

# Swedish Swimmers' Perception of Parental Involvement

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Parents play a critical role in children's sport involvement and throughout their sporting lives. Parental level of involvement can influence positively or negatively their children's sport participation. It is essential to investigate the influence of perceived parental involvement on enjoyment and competitive anxiety in young Swedish swimmers. Several valid and reliable instruments were used to assess perceived parental involvement in 104 (61 female and 43 male) Swedish swimmers, aged 9-18 years old and members of a swimming club at various competitive levels. The analysis revealed, in short, that athletes were satisfied with their parent's directive behavior and praise/understanding, but were dissatisfied with their parents' level of active involvement and pressure. The negative discrepancy scores in active involvement revealed that athletes desire slightly more active involvement and pressure from their parents. On the whole, young Swedish swimmers were satisfied with their parents' level of involvement in their sports, indicating the protective and caring nature of Swedish parents in relation to the sport of swimming. A methodological weakness, based on the time that the Sport Anxiety Scale-2 was administered, might explain the weak relation between parental practices and athletes' competitive anxiety. Further research is needed in order to identify any interaction between parental practices and the swimmers' competitive anxiety.

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## Introduction

Sports plays a significant role in numerous children's lives. For many children, sports participation is a positive and enjoyable experience, where as for others, sports can become a negative and stressful experience. Children's sports participation may be influenced by numerous factors such as siblings, teachers, coaches, peers, officials and spectators. Eventually, all these factors can play a crucial role in influencing behaviors and attitudes, at least during childhood, regarding physical activity and sports participation for both boys and girls (Coakley & White, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). However, there is a vast amount of research into the domain of competitive youth sports that signalize that children who get involved in sports are mainly influenced by the effective roles and behaviors of coaches and parents (Côté & Hay, 2002). While the task of the coach as professional aid may certainly be important, the informal role of the family is most significant (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). This is because most of the children remain in the family environment for several years, which provide ample opportunities for parental influence. Indeed, parents have been consistently and strongly linked with children's motivation, self-perceptions, and sports involvement (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). Findings also suggest that parents play an important role in the children's affective experience of extracurricular activities (Anderson et al., 2003) and that both parents play a critical, though slightly different role in a young athletes' career development (Wuerth et al., 2004).

Both tennis and swimming provide some of the best examples of excessive parental behavior. For example, Monica Seles' father was banned from Women Tennis Association (WTA) events and Andre Agassi revealed in his autobiography how his father's pressure made him 'hate' tennis. On the other hand, parents have also the capability to produce positive and inspirational behavior by promoting their children's athletic and personal development through sports. Eventually, parents have been recognized as critical providers to their children's sports experiences and as critical contributors to the Olympic achievement of elite athletes (Gould et al., 2002). A perfect example supporting this comes from one of the greatest swimming legends, Michael Phelps. Phelps mentions several times in his autobiography that his mother was one of the most important elements for his athletic success, but she also played a central role in his personal development.

Positive parental involvement has been well associated with athlete enjoyment and sports adherence (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). But at the same time, young athletes have reported over-involved parents as a source of stress (Reeves, Nicholls & McKenna, 2009). Over-involvement includes parents over-emphasizing winning by having unrealistic performance expectations rather than promoting their children's happiness, health and personal development (Gould et al., 2006). Such an involvement may increase children's anxiety (Norton et al., 2000), lower their self-esteem and self-confidence (Leff & Hoyle, 1995), reduce their enjoyment (Brustad, 1996), and eventually contribute to children's dropping out of sports (Gould et al., 1996).

Parents can have a negative influence on their children (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008); therefore, it is essential to explore the perceived and preferred parental behaviors of the young swimmers. It will be interesting to see how young Swedish swimmers perceive/desire their parents' involvement in their sport, and if the nature of parental involvement influences young athletes' enjoyment and competitive anxiety.

## Literature review

### *Parental involvement*

Holt et al. (2009) define parental involvement as the extent to which parents are interested in, are knowledgeable about, and also take an active role in their children's sports participation. According to Helmsell (1982), in the academic field there is a curvilinear relationship between parental involvement and children's experience of stress. More specific, parents who are moderately involved create less stress than those who are over- or underinvolved. Similarly, Stein et al. (1999), describing the relationship between parents and children, but by putting it in the sports context, suggested that there must be an optimal level of parental involvement in youth sports. Exploring deeply their finding, it was suggested that there is an "X shape" relationship between children's perception of their parents' degree of involvement (i.e., too much, just right, and too little), and their own enjoyment. They also revealed a "U shape" relationship between children's perception of their parents degree of involvement and children's stress level.

