# PARENTAL COMMITMENT TO COMPETITIVE SWIMMING

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**ABSTRACT**

This research explores the process of parental commitment to sport participation of children. A survey of 464 USA Swimming households showed commitment increased with the number of child swimmers and the belief that swimming enhances child development. However, higher SES and greater commitment to swimming resulted in greater perceived interference of swimming with family life. Results are interpreted in terms of *family habitus* -interrelated cultural and structural factors associated with the expression of parental commitment.

Parental commitment is a key factor in the sport participation of children, especially when participation occurs in organized, competitive programs. These programs require the expenditure of significant amounts of money for dues, travel, equipment, and coaching, as well as parental involvement in a wide range of activities (Chafetz & Kotarba 1995; Duncan 1997; Hellstedt 1995). These activities include fund raising, officiating, serving on program boards, driving children to practices and competitions, and maintaining gear.

In the past, the majority of youth sport programs were publicly funded and neighborhood-based, so children could manage their participation without extensive parental commitment and involvement. Fees in these programs were minimal. Parental participation usually was limited to volunteer coaching and minor forms of administrative support. However, as youth sport programs have become increasingly privatized, regionally located, expensive, performance-oriented, and highly structured in terms of participation schedules, children have become more and more dependent on their parents to make participation possible. At the same time that youth sports have become increasingly demanding of family resources, many parents have come to see participation in sports, especially performance-oriented, competitive sports, as an important part of the socialization of their children.

In this paper we focus on parental commitment to children's involvement in organized competitive swimming programs that are sanctioned by USA Swimming, the official national governing body for competitive, amateur swimming in the United States. Over 200,000 households are members of USA Swimming. In our analysis, we attempt to answer two primary questions: First, what are the factors associated with parental commitment? Second, what do these factors tell us about the cultural and social context in which a child's competitive swimming occurs?

## RESEARCH ON YOUTH SPORTS AND FAMILY

Past research on youth sports says little about the process of parental commitment to the sport participation of children. Most researchers have dealt with psychological and social psychological questions, and they have focused almost exclusively on the social influence exerted by parents and other socializing agents on young people (see Coakley 1993a, 1993b). The primary concerns of this research are how young people are socialized into sport participation and how parental support is associated with children's enjoyment, enthusiasm, self-esteem, beliefs, goal-orientations, achievement, and continued participation (Averill & Power 1995; Brustad 1996; Hoyle & Leff 1997; Kimiecek, Horn & Shurin 1996; Leff & Hoyle 1995; Power & Woogler 1994). Most researchers have used a *socialization-as-internalization* approach in which external factors shape young people and their sport participation. A few researchers have taken a *socialization-as-interaction* approach. In this perspective, sport participation is closely connected to important social relationships in the lives of young people (Adler & Adler 1998; Coakley & White 1992; Stevenson 1990). Unfortunately, only research by Snyder and Purdy (1982) has focused directly on interactional dynamics between parents and children. It found that socialization related to a child's sport participation is a reciprocal process in which parents are influenced by children, and children are influenced by parents.

Several studies have focused on paren-

tal aspirations to be associated with their children's success in sport (Horn, Kimiecek, Maltbie, Wong, & Rojas 1999; Jambor & Weekes 1995), but none of these studies deals with the actual commitments that parents make to enable their children to initiate and to continue participation. Finally, no studies discuss the complex cultural and social context in which parents make commitments to the sport participation of their children.

The purpose of our study is to identify the statistical correlates of parental commitment and to discuss issues related to the cultural and social context in which these commitments are made.

## METHOD

### Sample

A probability sample of 1200 households was selected from the membership roster of USA Swimming. The Dillman Total Design Method was used for data collection (Dillman 1978). This method calls for researchers to make up to four attempts to contact respondents.

Initially, a packet of materials was sent to each household in the sample. It contained a cover letter explaining the project, a questionnaire, and a business reply envelope. These materials were sent by first class mail to "the parents of: (member's name)." Additionally, a refrigerator magnet imprinted with the logo of United States Swimming was included in the packet as a premium. The packets were mailed in late June, so their arrival would precede the opening ceremonies of the 1996 Summer Olympics.

Three weeks later, a postcard was mailed to all 1200 households. The message on the postcard thanked respondents for their participation in the project—if they had already returned the questionnaire—and it reminded member families who had not responded to please do so as soon as possible. The postcard provided a telephone number to call if the respondent had not received the materials or if the respondent had thrown them away.

Two weeks later, on week five, additional materials were sent to the non-respondents. This packet contained a new cover letter that reemphasized the importance of the project, a replacement questionnaire, and a business reply envelope. The arrival of these materials coincided with the closing ceremonies of the Olympics.

