Published in *A Year in the Life of Australia* in 2014 by The Conversation and Future Leaders (www.futureleaders.com.au)

PART FOUR
THE NEXT GENERATION

Pain now, rewards later? Young lives cannot be relived


Johanna Wyn


Hernan Cuervo

Johanna Wyn
and Hernan Cuervo

The federal government's proposed budget measures are particularly harsh on young people, particularly the most vulnerable. A raft of measures, if introduced, will reduce young people's access to income support, to education and training, and to employment.

It is proposed that young people under the age of 30 will have a six-month wait until they can access Newstart or Youth Allowance. The benefit will be available for six months only. The age of eligibility for the Newstart allowance will increase from 22 to 24 years and those aged between 22 and 24 will only be eligible for the Youth Allowance.

This amounts to a loss of just under A$50 a week compared with current arrangements. At the same time, funding has been withdrawn for the organisations that provide career counselling, including Youth Connections and the Local Learning and Employment Networks (in Victoria). Support for young people

who are already vulnerable, including those with disabilities, will drop to a new low.

The justification for these harsh measures, according to Federal Treasurer Joe Hockey, is that they are necessary to balance the budget. This, according to Hockey, will, at a future time, enable the government to provide responsibly for the vulnerable, the poor, the disabled and the sick. Similarly, Prime Minister Tony Abbott argues that: "The budget pain will be temporary but the economic improvement will be permanent."

The problem with this logic is that it's not that simple. The harms that are done cannot be retracted. Young lives cannot be relived.

Critical years: the evidence

This message comes across loud and clear from the Youth Research Centre's longitudinal Life Patterns research program. Following a cohort of secondary school graduates of 1991, this research traced the impact on young people's lives of two significant policy changes that occurred in the early 1990s: university fees and the *Workplace Relations Act*. These policies changed the rules of school-to-work transitions, and created the conditions for a new generation (Generation X).

It is well known that this generation were the pioneers of the "new youth". The period that young people spend in educational institutions has extended into their mid-twenties. They have then spent the next 10–15 years seeking secure work before "settling down".

What is not as well known is that Generation X also bore the costs of this new life stage of extended economic insecurity and dependence. Although the majority of the participants in the Life Patterns study said they expected to be in stable relationships or married and becoming parents by their late 20s, it was more than ten years later that the majority were economically secure enough to make these commitments.

Concerned about the drop in the fertility rate that its policy changes caused, the Howard government offered a baby bonus to encourage parenthood. This belated gesture is echoed in the current government's assumption that young lives can be directed at the whim of political agendas.

In the wake of these events, members of Generation Y have largely accepted that it is up to the individual young person (and their family) to invest in education and learn how to navigate increasingly insecure labour markets. This works for some, but the evidence shows that for an increasing minority it is very difficult to work out what kind of education or training will be best and how to make this work in volatile labour markets. In other words, it's already difficult for young people to get it right.

The report *How Young People are Faring 2013* by the Foundation for Young Australians shows that it is taking young people longer to get from education to full-time work. Nearly one in four young women aged 23 and one in six young men are not in study or work.

The Life Patterns research also shows that financial hardship and combining work and study are associated with the trend towards declining mental health for young people aged 19 to 25. In other words, even now, many young people struggle against the odds to get educational or skills qualifications and to use these in the labour market. A proportion of those who do experience stress levels that are harmful to their health.

Increasing risk of a lost generation

Extended periods of poverty, unemployment, lack of access to meaningful and purposeful education or training, and insecure work for 18- to 25-year-olds rob them of the building blocks to make productive lives. The momentum lost during these crucial years is very difficult to recover.

These conditions, it is argued in the International Labour Organisation report *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2013*, are creating a "lost generation", who lose hope. The scarring does not

just affect young people. It also affects society in the form of intergenerational conflict and escalating welfare costs in the future.

A majority of young Australians have the social and material resources to survive and perhaps even thrive in these times. But a significant minority are already finding it tough. The proposed federal budget measures will effectively remove the threadbare social welfare safety net that provides a basic level of support for young people who, through no fault of their own, have little financial or social support, who have disabilities or health challenges.

The window of opportunity that exists at this stage of their lives closes as time passes. Economically and socially, Australia has a lot to gain by supporting young people during these significant years of their life. These years hold opportunities that young people need to take now. This time cannot be relived.