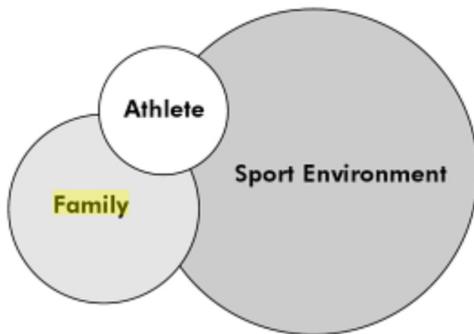
The main framework of the Stein et al. (1999) study was closely based on Hellstedt's (1987) findings and suggestions. Hellstedt was the first who described the relationship between parents and children, by placing the family system theory into a sports context, which resulted in a descriptive model with three categories, overinvolved, moderately involved and underinvolved parents of young athletes. In his first category, Hellstedt described the overinvolved parents (Figure 1). These parents are emotionally overly involved with their child's sport experiences and performance. They tend to spend enormous amount of time watching their child's training sessions, and they always attend competitions. Overinvolved parents have dreams of fame and great success, and they see their child's talent as an investment for the future (e.g. to become Olympic or WC gold medalist). Additionally, this type of parents is characterized by being overbearing with coaches and other members within the club. Based on Hellstedt's description, overinvolved parents are focusing on wins and success, rather than on their child's skills, happiness, health and personal development.



**Figure 1** A depiction of overinvolved family in both athlete and sport environment

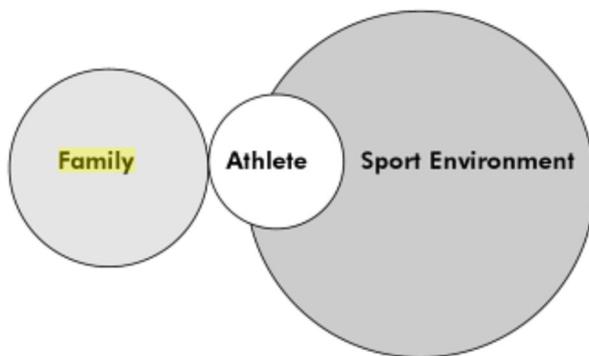
In his second category, Hellstedt referred to the moderately involved parents (Figure 2). The main concern of this type of parents is to create a beneficial balance between their child and the coaching staff. They attend competitions and some practices but they leave the coaching part completely up to the coach. Although they invest time, emotion and

money on their child's sports participation, it is vital that moderately involved parents give more emotional and actual space to their children allowing them to make and take their own decisions about different sports related issues like goals, participation and commitment.



**Figure 2** A depiction of moderately involved family in both athlete and sport environment

Hellstedt concluded by describing the underinvolved sports parents (Figure 3). Underinvolved parents are the type of parents who show little or no interest in their child's sports participation and athletic progress. They lack investment of emotional, financial, and/or practical energy in their child's sports activities. Normally, this type of parents tends to put no effort at all into guiding their children through their sporting participation and experience.



**Figure 3** A depiction of under-involved family in both athlete and sports environment

By putting everything together, Hellstedt's suggestion was that moderate parental involvement is ideal, since it promotes a healthier relationship between parents and children. On the other hand, over- or under- parental involvement creates a negative environment for the children. It is more likely to reduce children's enjoyment and at the same time to increase their stress level in relation to their sports participation.

The importance of parental involvement was also emphasized in a recent interview-based study by Lauer et al. (2010). The aim of the study was to explore the role that parents play in developing professional tennis players and, specifically, the full array of negative and positive attitudes and behaviors that influence talent development in tennis. The participants in this study discussed in depth the positive and negative behaviors parents exhibited during the junior tennis years. The study revealed that positive parental involve-

ment included various forms of support, emotionally intelligent discussions, and developing the child psychologically and socially through tennis. On the other hand, negative parental behaviors included being negative and critical, pushing, emphasizing winning and talent development over other domains of the child's life, and using controlling behavior to reach tennis goals. The results also showed that positive and negative parental behavior take place during the developmental stage (early and middle years), and supported Côté's (1999) findings that direct parental involvement mostly occurs in the early and middle years of athletic talent development.

### *Enjoyment*

Children have identified enjoyment or fun as a key factor for motivated behavior, as a major reason for their sports participation and as a key predictor of their sports commitment (Weiss et al., 2001). Apparently, there are several factors underlying enjoyment among young athletes at different ages. Research from a variety of theoretical perspectives have shown that one of the best predictors of children's continuing involvement and enjoyment in sports is the development of an intrinsic versus an extrinsic motivation environment (e.g. Brustad, 1996; Eccles & Harold, 1991). Wankel and Kreisel (1985), working on four different age groups (7-8, 9-10, 11-12 and 13-14 years) within teams' settings, found that enjoyment factors were consistent between age groups. Intrinsic factors (e.g. personal achievement and skills improvement) were rated as most important, followed by social factors (e.g. being with teammates), while extrinsic or outcome-related factors (e.g. winning and satisfy others) were rated as less important. Since then, several studies have shown the importance of active parental interest, often showing an appropriate amount of parental support and encouragement, can increase enjoyment as well as how long children stay involved in sports (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006). For instance, the less parental pressure perceived by young male and female basketball players, the greater their enjoyment of the sport (Brustad, 1988). A study by Anderson et al. (2003) suggested that parental pressure is a significant negative predictor of sports activity enjoyment; as parental pressure increased, children reported enjoyment decline. Woolger and Power (1993) also suggested that adults (e.g. parents and coaches) are two of the stronger influences on sports enjoyment, and through their study on young swimmers they demonstrated a positive correlation between children's enjoyment in swimming and parental support. However, Stein et al. (1999), by introducing a different perspective about parental involvement, argued that quality of involvement is more important than the amount of involvement. Specifically, they showed that children who reported higher rates of perceived quality of parental involvement, enjoyed their sports more. Consequently, we can conclude that level of parental involvement, combined with quality of parental involvement influence children's sports participation and enjoyment.