Of 1200 cases in the initial sample, 47 cases contained a bad address, and 53 cases did not qualify for inclusion in the sample because the family had not been affiliated recently with USA Swimming. The effective sample size was 1100 cases. A total of 700 respondents replied by mail. In week fifteen, we attempted to contact someone in the non-responding households by telephone. These attempts produced 67 additional cases, so the sample size was 767 cases. The response rate was 70 percent, but as the reader will see, the working sample size was smaller because of missing data on the instruments. Among the non-respondents are 52 refusals.

### Respondents

Seventy-three percent of our respondents were female, and 27 percent were male. The average age of respondents was 42 years. The average number of people living in the household was 4.4. This number was higher than the national average household size of 2.6 (United States Bureau of the Census 1991). Ninety-five percent of the male heads of household were employed, and 71 percent of the female heads worked for pay outside of the household at least part time.

Respondents were well educated. In the United States, 24 percent of men and 18 percent of women 25 years and older had completed four or more years of college (US Bureau of the Census 1991). Over two-thirds (71%) of the USA Swimming fathers had completed at least four years of college. This percentage was almost three times the national one (US Bureau of the Census 1991). Approximately one-third (33%) of the fathers had earned postgraduate degrees. Among the mothers, over two-thirds (68%) had completed at least four years of college. This percentage was almost four times the national one. Twenty-one percent of the USA Swimming mothers had earned postgraduate degrees. The median income for USA Swimming families was approximately $85,000 per year, and this median income easily placed them above the ninetieth percentile of families in the United States.

The majority of households supported one swimmer (39%) or 2 swimmers (40%). Eighteen percent of the households supported three swimmers, and 3 percent of the households supported four swimmers. No households supported five or more swim-

**Table 1 - Means and Standard Deviations of Measured Variables**

| Variable Name | Mean | S.D. |
|---|---|---|
| Number of swimmers in family | 1.77 | .83 |
| Number of parental swimming activities per week | 1.86 | 1.03 |
| Number of hours per week spent on swimclub activities | 4.24 | 4.92 |
| Number of times per week parent drives swimmers | 3.51 | 2.32 |
| Percentage of free time parent gives to swimming | 2.97 | 1.18 |
| Swimming interferes with family activities (7-point scale) | 3.68 | 1.67 |
| Swimming promotes quality family time (7-point scale) | 4.51 | 1.60 |
| Swimming enhances home life (7-point scale) | 4.89 | 1.41 |
| Swimming enhances self-confidence (7-point scale) | 6.27 | .96 |
| Swimming enhances scholastics (7-point scale) | 5.08 | 1.38 |
| Swimming enhances social life (7-point scale) | 5.03 | 1.48 |
| Family income (12 ordinal categories treated as interval. The median was "$80,000 to $90,000" per year, category 7) | 7.01 | 3.06 |
| Father's degree (8 ordinal categories, treated as interval. Median was beyond "graduate from college," category 6) | 6.25 | 1.49 |
| Father's occupational level (10 ordinal categories were reflected and treated as interval. Category 3 was "medical," and category 4 was "education.") | 3.64 | 1.63 |
| Mother's degree (8 ordinal categories, treated as interval. Median was just below "graduated college," category 6) | 5.98 | 1.42 |

mers.

**Instrument**

The survey instrument contained forty-six items. Specific items measured involvement in swimming and beliefs about the effects of swimming on swimmers and on the family. The instrument took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Means and standard deviations for the items are presented in Table 1.