We're not talking to our kids: are we causing speech delay?

Jane Louise Hunter

A parent with a small child in a stroller is walking along the footpath with headphones in. The child is crying, the parent is oblivious.

A parent walks into a cafe engaged in conversation on the phone, with a child tagging along. The parent orders a coffee and a drink for the child. The parent sits down and continues talking on the phone. A tablet computer is pulled out of the parent's bag and passed to the child. The parent continues talking on the phone.

A parent enters a doctor's waiting room with child in arms, sits down; the child is placed on a nearby chair. The child is handed a mobile phone to play with, while waiting.

Is technology the villain?

As a parent and educator I encourage teachers to integrate technology in learning at schools. I have done a number of large studies in the area, and studies show educational programs on computers and other devices have great potential to improve early learning.

But primary school principals and early years' teachers have expressed concern to me about the increased numbers of kindergarten students with obvious speech delays — so much so that in many schools speech therapists have been called in.

One inner-city Sydney school principal said:

> From 62 kindergarten children this year, 11 require speech therapy. That is almost 18% of the cohort. While I am an advocate for using technology in education, I am very concerned about basic human skills like speech not being as developed as well as they could be when young children start school.

Are parents relying on technological devices to entertain their children — known as "pass 'n' play" — rather than direct conversation, story reading, playing games and make-believe, and other forms of quality interaction?

There aren't enough studies on the effects of parents' use of technology on children's speech development to make definitive claims, but the fact that it has been raised by teachers and principals suggests we need to look into the issue more closely.

Pass 'n' play

This is just as it sounds: the parent passes the child a technological device to play with while in the café or in the doctor's waiting room. While technology certainly has its place in childhood development, devices should be used as active tools providing quality interactions, not as pacifiers.

Parents should use the device with an educational app or game to question and talk about what is happening on screen. If technological devices are just "inbuilt babysitters" or "moment

fillers" they are not fulfilling the educational capacity for which they could be used.

Similar fears of declining familial interactions were raised with the promulgation of television in the 1950s. The main difference here, however, is that these smart phones and tablet computers are carried everywhere we go.

What does the research say?

A UK study suggested "technology gadgets are blamed for a 70% leap in speech problems in the past six years". In a follow-up article, a US paediatric speech pathologist asked whether technology is damaging children's speech and language skills; it concluded too much time on devices is definitely playing a role.

When parents are endlessly busy on computers, phones, tablets and watching TV, that is time they are not spending interacting with their child. Brain scientist Dr Jordy Kaufman argued that in 2013 there were no scientific studies on the consequences of the use of technological devices by very young children. Research at the Swinburne BabyLab is being undertaken to fill this gap. Kerry Staples, an early childhood specialist at the University of Western Sydney, adds:

> We need some caution here — to say it's all down to technological devices and parents' overuse is too simplistic. Technology holds tremendous potential for young children but interactions between parents and children while using tablets and mobile phones is what I'd like to see more of.

Turn off the devices and talk

In his book *Program or Be Programmed,* Douglas Rushkoff implores us to "not always be on". Children do learn from TV and from using apps on devices and by using other technologies, but speech, language and social skills are learnt from real interactions with people. Technological devices can be used better, especially with young children.

Are our kids failing in maths because they can't read?

Misty Adoniou

There has been a lot of hand-wringing about mathematics lately. According to national and international testing we are not getting any better at it and plenty of good reasons have been offered for why this may be so. Not enough students are studying it, not enough students like it, and not enough qualified teachers teach it. But a much less discussed explanation is that some of our kids fail in maths because they can't read the questions.

How is maths teaching changing?

Students often complain they can't see the point of maths — beyond basic arithmetic. In response, keen teachers look for ways to show them how maths is relevant to their daily lives. Trigonometry is set inside problem solving about rugby ball angles and penalty kicks, probability is used to predict the winners of X Factor and Pythagoras' theorem is applied to save people from a burning building.

This shift to meaning and context in learning maths is laudable, but it does fundamentally change the nature of maths teaching in ways that teachers are not currently trained for.

