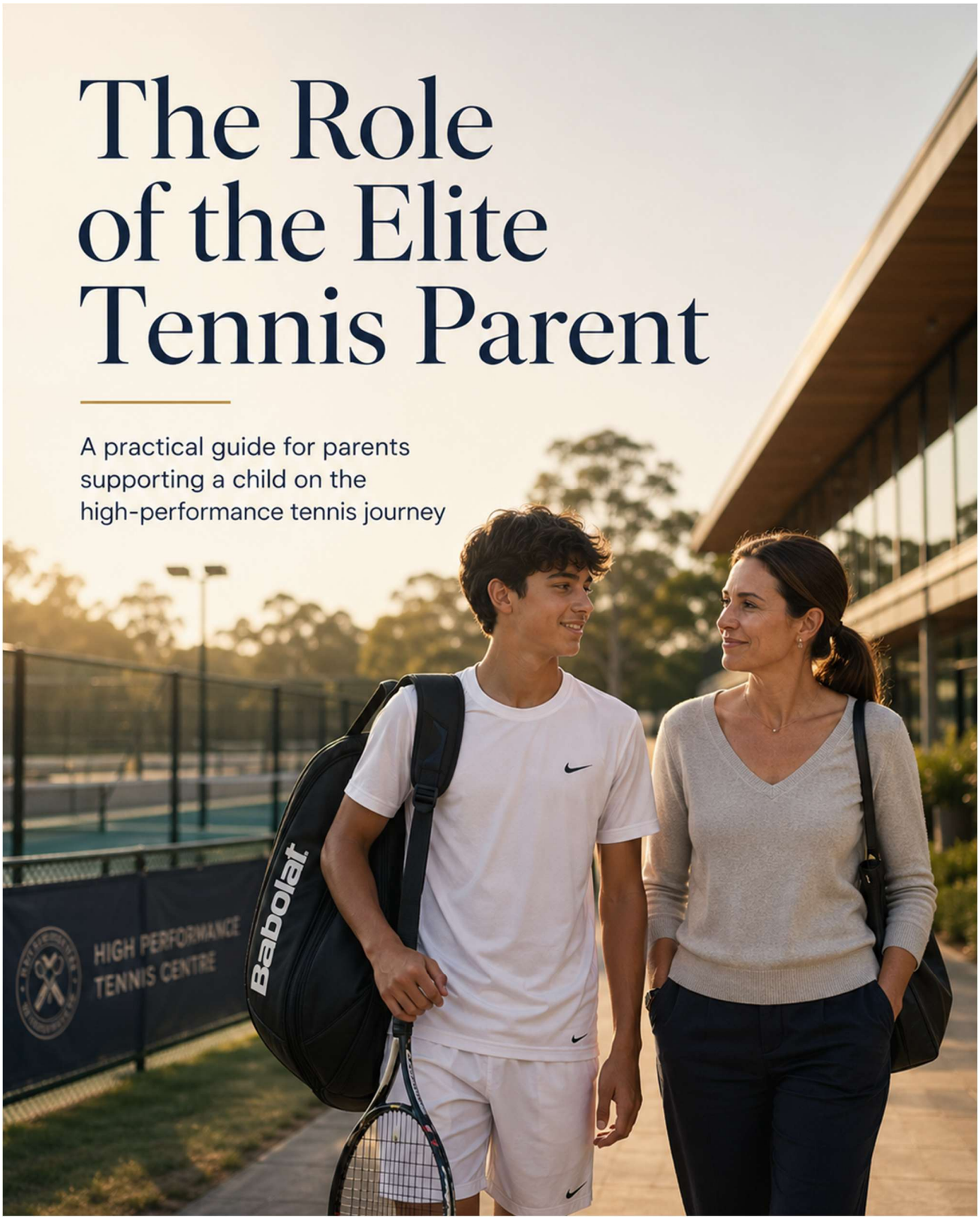
The Role of the Elite Tennis Parent

A practical guide for parents supporting a child on the high-performance tennis journey



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Introduction

Supporting a child in tennis is far more complex than paying for coaching, entering tournaments and encouraging them from the side of the court. For many parents, the journey quickly becomes confusing. They are surrounded by advice, rankings, results, tournament gossip, online videos, technical coaches, squad coaches, county and other LTA coaches, fitness trainers, social media clips and competing opinions. Much of the advice sounds convincing. Much of it is well-intentioned. Some of it may even be useful in the right context.

