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Factors Impacting Swimming Participation and Competence: A Qualitative Report

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Factors Impacting Swimming Participation and Competence: A Qualitative Report

Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract

Drowning continues to be a major cause of death for children, especially among minority groups. USA Swimming commissioned studies in 2008 and 2010 to look at swimming ability or inability, an associated drowning variable. The 2010 study showed alarming high percentages regarding insufficient swimming skill for many demographic groups. The current study's purpose was to provide further analysis of variables which emerged from 2010 study and how these variables are affecting all US populations. Focus group interviews accomplished in three regionally diverse US cities asked participants (3=fathers; 12=mothers) about their personal history with swimming, perceptions concerning swimming in general, and their child's swimming ability/habits. Results confirmed the positive impact parents have on their children and the benefit of their child developing strategies for continued growth of their swimming skill. Participants expressed a healthy fear of water. They believed that swimming was a life skill that all children should learn.

Keywords: swimming competence, swim lessons, fear, parental impact, drowning prevention

Learning to safely take part in the physical activity of swimming is consistently and highly recommended for all children in the research literature (Brenner et al., 2009; Yang, et al., 2007) and by public health agencies such as the American Red Cross (2014), the American Academy of Pediatrics (Weiss et al., 2010), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2017a) and the World Health Organization (WHO, 2014). Despite consistent messages to learn how to swim from a qualified instructor, drowning incidents still occur far too often. According to the CDC, unintentional injuries are the leading cause of death for children in the United States (US) ages 1-19 years, and, of all unintentional injury causes, drowning is the leading cause of death for children ages 1-4 years (CDC, 2017a). Furthermore, lifetime cost estimates regarding drowning for ages 0-19 years has been estimated to be over \$1.53 billion (CDC, 2017b).

The public health issue of drowning is not just a problem in the US, but is worldwide. According to the WHO (2017), approximately 40 people drown every hour across the world. The global drowning problem is more prevalent in countries with high rates of poverty (called low- and medium-income countries or LMICs), as compared to countries which are more affluent, such as the US and European countries (designated high income or HICs) (WHO, 2014).

Past research in the US has noted demographic differences regarding swimming skill and reasons explaining these differences (Gilchrist & Parker, 2014). USA Swimming, the national governing body (NGB) for the sport, funded three national research projects in 2008, 2010, and 2017 to help better determine

swimming skill rates for children of different ethnic or minority groups. In all three studies, African American children ages 4-18 years have been found to have significantly lower swimming performance rates compared to all other racial groups (Irwin, et al., 2009; Irwin, et al., 2010; Irwin, et al., 2018). During the 2010 and 2017 national studies, the definition of “no or low” swimming skill was based on a swimming scale (see Figure 1) that ranged from “could not swim” to “could swim a little in the deep end of a pool and/or could float a little.” Also, regarding the next more advanced level of swimming skill (ranging from “could swim a length of a pool” to “could be on a swim team”), children who reported this level of swimming competence were typically affluent with parents who had a higher educational status.

Although, the numbers and statistics described the swimming performance differences among groups, there were still questions concerning why these differences existed. Therefore, during the 2010 study (Ross, et al., 2014), focus group interviews were included in the protocol in order to get a better view of the issue. This study targeted low income, minority parent samples for recruiting focus group participants. Focus group participants for the 2017 study included more representative middle-class individuals.

During the 2010 study (Ross et al., 2014), focus group interviews took place to help explain why this lack of swimming skill occurred within certain underserved minority groups. The qualitative results from this study showed that there were four main themes: *Swimming access, cultural constraints to swimming aptitude, parental perceptions that encourage swimming participation, and convincing resistant parents the value of water competence.* The conversations around swimming access focused on the difficulties which included cost of swimming and swimming lessons as well as inability to transport children to an aquatic facility in their neighborhoods. Further, many cultural constraints were discussed and elaborated upon such as the generational fear of drowning or injury as well as how chemicals in pool water may damage their child’s hair. Another overarching theme included how the participants who knew how to swim shared what they found to be successful to support children to learn how to swim. This included personal experiences such as leaving the pool area during their child’s swimming lessons because they were so overcome with fear. Lastly, the participants who knew how to swim spoke at great length about how to convince resistant parents, and the most prevalent recommendation was to emphasize that these lessons could save their child’s life. The most recent study (i.e., conducted in 2018) also incorporated focus group interviews as a means to better understand this deadly problem but involved more middle-income groups of parents.

Over the years, most swimming performance results changed for the better. Including all participants, approximately 61.4% reported a no or low swimming skill level in 2010. The results from the most recent (Irwin, Pharr, Irwin, & Layne, 2018) study showed that 49.3% of the sample indicated they had no/low swimming skill level. When looking at specific racial or ethnic groups in 2010 the no or low swimming levels for African American children were 68.9% as compared to 66.5% from the 2017 sample, which was not significantly different ($p=0.03$). The other racial category designations improved at a higher degree. White respondents in 2010 reported a 41.8% no or low swimming ability compared to a 36.2% rate in 2017, which was also not significantly different ($p=0.17$). Hispanic-Latino children reported a 57.9% no/low swimming ability in 2010 and a pointedly adjusted rate of 45.5% during the 2018 study, which was a significant difference (Irwin, Pharr, Irwin, & Layne, 2018).

The primary purpose for the current study was to provide further analysis of key variables which emerged from the 2010 study (Ross et al., 2014) and how these variables are or are not affecting all US populations. Additional purposes of this study included measuring the degree to which the parent/caregiver's swimming skill would predict their child's swimming skill, and if the child's swimming skill could forecast if that child had learned to swim by means of formal lessons from a certified swimming instructor. Also, another reason for this research was to uncover motivating factors as well as constraining barriers that caused parent/caregivers to enroll, or not enroll, their child(ren) in formal swim lessons. Supplementary analysis would also provide information concerning the level of fear of drowning/injury for both swimmers and parents, parental influence/encouragement, swim skill level, and parental swimming skill level.