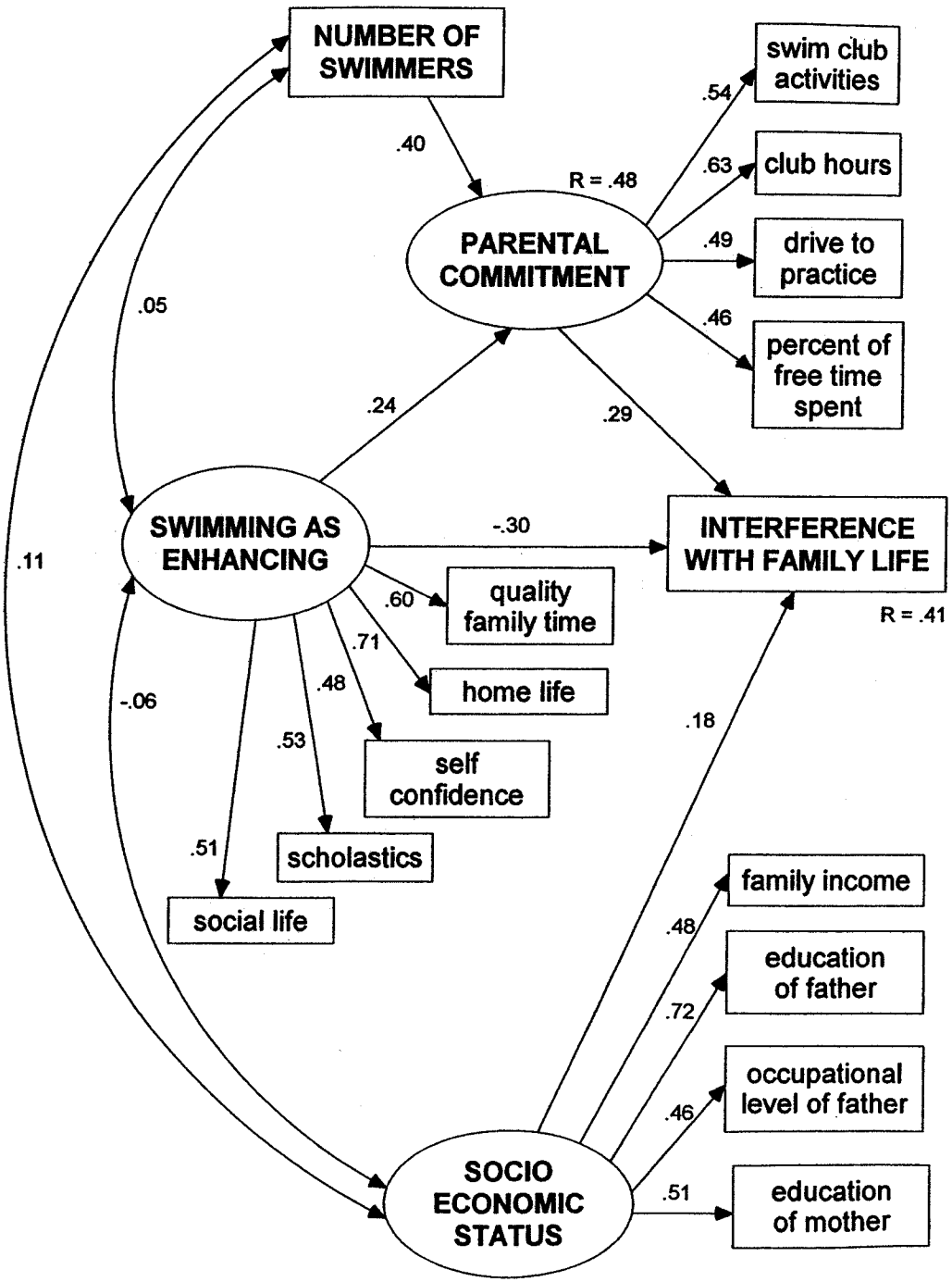
One item on the instrument measured the number of competitive swimmers in the household. Four items measured the socioeconomic status of the family. Eight ordinal categories measured the educational level of the father and the educational level of the mother. These categories ranged from "grade school" to "received post graduate degree." We measured the occupational prestige of father with a ten-point scale that listed "management/professional" positions as the highest category and "clerical" as the lowest category. We used twelve ordinal categories to measure family income. The lowest category was "under $30,000," and the highest category was "over $130,000." We treated these ordinal categories as interval (Bollen & Barb 1981), and then we used factor analysis to create a measure of *socioeconomic status*.

We used four items to measure parental belief in swimming as an enhancement to the personal growth of their children. The common root of these items asked, "In your experience as the parent of a competitive swimmer, to what extent does participation in the sport detract from or enhance the _____ of the swimmer." The items measured social life, scholastics, self-confidence, home life, and quality of family time. Responses were recorded on seven-point response scales that were anchored by "Detracts from," and "Enhances." We used factor analysis to combine these four items into a scale of *swimming as enhancing*.

A single item measured the extent to which the respondent believed that swimming created *interference with family life*. It asked, "How often does your child's involvement in swimming interfere with other family activities?" The seven-point response scale was anchored by "Rarely interferes," and "Often interferes."

We measured parental commitment to swimming using four items. First, we counted the number of parental swimming support activities from a checklist. These activities included chauffeuring, coaching, fundraising, officiating and other support. Second, we counted the number of hours per week that the parent spent in the activities from the checklist. Third, we counted the number of practices per week to which the parent drove. Fourth, we used percentage of free time the parent spent supporting swim-

**Figure 1: Model of Parental Commitment**



ming. Using factor analysis, we converted these items into a measure of *parental commitment*.