When we build stories around maths problems to give them a real-life relevance, we introduce contexts that may be unfamiliar to some students, or information that is irrelevant to the maths of the question. One of the questions in the most recent PISA maths tests began:

> Ninety-five percent of world trade is moved by sea, by roughly 50,000 tankers, bulk carriers and container ships. Most of these ships use diesel fuel. Engineers are planning to develop wind power support for ships.

> Their proposal is to attach kite sails to ships and use the wind's power to help reduce diesel consumption and the fuel's impact on the environment.

None of this information was necessary to solve the mathematical question that followed. A student may spend a deal of time distracted by this information, either trying to read it successfully or trying to figure out if the paragraph contains anything crucial to the maths question that followed.

Being a good reader with a broad general knowledge has become integral to mathematical achievement, so teaching language has become a necessary part of teaching maths.

Many maths teachers roll their eyes when talk turns to teaching language in the maths classroom. They already have a packed schedule just trying to fit the maths content in, let alone teach language — and, anyway, isn't that the English teacher's job?

But being an avid reader of novels is no guarantee of success in maths, as the mathematics classroom generates its own unique mix of everyday language and maths-specific language. It is only the maths teacher who has the discipline knowledge to teach it. This is equally true for the generalist primary teacher who must also teach how language works differently in every subject area, including maths.

Language in the maths classroom

Vocabulary is the key to success in reading comprehension and this is particularly true in mathematical reading. In a novel, unknown words can often be guessed from context, or even skipped, and meaning can still be maintained. However, in maths, if one word is not understood it is probable the entire sentence will be misconstrued.

In the PISA example given earlier there is no redundancy in the maths question that followed the lengthy prelude information.

> At what approximate speed does the wind blow into a kite sail when a wind speed of 24 km/h is measured on the deck of the ship?

The linguistics of this question are more complex than the maths it seeks to test.

Often, words in mathematics can seem familiar to the student but are used in ways that are specific to maths. For example, in this question from a Year 7 maths textbook, the word "decimated" is key to getting the maths right.

> 99 Roman soldiers who fled from battle were to be punished. The group was lined up and decimated. How many were killed?

Mathematically, "decimated" maintains its original meaning of "one in ten". In common parlance, however, "decimated" has come to mean "completely wiped out". Clearly, the two interpretations of the word "decimated" will each result in a very different answer to this maths problem, but only one will be correct in the maths classroom.

It's not just words. Sentences can also work differently in mathematics. Usually in English there is a sequential logic to sentences; we start at the beginning and read through to the end and rely on this predictability for comprehension.

However, in mathematics the logic of sentences may be organised in more unexpected ways. For example, "Draw a circle with a diameter of one-third the sum of 6+9+15", requires the learner to start the operation from the end of the sentence and move backwards through to the beginning of the sentence in order to successfully complete the instruction.

These language differences need to be explicitly taught to students, but very often the language is so familiar to teachers they fail to notice what they should be making visible to their students. All teachers need a strong and explicit understanding of how the English language works. Knowing your content simply isn't enough to make a real difference to student learning outcomes.

Why it matters

Students who fail in mathematics are less likely to go on to further study and more likely to have lower-paying jobs.

To teach maths properly we have to be clear on whether students are getting it wrong because they don't understand the maths or because they can't comprehend the questions. Either is serious, and both require very different teaching solutions. Teachers must take up the challenge and teach both the content and the language of mathematics, but how well prepared are they to do that?

Private schooling has little long-term pay-off

Jennifer Chesters

In a recent article for The Conversation, Barbara Preston examined the link between type of school attended and progress at university. Barbara concluded that after controlling for tertiary entrance score, university students from government schools outperformed students from private schools.

This finding suggests that paying for an expensive private school education might not be the best preparation for university study. If this is the case, perhaps parents paying private school fees are looking for longer-term pay-offs for their investment.

So who has more success *after* university?

I analysed data from the 12th wave of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) project to examine the longer-term outcomes of attending private schools. For the analysis, I selected one respondent aged between 25 and 34 years per household. The majority of young people have completed their education by the age of 25 and are settled in their careers by the age of 34.

Preliminary analysis shows that individuals who attended Catholic or independent schools were more likely to have completed Year 12 and to have graduated from university, after controlling for the effects of parents' education, age and sex.

But are there differences in labour market outcomes? Here, the type of private school is important. Although those who attended a Catholic school were, on average, 1.3 times more likely to be employed on a full-time basis compared to those who attended a government school, former independent school students were no more likely to be employed full-time than those who attended a government school after controlling for the effects of level of education, sex and age.