The importance of enjoyment can be also emphasized by the fact that enjoyment is a primary element in some sports motivation theories, such as competence motivation theory (Harter, 1981), sport commitment model (Scanlan et al., 1993a) and the sport achievement goal theory (Nicholls, 1998). Through his sport achievement theory, Nicholl's proposed that individuals differ in terms of the criteria they use to define success and evaluate their competence, and that these differences are reflected by two goal orientations: ego and task. Ego oriented individuals tend to define success through competitive situations and when

they have done better than others. In contrast, task oriented individuals feel success and enjoyment when they improve their skills or learn new tasks. Morris & Kavussanu (2009), in a study on young British athletes, showed that in hierarchical regression analysis, task/ego oriented goals were the most important predictors of athlete's enjoyment. They found that task-approach goals positively predicted enjoyment, and negatively predicted concentration disruption and worry. In a more recent report, Smoll et al. (2011) trying to assist the coaches-parents relationship in youth sports also highlighted the importance of promoting mastery climate by both parents and coaches.

Consequently, children's sports enjoyment is strongly related with the level of parental involvement. Moderately involved parents promote children's enjoyment and satisfaction more, compared to over- and underinvolved parents. In addition, good quality of parental involvement can also promote children's enjoyment by creating mastery climates and emphasize more on the importance of intrinsic motivational rewards compared to extrinsic achievements and prizes.

### *Anxiety*

According to Smoll and Smith (1996), anxiety is generally defined as an emotional response consisting of cognitive concerns and physiological arousal to perceived threat. Thus, sport anxiety is formed by both cognitive and somatic arousal. Cognitive anxiety is related to worries, negative thoughts and expectations, whereas somatic anxiety represents the physiological components associated with autonomic arousal (i.e. increased heart rate and muscle tension).

In a study examining the degree of agreement among parents' and children on support and pressure, Kanters et al. (2008) found that parents have incongruent views to those of their children with regard to behavior perceived as exerting pressure and support. Parents' perception of the amount of pressure they imposed on their child was in fact consistently lower than the scores reported by their children. This discrepancy between children's and parents' perception of exerting pressure and support was shown to have a direct impact on children's level of anxiety. Bois et al. (2009), examining the parental practices on children and adolescents pre-competitive anxiety, found a positive relationship between parental pressure and anxiety in tennis players. A finding that was consistent with the existing literature (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Some studies have also shown that there is a positive relationship between parental expectations and their children's success and enjoyment in sports (McElroy & Kirkendall, 1980; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1985). Working with young swimmers, Power and Woolger (1994) found a curvilinear relationship between parental expectations and their children's enthusiasm for swimming. High and low parental expectations were associated with less enthusiasm from children, while an intermediate level of expectation was associated with children's highest level of enthusiasm for swimming. However, several other studies have shown that parental expectations can become a source of stress and pressure that can interfere with their children's participation in sports (Scanlan et al., 1991; Weiss, et al., 1989). Collins and Barber (2005), using a sample of 416 female field hockey players, found that children who perceived their parents to attribute greater importance to doing well had greater confidence but higher cognitive anxiety than children who perceived their parents to place less importance on doing well. Moreover, no relationship was found between levels of perceived parental involvement and pre-competitive

anxiety. Bois et al. (2009) also reported a positive relationship between pre-competitive anxiety and parenting practices for tennis players. More specific, it was found that directive behavior and pressure were positively associated with pre-competitive anxiety for all tennis players. In general, young athletes have reported over-involved parents as a source of stress (Reeves et al., 2009). However, the dimension of parental level of involvement includes the element of parental expectations as well as the element of parental stress perceived by the children. This assumption arises from the fact that over-involvement includes parents over-emphasizing winning, having unrealistic performance expectations, or providing excessive criticism following competition (Gould et al., 2006).

Obviously, there is a thin line between enjoyment and anxiety in children's sports domain. It is well documented that parental approaches and practices can influence children's sports experiences in a positive or negative way. Two of the main factors maintaining the balance between children's sport enjoyment and anxiety are the level and the quality of parental involvement. Promotion of enjoyment, and at the same time unwanted feelings reduction can be fostered by reducing the space between children's needs and parents' wants. That is why it is important to explore how children perceive their parents involvement and how they actually wish them to act and being involved within their sports domain.