But without a clear framework, the parent can easily become overwhelmed. More importantly, the child can become confused. This guide has been written to clarify the parent's role. It is not a guide to coaching your own child. It is not a claim that there is only one correct pathway. It is a practical framework for understanding what parents can do - and what they should avoid doing - if they want to give their child the best chance of developing in a healthy, disciplined and sustainable way.

The role of the elite tennis parent is not to become the coach, analyst, strategist, technical director or emotional manager of every result, but to create the conditions in which the child can learn, compete, struggle, recover, grow and keep believing.

About the author

This guide is written by **Hareen Wasantha, Director of Tennis Avenue**. The author has experienced the performance pathway from several perspectives: as a former top junior player within the LTA system, as the parent of a child who became national No.1 and won multiple international junior titles, as a coach who has developed numerous elite-level juniors (including multiple national and international champions), and as a director who, over more than a decade, has observed the parent behaviours that most often correlate with successful long-term outcomes.

The views in this guide are not based on theory alone. They come from years of seeing what helps children become stronger, calmer, more independent and more coachable - and from seeing how well-intentioned adult behaviour can unintentionally hold children back.

The parent's role is vital - but it must be clearly defined

A parent's role in a tennis journey is not small. In many ways, it is foundational. But it is not the same as the coach's role.

The coach or academy should lead the tennis development process: technical direction, tactical identity, training structure, tournament planning, physical development, match analysis and long-term progression. The parent's role is to create the environment in which that process can work.

That means helping the child arrive rested, fed, punctual and prepared. It means reinforcing respect, manners, discipline and responsibility. It means providing emotional stability after wins and losses. It means choosing the right coaching environment through proper due diligence, then giving that environment enough trust and space to do its job.

The elite parent is not the parent who says the most, watches the most, analyses the most or intervenes the fastest. The elite parent is the one who understands the role deeply - and has the discipline to stay within it.

Why input may not seem to equal output

One of the hardest concepts for parents to accept is that tennis is not like a vending machine. In most areas of adult life, a specific amount of input - time, money and effort - usually produces a more predictable output. Parents often look at another child receiving the same training and ask: “Why is my child not achieving the same result?”

The answer is in individual variation. Every child arrives with a different set of attributes that affects how they absorb and apply training:

- **Physicality:** baseline coordination, explosive speed, athleticism and varied growth rates.
- **Absorption rate:** how quickly they mentally map a technical change or tactical concept.
- **Focus and concentration:** not every hour on court is equal. One child may have the mental endurance to stay locked in for the full 60 minutes of a session, while another may only have the cognitive stamina for 20. This hidden variable fundamentally changes the actual value of the training.
- **Behavioural discipline:** the capacity to remain productive when learning feels difficult, frustrating or uncomfortable. A child who shuts down, negotiates or acts out when struggling loses development time that a disciplined child does not.

Two children can have identical training schedules, but because of these variables, their trajectories will never be identical. The goal is to maximise your child’s unique potential, not to win a race against a peer on an arbitrary timeline.

Build the foundation: raise a child who is coachable

Before a child can become an excellent tennis player, they must become coachable. Coachability is not created by the coach alone. It is built at home, in daily habits, expectations and standards.

A coach can teach technique, tactics, movement, decision-making and match patterns. But if a child arrives late, tired, distracted, entitled, poorly equipped or unwilling to listen, the coaching process becomes inefficient. Time that should be spent developing the player is instead spent managing basic behaviours.

A coachable child is not a perfect child. They will still have difficult days. They will still become frustrated, tired or emotional. But over time, they should be learning to:

- listen properly;
- accept correction;
- work hard without constant negotiation;
- take responsibility for their equipment and preparation;

- treat coaches, opponents, officials and other players with respect;
- respond to setbacks without blaming everyone else;
- and understand that improvement requires repetition, humility, effort and time.

This is one of the most important contributions a parent can make. When these foundations are strong, coaching can go deeper. When these foundations are weak, even excellent coaching can be wasted.