**Factor Analysis**

In *exploratory* factor analysis, a collection of variables is analyzed to discover which ones are related to each other and to determine how many factors are needed to account for the interrelations among these variables. In *confirmatory* factor analysis, the researchers are required to predict which variables will "load together" on which factors. We used confirmatory factor analysis and a minimum loading of about .5. For an excellent introduction to factor analysis, see Child (1970). The first prediction was that the four measures of socioeconomic status would load on a single factor, *socioeconomic status*. The second prediction was that the five measures of *swimming as enhancing* would load on their own single factor. The third prediction was that the four measures of *parental commitment* would load on a single factor. We present information on loadings in the section on results.

**Substantive Model**

The substantive model predicted five relations among three factors and two single item measures in Figure 1. In the figure, the three ovals represent the factors of *parental commitment* (four measured variables), *swimming as enhancing* (five measured variables), and *socioeconomic status* (four measured variables). These factors accounted for interrelations among the variables shown in the thirteen small rectangles. Additionally, the model included two single item measures (*number of swimmers and interference with family life*). These measures are shown in large rectangles in Figure 1. The single-headed arrows represent hypotheses about the relations among the five major parts of the model. The double-headed arrows represent non-causal, nuisance correlations between variables.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the greater the *number of swimmers* in the family, the greater would be the *parental commitment* to swimming. The rationale for this prediction was that when parents supported a greater number of swimming children, demands increased on the time and effort that they devoted to the support of swimming. These demands included coaching, fund raising, officiating, and other activities.

Most likely, the largest increase in commitment should occur when the first child takes up swimming. When a second child in the family takes up swimming, demands on parents are increased further, but because of an economy of scale, the demands do not double. If a third child begins swimming, demands on parents rise again, but the change is smaller than the change from one to two swimmers. Put another way, the slope of the relation between *number of swimmers* and *parental commitment* should decrease as the number of swimmers increases. For instance, if practices were held at the same time and place, parents could drive up to four swimmers (the maximum number in our sample) in the time and distance that it would take to chauffeur only one child. Therefore, support of two swimmers is not twice as much work as supporting just one, but support of additional swimmers creates greater demands on parents, and the model predicts that these demands will be met by greater parental commitment.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that the stronger the belief by a parent that *swimming enhanced* the swimmer, the greater would be the *parental commitment* to swimming. Using the model proposed by Fishbein (1979) and Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), beliefs led to attitudes which led to behavioral intentions which in turn led to behavior. Our rationale assumed that beliefs in swimming as enhancing for children preceded commitment. In our study, parents believed that swimming contributed to the personal development of the swimmers across several broad areas such as, social life, scholastic achievement, self-confidence, and home life. This belief led them to become more involved with (and committed to) swimming activities.

A second possible explanation of a relation between belief and commitment is the insufficient justification hypothesis (Festinger & Carlsmith 1959). Parents may have rationalized the *parental commitment* of time and effort by imbuing participation in swimming with more importance. That is, they would be justifying their effort by believing that the children benefited from it (Webben, Straits & Schulman 1974 50-51). Of the two rationales, we considered the former one, attitude-behavior, to be the stronger because prior research has found that attitudes predict behavior quite accurately when the be-

lief and the behavior are very specific and closely related (Ajzen & Fishbein 1977; Ajzen 1982). These conditions match closely the items that were answered by our respondents.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that the greater the *parental commitment*, the less the belief that swimming *interfered with family life*. The rationale for this prediction was that family members were required to alter their activities and schedules to support swimming. While they considered this alteration worthwhile, the change meant that the family could not pursue other activities with which swimming interfered. Insufficient justification theory predicts that parents would bring attitudes about *interference with family life* into line with commitment behavior, so parents and children would devalue other family activities, and they would participate less in them (Festinger & Carlsmith 1959). The result of this cognitive "work" would be an inverse relation between *parental commitment and interference with family life*.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that the greater the belief that swimming *enhanced the swimmer*, the less that swimming would perceived by parents to *interfere with family life*. The rationale for this prediction was the reasoning that family activities tended to follow a system of priorities in which former activities became subordinate to swimming because swimming was considered highly beneficial. As parents believed that swimming enhanced the personal growth of the children, swimming families willingly (or grudgingly) changed lifestyle. Once this change took place, swimming became a "normal" thing for them to do, so even as commitment rose, they did not perceive greater interference in family activities. Swimming *became* the family activity. Part of this rationale was that parental support of swimmers was a public investment of time, energy and money in the child. It was easy for children, family members, and other parents to see the investment.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that the greater the *socioeconomic status* of the family, the greater would be the perception that swimming *interfered with family life*. The rationale for this prediction was that within these mostly upper middle class families, higher socioeconomic status was a result of more work, up to eighty hours per week for two full-time workers. Higher status also could have been linked to additional social obligations that created greater time pressure and role strain (Domhoff 1998 Chapter 3). While greater economic resources of families with higher socioeconomic standing could have brought freedom from house and yard work, swimming demanded that parents give their time. Therefore, swimming interfered more with family life among families of higher socioeconomic status.