This result seems to suggest that paying private school fees is no guarantee of securing full-time employment. Given that women in this age cohort are in their prime child-bearing years, I also looked at the effect of interactions between sex and type of school attended; sex and age; and sex and level of education to determine whether there are differences between men and women. As expected, women were less likely than men to be employed full-time.

Next, I examined the earnings of those employed full-time according to type of school attended, controlling for the effects of sex, age and level of education. When it comes to weekly earnings, having attended a private school rather than a government school has no effect.

So, there would seem to be no return on the parents' investment in terms of the earnings of their offspring.

Perhaps parents were seeking to ensure that their offspring secured jobs with high levels of prestige in order to maintain their social status. After taking into account the effects of level of education, sex and age, having attended a Catholic school is associated with higher, on average, levels of occupational prestige than having attended a government school. On average, attendance at an independent school is not associated with higher levels of occupational prestige.

So why choose a private school?

A closer examination of university graduates may shed some light on this paradox. Of the individuals who had completed a university-level qualification, those who had attended an independent school were more likely to have graduated from a Group of Eight (Go8) university compared to those who attended a government school. However, individuals who had attended a Catholic school were no more likely to have graduated from a Go8 university. Perhaps parents expect that graduation from an elite university would provide a pathway into a higher-paying career.

For university graduates employed on a full-time basis, graduation from a Go8 university had no effect on occupational prestige after taking into consideration the effects of sex, age and type of school attended. There was no pay-off for graduation from a Go8 university in the form of increased earnings, nor did type of school attended have any effect, after controlling for the effects of age, sex and field of study.

These results must call into question the wisdom of paying private school fees, particularly for independent schools whose fees can be anywhere from $20,000 to $34,000 a year. The massive growth in the number of private schools since the 1990s may be having the effect of diluting the advantages perceived to be attached to private schooling.

If, as these results suggest, there is no long-term advantage to be gained from paying to attend an independent school, why do parents stretch their family budgets to pay private school fees? In a climate where university fees are set to rise, parents across the country may start asking themselves this very question.

More expensive, more elite: higher education in five years

Gavin Moodie

Education Minister Christopher Pyne flew several kites in the months and weeks leading up to the budget. Tuesday night's budget cut their strings. Just where the kites will fly and whether they will come crashing down is hard to say.

If the government can get its proposals past the Senate, Australia will run an unprecedented experiment in fee and place deregulation with few constraints and little direct experience to inform policy, analysis and institutional strategy.

The budget contains many important changes to higher education, each of which warrants sustained analysis. But the future of Australian higher education in five years' time will be shaped most by three big changes: extending the demand driven system to all providers of all higher education qualifications; removing caps on fees; and introducing fees for research higher degrees.

Institutional restructures

The demand driven system among public universities has put most pressure on campuses and institutions with lower status that are within commuting distance of higher-status universities seeking to expand. The institutions under most pressure are mostly in the outer suburbs and inner regions. They are losing enrolments and having to cut budgets.

Extending the demand driven system to private providers will greatly expand private providers in both numbers and size. Some private colleges and universities will become medium-sized institutions, which will increasingly have to be taken into account in

policy analysis and institutional strategies. They will attract even more students from the lower-status universities.

At the same time, online learning is also increasing competition, while changing the relationship between teaching and learning. All universities, including those with no recent background in distance education, are offering many of their subjects and programs by blending on-campus and online learning. This greatly increases the convenience for traditional campus-based students, but it also makes programs more accessible to people whose study is constrained by time or place.

Most of these students are in capital cities, but they have been served mostly by the regional distance education providers such as Charles Sturt University, University of Southern Queensland and the University of New England. Blended learning is making programs offered by nearby metropolitan universities more accessible, diverting students from outer regional campuses and institutions.

Lower-status universities are thus being squeezed from above by higher-status universities and will be squeezed from below by private providers. Some of their futures are threatened. Governments are unlikely to allow any university to fail. But there will be more substantial mergers and other restructures of university campuses and institutions, which one hopes will be eased with restructuring grants.

Fee blowout

There is no reason why a high-prestige university should not charge fees of $1 million a year. Students would get a gold-plated education without ever having to repay much of the fee they have been charged and the university would get richer.