Be the safe harbour

Tennis is emotionally demanding. Unlike team sports, the player is often alone on court. They cannot hide. They are exposed to the scoreboard, the opponent, the conditions, their own thoughts and the reactions of parents and spectators.

Children need ambition. They need standards. They need to learn how to compete. But they also need somewhere emotionally safe to return to. That place should be home.

A child must know that their parent's love and warmth do not rise and fall with the scoreboard. They should not feel that a loss changes the emotional atmosphere in the car, at dinner or at home. They should not feel that they are responsible for their parent's pride, anxiety, disappointment or mood.

This does not mean pretending results do not matter. Results are part of competitive sport. But the emotional meaning of those results must be kept in proportion. A useful message for the child is:

"You are my child before you are a tennis player. I am proud of how you are learning and growing. The tennis development can be handled with your coaches. My relationship with you is bigger than the result."

That emotional security is not being soft. It is the bedrock of genuine resilience. A child who feels safe is more likely to compete freely, take risks, recover from mistakes and stay in the sport long enough to fulfil their potential.

Do not rush to the rescue

Every tennis parent will eventually watch their child struggle. They may lose from a winning position. They may be treated unfairly by an opponent. They may panic, cry, argue, freeze or lose confidence. They may go through a period where results get worse before they get better. The instinct to step in is natural.

Parents love their children. They want to protect them. They want to reduce pain, fix problems and prevent avoidable mistakes. But in tennis, struggle is not always a sign that something is wrong. Often, it is where the most important learning takes place.

The goal is not to protect the child from every difficult experience by eliminating perceived threats. The goal is to help the child become capable of handling difficult experiences. That means learning to reset, problem-solve, regulate emotions, adapt tactically, accept unfairness, compete with integrity and return stronger after disappointment.

Those skills cannot fully develop if adults remove every obstacle too quickly. Support the child emotionally, but do not take over the learning journey. A parent who constantly rescues, or worse, displays emotional

behaviour themselves, may unintentionally teach the child that discomfort is dangerous, that unfairness is unmanageable, or that someone else will always step in when things become difficult.

In the long term, resilience is far more valuable than rescue.

Lift the child when belief is low

Staying within the parent role does not mean being passive or detached. High-performance journeys are punctuated by droughts: periods where hard work does not seem to yield results. In these moments, a child's self-belief can fracture.

The elite parent's role is to allow the child to borrow their belief. This is not about offering false praise or ignoring technical flaws; it is about providing a steady, unshakeable perspective. While the child is focused on the frustration of the last hour or the last match, the parent remains focused on the progress of the last year.

This is where the elite parent's discipline is most tested. When a child is at their lowest, the temptation to criticise, compare or show sympathetic disappointment is at its highest. However, adding parental stress to a child's fragile confidence only creates a deeper hole. The elite parent provides the emotional ladder, helping the child regain perspective and return to the work with their dignity and belief intact.

Why parents are tempted to take control

It is important to be fair to parents. Most parents do not become over-involved because they are arrogant or careless. They become over-involved because they care deeply.

They see their child's potential. They worry about wasted time, poor coaching, missed opportunities and bad decisions. They see other children improving. They hear other parents talking. They watch online videos. They feel the pressure of rankings, tournaments, selection and time. Their instinct is understandable:

"If this matters so much, surely I should be more involved."

There is also another issue, which needs to be said carefully. From the outside, tennis can look deceptively simple. A player hits a ball over a net. A coach feeds drills. A match is won or lost. Parents watch, compare, analyse and begin to form opinions. Because the game is so visible, it is easy to believe that the development process is visible too.

But it is not.

The real work is often hidden beneath the surface: the order in which skills are built, the timing of technical changes, the relationship between movement and stroke production, the development of weapons, the ability to absorb pressure, the management of confidence, the selection of competition, the balance between short-term results and long-term growth, and the judgement to know when to push, when to hold back and when to wait.

This is where tennis is often underestimated. Parents may deeply respect surgeons, pilots, engineers or Formula 1 teams because the technical difficulty and risk are obvious even if the details are not. With

tennis, the expertise can appear more accessible because everyone can see the ball, the court and the outcome.

But seeing the outcome is not the same as understanding the process. High-performance tennis development is a specialist field. Only a small number of people genuinely understand how to help a child progress towards elite level, because that understanding requires far more than theory. It requires experience, detailed technical knowledge, competitive insight, long-term judgement and repeated exposure to the patterns that lead to success or failure.