Hypothesis 6 was derived from the first two hypotheses. It stated that the greater the number of swimmers in a family, the greater would be *interference with family life*. The rationale was that different schedules, more driving, and greater cost, would create interference with other family activities.

**Structural Equations Model**

Data were analyzed using a structural equation model (SEM). This technique is unsurpassed in capturing relations among measured and latent variables in a single model (Bentler 1995; Dunn, Everitt & Pickles 1993).

In a preliminary analysis, we tested the model using a listwise deletion of missing data. This procedure defined an entire case as missing if data on at least one variable were missing. The sample size was 464 cases, a substantially lower number of cases than the 767 cases in the original sample. The variable, income, contained the greatest number of missing values (119 cases; 15.5%). An informal rule-of-thumb for imputing data that are missing is that generally, it is safe to impute missing data if fewer than ten percent of the cases have missing data on a particular variable. We violated this rule by using mean substitution to impute missing data. After imputation, we ran the model again (n = 767), and the results were virtually identical to the first run that used listwise deletion of data (n = 464). In the results of the two analyses, no coefficient varied by more than .01, so it was reasonable to assume that the missing data were randomly distributed throughout the cases. Under this condition, either procedure for handling missing data would be acceptable. Analyses below were performed using listwise deletion of missing cases (n = 464). Three reasons encouraged us to make this decision. First, as presented above results with or without imputation were almost identical. Second, listwise deletion of missing values was a

more parsimonious procedure than imputing missing values. Third, we did not want the larger number of cases to overwhelm the $X^2$ test of significance.

Small, representative samples have an advantage in SEM because a $X^2$ tests the difference between a saturated model and a restricted model (see below). With the same degree of association among the variables, a larger sample can result in the rejection of the null hypotheses that the covariance matrices are the same for the saturated and restricted models. This rejection would be evidence for a poorer fitting model. Conversely, the same SEM test with a smaller sample would lead one to fail to reject the null hypotheses of similar covariance matrices; thus, failure to reject it would be evidence for a better fitting model.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) goes a step beyond factor analysis because SEM not only creates latent variables (factors), but also it allows the examination of relations among them. SEM has three main advantages over other statistical techniques. First, as discussed above, in contrast to scales in which the items merely are added, latent variables are better able to represent the subtleties of higher-level, more abstract constructs such as enhancement, commitment, and socioeconomic status.

Second, latent variables are error-free constructs. These constructs represent the shared variance among a set of measured variables (items). By using latent variables (rather than a collection of measured variables), relationships among them can be assessed without the usual "noise" of measurement error.

Finally, SEM provides a *fit index*. This statistic indicates the overall strength of the relationships among all of the variables of the model. In a simple model, the fit index can be the same as a multiple correlation coefficient, but in more complex models like the one shown in Figure 1, the use of several multiple correlation coefficients would be required to describe the findings. A fit index is more elegant than a series of multiple correlations. Fit indices have a range between zero and one, and higher coefficients indicate a better fit between the data and the model. A coefficient of .90 or higher represents a good fit between the model and the data.

Figure 1 summarizes results of the structural equation model of parental commitment to swimming. On the figure, latent variables (factors) are shown by ovals, and measured variables are shown by rectangles. Also, straight arrows represent presumed causal relations, and curved arrows show nuisance correlations that we do not consider causal.

## RESULTS

Means and standard deviations for all variables are shown on Table 1. In addition, items on *parental commitment, swimming as enhancing* and *socioeconomic status* were factor analyzed using maximum likelihood estimates.The four items on *parental commitment* loaded between .46 and .63. Factor weightings on the five items of *swimming as enhancing* to the swimmer loaded above .50. All four items loaded at least .46 on the factor, *socioeconomic status* (see Figure 1).