Method

Based on the purpose of this study, research methodology followed the process used during the 2010 study (Ross et al., 2014). The research team conducted four focus groups, one each in Houston, Jacksonville, Las Vegas, and Memphis between March and May 2017. Parent participants were asked questions about their own swimming skill levels and perceptions concerning swimming. If a participant had more than one child, they were also asked to focus on only one child of their choice when responding to questions regarding that child's swimming skill level and perceptions.

Protection of the Human Subject

Approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the university from which the study was conducted. A consent/assent form for participants and parents was obtained before collecting data. All data were uploaded onto a spread sheet for analyses. The data were retained for one year from the date the data were first

obtained. For privacy purposes all data were kept confidential and no individual was identified.

Participants

A total of 15 parents, all mothers and fathers of children (males=3; females=12), took part in the focus group interviews. Table 1 provides a summary of demographic data.

Table 1

Demographic data

Gender (N=15)	
Male	3
Female	12
Age	
Adults	Avg.=39.2
Chosen Child (7M/8F)	Avg.=7.3
Race	
White	10
Black/African American	5
Income	
Less than \$20,000	2
\$30,000-49,999	2
\$75,000-99,999	2
\$100,000 or more	6
Would rather not say	2
Highest Educational Level	
High School	2
College or Technical Degree	7
Advanced College Degree	6
Living Arrangements	
Single-Parent home	4
Two-Parent home	11
Lunch Program	
Free school lunch	4
Not eligible	10
Do not know	1

Swimming skill level for each focus group participant and their child was self-reported and defined using a created scale (See Figure 1). Results are posted in Figure 2.

Figure 2*Self-reported swimming ability of parent and child*

Swim ability	Child	Parent
Cannot swim at all	2	1
Low swimming ability	6	2
Good swimming ability	6	7
Expert swimmer	1	5
Times to swim during summer months		
0 times	0	1
1-4 times	5	6
5-15 times	7	7
20 or more times	3	1

Procedures

Focus group interviews were held at YMCA facilities, but also included one elementary school. Upon arrival, introductions were made, and the study was briefly described by the researchers. Participants were told they would be sharing information about their child's swimming skill level and interest as well as their own swimming experiences and thoughts about swimming opportunities. Participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and were provided with a consent form to read and sign if they were willing to continue participation. All focus groups were audio- and video-recorded, and subjects were informed that only the researchers would see and hear this footage and that all participants would be assigned pseudonyms for any written reports.

Data collection

Each focus group was facilitated by at least one member of the research group. The moderator of the focus group followed a semi-structured interview guide (refer to Appendix A) which consisted of a list of open-ended questions to address with the group. In addition to relying on the interview guide, the moderator also probed, requested elaboration or clarification, and compared and contrasted statements made by group members. At the end of each focus group the researchers debriefed by reviewing interview notes, discussing the recent process, and enhancing interview questions in response to especially salient or novel responses from focus group members. The interviews were transcribed verbatim from audio tapes and video was utilized when necessary to identify speakers.

Qualitative Data Analysis and Coding

Coding was performed through a process of repeated readings of transcripts, directed by the principal researcher trained in qualitative methodology. During the initial coding process, observation and debriefing notes taken by all researchers

Figure 1

Swim scale

-----“No”-----

-----"Low skill"-----

-----“Good skill”-----

I avoid getting near/in water except to bathe	Cannot swim at all	Can splash around-shallow end	Can put face in water-blow bubbles	Can hold head under water-5-10 sec's	Can glide a little-face in water-shallow end only	Can swim a little in the deep end-face in water-can float a little	Can swim with a true front crawl stroke-1 pool length - no stopping	Can swim-front crawl stroke- 2 or 3 pool lengths; can tread water for 5-10 minutes	Can swim 4 or more pool lengths-no stopping-know 3 or 4 different strokes	Can swim many lengths without stopping-on a swim team or could be on a swim team
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present for focus groups were shared and discussed. Researchers deliberated and identified overarching themes and patterns.

Results

To help provide an understanding of the conversation between the researcher and parents/guardians, quotes were used to identify and explain existing themes. In certain situations, segments of the conversation were included to comprehend the dialogue between focus group participants. For the purpose of this paper, we identified participants by first name pseudonyms and/or by the focus group city in which they were interviewed.

Our analysis of the data resulted in four initial themes: *Influence of parent/caregiver's swimming ability, reasons to enroll/not enroll in swim lessons, fear factor, and parental influence/encouragement*. The data also reconfirmed some of the findings from the 2010 report (Ross et al., 2014). For this paper we will discuss findings related to *swimming access* and *parental perceptions that encouraged swimming participation*. The following section will discuss the findings from this study related to the discovered and reinforced themes.

Influence of Parent/Caregiver's Swimming Ability

Focus group data revealed that a child's swimming skill was more advanced when a parent reported their own advanced swimming skill level. All 12 parents who reported their own swimming performance as "good" also noted that their child's swimming skill level was either "low" or "good." Seven reported their child having "good" swimming ability (ages 6-18 years), while five reported their child having "low" swimming ability (ages 3-5 years). One mother in the study couldn't swim, while the father reported low swimming skill. Even with limited skill level, the father took the lead in attempting to teach their child (a non-swimmer) how to swim. Two couples participated in the study. For both couples, the parent with the greater swim skill level was responsible for teaching their child how to swim and encouraging them while in the pool. Both parents wanted their child to learn how to swim, but the more advanced swimmer parent took the lead in both situations.