### ***Young athletes' preferences for parental behaviors***

Many parents invest money, time, and emotional energy in order to support their children's sports participation (Gould & Carson, 2008). Although researchers have constantly examined parental behavior at youth sports, little research has explored children's preferences for their parents' behavior at sports events. In a very explanatory interview-based study, Knight et al. (2010) attempted to fill the void in literature concerning children preferences for parental behavior. They tried to identify junior tennis players' preferences for parental behavior at competitions. Generally, the results showed that young athletes wanted their parents to support their engagement and development in tennis, without pressuring them to achieve certain outcomes or performance levels. Specifically, junior players expected specific parental behaviors, which were grouped by the researchers under a general "umbrella" principle of being involved in a supportive way. The majority of the young players reported that they didn't like their parents to give them any tactical or technical advices before matches, because it confused them. Moreover, young players preferred not to be criticized for performance-related issues after a match. However, they didn't express negative attitudes for receiving feedback regarding their efforts, even if the feedback was critical. Additionally, players highlighted that they liked their parents to help them prepare for and recover after their matches. Athletes' turned out to respond positively when parents provided practical advices like "*have you eaten enough?*" or, "*did you drink enough water?*" but only when parents could "read" them and were not repetitive. The young players were also aware about their parents' facial expressions and the tone of voice, i.e., they could 'read' their parents emotions and attitudes. Young players explained how inconsistencies in parents' behavior or changing behavior during a match might cause a shift from perceptions of support to pressure. Therefore, athletes highlighted the importance of relaxed parents, yet appearing interested, and controlling their tone of voice to be consistent with their verbal behavior. Finally, it was found that young players expected from their parents to respect their opponents and fans and not to get involved in a match or shout at anyone.

Young players also highlighted that parents who were respectful to their opponents and fans helped the creation of a positive and supportive environment for the all tournament participants. Summing up, the importance of this study was that it provided the children's perspective on desired parental involvement, but the finding also offered future guidance in order to improve parental involvement in the sport of tennis.

However, the majority of studies so far have tried to explore and identify children's preferences for their parents' behavior in sports by using questionnaires. Several researchers have used the parental involvement in sport questionnaires (PISQ) in different sports in order to assess youth athletes' perception of their parents' level and quality of involvement. For example, Ede et al. (2012), using the PISQ, tried to understand young hockey players' perception and satisfaction of their parents' level of involvement. Bois et al. (2009) using the PISQ explored the influence of parental practices and presence during matches on young tennis and basketball players' pre-competitive anxiety. Likewise, both Lee and MacLean (1997) and Stroebel (2006) using the PISQ investigated the source of parental pressure among age group swimmers, and the swimmers' perception of their parents' level on involvement respectively.

Lee and MacLean (1997) studied 82 swimmers from two swimming clubs from the South of England and explored the parental behavior and how the athletes perceived it as a source of pressure in their sport. The finding revealed that children experienced excessive directive behavior, insufficient praise/understanding, but satisfactory active involvement by their parents. Additionally, it was found that children experienced excessive level of pressure from their parents. A multiple regression analysis also indicated that discrepancies between desired and perceived directive behavior and levels of desired pressure predicted experienced pressure. This provided qualified support for the model of the study about perceived parental intensity of involvement and pressure (low perceived parental intensity of involvement = little pressure experienced; high perceived parental intensity of involvement = too much pressure experienced), but it also indicated that the quality of parental behavior rather than simply its intensity is critical in provoking feelings of pressure.

In a more recent study of 93 adolescent swimmers in three swimming clubs from the geographical area of Bloemfontein (South Africa), Stroebel (2006) tried to explore how the athletes perceived their parents involvement in their sport. The study found that the swimmers perceived their mothers and fathers involvement differently. Specifically, swimmers were satisfied with their mothers' active involvement, praise/understanding and pressure, but they were dissatisfied with their mothers' insufficient directive behavior. On the other hand, the swimmers were satisfied with their fathers' directive behavior, but the fathers displayed more pressure, active involvement and praise/understanding to their children. Although respondents reported excessive levels of pressure from their fathers and insufficient directive behavior from their mothers, it is encouraging that the data revealed that the majority of the respondents (92.5%) were very satisfied with their swimming experience in general, indicating that they enjoyed swimming to a large extent. These results were inconsistent with previous findings (Anderson et al., 2003), which suggests that perceived parental pressure could negatively influence the adolescents' extracurricular enjoyment.

## **Aim of the study and research questions**

The objective of this study is to explore young competitive swimmers' perception of parental involvement and how it affects their enjoyment and competitive anxiety.

The aim of the study is to discover answers to specific research questions:

1. How do youth swimming athletes perceive their parents' level of involvement?
2. Are youth swimming athletes satisfied with their parents' actual level of involvement in comparison to desired level of parental involvement?
3. Do youth swimming athletes' perceptions of their parents' level of pressure correlate with their perceived parental directive behavior, active involvement, and praise and understanding?
4. Do youth swimming athletes' perceptions of their parents' level of involvement correlate with their level of enjoyment in swimming?
5. Do youth swimming athletes' perceptions of their parents' level of involvement correlate with their level of competitive anxiety in swimming?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participating in the present study were 104 (61 female & male 43) swimmers, aged 9-18 years old (mean age 13.7, SD 2.5) living in the south of Sweden. All participants were members of a swimming club at various competitive levels, with an average of 11 hours training per week. All the participants spent an average of ten and a half months training for swimming per year and one and a half month taking some time off from any structured swimming training.

