beyond educating and supporting stakeholders, participants who were full-time or working regularly in youth sport environments also sought opportunities to proactively embed interventions and strategies within coaching practices. For instance, participants spoke about how they integrated interventions within coaching sessions, warm-ups, and debrief sessions to ensure psychology was a normal part of young athletes training (e.g., training under pressure) as well as their pre- and post- performance routines (e.g., mindfulness stretching, post-match reflective practice). One participant explained the reasons for embedding interventions within coaching practices:

It does come back down to the delivery style. It does come down to the time you have with the player, compared to working through the coach – working these strategies through the coach because I actually think some of this stuff actually is effective, but can be more effective through the coach than it is necessarily effective with us just once a week, trying to deliver something which is not integrated or it's not functionally equivalent and integrated into the actual tennis or the football motor skill context (Participant 2).

Practitioners also emphasized the need to constantly check understanding, particularly when working with young children, and seek opportunities to reinforce or offer psychological insights during coaching sessions. In addition, when working with adolescent athletes, participants explained the value of "drip-feeding" techniques and strategies alongside the more technical and tactical aspects of performance. As one participant explained:

I'm out on the course with them. If I see something, I point it out or if they've practicing on the range or wherever, on the wedge play area, the coach might say something technical and I'll jump in and say, "And have you perhaps thought about this element of it as well in relation to the focus, for example, where you're at and how you prepare for each shot?" So I think with kids particularly that's effective because they're getting little sound bites of information rather than it being something formalized (Participant 12).

### Adaptation and integration determines PST effectiveness

Beyond indirect intervention delivery, practitioners also shared their considerable experiences of directly delivering more formalized PST interventions to young athletes. However, it is important to note that teaching psychological strategies and techniques was viewed as only one aspect of their work. For instance, one participant explained:

> Mental skills training is not useful until like right at the end. Like it's not even the icing on the cake, it's very often like the sprinkles. If someone wants to come in and they see someone who's wracked with anxiety and they think a couple of breathing techniques and some goals are gonna fix them, then I have a real problem with that (Participant 9).

Although there were conflicting views about the effectiveness of some more abstract strategies during adolescence (e.g., imagery, mindfulness), several psychological techniques and strategies (e.g., self-talk, relaxation, goal setting, imagery, routines, reflection, modeling, mentoring) were listed on the timelines as effective by one or more practitioners across all three developmental stages. Despite this, the effectiveness of specific strategies was largely considered to depend on the individual, particularly as they got older (i.e., mid-to-late adolescence), and based on the extent to which they were adapted and integrated in simple, creative, and flexible ways.

When participants engaged in PST directly with young athletes, it typically started with helping them to make sense of (i.e., scaffold) their experiences by building knowledge and promoting self-awareness. In contrast to "traditional" PST delivery (i.e., workshop on self-talk, goal setting etc), practitioners explained how they often used themes, physical props, scenarios, biofeedback, or YouTube footage as the basis for their individual or group sessions and focused on connecting these examples to relevant skills or strategies in a simple way. One participant explained the importance of involving athletes in this decision-making process:

> The psychoeducational piece is still there, but I guess it's not framed up as [a] mental skills program. Like it might have been, a week on self-talk, and a week on imagery, and a week on goal setting. I definitely would have done that in my early years. But as the years have gone by, less and less so. Which makes it a lot messier to then unpick … and what works for one person in the way that they interpret self-talk is gonna be really different to another person. So actually, the psychoeducational piece still has a place for sure, workshops or group stuff with young players. But I definitely wouldn't do it in terms of self-talk heading, I would do it as real-world scenarios and helping them understand in situations what works for them and what doesn't. And then part of that would be bringing in the goal setting, self-talk and emotional regulation and journaling and, you know, meditation, whatever it might be (Participant 11).

Practitioners also took young athletes' understanding, self-awareness, and experience/ perceptions of sport psychology into account when designing PST and adapted tasks and activities accordingly (e.g., simplified and made more concrete). Adapting and integrating strategies also served the added benefit of sport psychology not being associated with school (e.g., workshops in a classroom setting). The following quote highlights the importance of integration in determining PST effectiveness:

> When you actually integrate it into the match or into a training session, as part of a between point routine, with the coach on board, getting them to integrate a brief bit of visualization on targeting the serve, breathing in the accept phase, and the build phase of

the routine, and actually making it part of the strategy, where you're taking 20 seconds in between points … then it begins to land well and it begins to become more integrated as part of the performance itself (Participant 2).

Irrespective of the mode of delivery, participants emphasized the importance of repetition and reinforcement to facilitate the long-term effectiveness of PST. One participant explained why repetition is especially important with young children during a focus group:

The other thing that I really learned is that actually I can end up doing the same things over and over and over again with young athletes. Not like every single week, back-to-back, but I can think that we've pretty much nailed routines, and then we don't discuss routines for like a few months, and then we come back to routines or whatever and I go well, how's that routine going? Oh, I forgot. I've stopped doing it. So, I find that we often have to cycle back – or they're very good at remembering the behavioral components and not like the cognitive components. Those are the bits that get forgotten, so I think there's a lot of repetition around ideas and presenting the same ideas in different ways (Participant 1).

## Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to gain insights from experienced applied sport psychologists working with young athletes in the UK, to inform the training and development of practitioners. Specifically, the research questions focused on exploring the most effective ways to understand, assess, and build working relationships with young athletes, as well as the most effective psychological techniques, strategies, and skills when working with them. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of applied sport psychologists understanding young athletes' biopsychosocial development, as well as developing the skills required to work flexibly and adapt to the situation and/or individual. In doing so, the current study builds upon previous research (e.g., Foster et al., 2016; Henriksen et al., 2014; Howells, 2017) and provides contextual "craft knowledge" which offers a more complete picture of the consultancy process when working with young athletes in the United Kingdom.

Focusing initially on consulting philosophies, findings highlight how practitioners' personal core beliefs and values aligned with the notion of a holistic child-centered philosophy (i.e., focus on the unique needs, development, growth, and well-being of children; Foster et al., 2016; Orlick & McCaffrey, 1991; Weiss, 1991) and was underpinned by a genuine motivation to support and work with young athletes (i.e., Bell et al. 2022; Knight et al., 2018). Similar to previous studies exploring holistic sport psychology practice (e.g., Friesen & Orlick, 2010), this philosophical approach was typically delivered through an integrated theoretical approach. Most practitioners in the current study drew on one organizing theoretical approach (e.g., CBT, REBT, ACT, Psychodynamic) but different methods and techniques originating from various schools of thought. This enabled practitioners to attend to the specific needs and/or expectations of the clients and adjust their practice accordingly although still holding true to their core beliefs and values (Poczwardowski et al., 2004). These findings support the notion that applied sport psychologists must be flexible with their philosophy to gain entry, fulfill employer expectations, and avoid the need to refer athletes based solely on a fixed consulting

philosophy (Woolway & Harwood, 2019). In doing so, they also challenge the way that consulting philosophies are often taught to neophyte sport psychologists (i.e., "practitioner-led" vs. "client led"; Keegan, 2015).

Findings from the current study also illustrate how a holistic child-centered philosophy was integral to how practitioners built and maintained working relationships with young athletes (Friesen & Orlick, 2010). Although previous studies have highlighted the importance of being able to relate to young athletes and using age-appropriate language (i.e., Foster et al., 2016), our findings provided more detailed insights regarding *how* practitioners developed these relationships. For example, practitioners in the current study used a range of strategies (i.e., being inquisitive about a young athlete's experience, discussing their favorite athletes, sharing sporting experiences, and/or getting involved in training and warm-ups) to initially connect with young athletes. Consistent with previous research (see Tod et al., 2022 for a review), practitioners valued being authentic, genuine, trustworthy, and honest with young athletes once they had secured initial connections. This was perceived as crucial for developing and maintaining the relationship and practitioners maintained these values through being consistent, non-judgmental, and maintaining professional boundaries with young athletes.

Beyond building and maintaining relationships, the current study offers valuable insights in relation to how practitioners assess the needs of young athletes. Although youth sport consulting models (e.g., Visek et al., 2009) recognize the importance of a "formal" needs analysis process, to date little consideration has been given to how practitioners assess the needs of young athletes within the literature (see Howells, 2017 as a notable exception). Practitioners in the current study typically relied on gaining multiple perspectives (i.e., athlete, coaches, parents, and support-families) via various methods (e.g., observations, conversations, drawing activities) to create a complete picture of the athlete's characteristics, sport-specific demands, strengths, and needs. This integrated approach was also viewed as a way for practitioners to assess young athletes' knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) toward the psychological aspects of their sport and specific techniques or strategies (see Holland et al. 2018). Although this type of "case-formulation approach" has been used with adult athletes (see Gardner & Moore, 2005), it appears to be valuable when working with young athletes given the complex and wide-ranging biological, psychological, social, and cognitive developmental factors which need to be carefully considered when assessing a young athlete. However, gaining multiple perspectives is challenging, time-consuming, and requires careful ethical consideration (respecting confidentiality, protecting client's privacy etc).

Findings also provide insights into the effectiveness of different psychological skills, techniques, and strategies when working with young athletes. This is valuable given PST is often viewed as the first mode of psychological support introduced to young athletes (Holland et al., 2018). Consistent with experimental studies examining imagery (e.g., Munroe-Chandler et al., 2012), self-talk (e.g., Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2009), relaxation (e.g., Haddad & Tremayne, 2009), and goal setting (e.g., Pierce & Burton, 1998), practitioners in the current study felt that these basic psychological strategies could be effective at enhancing well-being, long-term development, and performance across developmental stages. However, the effectiveness of PST in youth sport was considered to depend on simplicity, adaptation, and integration (Foster et al., 2016; Henriksen

et al., 2014; Orlick & McCaffrey, 1991). Such adaptation was based on practitioners' understanding and recognition of the cognitive development and emotional maturity of the young athlete(s) rather than chronological age. Although such adaptations are often logistically difficult in ever changing youth sport environments, and caused some practitioners to favor working with individuals (rather than groups), such findings highlight the need for practitioners to pay particular attention to young athlete's cognitive and emotional development during service delivery. PST interventions should also be considered based on the extent to which they help children manage the demands of their sport and contribute to their broader growth and psychosocial development.