An interesting finding from this study was the age at which children began learning how to swim. Typically, it was reported that children of parents with more extensive swimming experience had begun learning how to swim when they were infants. This was true of many of the participants in Houston. Elizabeth's mother believed in the "dunking babies" concept, and due to this early introduction to swimming, she was swimming competitively by the age of five. Using this same approach of exposing her kids to the water resulted in her children having foundational swimming mechanics at an early age. She reported that children of nine and seven years of age swam competitively and her three-year-old could swim

without her assistance. Similarly, Fran grew up on an island in Florida, thus swimming effectively was a must. She indicated that her five-year-old was a “fearless” swimmer and could dive to the bottom of the pool. Fran discussed plans to have her two-year-old out of arm floats sometime during that year. Very much like Elizabeth and Fran, Amy also believed it was important to put their children in the water at an early age. Her four-year-old was capable of swimming with his head down and turning to the side to breath. Further, she was hopeful that her two-year-old would also be out of her arm floats that particular year. Agreeing with early exposure, Becky discussed that she had a heated pool in their backyard which allowed the whole family to swim year-round. She noted that her five-year-old was proficient with the front and back strokes.

Like Houston, the children of the Memphis group, in general, also had started swimming at an early age. Lanie, who grew up in the Netherlands where learning how to swim was required in the schools, started swimming at the age of seven. Her six-year-old had been involved with swim lessons since the age of six months and at the time of the focus group was enrolled in swimming lessons. Krista started her child even sooner at the age of six weeks by getting into the pool with her child and Krista’s mother, who was a certified swim instructor. Since she and her mother instructed her child, formal swim lessons for her 11-year-old son, did not begin until a couple of years ago. Calvin could not remember at what age he began swimming primarily because he had always been swimming. His children were exposed to the water with ‘Mommy and Me’ classes and began taking formal swimming lessons between the ages of three and four.

The swimming skill level of the Jacksonville group was much different from Houston and Memphis. Gretchen, a single mother of one, indicated that she could splash around in the shallow end, but did not swim in the deep end. Her son could not swim and had a significant fear of the water. His father also did not know how to swim. Adam and Heather, parents of a five-year-old, noted that Adam had rudimentary swimming skill level, but Heather could not swim due to her fear of the water as a result of childhood events. Even with rudimentary skill level, Adam had taken the lead on teaching their daughter how to swim. Finally, Isabella could swim, but did not spend a lot of time swimming. However, she was in the process of building a pool in their backyard and her daughter enjoyed swimming on a frequent basis.

Finally, the Las Vegas focus group individuals’ swimming experience was unique due to where they were raised. Bob grew up in New York City where there were not a lot of community pools. Due to limited access, he did not learn to swim until the age of 13. In contrast, Jessica grew up in Phoenix where there were many

swimming pools and she was on the swim team. In their family, Jessica took the lead in teaching their children how to swim.

Reasons to Enroll/Not Enroll

All the parents believed that swim lessons were an integral part to learning how to swim. The Houston focus group discussed different reasons for enrolling their child in swim lessons. Amy wanted her children to be able to handle difficult swimming situations (e.g., undercurrents) due to the time that they spent at the beach and stating that she told her child, “You will take swimming lessons in some form until you’re totally proficient and you can get yourself out of trouble.” She also hoped that lessons would minimize the fear of water and said, “I’m hoping that with once a week swimming lessons for my youngest that we can avoid that issue of all of a sudden being scared of the water. It’s like, ‘Oh, I’m used to this place.’” Diane wanted the swimming lessons to be more frequent so that skills could be enhanced and stated, “you can constantly build on it (skills) and actually learn to swim as opposed to getting a couple of weeks’ worth of lessons in the summer.”

Elizabeth enrolled her child in formal swimming lessons because of the motivation it provided:

“It was the instructor, it was a younger man, and he was really good with him [her son], kind of no nonsense because my son can talk his way out of things, and he wouldn’t let him have it. That is the only time when he will swim with his face in the water is when coach is there.”

The Las Vegas group also discussed the concept of encouragement that swimming lessons presented. Jessica shared a story of when an instructor’s persistence helped:

Jessica: “And a young woman at the Y had these... plastic toys that sunk. And she said, ‘You can have one, but you got to go down there and get it.’ And at first...he couldn't reach it and finally, ‘I'm going to have to get my face wet’ and I... thought, finally got him past, but it was a couple of weeks where he was not getting past that step. And she was very encouraging ‘Don't worry, you have plenty of time, I've seen this before.’”

Bob: “And then he turned a corner, and then he was comfortable.”

All participants from the Memphis focus group stated that their primary reason for starting swimming lessons was because of their time spent in the water. Calvin explained, “I think for us it was just the knowledge of we’re going to go to the beach at least once a year, have family-friends with pools.” Krista expanded, “Yeah, we’ll go to the pool in the summer, we’ll go to the beach.” Lanie’s reasoning

was a little more personal as she had family in the Bahamas and makes frequent visits to the island. She believed it was important to learn how to swim due to the amount of time that family spent near and in the water.

Fear Factor (Swimmer and Parent)

Regardless of swimming skill level, the participants had a healthy fear of the water. This fear was both beneficial and detrimental to their swimming performance. Calvin discussed how his motivation for his child learning to swim was preventative by saying, “Maybe it was the result of the fear of not drowning, but we wanted them to learn because that’s one less person we have to worry about.”