### ***Procedures***

The study took place in February and March. Initially, all the coaches of the club were fully informed about the objectives and the value of the study. Coaches were also informed of the types of questions and the nature of the questionnaires, and the procedures of the data collection phase. The coaches of the club agreed to participate, and they encouraged their swimmers to give their full cooperation. Parental consent forms highlighting the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were given to the athletes to complete at home and return it to the club within two weeks. During the next four weeks the self-completion questionnaires were administered to small groups of respondents before training sessions, so as to minimize any possible disruption to the training sessions. The coaches explained to the participant the data collection procedures. In addition, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions when something were unclear to them. This enabled the coaches and the researcher to ensure that all participants adequately comprehended the items in the questionnaires.

## *Measures*

The athletes completed an introductory sheet by answering and giving information about themselves (e.g. age, gender, swimming experiences). Then, three questionnaires were administered including the Parental Involvement in Sport Questionnaire (PISQ), a questionnaire with three items that assessed enjoyment in swimming, and the Sport Anxiety Scale-2 (SAS-2). All questionnaires have been used in published scientific studies and have been tested for reliability and validity (Smith et al., 2006; Wuerth et al., 2004).

*The Parental Involvement in Sport Questionnaire (PISQ)* was used to assess youth athletes' perceptions of their parents' levels of involvement (Lee & MacLean, 1997; Stroebel, 2006). The original British instrument consists of 20 items including three multi-items scales and a single item of pressure. The Active Involvement scale (AI) consists of five items that assess parents' activity in the club or during the practice sessions (e.g. Do your parents discuss your progress with your coach?). The Directive Behavior scale (DB) with 10 items focused on the extent to which parents control their children's behavior in sports (e.g. before a contest, do your parents tell you how to compete?). The Praise and Understanding (PU) includes 4 items assessing the praise and empathy parents' display towards their children (e.g. Do your parents show they understand how you are feeling about your sport?). Parental pressure (PR) was assessed with one item (Do your parents put pressure on you concerning your sport?). The participants answered the 20 questions based on how they perceive their parents' involvement. Then, they answered the same 20 questions, but this time based on how they desire their parents' involvement. Participants were required to indicate their answers to these 20 items on a five-point scale anchored by "never" (1) and "always" (5).

Three items were added to assess youth athletes' *enjoyment* in swimming. Enjoyment in sport is defined as "an individual's positive affective response to her or his competitive sport experience which reflects feeling and/or perceptions such as pleasure, liking, and experienced fun" (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986, p. 32). Participants identified the extent to which they enjoy a) practices, b) competition, and c) swimming in general. Participants were required to indicate their answers to these 3 items on a five-point scale anchored by "none at all" (1) to "a lot" (5).

*Sport Anxiety Scale-2 (SAS-2)*, revised and validated by Smith et al. (2006), was added to assess competitive anxiety. Anxiety is generally defined as an emotional response consisting of cognitive concerns and physiological arousal to perceived threat (Smoll & Smith, 1996). The SAS-2 instrument with 15 items includes three multi-items scales. The somatic Scale consists of five items that assess somatic anxiety (e.g. My body feels tense). The worry Scale consists of five items that assess worries (e.g. I worry that I won't swim well). And the last scale is related to concentration/disruption (e.g. I lose focus on the swim race). Participants were required to indicate their answers to these 15 items on a four-point scale anchored by "none at all" (1) to "very much" (4).

All documents and items were translated into Swedish and were checked by at least three persons with extended knowledge of both Swedish and English. The terminology used in all questionnaires was slightly modified to meet the requirements of the target sport (swimming). For example in SAS-2, the question "I worry that I will not play well" was changed to "I worry that I will not swim well".

## **Data Analysis**

The data attained from the questionnaires were entered into SPSS, Version 21.

## **Research questions**

i) “How do youth swimming athletes perceive their parents’ level of involvement?” was analyzed using descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations). The parental level of involvement is presented using the four scales of the PISQ (directive behavior, praise and understanding, active involvement and pressure) and includes mothers’ and fathers’ perceived level of involvement collectively.

ii) “Are youth swimming athletes satisfied with their parents’ actual level of involvement in comparison to desired level of parental involvement?” was analyzed using a dependent t-test. The swimmers’ perception of their parents’ involvement is represented by discrepancies (D) between the rating of perceived and desired behavior (e.g. Discrepancy = Perceived behavior - Desired behavior). The range of possible discrepancies is -4 to +4. When the discrepancy between the perceived and desired behavior is zero, it indicates that the swimmer was satisfied with a particular parental behavior. The results are presented by each scale of the PISQ (directive behavior, praise and understanding and active involvement) and include mothers and father’s perceived level of involvement collectively.

iii) “Do youth swimming athletes’ perceptions of their parents’ level of pressure correlate with their perceived parental directive behavior, active involvement, and praise/understanding?” was analyzed using a series of Pearson correlation analyses. The results are presented by each scale of the PISQ and include perceived mothers and father’s level of involvement collectively.