Good intentions are not enough. Intelligence is not enough. Commitment is not enough. Statistics and metrics are not enough. Even tennis knowledge is not always enough. The person or team guiding the journey needs deep expertise and first-hand understanding of the pathway.

The danger of misunderstood data

Another area parents often misunderstand is data.

In many areas of adult life, data is extremely useful: record information, analyse patterns, make improvements, and go again. It is understandable that parents bring this mindset into tennis. Recording serves, errors, winners, percentages, rally lengths and training hours can feel professional, scientific and responsible.

But elite-level tennis data is highly contextual.

A thousand serves practised with poor technique is not the same as a thousand serves practised with good technique. A thousand hours of low-quality training is not the same as a thousand hours of high-quality training. A forehand missed in one tactical situation is not the same as a forehand missed in another. A backhand missed at deuce does not carry the same meaning as one missed at 40-0 or 0-40. A return of serve missed against a big server or a left-handed opponent is not the same as one missed against a slower server or right-handed opponent.

Surface, opponent and conditions also matter. Statistics gathered on clay may not apply in the same way to hard courts. Numbers collected outdoors in wind may not translate to indoor tennis. A player may miss for technical, tactical, physical or emotional reasons - and the number alone rarely tells the full story.

Data can show broad patterns and can support good coaching when interpreted properly. But without context, it can mislead. It can make parents feel they are being objective when they are actually reacting to surface-level outcomes.

The better question is not simply, “What do the numbers say?” It is:

“What do these numbers mean in the context of the player’s stage, technique, tactics, opponent, conditions and long-term plan?”

That is a coaching question, not just a data question. In tennis, data is useful only when interpreted with experience, context and judgement.

The Formula 1 analogy: developing the car, the driver and the race strategy

A useful way to understand high-performance tennis development is to compare it to Formula 1 racing. In Formula 1, success is not just about having a skilled driver. It is not just about having a powerful car. It is not just about hiring a good engineer or copying another team's setup. Everything has to work together.

- The "car" is the player's technical, physical and athletic development: the serve, movement, forehand, backhand, tactical weapons, speed, strength, coordination, injury resilience and ability to repeat skills under pressure.
- The "driver" is the child themselves: their courage, decision-making, emotional control, competitive intelligence, ability to adapt, willingness to take responsibility and capacity to perform when conditions are difficult.
- The "race strategy" is the long-term plan: training blocks, tournament selection, rest periods, technical priorities, physical development, competitive exposure, confidence management and timing.
- The "race team" is the wider environment: coaches, fitness support, school, parents, travel, communication, expectations and emotional climate.

All of this has to be connected. Even a talented team with too many conflicting voices will underperform.

The quality of the team matters. In Formula 1, success depends on specialist components, expert engineers, experienced strategists and mechanics who understand the demands of the level. A local garage mechanic may be excellent at servicing ordinary cars, but that does not mean they should be diagnosing or repairing a Formula 1 car. They might see that tyres are missing and fit standard tyres, believing they have solved the problem, without understanding that the car requires a very specific compound, pressure, temperature window and setup for the conditions. The mistake is not a lack of effort; it is a lack of specialist context.

Tennis is similar. At serious performance level, a child needs more than general tennis knowledge, enthusiasm or well-meaning support. They need people who understand the level they are trying to reach, can diagnose what is actually limiting progress, and can make the right adjustments at the right time. Otherwise, problems may be "fixed" in a way that appears sensible on the surface but is wrong for the player's long-term development.

In Formula 1, nobody would expect a parent to design the car, analyse the data, engineer the setup, train the driver, read the race conditions, decide the strategy, manage the pit stops and communicate from the pit wall - especially if they had never competed at that level or successfully guided a driver through the journey before.

Yet in junior tennis, this is effectively what can happen when parents try to piece together the pathway themselves. If the parent is collecting advice from different coaches, online videos, tournament parents and social media clips, while also deciding the direction and adjusting the plan, they have unintentionally placed themselves in the role of team principal, engineer and race strategist - all in one.

The parent's role is not to become the team principal. The parent's role is to do proper due diligence, choose the right team for their child, understand the philosophy, and then create the stability that allows the child and the coaching team to work and grow.