Even though swimming skill level was motivating for the Houston participants, for some, their other motivation was similar to Calvin. Carol illustrated her feelings regarding pool safety by stating, “We just grew up in the water all the time and they (kids) want to be in the water all the time, but not do the work to be as safe as I am comfortable with.” Carol expanded by sharing a personal story of witnessing a drowning:

“I’m like we’re going to learn to swim because it was the only safe option. And still to this day I probably put more of a fear factor into my kids because we were on a family vacation and unfortunately witnessed a little girl drown like right in front of us. And I’ll tell my kids that story, I don’t know why, just because it still scares me.”

Becky shared a similar story to Carol regarding a fear of drowning:

“...but as far as the safety aspect, I think my kids are really good about one and done is our in the pool rule... We don’t have second chances in our pool so they (are) really good I think about loving the water from a happiness standpoint. I kind of say you’ll die if you drown so I think it sounds extreme to some personalities but with my personal experiences drowning is real, you die. So, our experiences have been happy because we haven’t had any second chance situations. It’s usually just fun.”

This fear was evident with Elizabeth who had children who were good swimmers:

“So, my seven- and nine-year-old kids are super comfortable in the water; they know all four strokes and swim competitively... I trust them, but I also know to keep my eyes on them because anything can happen at a certain point and they never turn down swimming.”

Finally, Fran shared her fear of the water and supervision while her children were swimming:

“We were at (a facility) which is a splash thing so there’s not even any deep water. So, my son was there with his puddle jumpers on and there’s a giant thing in the middle but there is also a lifeguard here at the side, a lifeguard over here and over there, and a tunnel through the middle so there’s a lot of ways around. My daughter had some things around her, and my son was gone for like two seconds wearing his puddle jumpers and he got around a thing, around it somehow. He went through the middle and (my son) was like ‘where’s (other son)?’ I ran over quickly, and he was face down and he couldn’t get up because of his puddle jumpers and there was a lifeguard just staring at him. I think if I would have gotten over there ten seconds later, it would have been more terrifying, but he was choking on the water and the lifeguard was staring at him. I saw him and immediately looked up (to lifeguard) as I was grabbing him...I said, ‘Didn’t you see him?’ And she was like ‘Yeah, I was about to do something.’ About?! I flipped out. It’s like this mom moment where I was like ‘Where’s (my son)?’ and even though it was just a shallow thing, it was very scary.”

The Jacksonville group discussed how fear can be both beneficial and detrimental to one’s swimming performance. Like the Houston group, Gretchen expressed how the fear of drowning had provided extra motivation:

“Just looking at the news, watching how many people drown and all this stuff, it makes me want to learn and also wants me to get my son to learn at least something, the doggie-paddle, something that will save his life.”

Heather expressed a similar desire, “With the drownings and the (incidents) on the lake and stuff, I want to learn. I do want to learn. I’ll probably just learn the basics, that’s probably what’s best.” The group also discussed a lack of safety at community pools. This lack of safety led all participants to stay away from community pools, which offered the best access to swimming and potential lessons.

Gretchen provided this thought on this topic:

“I know here in Jacksonville, I would love to take my son out more swimming, but these community pools just aren’t safe anymore. As far as, I don’t know, it was a couple years back. Someone was shooting at a community pool and there was a bunch of kids down there.”

The Las Vegas group discussed a healthy respect for the water. Participants believed that protecting their children resulted in not swimming at other pools

without the parents there to supervise. Jessica shared a story that described these feelings:

“I was at a mom party. And all the moms went inside, and I happened to be on my phone and there was a kid in the pool, and I was a lifeguard. And you did not, no lifeguard cleared the deck if there was a body in that pool, you did not clear the deck, so I was in the state of mind where you all might be going inside and ya'll might think this kid is a strong swimmer but I'm not leaving this pool. This kid comes down this rock slide they had at the house and he gets in, or he, you know, finishes off his slide and then he turns around and he takes this big gulp of water...And I went clothes in, and went clothes in and I snapped and pulled him out. By then, all these moms come running out and they said, ‘Oh my... we saw what happened’ and I'm like ‘That's why you don't leave your (expletive) kids.’”

Parental Influence/Encouragement

One of the most interesting findings from this study was the shared idea that swimming was an essential life skill that all children should learn. This belief may also align with the previously- discussed common themes regarding parent swimming skill, reasons to enroll children in swim lessons, and their healthy fear of the water. Amy shared this thought, “It’s like a life skill. It’s not negotiable. My kids cry and complain about going to swimming lessons. No, this is something you have to learn to do.” Amy added, “You don’t have to swim laps, but there’s a minimum amount they need to know to be able to get out of situation if they fall into a pool or something.”

Carol compared it to eating your next meal:

“No child should have to worry about getting their next meal. Living in a town like we do here where there is so much access to water, probably the same thing should be said. A child shouldn’t have to worry about not being able to know how to swim.”

Jessica said the reward of swimming lessons was an investment into her child’s future by saying, “I think if I knew that the lifetime payback...is a six-week investment, okay maybe I’ll do that.” Bob also believed it was a lifetime investment by stating, “We just knew that they were going to be around pools. And it’s essential.” Jessica continued by adding what her sales pitch would be to other parents, “Listen, you put your kids in swim lessons for six weeks at that age, they’re going to learn the skills they need for life. And, you don’t have to worry about it after that.”

Results also showed that parental encouragement had an impact on their child spending time in the pool and improving their overall skills. Elizabeth shared that she had parents who believed that getting in the pool at an early age was beneficial. Elizabeth started participating on a swimming team at the age of five and continued through college. She believed that swimming with your children is important and said, “We never enrolled them (oldest children) in swim classes, we just swam with them as much as we could.” Based on Elizabeth’s experience, many people have approached her about giving private swimming lessons to their child(ren). Although Elizabeth enrolled her youngest child in swimming lessons and appreciated the benefits, she believes swimming with your child is the most beneficial by adding, “People who know my background ask, ‘Do you want to do swim lessons for me?’ and I tell people just swim with your child as much as you can.” Lanie noted her focus was for her child to have fun, “I just wanted him to enjoy the process because he’s a very big six-year-old and people are encouraging me to start (having him) swimming competitively, but I don’t want to do that.”