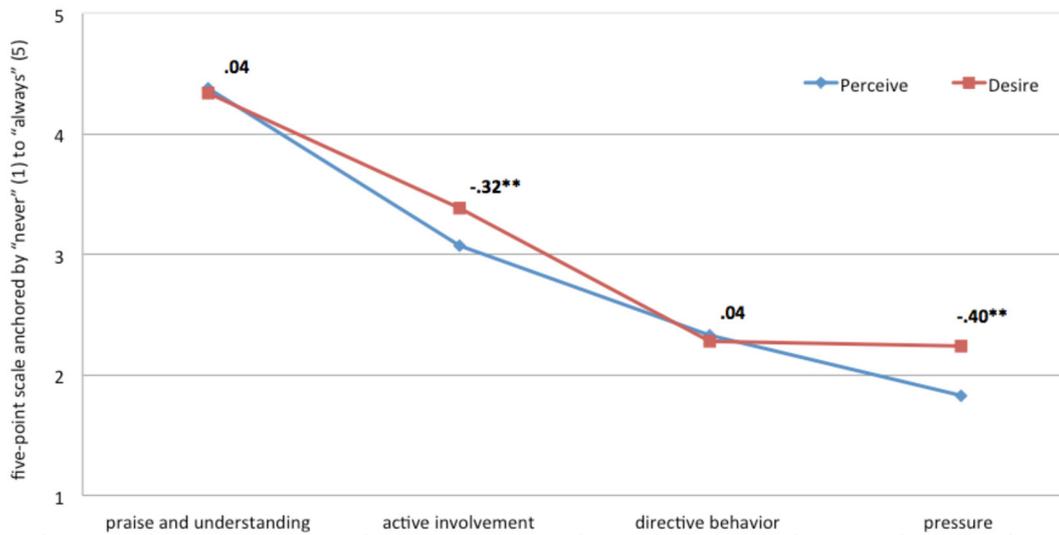
iv) “Do youth swimming athletes’ perceptions of their parents’ level of involvement correlate with their level of enjoyment in swimming?” was analyzed using a series of Pearson correlation analyses. The results are presented by each scale of the PISQ and include mothers and father’s perceived level of involvement collectively.

v) “Do youth swimming athletes’ perceptions of their parents’ level of involvement correlate with their level of competitive anxiety?” was analyzed using a series of Pearson correlation analyses. The results are presented by each scale of the PISQ and include perceived mothers’ and fathers’ level of involvement collectively.

## **Results**

i) *How do youth swimming athletes perceive their parents’ level of involvement?* The athletes perceived their parents’ as using praise and understanding ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = .66$ ) and active involvement ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = .67$ ) quite often, compared to directive behavior ( $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = .71$ ) and pressure ( $M = 1.83$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ). The athletes perceived their parents’ using more praise and understanding and active involvement than directive behavior and

pressure. The participants perceived both their parents involvement equally, and there will be no distinction between fathers and mothers; they will be considered as one group.



**Figure 4** Athletes' satisfaction in relation to perceived and desired level of parental involvement based on discrepancy scores. \*\* Significantly different at the  $p = .01$  level.

ii) *Are youth swimming athletes satisfied with their parents' actual level of involvement in comparison to desired level of parental involvement?* A significant difference was found between the athletes' perceptions of their parents' actual and desired levels in two scales out of four of the PISQ. Specifically, a significant difference between the athletes' perceptions of their parents' actual and desired levels of involvement were found for active involvement  $t(103) = -4.47, p = .00$  and pressure  $t(103) = -2.84, p = .005$ . However, no significant difference between the athletes' perceptions of their parents' actual and desired levels of involvement were found for directive behavior and praise/understanding. In other words, the athletes were dissatisfied with their parents' level of active involvement and pressure and they were satisfied with their parents' directive behavior and praise/understanding. The negative discrepancy scores in active involvement ( $M = -.32, SD = .75$ ) and pressure ( $M = -.40, SD = 1.44$ ) revealed that athletes desire more active involvement and pressure from their parents (Figure D).

iii) *Do youth swimming athletes' perceptions of their parents' level of pressure correlate with their perceived parental directive behavior, active involvement, and praise/understanding?* A moderate and positive correlation  $r(104) = .49, p = .000$  was found between perceived pressure and directive behavior. Additionally, a weak but significant correlation  $r(103) = .28, p = .003$  was found between perceived pressure and active involvement. However, there was no correlation between athletes' perceived pressure and praise and understanding.

iv) *Do youth swimming athletes' perceptions of their parents' level of involvement correlate with their level of enjoyment in swimming?* The young swimming athletes highly enjoyed swimming in general ( $M = 4.42, SD = .75$ ), swimming competitions ( $M = 4.38, SD = .91$ ), and swim training ( $M = 4.23, SD = .74$ ). Some weak but significant correlations were found between the athletes' level of enjoyment and their perception of their parents'

level of involvement (Table 1). However, there was no strong correlation between the athletes' level of enjoyment and the perception of their parents' level of involvement.