The problem with too many voices

Many parents do not think they are taking over the journey if they are not personally standing on court feeding balls. Instead, they try to assemble expertise. This can create the impression that the journey is professionally managed.

But if there is no coherent leadership, no shared philosophy and no experienced person responsible for the overall direction, the child can become surrounded by disconnected input. Each piece of advice may sound reasonable in isolation. But without one clear design philosophy, one race strategy and one experienced team leading the process, the result is often confusion rather than performance.

Different coaches often have different philosophies. One may prioritise technique, another intensity, another short-term results. Combined without co-ordination, they pull the child in different directions. The child develops too little clarity. High-performance development requires alignment. The parent's job is not to collect as many opinions as possible; it is to find the right team to trust.

Due diligence: choose very carefully, then allow the process to work

Trust should never be given casually. Parents are right to be careful. The number of environments genuinely capable of managing a serious junior tennis journey is very small. Good due diligence should include asking:

- What is the long-term development philosophy?
- Have they genuinely developed players, not just recruited them?
- Do they understand the age and stage of the child?
- Can they explain the plan clearly and specifically?
- How do they handle setbacks, plateaus and confidence dips?
- Who is responsible for the overall direction?
- Does the environment build independence and resilience?
- Can the parent trust this person or team enough during difficult periods to resist intervening?

The last question is crucial. If you cannot trust the coach or academy, do not pretend to trust them. Keep looking. Once you have chosen carefully, you must give the process space. A good plan cannot work if it is questioned, interrupted or redirected every week. Even the best-laid plan can be suffocated by constant interference.

Protect the child's clarity

Children trust their parents more than anyone. If a parent constantly questions the coach, criticises the plan, or adds their own technical or tactical advice before and after matches, the child will recognise the implicit doubt. The child needs to feel that the adults around them are totally aligned. They need one clear direction, not a committee of competing voices. Clarity is one of the greatest gifts a parent can give.

Keep the long game in view

Progress in tennis is not linear. There will be breakthroughs, plateaus, regressions, and results that do not reflect the quality of the work. Many parents struggle most during the quiet phases, when progress is happening beneath the surface but not yet showing in results. This is when panic can set in.

The long game requires patience and restraint. Restraint does not mean doing nothing. It means knowing when not to interfere. It means allowing the child to experience struggle without turning every difficulty into an emergency. Good development often looks messy before it looks impressive.

Control the controllables

One of the most important disciplines for both parent and player is learning to control the controllables.

In tennis, there will always be things outside your control: draws, rankings, selections, opponents, line calls, weather, court surfaces, tournament scheduling, injuries, growth spurts, funding decisions and the speed at which other children develop.

A parent who becomes consumed by these things can quickly pass anxiety to the child. The journey starts to feel unfair, chaotic and emotionally exhausting.

The healthier approach is to keep returning to what can be controlled: preparation, attitude, effort, punctuality, respect, recovery, communication, coachability, training quality, emotional response and commitment to the process.

This does not mean ignoring problems or pretending everything is fair. It means not allowing uncontrollable factors to dominate the emotional climate around the child.

The parent's job is to help the child understand that they cannot control every outcome, but they can control how professionally they prepare, how bravely they compete, how honestly they reflect and how consistently they return to the work.

That mindset protects the player. It builds resilience, reduces blame and keeps the focus on development rather than distraction.

The difficult truth: even the right process does not guarantee the outcome

There is another truth that every tennis parent must hold with humility. Even with the right coach, environment, and attitude, success at the highest level is never guaranteed. This is not because anyone has failed; it is because elite sport is brutally selective.

There are only 100 places in a top 100, and only one winner in any 32-player or 64-player draw. Every draw is full of children and families who have also worked hard, sacrificed and believed.

No parent or child is entitled to the outcome because they have "done everything right." No child owes a parent success because the parent has sacrificed. Humility protects the child from becoming a project and protects the parent from resentment. The aim is to pursue excellence seriously, but not with entitlement.

World-class commitment without unhealthy obsession

Elite tennis requires a level of family commitment that can appear extreme to those outside the sport. There will be stages where training and competition must be prioritised over social events and normal routines.