Even though Gretchen couldn’t swim, she accompanied her son in the water and provided him with assurance:

“He can’t (swim) because he’s always afraid of the water. But I assure him, if you do this to hold your breath or do this, you’ll be fine. I’m not going to let anything happen to you unless you want to go out into the 12 feet.”

This encouragement had helped improve his skill level even though neither parent was capable of swimming.

Adam and Heather’s daughter was not able to swim, but Adam’s involvement in the pool had encouraged their daughter, “I’ve showed her how to kick, she knows how to kick. She has her floaties on. Then she knows how to do some of the strokes.” This increased performance has even encouraged Heather to be able to swim:

“And when I see Adam do it, I think ‘Oh, not bad.’ I do want to learn because (our daughter) catches on quick and I’m not as quick, you have to show me what to do. But I do want to learn.”

Findings from this study also confirmed findings from the 2010 report (Ross et al., 2014). The following section reports findings from this study related to these categories.

Swimming Access

Focus group participants during both the current study and the 2010 study offered up a significant amount of discussion around swimming facility access which included the physical aspects of the facility, the amount of money it took to travel

there and to use it as well as the time it took out of their day to get to and from the swimming pool.

Facilities

The Houston and Jacksonville focus groups expressed difficulties associated with the available facilities. In Houston, weather issues often prevented lessons from occurring as many of the YMCA pools are located outside. Diane explained why this was a problem “Here (Houston) we have a lot of thunder in the summer, so you can easily miss two or three days of your week.” Most of the participants talked about having their kids take lessons at a different facility in town. There are a variety of reasons as to why this facility was more popular. Becky explained “It’s very well run. They have changing rooms; a station with blow dryers; the restrooms are set up.” Diane expanded, “And parents don’t have to sit out in the heat. They can be in an air-conditioned room with glass and your kid goes out to the warm area where it is completely climate controlled.” The only complaint from the Las Vegas group regarding the facilities was related to the temperature of the water by stating, “(Our son) would always complain about the water being too cold. And that’s ultimately why he got off the team.”

Finances

The Houston and Memphis groups believed the extra cost associated with private swimming lessons was worth the expense. The extra cost may have been manageable due to the higher reported income. Of the nine individuals represented in these groups, eight reported an income of \$75,000 or higher. In contrast, all participants in the Jacksonville group reported an income of less than \$40,000. Everyone from this group opted not to enroll their child in swim lessons due to the high costs and the availability of more affordable activities. The Houston and Memphis groups believed the benefits received from private lessons were a more standardized curriculum, quality instruction from motivating instructors, no or low instructor turnover, low student/teacher ratio (4:1), and better facilities. Lanie shared a story about why they decided to go with private instruction, “For me, at the (facility), it was hit or miss and that’s why we went private because for an instructor, they would hire a lot of college students, so it was never consistent, and we realized we needed consistency.” She continued by discussing the impact of larger group lessons by saying, “Also, I found that experience less pleasant (with) the younger ages when they had more than four or five children in that class. I noticed a big difference in their advancement, their behavior, and private was great.” Parents also liked the connection that instructors made with their child.

Becky shared a story:

“If they didn’t want to go, she (instructor) would be like, ‘Let’s get to here and we’ll figure it out from there’...So, for the instructor,

being confident in themselves with that extra little push, you're not reprimanding them, you're encouraging."

But, the most valued benefit was the progression seen in their child's ability to swim.

Time

The Houston group preferred a different location for swimming lessons due to the availability of these lessons conforming to their own personal schedule. Most YMCA swim lessons were for a set period of time during the summer. Diane described the benefit of consistent swim lessons, "You can constantly build on it and actually learn how to swim as opposed to getting a couple of weeks' worth of lessons in the summer." The Jacksonville group discussed the hindrance of work schedules and travel time to the swim facility. Adam explained, "...swim practice would be after school and I'm working until nine o'clock at night so it's just a time issue for us." He continued by saying, "Sometimes the swim program we really want is over on the west side (other side of city). It's about a 30-minute drive to get there." Isabella expressed similar problems, "It's (swim lessons) kind of hard because their dad has his (own separate business), so he's getting off at nine, then if I'm at work, I get home late."

Time was a significant problem for Lanie:

"My only complaint, which has nothing to do with the class, is the time. And I don't understand why a lot of sports for school-aged kids start at 5:00 and 6:00, and I know that has nothing to do with your study, but that's my only negative. I think they do good with programing, it's just the time. Right now, I'm running on fumes."

Parental Perceptions that Encourage Swimming

Similar to the 2010 report, none of the participants discouraged their children from swimming. In fact, the parents who were swimmers were very progressive in seeking opportunities to expand the swimming ability of their child(ren). The parents who were non-swimmers, although there was a fear of the water, believed it was important for their child(ren) to learn how to swim. In addition, there was a desire by the parent to learn how to swim even though they were older.

Getting Kids in the Water

Participants understood the importance of spending time in the pool and the impact it had on overall swimming skill. Many shared their feelings about why they wanted their child to be in the pool. Growing up Becky was a lifeguard and constantly swam in her family ponds. She believed that more time in the pool would be beneficial, "As long as we can keep them in there (pool) and then having a pool in your backyard doesn't hurt." Becky realized the importance of experience and the

learning that comes from being in the pool. Amy shared this belief as well, “We started putting our boys in the pool as soon as possible.”