		How much do you enjoy training	How much do you enjoy competitions	How much do you enjoy swimming in general
Praise/Understanding	Correlation	.253**	.245	.314**
	Sign. (2-tailed)	.01	.012	.001
Directive Behavior	Correlation	.101	.134	.129
	Sign. (2-tailed)	.30	.17	.19
Active Involvement	Correlation	-.039	.183	.086
	Sign. (2-tailed)	.69	.06	.38
Pressure	Correlation	-.320**	-.126	.070
	Sign. (2-tailed)	.001	.20	.47

**Table 1** Pearson correlation coefficients (*r*) and *p*-values for youth swimming athlete's enjoyment in relation to the perceived level of parental involvement. \*\* Significantly different at the *p* = .01 level

v) Do youth swimming athletes' perceptions of their parents' level of involvement correlate with their level of competitive anxiety? Some weak but significant correlations were found between the athletes' level of competitive anxiety and their perception of their parents' level of involvement (Table 2). However, no strong correlation was found between the athletes' level of competitive anxiety and their perception of their parents' level of involvement.

Type of anxiety:		Somatic	Worry	Concentration	Total
Praise/Understanding	Correlation	-.160	-.179	-.269**	-.240*
	Sign. (2-tailed)	.10	.069	.00	.014
Directive Behavior	Correlation	.203*	.171	.152	.220*
	Sign. (2-tailed)	.003	.083	.12	.02
Active Involvement	Correlation	.024	.016	.082	.044
	Sign. (2-tailed)	.81	.87	.40	.66
Pressure	Correlation	.064	.151	.170	.153
	Sign. (2-tailed)	.51	.12	.08	.12

**Table 2** Pearson correlation coefficients (*r*) and *p*-values for youth swimming athlete's competitive anxiety in relation to the perceived level of parental involvement. \* Significantly different at the *p* = .05 level, \*\* Significantly different at the *p* = .01 level

## Discussion

Part of the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of youth swimming athletes' perceptions and satisfaction of their parents' level of involvement. In sum, young swimmers were completely satisfied with their parents' level of praise/understanding and directive behavior. However, they were slightly dissatisfied with the level of active involvement and pressure on the part of the parents, suggesting that they want more active involvement and pressure from their them. Finally, the athlete's level of parental involvement did not impact their enjoyment and competitive anxiety of swimming, since no-correlations were found between perceived parental practices, enjoyment and competitive anxiety.

The findings in this study are consistent with the studies of Wuerth et al. (2004) and Ede et al. (2012) of parental involvement in sports. Ede et al. found that the young hockey athletes perceived their parents as using high level of praise/understanding and moderate levels of active involvement and directive levels of behavior. In addition, Wuerth et al., involving more participants from different sports, produced similar results. It was found that the athletes who participated in tracks, hockey, tennis, handball and swimming also perceived their parents as using high level of praise/understanding, moderate level of active involvement and directive behavior and low level of pressure. Thus, the findings in this study are consistent with previous studies, since young swimming athletes were found to perceive their parents as using more praise/understanding and active involvement less directive behavior, and low levels of pressure. However, even though young swimmers in this study were completely satisfied with their parents' praise/understanding and directive behavior, they were slightly dissatisfied and asked for more parental active involvement and pressure. This type of young swimmers' parental perception could be explained in the light of the structure of the Swedish family philosophy and society in general. Testimonies from parents and swimming coaches within the club under study have revealed that Swedish parental behaviors are characterized as protective and caring. However, further socio-economical research is needed to support this preliminary conclusion. The Swedish psychiatrist David Eberhard (2006) addressed the problem with overprotective parents and children who are not allowed to take risks, resulting in panic-anxiety development. According to Eberhard, Swedish parents in general are overprotective and "cosseting" their children. Surprisingly, this phenomenon is widespread, he claims, as it is found also in schools and daycare centers.

In the current study, young swimmers reported that their parents are but moderately involved in their sporting endeavors. The athletes showed that they prefer more active involvement and pressure from their parents, albeit not to the extent as to characterize the parents as overinvolved. In general, young athletes want their parents to engage in their sport in a supportive way, to set realistic goals, and to volunteer in sports activities, all of which are behaviors of moderately involved parents. In previous studies, researchers have indicated that the parents who are moderately involved in their child's sports participation are preferred, ahead of parents who are uninvolved or overinvolved (Stein et al., 1999; Wuerth et al., 2004).