The first hypothesis stated that a greater *number of swimmers* in the family should predict greater *parental commitment*, and the data supported the prediction ($\beta$=.40; p<.01). This $\beta$ (*BETA*) contained the assumption that the relation was linear. Our rationale (above) predicted that due to an economy of scale, the relation would be curvilinear. A plot of the mean *parental commitment* scores for one, two, three, or four swimmers confirmed a slight departure from linearity. The Scheffe post hoc test showed that parental commitment rose significantly (p< .001) when the number of swimmers increased from one to two. We observed no significant differences in *parental commitment* for increases from two to three swimmers or for increases from three to four swimmers. To gauge the amount of curvilinearity in this relation, we compared the value of a correlation coefficient for these variables (.27) with the value of the $\eta$ (*ETA*) statistic (.28). The correlation coefficient assumes a strict, linear relation, but the $\eta$ reflects curvilinearity of any form. Since the difference between these two measures was so small (.01), we treated the relation as linear, and we reported the $\beta$ above.

The second hypothesis predicted that a greater belief that *swimming enhanced* the swimmer would lead to increased *parental commitment*. The data supported this prediction ($\beta$=.24; p<.01).

The third hypothesis predicted that as *parental commitment* increased, parents would judge swimming to create less *interference with family life*. The data supported the nonzero prediction of the relation between these

variables, but we did not accurately predict the direction of the relation. We expected the $\beta$ to have a negative sign; however, the observed $\beta$ was .29 ($p<.01$).

The fourth hypothesis predicted that as swimming was perceived as *enhancing* to the swimmer, the less swimming would be perceived as *interfering with family life*. The data supported this prediction ($\beta$ =-.30; $p<.01$).

The fifth hypothesis predicted that the greater the *socioeconomic status*, the greater the *interference with family life*. The data supported this prediction ($\beta$=.18; $p<.01$). We conducted additional analyses to test our rationale that greater SES resulted in greater social activity that interfered with family life. Results showed that families of higher socioeconomic status belonged to more golf clubs, tennis clubs, sports clubs, racquetball clubs, running clubs, exercise clubs, regular exercise, and ownership of a vacation home. All relations were significant beyond the.05 level. The data supported the rationale for the fifth proposition.

Finally, the derived proposition was tested. It predicted a direct effect between the *number of swimmers* in the family and *interference with family life*. Results did not support this prediction ($\beta$ =.04; not significant). As reflected by this low $\beta$, we did not observe a relation between the *number of swimmers* and *interference with family* when *parental commitment* was held constant. Therefore, *parental commitment* interprets the relation between *the number of swimmers* and *interference with family life*.

### Fit of the Model

The aim of our structural equation model was to capture the maximum amount of covariance (interrelation) among all of variables by using as few statements of relation as possible (shown by arrows). A *saturated* model would contain every relation, so it would have an arrow connecting every pair of variables. The model presented in Figure 1 was *restricted*. It attempted to capture as much covariance as possible using only the relations shown by the arrows. The Comparative Fit Index (*CFI*) is a measure of how well a model captures all of the covariance (Bentler 1990). The model on Figure 1 had a *CFI* of .94, a value that shows a well-fitting model. The $X^2$ statistic tests the hypothesis that the restricted model is identical to the saturated model. Results showed that the two models were different ($X^2$ =175.77; $p<.01$), but this finding almost certainly was a result of the still large sample size rather than a true, substantive difference. A rule of thumb is that the $X^2$ statistic should be at least twice as large as the degrees of freedom. Our model had 84 degrees of freedom, so the ratio was 2.09, a level just above this threshold. Therefore, the model captured much of the covariance among the variables.

## DISCUSSION

Participation in competitive swimming occurred in households that were financially affluent. Not only was the income for these households very high, but also parents were highly educated, and generally, they had jobs and lifestyles that provided them with considerable security and stability. Most often parents currently were married, they owned their own home, and they had lived in their home an average of six years. These households had considerable resources to facilitate a wide range of family activities, including the sport participation of their children.

Parental commitment to a child's involvement in competitive swimming suggests a pattern of prioritizing. *First*, parental commitment seems to be grounded primarily in beliefs by parents that competitive swimming provides a positive developmental experience for their children. These beliefs emphasize that participation in swimming enhances their children's self-confidence, family life, academic achievement, quality of family time, and general social life. In other words, parents are committed to their children's sport participation to the extent that they believe that participation is associated with positive developmental outcomes that manifest themselves outside the family as well as inside it. For this reason, parents devote many hours of their lives and a high proportion of their "free" time to supporting programs and program organization, providing transportation, and attending club activities. The analyses suggest that an *attitude-behavior* approach is more appropriate than a *minimum justification* approach to model these relations.