Even though Carol did not have a pool, they still swim as often as possible: “We do live in a place that does have a pool, but it’s not in our backyard, it’s in a complex and we’ll spend as much time as we can down there because it’s nice free entertainment when it’s hot and (child) definitely trying (swimming) for sure.”

Amy believed that their child would benefit from being in the pool year-round:

“I think swimming all year-round would be good. Like my oldest had this phase where he would love the water then be terrified of the water and we had to work to get him back in and then he was good, but there was a break.”

Fran discussed the benefit of continuous swimming for her child by saying, “Those four months of going once a week got her to a point where puddle jumpers weren’t necessary.”

Although Jessica and Bob learned to swim at different times, their children shared a passion for being in the pool. The following conversation provides an example of how much their children enjoyed swimming:

Bob: “We moved into this house, our next-door neighbor from California bought this as like an investment house. With a swimming pool in it, and said, ‘You guys are welcome to use the pool anytime you want.’ And, what, really?”

Jessica: “So during the summer, we were there.”

Bob: “From the ages of 6 and 3-They were calling ‘Dad, I pool’ and ‘Daddy can you take us swimming?’”

Jessica: “We were there all, every day.”

Bob: “And on the weekends. Definitely.”

Even though Adam did not have consistent access to a pool, he took advantage of the time in the pool to practice swimming with their daughter:

“Because we don’t have a whole lot of access to pools, we have a community pool that’s only open during the summertime, but the rest of the times it’s closed. And mainly, we try to take her out during some of the summer months that will just keep her up and teach her how to kick.”

Keeping Kids in the Water

Similar to 2010, participants expressed concern regarding their child's safety during swim lessons. Although they would have preferred to leave and eliminate distractions, participants expressed concern over leaving their child with an instructor who was responsible for overseeing multiple children.

While Carol indicated she was a strong swimmer and had a lot of experience, she still experienced fear when other people were in control of swim safety, "My fear is that they don't watch as well as they should, so I want to know that (her child) can be safe." Diane noted that her major fear was related to past experiences. Although her daughter is a good swimmer, a frightening moment in the pool provided Diane with some concern, "But (daughter) was telling everyone she could swim but she hopped in the pool, she got nervous and thought she could touch the bottom, she couldn't, and she panicked." Becky expressed that she believes that lifeguards sometimes assume that safety is not an issue based on the situation, "I think lifeguards think, 'Oh, they got a puddle jumper, they're great.' It's unfortunate that (lifeguards) probably just assume." Swimming accidents can happen instantly. Having a low teacher-student ratio and more supervision can potentially provide parents with more comfort regarding the safety of their child.

Calvin was concerned about not being allowed to stay with his child and watch practice, and stated, "I've been happy with the lessons we've had but I think we've used two different people for private lessons and the thing is that I don't know what's going on with those lessons because they make the parents leave." Similarly, Bob and Jessica were cautious when it came to the supervision of their children while swimming. Both admitted to being highly protective and having a policy of not allowing their children to swim in somebody else's pool unless either Bob or Jessica would accompany them. This continued until their children were about 14 or 15 years of age. In addition to the story previously mentioned, Jessica also experienced a situation in the pool that reminds her of the importance of swim safety:

"We had an incident when I was a lifeguard where a kid was in the water and he was under the water and somebody jumped in on top of him and I don't know if it just pushed out all the air, whatever, and then he cocked(sic) his head on the bottom, so, even you, you can have a strong swimmer and somebody knocks them out or whatever and then, you know, and unless you got paid lifeguard sitting there, I don't trust, I don't trust anybody with our kids. Especially at that age cause, and, that's another thing, number of bodies per square foot in a pool. Parents don't think of stuff like that, they don't think of stuff - And they have a 4th of July party-- and the pool can fit 40 people in general and 800 kids in there. And

it's like, (expletive) no I'm not leaving my kid in here without you. They could be down at the bottom for an hour and a half before you figured it out.”

Based on past experiences, it is easy to understand why Bob and Jessica were not comfortable leaving their child under the supervision of a lifeguard.

Getting Parents in the Water

Although most parents knew how to swim, the two who did not were positive in their discussion of learning how to swim with the interviewer:

Interviewer: “Today, do you have a desire to learn more about swimming?”

Gretchen: “Well, my parents pretty much always worked, so never really took us out to that type of stuff. But like I said, from church is where I started. They were always ‘Well you need to learn how to swim; you need to learn how to swim.’ And you know it wasn’t a big issue to me because it was too hot outside and I’m not an outside person to be honest with you.”

Interviewer: “You like the inside?”

Gretchen: “I would rather be inside. But now that I think about it, just looking at the news, watching how many people drown and all this stuff, it makes me want to learn and wants me to get my son to learn at least something, the doggie-paddle, something that will save his life; you know what I’m saying? It is something that I would want to learn.”

Interviewer: “Alright, thank you Gretchen. Heather?”

Heather: “I was going to say the same thing. My mom, she was a single parent, so I was with my brother a lot. Not that I’m not an outside person, I guess because my brother used to throw me in the water; not like I didn’t have the opportunity. I guess, it’s just I never had a passion for it.”

Interviewer: “Never had a desire?”

Heather: “A desire, but now that my daughter wants to go, it’s like, ‘Ooh.’ I don’t to feel bad, but she’s got a lot. And I’ll tell her, wait up baby, nobody is going to be able to catch you or something, so now, like she’s said with the drownings and the people on the lake and stuff, I want to learn. I do want to learn. I’ll probably just learn the basic, that’s probably what’s best. And when I see Adam do it, I think, ‘Oh, not bad.’ I do want to learn because (daughter) catches on quick. And I’m not as quick; you have to show me what to do. But I do want to learn.”