Despite the low perceived level of parental directive behavior and pressure, a positive correlation was found between those two styles of parental behavior. Young swimmers revealed that the more directive behavior they perceive from their parents the higher is the

feeling of pressure they experience in their sport. The results in the current study support findings from previous studies, which also found that there is positive relation between perceived parental directive behavior and pressure (Lee & McLean, 1997; Weurth et al., 2004). Directive behavior refers to the extent to which parents controlled their child's behavior (Stroebel, 2006). Therefore, an explanation on this positive relation between directive behavior and pressure can be explained based on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Self-determination theory holds that controlling behaviors diminish intrinsic motivation by preventing satisfaction of the need for autonomy, which, according to Deci and Ryan, is one of the three basic psychological needs. Consequently, lack of autonomy and intrinsic motivation may lead to negative emotional experience such as pressure and potentially poorer performance. Overall, it is important to mention that different children can tolerate different degree of direction by their parents. Thus, the importance of individual differences would more likely be the significant factor in regards to the desirable amount of pressure for each child involved in sports (Lee & MacLean, 1997)

Moreover, this study revealed that youth swimmers' enjoyment in swimming was not impacted by their parents' level of involvement since non-significant correlations were found. The youth swimming athletes reported high levels of enjoyment of training, competitions and swimming in general, which most likely impacted this finding. Thus, the youth swimming athletes simply enjoyed the sport of swimming regardless of their parents' level of involvement. However, it is well documented that parental level of involvement can influence the athletes' level of enjoyment. Woolger's (1993) findings suggested that there is a positive correlation between children's enjoyment in swimming and parental support. Additionally, Stein et al. (1999) argued that quality of involvement is more important than the amount of involvement, since children that reported higher rates of perceived quality of parental involvement also enjoyed their sport more. Hence, the findings in this study are consistent with previous studies. The results in this study showed that young swimmers were satisfied or just slightly unsatisfied with their parents' level of involvements, promoting the parental support and quality of involvement. Likewise, the low level of perceived parental pressure found in this study also supports the feeling of high enjoyment that young swimmers' reported. Also the relationship between perceived parental pressure and athletes' enjoyment has been highlighted in previous studies. For instance, the less parental pressure perceived by young male and female basketball players, the greater their enjoyment of the sport (Brustad, 1988). Similarly, Anderson et al. (2003) also reported that parental pressure is a significant negative predictor of sports activity enjoyment, since it was found that as parental pressure increases, there is a decline in children's enjoyment. Thus, it is well documented that low level of perceived parental pressure positively influences the young athletes' enjoyment. A finding that this study is also supports. Overall, the findings in this study are consistent with previous studies, supporting the relationship between parental support/quality and young athletes' enjoyment in their sport.

An additional objective in this study was to explore the influence of parents' level of involvement, as perceived by the athletes, on their competitive anxiety. One should note that anxiety is not be seen as essentially negative, since its relationship with performance is generally weak and can even be positive for elite athletes (Craft et al., 2003). The Pearson correlation analysis showed some weak but significant correlations between the athletes' level of competitive anxiety and their perception of their parents' level of involvement. To

be more specific, “total anxiety” was negatively correlated with praise and understanding. A negative correlation was also found between praise /understanding and young swimmers’ “concentration”. A significant positive correlation was also found between directive behavior and total anxiety. However, it is necessary to emphasize that any correlation found in this study between the athletes’ level of competitive anxiety and the perception of their parents’ level of involvement are not strong. Previous researches have however demonstrated significant relationships between parenting practices and anxiety in both male and female athletes. A study by Bois et al. (2009), examining a sample comprised from 201 basketball players and 140 tennis players, showed that parenting practices influence the competitive anxiety level of young athletes. A canonical-correlation analysis revealed that directive behavior and pressure were positively related to anxiety for all tennis players, whereas praise and understanding was negatively associated with anxiety, but only for female tennis players. Therefore, even though the correlations found in the current study are not strong, they reveal the tendency that praise and understanding is negatively associated with competitive anxiety, where directive behavior is positively related to young athletes’ competitive anxiety.

## **Limitations**

In the current study no correlation was found between parental pressure and anxiety, something that deviates from previous studies (Bois et al., 2009; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Eventually, the weak correlations between parental practices and young swimmers’ anxiety found in this study might originate from an essential limitation in the methodology. The SAS-2 questionnaire in the current study was administered before the training sessions and not before competitions. In contrast, in a study by Bois et al., the SAS-2 questionnaire was administered before competitions. This is a critical weakness in the current study, since the SAS-2 questionnaire objective is to evaluate pre-competition anxiety and should thus be administered before or close to actual competitions. Hence, weak correlations found in this study between parental practices and young swimmers’ competitive anxiety might be the result of a methodological weakness.

## **Conclusion**

The finding revealed that young Swedish swimmers are more or less satisfied with their parents’ level of involvement in their sports, indicating the moderate style of Swedish parents involvement. On consideration, they perceived their parents using more praise/ understanding and active involvement than directive behavior and pressure, revealing the protective and caring nature of Swedish parents in relation to the sport of swimming. The findings also revealed that there is a positive correlation between directive behavior and pressure. Young Swedish swimmers showed that they enjoy their sport. The findings also indicate that there is no correlation between perceived parental involvement and competi-

tive anxiety. Overall, this study was the first attempt trying to explore the young Swedish swimmers' parental perception in relation to their sport. Therefore, additional research in different geographical regions within Sweden is needed in order to support and expand the current findings.

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