It is hard to anticipate how most students and institutions will respond to deregulated fees. However, it may be worth stimulating thought with a few speculations.

I expect most universities will initially increase their fees for most programs by about 50% to compensate for cuts in the

Commonwealth contributions announced in the budget and to relieve pent-up cost pressures. The institutional and program market leaders will double their fees. If that doesn't dampen demand too much, other institutions and programs will follow with doubled fees and the leaders will increase their fees even further.

At this point fees will be so high that the proportion of new HELP debt not expected to be repaid will far exceed the 23% the budget projects for 2017–18. At some point the government will decide that it should no longer absorb this unpaid debt, which would effectively be a subsidy for yet more fee increases. The government is likely to contemplate financial caps, but rather than recapping fees it may be more likely to reintroduce lifetime borrowing limits, which it is proposing to remove from Fee-Help.

Research

The government's proposals for research warrant a separate discussion, but the biggest change in research funding will be a big increase from higher tuition fees. This will further strengthen most Australian universities' already strong research, particularly those that make the biggest fee increases.

The government proposes to cut funding for the research training scheme but will allow universities to charge up to $3,900 per equivalent full-time student for high-cost programs and up to $1,700 for lower-cost programs. Since HELP loans will also cover these fees, they are unlikely to affect demand much. But many of the arguments for removing the caps on undergraduate fees will be made for research higher degree fees and these will also be uncapped in time.

System shape

The higher-status institutions will be dominated by students from high and upper-middle socioeconomic status backgrounds and they will have few students from a low socioeconomic background. The 20% of additional fee revenue the government

will require universities to allocate to scholarships will make it easier for the few disadvantaged students who are accepted by the elite universities, but will not markedly increase their proportion.

The result will not be the two-tiered system of institutions that students are protesting against, and still less the different categories of institutions that some still seek, but a more explicit, ordered and steeper hierarchy of institutions by fees and hence funding, research, status and elitism.

State school kids do better at uni

Barbara Preston

State school graduates do better at university than private school graduates with the same end-of-school tertiary entrance score. That's the clear finding in a number of Australian studies since the 1980s, and in England since the 1990s.

The Australian research compared academic results at the end of first year at particular universities for cohorts whose entry was based on tertiary entrance scores (now ATAR) for the previous year in the same state. The most recent English research tracked all students who completed the end-of-school A-levels and went directly on to complete a full-time four-year degree course.

The differences between graduates of state and private schools were substantial (though less pronounced among those who did very well at university). The Australian research found that, on average, graduates of state schools received the same marks at the end of first-year university as graduates of private schools who had tertiary entrance scores around three to six points higher.

The English research found that at each A-level standard, on average around 7 percentage points more graduates of state schools than graduates of private schools received first or second-class, first division (upper second) honours.

Research in both Australia and England also found that with the same tertiary entrance scores:

- graduates of co-educational schools tend to do better than graduates of single-sex schools
- graduates of lower-fee private schools (in Australia, Catholic schools) tend to do better than graduates of higher-fee private schools (in Australia, independent schools)
- graduates of schools with lower average tertiary entrance scores tend to do better than graduates of schools with higher average tertiary entrance scores
- graduates of (English) state comprehensive schools do better (to a small extent) than graduates of state selective schools.

The general finding is that graduates of non-elite and co-educational schools do better at university than graduates of socially and academically elite and single-sex schools who achieved the same tertiary entrance score.

So, what can explain this difference?

There are no definitive explanations for these findings, though there is some attempt in the literature, some indicative data, and much informed speculation. And there is, of course, great variation among individual students — and among schools, universities and university courses.

Explanations tend to focus on aspects of secondary schooling and on students' effort levels at university (associated with their cultures and aspirations), and any may be involved in particular cases:

- Preparation for the end-of-school assessments in private schools, relative to state schools, boosts tertiary entrance results above "underlying ability", and graduates regress to "underlying ability" level at university.
- Preparation for life and learning beyond school in private schools (and single-sex schools) relative to state schools (and co-educational schools) is poor, resulting in university performance below "underlying ability".
- Graduates of private schools make less effort at university because of perceived long-term advantages of their secondary schooling and other socio-cultural reasons.