Discussion

The aim of this study was to provide further analysis of variables which emerged from the 2010 study (Ross et al., 2014), and how these variables affect or not affect all US populations. Findings indicate that the collected data provides a positive direction for the swimming skill levels of both youth and their parents. In addition, the results confirmed the positive impact that parents have on their children and the benefit of getting their child in the pool and developing strategies for continued growth of their swimming performance.

Parent – Child Swim Relationships

Responses from this study emphasized the importance of a parent/caregiver's swimming skill level. Parents who reported having "good" swimming ability indicated that their child also had "good" swimming ability. The parent with the stronger swim skill and experience normally took the lead for teaching their child how to swim. A positive finding from this study was that parents with lower reported swimming ability stressed the importance of wanting their child to learn how to swim. One parent, who didn't spend a lot of time swimming, was building a pool for their child who enjoyed swimming. Ross et al. (2014) found that parents, regardless of swimming skill level, wanted their child to learn how to swim. They provided a commitment to help their child overcome the fear that may have prevented the child from learning.

Parental Motivations for Child Swim Lessons

An interesting finding from this study was that parents with self-reported strong swimming skill level wanted their child to learn how to swim at an early age. Some parents even began their child as infants with some reporting a belief in the "dunking babies" concept, where an infant would be submerged repeatedly in the water. Moran and Stanley (2006) believed that many parents have an overly optimistic view of the outcome of swim lessons prior to the age of two. Research on when to begin child swim lessons has been inconclusive. Recently the American Academy of Pediatrics (Weiss, 2010) relaxed their policy on prohibiting toddler swim lessons prior to the age of four indicating that each parental decision should be individualized. While examining this idea was not a goal of the study, it may be beneficial to examine more closely the impact of when children begin to learn to swim.

Parents believed that swimming lessons were impactful and an integral part of learning how to swim. Many parents chose to have their child take swim lessons because they believed it was an important life skill. Houston parents discussed how they believed that swim lessons would help their child get out of difficult situations. Swimming deaths can occur because of panic and the inability to adjust when faced with a difficult situation (Tipton, 2014). If children are equipped with the tools

necessary to manage difficult situations, a decrease in swimming accidents may occur. Another reason for swim lessons is related to the amount of time spent in water. Specifically, the states in warmer climates have more opportunities to be in a body of water (i.e., ocean, lakes, pools), thus the necessity for taking swim lessons and being prepared.

Results from this study confirmed the findings from the 2010 study (Ross et al., 2014) that reported parental fear of the water as a motivation for having their child learn to swim. Participants discussed how their fear was both beneficial and detrimental. For example, participants expressed their concern over what could potentially occur in the water. Irwin et al. (2011) had reported that fear of injury and drowning were strong predictors of no and/or low swimming skill level. Based on this fear, parents emphasized with their children the importance of being safe and the dangers associated with the water. Parents did this to stress the importance of what can happen if a mistake is made. In addition, based on the fear from the parents, some children lost out on time in the pool. Jacksonville parents discussed how swimming in lakes and community pools were not safe. With news outlets reporting drownings and with shootings occurring at community pools, parents were not taking their children to swim in community pools, thus preventing them from using the most accessible resource for swimming.

The most interesting finding from this study was the idea that swimming was considered an essential life skill by many parents. Ross et al. (2014) had stated the importance of convincing parents of the need for their child to develop water competence. Findings from this study indicated parents believed that the return on a minimal commitment to taking swim lessons was a lifetime reward. By spending the money to help their child learn how to swim, they were decreasing the fear of getting in the water and increasing the likelihood of having fun with their family and friends in the pool. To help the process of getting children into the pool, participants believed that parental encouragement was a necessity for helping a child learn how to swim. Research has indicated that when communication comes from an attractive and credible source (i.e., a parent) that participant attitudes and behaviors are positively impacted (Irwin, et al., 2008). In addition, motivation also occurred when parents entered the water with their child. The presence of a parent (regardless of swimming prowess) provided a calming effect for a child learning how to swim.

Factors Impacting Swim Lessons

Similar to the 2010 study (Ross et al., 2014), results from this study provided further identification of factors that parents felt impacted the provision of swim lessons for children. Participants discussed the importance of the quality, safety, cleanliness, and accessibility of a swimming facility. Since parents were often there to observe,

facilities that provided quality seating, clean restrooms, competent and caring lifeguards, and other amenities provided greater appeal. Houston participants with higher incomes chose facilities with higher costs based on their offerings, facility, and the opportunity for better teacher-student ratios. They believed the extra costs were worth the opportunity for their child to have more 1-on-1 time with the instructor and helped develop a relationship with them. In contrast, the lower income Jacksonville group decided not to do lessons based on the lack of affordable options that were available. Time was also an issue that was discussed by the groups. Private lessons allowed parents the opportunity to choose a preferred time and provide consistency to the learning. Many participants expressed the difficulty of driving longer distances and having to adjust their work and family schedules in order to make a specified swim lesson time.

Parental Beliefs About Swim Lessons

Finally, parents from this study discussed the importance of getting kids in the water, keeping them in the water, and getting parents in the water with them. Regardless of parental swimming skill level, all participants wanted their child to be in the pool as often as possible. Research has shown that the most effective skill development occurs when students have an abundance of practice opportunities as well as an extended period of learning and practice time (Rink, French, & Graham, 1996). The notion is that if a child is in the pool frequently, they will become more comfortable and thus know how to respond in difficult or unfamiliar situations.