The distinction between healthy commitment and unhealthy obsession is found in the parent's motivation. The unhealthy parent is often driven by money, ego, status, or a desire to live through the child's results. The elite parent's commitment is selfless and controlled; it is a commitment to the process and the child's ambition, not the parent's own needs.

A child may occasionally need a push-start, particularly during difficult transitions. However, the parent must never become the permanent engine. If the parent remains the primary source of ambition and pressure, the journey is built on sand. For the child to reach the highest levels, the drive must eventually become internal.

High-performance parenting is about enabling the dream, not driving the car. It requires the courage to be fully committed to the child's goals while remaining fully detached from the need for self-validation through their trophies.

Match-day guidance for parents

- **Before the match:** Keep the atmosphere calm. Avoid last-minute advice or emotional speeches. Allow the child to focus on what the coaches have been working on in their own mental space.
- **During the match:** Do not coach. Do not react dramatically to mistakes or line calls. Do not get involved even if you feel your child is suffering an injustice. Your child should not have to manage your body language and emotions while trying to manage the match.
- **After the match:** Give space. Do not turn the car journey into a review session. Useful questions are: "How are you feeling?" "What do you need right now?" "What did you learn?" Sometimes the best response is simply: "I loved watching you compete. Let's get some food."

Pressure: make sure your child is not carrying yours

Pressure is a big part of competitive tennis. But there is a difference between healthy sporting pressure and emotional pressure from home. Children notice facial expressions, silence in the car, and changes in mood after results. Ask yourself:

“Does my presence make my child feel calmer, clearer and more secure - or more judged and responsible for my emotions?”

Summary: what the elite tennis parent does

The elite tennis parent:

- raises a child who is respectful, punctual, prepared and coachable;
- provides unconditional emotional support;
- actively uplifts the child when confidence, belief or motivation is low;
- gives perspective during difficult moments instead of adding criticism or panic;
- shows world-class commitment without making the child responsible for the parent’s sacrifice;
- chooses the coaching environment carefully and trusts it;
- protects the child from too many voices;
- stays calm during setbacks;
- allows the child to struggle and learn;
- keeps the family’s focus on the controllables: preparation, attitude, effort, recovery, coachability and response to setbacks;
- keeps perspective during wins and losses;
- understands that effort, sacrifice and investment do not create entitlement to results;
- remembers that the parent-child relationship is bigger than tennis.

The role of the LTA in the journey

For parents in British tennis, it is also helpful to understand where the LTA fits into their journey. The LTA is the national governing body for tennis in Great Britain. It plays an important role in the wider tennis ecosystem: supporting the sport, creating competitive structures, and providing selected opportunities for players who meet the relevant criteria.

For some players, these opportunities can be extremely valuable, providing access to higher-level training environments, international exposure and funding.

They can be particularly valuable where a player's day-to-day coaching environment does not yet have extensive experience of the high-performance pathway. In those situations, LTA involvement can provide useful benchmarks, exposure to higher standards and a clearer sense of what the next level requires.

Parents should not dismiss these opportunities. They matter.

But parents should also understand what these opportunities are - and what they are not. The LTA pathway is, by its nature, a structured county, regional and national pathway with defined criteria and limited resources. Selection should be seen as a positive sign, but it is not a guarantee. Not being selected can be disappointing, but it is not the end of the journey. A parent should see LTA opportunities as something to value, but not as something to depend on financially, emotionally or structurally.

What matters most is where the day-to-day accountability sits. That is usually within the player's own environment: the coach, the training culture, the family support, and the daily habits that shape the player over time.

Parents should not expect the LTA to "take over" the journey, or assume that being selected for county, regional or national opportunities means the player is now on an elevator to success. Nor should they expect LTA coaches to take the strategic or technical lead unless they are also the player's day-to-day coach.

The role of LTA coaches will usually be different from the role of a coach or academy working with one child through the full journey. Players will be exposed to different LTA coaches at different stages of the journey. Future selection and associated funding will still depend on continuing to meet the relevant criteria.

Final word

The hardest part of being an elite tennis parent is not effort; it is judgement. Judgement to choose the right team, to recognise real expertise, to stay calm and restrained when progress is slow, to focus on the controllables, and above all, to remain the parent - not the coach, analyst, or strategist. When adult roles are aligned, the child has the best chance to become a stronger player and a more resilient young person.