It appears a reasonable assumption that tertiary entrance scores are boosted by a better quality of education at high fee private schools. Fee-based resources several times greater than those of state schools can fund smaller classes and other ways to enhance learning. In addition, selection and exclusion practices can ensure an academic atmosphere not disturbed by disruptive, difficult-to-teach students, or even students without high academic aspirations.

However, there appears to be contrary evidence: state school students tend to do better in NAPLAN tests than private school students at schools of similar socio-economic status (especially at higher socio-economic levels), according to data on the My School website analysed by researchers Bernie Shepherd and Chris Bonnor for a forthcoming publication.

Thus other explanations are likely. One involves a narrow focus on tertiary entrance results at many elite schools. Tertiary entrance results are a central aspect of the status and marketing of high-fee private schools — supported by high-visibility league tables and human interest stories in the media. High pressure, close supervision and narrowly defined learning leave little room for independent, self-motivated learning, and developing the personal and social skills required for success at university.

Single-sex school cultures and practices may not prepare students well for university life. This is hinted at in the literature,

but was "obvious" for a recent university graduate I spoke to who attended both single-sex and co-educational secondary schools and said many single-sex school graduates "do not learn to socialise at school, and when they get to uni they just party".

Other possible explanations relate to cultural class assumptions around success and entitlement. Some private school graduates may have an explicit belief (whether reasonable or not) that just having attended such an elite school will lead to employment advantages after university. Thus the incentive to work hard at university is diminished.

Some may have a less conscious belief that they have innate superior intelligence that will get them though university without much additional effort. This sense is not properly tested in the "hothouse" atmosphere of closely supervised elite schooling, but is found wanting in the more open society of university.

There may also be a lack of motivation for university among those from elite private schools where university is the norm. Those from state schools, where many different destinations are common, make a more deliberate choice for university.

What are the implications?

The government has set its sights on a highly differentiated fee and scholarship regime for higher education. Graduates of many universities are likely to have debts of over $100,000 for popular and socially important courses such as science, and debts of over $250,000 for longer courses such as veterinary science.

Universities with high-demand courses and high fees will need fairer criteria for access to all courses and for the awarding of all scholarships based on entry-level academic merit. This is not just a matter of justice for individuals, but also for our future as a well-educated, productive and fair society.

English education commentator Nick Morrison suggested that the disparity between state and private school graduates' success at university "… should provoke fee-paying schools to

question whether they are doing all they can to equip students for university".

The *Australian Financial Review* recently urged people to "do the sums on the true cost of private schools". It's apparent that high private school fees may not be buying effective education. In the context of university debts upwards of $100,000, families should "do the sums" on comparable expenditure on schooling.

Want to raise a gold medallist? Six tips for sporting success

Richard Keegan

Australia has kicked off the Commonwealth Games with a bang, winning 17 medals in the first day of competition, including five gold medals.

The women's 4 × 100 m freestyle relay had a particularly successful race, smashing a five-year world record.

Now picture your young son or daughter watching the race, then turning to you and saying: "I want to do that."

Let's imagine you're not a complete novice to sport, and you're fully aware that substantial sacrifices, early mornings (or late nights), and an array of upsetting defeats and injury setbacks lie ahead of the child choosing such a path (with no guarantee whatsoever of becoming world champion).

There are certainly stories of parents who have deliberately raised their children to become world-beaters in sport: the Williams sisters, Tiger Woods and Andre Agassi.

What cost a few early mornings, a few extra coaching lessons, or a summer camp every year, compared to the returns on your investment?

The cons of turning pro

First of all, we need to remember the odds of the bet. While the rewards are enormous, the numbers wouldn't appeal to many investors.

The American National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) examined the raw numbers and found of athletes still competing at age 14 (which is many fewer than first started):

- only 0.03% (1 in 3,300) will turn pro at basketball
- 0.09% (one per 100 full competitive teams) for soccer
- 0.08% (1 in 1,300) in gridiron.

And turning pro is still a long way short of becoming world champion. There are much better ways of making money.

There is also a significant bias in relying on the stories of celebrities (known as the survivor's fallacy). We don't hear from the numerous athletes who were pushed by their parents but who never made it. What costs and damage might they report if we offered them the platform of celebrity?

To exclusively seek global success grossly underestimates the value of what sport can teach us:

- winning and losing gracefully
- self-organisation
- goal-setting skills
- dealing with criticism
- communication
- moral awareness.