Another concern of the participants was high student to teacher ratio during lessons from the YMCA that potentially affected child supervision and safety. While the goal was to be in the water as much as possible, parents expressed a concern (based on numbers and experiences) regarding the amount of supervision that occurred. The majority of lifeguards were younger in age and could sometimes assume that a child's swimming skill level was sufficient to keep them safe without close supervision. Drownings can happen quickly and in a small amount of water. Parents also believed that their role was important for ending the cycle of drownings due to low/no swimming skill level. If parents are active in the pool with their child and take the time to promote swim awareness, positive outcomes can occur related to the child's swimming performance (Ross et al., 2014).

Limitations

Qualitative research can help to verify quantifiable results as well as uncover unknown variables. However, this particular study's methodology does have some limitations. As in many small-scale interview procedures, actual beliefs or feelings might have been modulated due to the group interview context. Also, for this study, the number of participants (N=15) as well as the gender proportion (3 males & 12 females) were limitations. Although the researchers strove to find a more

representative sample than the targeted sample in Ross et al (2014), two-thirds of the group who reported (8 out of 12) had an annual household income of \$75,000 or more, a much more affluent participant group than the 2014 study, which encompassed only 23% (16 out of 71). Conversely, a strength of this study was the regionally distinctive nature of the participant group's place of residence within the US. Findings from this study may not be meaningful to other parts of the country or other parts of the world. It is highly recommended that future studies involve a more diverse group of parents/caregivers.

Conclusion

It has been reported that death rates by drowning per 100,000 offers an accurate picture of the problem (WHO Drowning Report). The UK has a drowning rate of 0.8 while the US drowning rate is 1.5. This difference may be due to the inclusion of swimming lessons in the national curriculum for the UK. The aim of this study was to provide further analysis of key variables which initially had emerged from previous studies (Ross et al., 2014) as well as how these variables were positively or negatively affecting the US population drowning rate. The data provided a positive direction for the swimming skill level of both youth and adult. In addition, the results confirmed the positive impact that parents have on their children and the benefit of getting their child in the pool and developing strategies for continued growth of their swimming skill. While each focus group was different in various demographic markers, all participants expressed a desire for their child to be proficient swimmers. In general, all participants believed that formal swimming lessons were important for development of what many considered to be an essential "life skill." Although many parental participants expressed a fear of the water, it was mostly a healthy fear that would help protect their children from the possible dangers of swimming and develop an appreciation of safety when swimming. Finally, participants believe that parents had an important role in ending the cycle of drownings that resulted from not being able to swim. By swimming with their child(ren) and providing encouragement during the learning process, the number of people who can swim will continue to increase. As a consequence, the strategies discovered in this study can increase knowledge about the importance of learning to swim and potentially save countless lives lost to drowning.

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Appendix A

Parent focus group interview protocol

USA Swimming

Parent Focus Group Interview Protocol

Section I: Participant Background

- Please tell me a little bit about you and your family
 - Are you originally from this area?
 - What neighborhood/area of the city do you live in?
 - How many children do you have?
 - Gender & ages?
 - Which of your children will you focus on during this focus group interview?
 - Are you and your family active members of this YMCA branch?
 - Do you and other members of your family participate in other sport of physical activity programs?

Section II: Swimming Background-Parent's and Child's

- Tell me about your swimming ability; do you know how to swim?
 - If yes...
 - How old were you when you learned?
 - Who taught you?
 - Did other people in your family swim?
 - Were you ever on a competitive swim team?
 - Do you still swim on a regular basis?
 - Have you ever gone swimming with your child(ren)?

- How confident are you in the water, i.e. deep end vs. shallow end of a pool?
- If no...
 - Is there a reason you never learned?
 - Did other people in your family swim?
 - Did your parents encourage you to swim?
 - Why or why not?
 - Would you like to learn?
 - Why or why not?
- Now I'd like to hear about your child's swimming background?
 - How well does he or she swim?
 - How much does he or she know about swimming?
 - Different strokes
 - Water safety
- How often does he or she go swimming?
 - At a pool, lake, the river, etc.
 - On a team
- Did you know about the high drowning rates for children, specifically for minority populations?
- Were you ever worried about your child drowning or being injured while swimming?
- Do you know of anyone personally that in the past has died or been injured from drowning?
- Do you think swimming lessons will "drown proof" your child? Why? Or why not?

Section III: Participation in Swimming

- Now I'd like you to tell me about your child's swimming lessons.
 - How did your child get involved with swimming lessons?
 - Who told you about the lessons?
 - What were your initial thoughts about your child being in the lessons?
 - Did you ever stay and watch the lessons?
 - Tell me what you know about what they did in these swim lessons.
 - Did the instructors seem qualified and effective?
 - Why or why not, give examples
 - Did your child enjoy the lessons?
 - Why or why not, give examples
 - Was there anything you didn't like about the lessons?
 - How do you think the instructors or other staff could make it better?
 - What might help your child to swim more?
 - What might hinder your child to swim more?

Section IV: Impact on Participants

- After the lessons, how well can your child swim?
- What did your child learn about swimming?
 - Different strokes
 - Water safety
 - Opportunities to participate or get involved more
 - Competitive swimming
- Did these lessons change the way your child feels?
 - About their ability
 - Confidence in the water
 - Enjoyment in the water
- Did the lessons change the way you feel about?
 - Your child's swimming ability
 - Your child's safety in or near water
 - Your own interest or comfort in swimming
- Do you think your child will want to swim more in the future?
- Do you think your child will have opportunities to swim more in the future?
 - At a pool, lake, the river, etc.
 - Do you think they would be interested in being on a team?
 - As a lifeguard or swim instructor
- Do you think your child will continue competing in the sport of swimming?
 - Why or why not?
- Do you think a developmental swim team is a good idea for children who are just learning about swimming?

Closure:

Do you have any other thoughts or comments about swimming that we did not already discuss?

Thank you so much for your time and participation!