The data suggest that the parents of competitive swimmers are highly invested in their children, and that they take a proactive approach to influence their children's lives. Their educational and material resources en-

able them to do so, and their commitment increases in cases where more than one child in a family is involved in swimming.

*Second*, the data highlight a model of parental commitment that involves setting priorities among participation in alternate activities. Even when a child's participation interferes with other family activities, parents tend to persist in their commitment. Parents are likely to say that swimming interferes with other family activities when more than one child in a family swims and when the family's socioeconomic standing is high. This interpretation suggests that when families have the time or money to engage in alternative activities, parents realize that the investment of time and energy into any one activity inevitably precludes participation in other activities. However, the data suggest that parents accept interference with family life. Thus, interference is associated positively with commitment to swimming. In other words, these parents seem to believe that a commitment to participation in competitive swimming is important, even when it interferes with other family activities.

**Inconsistencies in the Structural Equations Model**

The $\beta$ for the relation between *swimming as enhancing* and *parental commitment* was positive. The $\beta$ for the relation between *swimming as enhancing* and *interference with family life* was negative. When these two signs were multiplied, they should have deduced that predicted sign for the relation between *parental commitment* and *interference with family life* was negative, as per our rationale (above). The product of these two "doglegs" (Davis 1971) predicts the sign of the relation shown on the third leg of the triangle. Instead, the observed relation between *parental commitment* and *interference with family life* was positive. That is, increases in parental commitment resulted in greater interference with family life. This finding makes sense, so we are not overly concerned with the mathematical inconsistency. The deduction of the sign of a third relation is unambiguous only when the variance explained by the first relation plus the variance explained by the second relation is greater than 1, and this level of prediction is not often reached in social science research.

**Theorizing About Parental Commitment**

We suggest that the sport participation of the children in the USA Swimming families was initiated and maintained by a particular *family habitus* that emerged primarily among affluent households in the United States in the 1990s. Our use of *family habitus* is an application of Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1978, 1984, 1985; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). He used the concept to identify the social and cultural contexts in which people live their everyday lives. Bourdieu explained that habitus is an open, yet relatively durable system of dispositions, perceptions, tastes, preferences, and activities that are learned through socialization and which are habitually are expressed by people as they make choices in everyday life.

*Family habitus*, as we use it here, refers to a historically and socially situated system of dispositions and associated family activities. It encompasses a combination of a belief system and lifestyle that is associated with the objective material conditions and historical practices that currently constitute family life in U.S. culture. This concept is useful because it enables us to simultaneously consider cultural and structural factors as we try to understand the choices made within families.

Bourdieu was concerned with how lifestyles and the choices that constitute those lifestyles vary with class position. He used concepts such as economic capital (money), social capital (social connections), and cultural capital (education and knowledge about the world) to illustrate how variations in people's "tastes" reproduce patterns of class relations and class. Therefore, actions of individuals and groups are the vehicles through which social class becomes and stays relevant in everyday life. Of course, "taste" is expressed partly through the use of economic capital. People use money to pay for the things and experiences they choose to buy. "Taste" also is connected with what might be called "circles of consumption" in which meanings are given to the lifestyle choices that people make. In this way, people accumulate "social profits" that can be used to open doors to social networks.

For the swimming families in our study, *family habitus* involves a belief system and lifestyle that encompass identifiable dispositions and practices related to social class, family life, parenting, child development, and

sport participation. *Family habitus* incorporates developmental goals and identifies the types of activities that are helpful in reaching these goals. By implication, *family habitus* subsumes appropriate activities that parents think will best facilitate the development of their children while also conforming to the current, widespread belief that parents are directly responsible—and even legally accountable—for the behaviors and the characters of their children. As such, *family habitus* entails the interrelated notions that child development is important, that the development of young people ultimately depends on the actions of parents, and that the type of development most valued among many middle- and upper-middle income parents is achieved best through participation in adult-supervised, rationally organized programs in which skills are built and manifested visibly and progressively through regular performances. Parents also see these programs as sites for accumulating social capital in the form of peer acceptance, and for accumulating cultural capital in the form of knowledge about how to succeed in organized, competitive reward structures such as those that characterize many educational and occupations settings.

*Family habitus* also is expressed in connection with norms that prescribe individualism and personal responsibility (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton 1985). In a society in which individualism and personal responsibility are given such high normative priority, parental support and love can be

> ...narrowed to a reward for doing well. [Under this condition] moral standards give way to the aesthetic tastes and technical skills of the achievement-oriented middle class. 'Being good' becomes a matter of being good *at things*... (Bellah et al1985 60; italics in original).