Building on these points, although practitioners worked directly with young athletes and/or teams, findings suggested that when delivering interventions with young athletes, practitioners should whenever possible be embedded within youth sport settings and work collaboratively with youth sport coaches and/or parents (*indirectly* or *directly*) to elicit greatest effects (Orlick & McCaffrey, 1991). Previous research has illustrated the effectiveness of interventions *indirectly* delivered by youth sport coaches (e.g., Fournier et al., 2005; Ste-Marie et al., 2011) as well as the potential benefits of integrating coaching knowledge in intervention design (e.g., self-talk instructions or imagery script refinements; Munroe-Chandler et al., 2005), incorporating coach education alongside the delivery of PST programs (see Sharp et al., 2013; Harwood et al., 2015), and including coaches as part of multidisciplinary intervention delivery teams (Bell et al., 2013). This is also consistent with research with adult athletes which has suggested that coaches are the most effective provider of psychological interventions, potentially because of the athlete and his or her coach possessing a more mature relationship and established rapport (see Brown & Fletcher, 2017). Coach engagement and/or provision is likely to be important during adolescence (and emerging adulthood) when coaches become one of the most significant influences on young athletes' psychosocial development (see Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Greater emphasis, therefore, needs to be placed on evaluating interventions which incorporate coach (and parent) education alongside the delivery of PST programs (e.g., Sharp et al., 2013; Harwood et al., 2015) or are delivered by multidisciplinary teams (e.g., Bell et al., 2013). Future research is also needed to "close the gap" between research and practice and explore the integrative processes and outcomes of a child-centered, coach-led, and parent-supported system that is focused on specific psychological skill outcomes over time.

Collectively, the current study's findings generate several important implications for how applied sport psychologists are trained, particularly in the UK. First, our results highlight how effective practice in youth sport requires an in-depth understanding of children's biopsychosocial development. Although the BPS standards for accreditation requires taught master's degree programs in sport and exercise psychology to cover 'developmental processes', in our experience, child and adolescent development is not given the attention it deserves (see Kipp, 2018; Visek et al., 2013). Second, if the demands of working in youth sport require practitioners to be flexible and construe their approach from multiple perspectives, whilst simultaneously remaining committed to their personal core values and beliefs, trainee sport psychologists[1] need access to multiple supervisors who can guide them through the use of different consulting styles (CBT, ACT, humanistic etc). This would also help to develop wide ranging domain-

specific skills to enable them to obtain a greater breadth of applied experiences (Sly et al., 2020). Finally, practitioners acknowledged several challenges associated with working with young athletes (e.g., perceptions of psychology, attention spans, worries about what friends might think) as well as intrapersonal (e.g., being a female applied sport psychologist in male dominated environments), interpersonal (e.g., coach support/ buy-in, conflicting messages from parents, lack of peers to exchange ideas with), and organizational level barriers (e.g., lack of funding in youth sport, constantly changing youth sport environments). Although unpacking these specific challenges was beyond the focus of the current study per se, they should be part of discussions on taught programs and independent training routes (i.e., QSEP, SEPAR) to prepare practitioners for working within youth sport contexts.

The current study and its applied implications should be considered in light of several limitations. Firstly, whilst using an ID design enabled us to provide a broad understanding of the consultancy process, future research is needed to build on our findings and take a more in-depth look at each specific phase of the consultancy process. Secondly, the majority of participants in the current study drew upon their experiences of working with individual athletes (even in group-based setting) who were part of talent development programs or pathways. Therefore, applied researchers are encouraged to explore the experiences of practitioners who favor working in differing ways (i.e., individuals vs. groups) across a range of youth sports levels. Finally, given our focus was on learning from applied sport psychologists working within the UK, we advise caution when transferring these findings and recommendations beyond this specific youth sport context.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study provides valuable insights from applied sport psychologists working with young athletes in the United Kingdom. Such findings highlight how sport psychologists working in youth sport not only need to demonstrate the characteristics of effective practice (i.e., good listeners, interested, create a connection, informal relationship with boundaries; Tod et al., 2022) but also manage the unique challenges associated with youth sport environments and the complex nature of young athletes' biopsychosocial development. In doing so, the current study offers valuable insights for applied sport psychologists, especially those undergoing the independent training route (i.e., QSEP, SEPAR), or professional doctorate pathway, and can promote developmentally appropriate practice within this area. By drawing upon "established" opinion, we hope the current study helps to accelerate the development and training of practitioners within the UK and moves closer toward evidence-based guidelines for sport psychology practice in youth sport in the United Kingdom.

## Note

1. There are two sport and exercise psychology independent training routes in the UK which make practitioners eligible to apply for registration with the Health Care Professions Council (HCPC): (1) BPS Qualification in Sport & Exercise Psychology (QSEP); and (2) British Association of Sport and Exercise Science (BASES) Sport and Exercise Psychology Accreditation Route (SEPAR).

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## Disclosure statement

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## Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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