In addition, children who participate in regular physical activity are the same ones who tend to be active later in life, with all the health benefit that brings.

Six main messages

Reflecting on my research over the past few years, here are a few hints and tips offered by interviewees: some of whom were

children and adolescents, and some of whom were the elite athletes who had, indeed, made it.

1. *Don't force it:* many athletes report a key moment where they realised they didn't want to compete any more, and in many cases their parents pushed, guilt-tripped and cajoled them into continuing.

External inducement like this can be termed extrinsic motivation.

Consider this quote from an elite athlete, talking about a world champion friend of hers:

> Like when [he] was younger he went through a phase of not really liking [his main sport] and I think [his mum] was obviously aware of the knock-on consequences, but she didn't want to like force him to do it. He was actually quite into [another sport] and he got offered a contract in that […] and I didn't see him for a while, like a couple of years […] but then he just got back into this which is obviously in his favour.

Remember, this boy went on to become world champion.

Contrast that, however, against the story of Jonny Wilkinson, who at the age of nine wrote an essay explaining his plans to play rugby for England.

At 12, he announced to his teacher: "I want to play for England, that's all I want."

… and a Jonny Wilkinson drop goal won the 2003 Rugby World Cup for England.

If this is the attitude you're faced with, your child is probably intrinsically motivated, and all you have to do is facilitate and stay out of the way!

2. *Just help, no strings attached:* a key idea that comes from athletes, young and old, is the "conditionality" of parental support. The less parents attach strings to their support (and affection), the more kids just feel free to play, learn and improve.

This quote from an international female footballer sums it up:

> Even like, less than a year ago when I wanted to go out and do something on the field, that involved like crossing a ball. My dad is like, as unfit as anything, but he came down and fetched the ball for me […] They don't have to do it with you but they're there just helping […] If I asked him tomorrow, to go down and like throw the ball for, like, 50 headers, he'd be there without a shadow of a doubt.

3. *Don't be a coach, be a parent:* athletes across the spectrum reported frustrations when parents tried to coach them, and offered the advice that at best "just reinforce what the coach has told me to work on".

But actually parents don't need to do the coaching — they need to provide emotional and material support along a journey that is, by definition, challenging. As noted by a European archery champion:

> My mum hasn't got the first clue about archery. I could turn round to her and […] with a big beaming smile, and tell her I shot an impossible score and she might turn round and say: "never mind you'll do better next time!" And you know […] she is my number one fan, she gives me the emotional support.

Likewise, this nine-year-old who plays football and cricket expressed himself well:

> They do want you to win. But if you like try too hard, and then make a terrible mistake, and like cost the game, your friends will be like: "What did ou do that for?" Whereas your dad knows why you did that, and he's done it loads and loads of times before, and he's not really bothered. He knows what it feels like when everyone's putting pressure on you.

4. *Leave it all at the oval (or court or pool or track):* in the same way that we often want to leave work at the office, our kids often want to leave their sport behind once it's done. But in interviews, I heard stories of parents offering feedback on the car ride home, over dinner and even at bed time.

A nine-year-old boy told me:

> When you're playing a match, like if you missed it, if you did like a terrible shot and it went miles wide, they'd remember it, and then at the dinner table they'd say "remember that shot that you kicked miles wide?" And you're like "I thought you'd forgotten about that".

5. *They will remember it:* one pleasant message in our research was that while children may not appreciate it at the time, once they grew into adults they invariably valued the support their parents provided.

An elite football player told me:

> You wanna repay them, 'cause of all those nights they probably wanted be at home sat down and chilling out […] they came out in the car, in the cold in the winter, and in the dark and waited for you to finish […] you just wanna repay them back for what they've done for you.

6. *Go and watch:* in a yet to be published study, we analysed which key themes linked together in people's narratives. Parents being physically present at training and competition was a root cause of many of the motivational influences parents exerted (positive and negative!).

Time together (such as travelling), a shared experience, working towards shared goals — all things that build a strong relationship and allow you to be a bigger part of your child's life as they grow up.

As noted above, "winning" at sport can be taken to mean a lot of things. If we want our child to get the most out of participation in sport (including the health benefits), then the most important message we need to send to our kids is: they'll always be winners in our eyes.