Competitive swimming is one of these *things*, as are other performance-based, organized, competitive sport programs. Of course, parents also value competence in things other than sports, and they see that competence as an important form of cultural capital for their children. However, organized, competitive sports are special for two reasons. First, they are highly visible in culture at this historical moment, and they involve a form of progressive skill development that enables parents to assess their children's achievement relative to age peers. These two factors have led organized, performance-oriented youth sports to become a high priority activity in the culture at large, but the substantial cost of participation in most high performance sport programs limits participants to those from affluent families.

*Family habitus* among middle and upper-middle income families includes the commitment to participation in such activities; economic capital enables them to act on their commitment. As our analyses demonstrate, parents take this participation very seriously. They are willing to forego other activities so their children can experience a form of measurable, progressive achievement that often is used as an absolute indicator of overall development as well as a barometer of how well their children are doing relative to age peers.

While our data do not deal with other consequences of this parental commitment, we argue that *family habitus* is associated with a high degree of sport specialization, a willingness to pay handsomely for lessons to perfect specialized sport skills, accommodation to nearly year round participation in a sport, and a definition of achievement that emphasizes competitive success.

Social class is directly implicated in *family habitus* because resources are required to supervise one's children throughout the day, to sponsor participation in adult-controlled activities that build individual skills, and to provide a forum in which measurable and progressive individual achievements may be displayed. To the extent allowed by family resources, responses to current expectations for total parental responsibility and accountability take the form of parental commitment to their children's involvement in the best and most reputable organized youth programs available. These programs include—but are not limited to—organized youth sport clubs, programs, and camps. In line with our application and use of *family habitus*, parental commitment to participation in particular sport programs is not unlike the commitment to enroll children in exclusive private schools. Private youth sport programs are popular in affluent communities today because so many parents see them as serving some of the same developmental and control functions served by private schools while at the same time helping their children

to accumulate social and cultural capital. In addition, parents realize that the fees for exclusive youth sport programs, clubs, and camps are less expensive than tuition at most exclusive private schools. Therefore, if the exclusive schools are out of reach economically or academically, the sport programs are a valued alternative.

Inherent in the idea of parental commitment to a child's participation in youth sports is the expectation that the child will benefit. Commitment is in part instrumental. Also inherent in parental commitment is the belief that youth sport participation is intrinsically valuable. In fact, Bellah et al (1985 335) defined "Practices of commitment" as activities that have clear, altruistic intent. They are not simply means to an end; they are ends in themselves. We argue that *family habitus* expresses both instrumental and intrinsic value in the case of parental commitment to youth sport participation.

Finally, it is important to recognize negative factors that may be associated with the parental commitment to organized youth programs and activities that, in part, constitute *family habitus* in middle- and upper middle-income households. The informal play and games that provide unique developmental experiences for children may languish for lack of time and parental encouragement and support. The emphasis on development as measured by progressive achievements and competitive success that is characteristic in organized, performance-oriented youth sport programs may subvert spontaneity, experimentation, and creativity in children's lives (Adler & Adler 1998). The demanding schedules associated with these programs may create what Elkind (1988) has described as "the hurried child" whose everyday life is organized by adults on adult terms. Similarly, parental commitment may be expressed in ways that are perceived as forms of pressure by children (Leff & Hoyle 1995). The loss of autonomy and the constriction of experience sometimes associated with highly structured youth sports may also lead to high rates of burnout (Coakley 1992).

**Policy Implications**

USA Swimming commissioned this research in part to discover how they might increase and diversify the participants in their programs. However, given the family habitus that may be expressed in such a commitment, it could be very difficult for them and for similar private, high performance sport programs to make changes that would encourage participation among a larger and more diverse collection of young people. In fact, efforts to become more inclusive might even erode the basis for current expressions of commitment among many middle- and upper-middle-income families in which parents feel that sport participation enables their children to accumulate relatively valued forms of social and cultural capital. To the extent that family habitus incorporates parental commitment to programs and activities through which their children receive rationalized forms of training that is not available to all children, inclusiveness would not be welcomed (Boulanger 1988).

Future research is needed to explore further the family-based choices underlying youth sport participation to understand how those choices are related to class-based lifestyles and cultures. Prior to conducting additional quantitative studies, there is a need for qualitative studies designed to, 1) identify the processes through which parents choose to commit family resources to their children's participation in organized youth sports, 2) describe how the participation of one or more children fits into the overall lives of family members and the family as a whole, and 3) explain the connection between commitment and participation in terms of the social and cultural context in which they occur. The notion of *family habitus* may be helpful in conceptualizing such research and dealing with the relationship between the cultural and social structural factors that constitute family life for many people in the United States today.

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