

**ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EXPERIENCE OF PARENTAL SUPPORT
WITHIN THEIR EXPERIENCE OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

By

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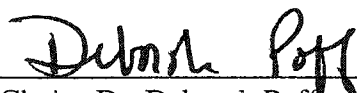
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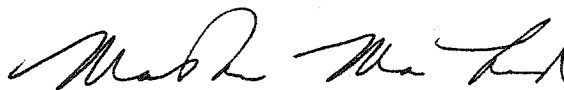
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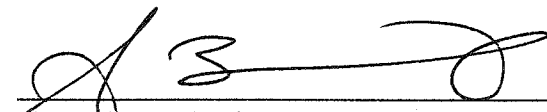
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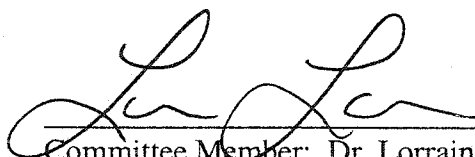
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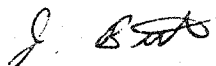
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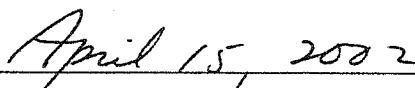


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ABSTRACT

Although parental support has been identified as significant to the continuation of girls in physical activity, it is not well understood what forms of parental support encourage girls to participate in and adhere to physical activity. This descriptive qualitative study examines the experiences of eleven 16-17 year old adolescent girls, in a small northern Canadian community, who were involved in a local swim club during adolescence. The study describes what the girls understood parental support to be within these experiences and what they understood about its contribution to their continued participation in physical activity. The girls stated that parental support involved helping them to learn self-regulation skills within a framework of consistent physical and emotional support, consistent expectations and an enduring belief in their abilities. Although its form changed over time, support was unconditional and always there. It enabled the girls to develop confidence and skills to remain involved in physical activity. The thesis concludes with recommendations for coaching, public health practice, and research.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Physical activity is important for health, as sedentary behavior is a risk factor for many diseases. Despite its acknowledged benefits, a large majority of people over their life span engage in less physical activity than necessary for health. Furthermore, women/girls have a lower rate of participation in physical activities than their men/boys counterparts, a trend, which begins in adolescence (Chen & Millar, 1999; McGinnis, 1992; Sallis et al., 1992; Smale & Shaw, 1993). Over half (58%) of Canadian and American youth from the ages 12 to 21 are not moderately active on a regular basis with the number of youth participating in sport and activities decreasing throughout adolescence, especially among girls, beginning at the age of 12 to 13 (Canadian Fitness and Life Style Research Institute, 1996; Chen & Millar; Sallis et al.; Smale & Shaw; US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). Teenage girls, on average, spend 40% less time in physical activity than teenage boys (Canadian Fitness and Life Style Research Institute).

Many factors have been identified as influencing individuals' physical activity patterns: confidence in one's ability to do the activity (perceived competence), confidence regarding one's ability to be active (self-efficacy), enjoyment of the activity, support from others (e.g. parents), positive beliefs concerning the benefits, lack of perceived barriers to being physically active, and attributes of self-motivation (King et al., 1992; US Department of Health and Human Service, 1996). Physical activity patterns, attitudes, and beliefs formed during childhood and adolescence persist into adulthood, affecting behavior and, therefore health (Sallis et al., 1992).

Research on the participation of adolescents in physical activity and sport, demonstrates that significant others (family, friends, coaches, teachers and role models), greatly influences formation of adolescents' values and beliefs towards physical activity; this in turn, influences adolescents' adherence to activity (Anderssen & Wold, 1992; Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Brown, Frankle, & Fennel, 1989; Butcher, 1983; Gottlieb & Chen, 1985; Kimiecik, Horn, & Shurin, 1996; Lau, Quadrel, & Hartman, 1990). Parents, in particular, play an important role in first socializing their children into sport and physical activity, and in then contributing to the child's psychosocial development in sport and activity participation (Babkes & Weiss; Brustad, 1992; Lau et al.). When introduced to the activity or sport, children receive encouragement and support from parents; this support influences the development of the children's values and attitudes toward physical activity. These attitudes and values influence children's behavior in their continued participation in physical activity (Babkes & Weiss; Lau et al.). Brown, et al. and Brustad contend that research has been directed almost exclusively toward discovering the influence of significant others on the initial entry of children into sport or physical activity, and suggest that individuals continue to be affected by socialization influences of their significant others both in their involvement in and their disengagement from the sport or physical activity. Sallis et al. (1992) indicate that the attention of research to key life transition periods, such as puberty and entering adulthood, is critical in understanding the process required to prepare adolescents for their transition to adult roles and adult environments.

As a coach of adolescents, a health care professional and a woman who participates in physical activity, I have always been perplexed about the limited participation of

females in moderately vigorous physical activity. The majority of females, as well as males, do not seem to be able to incorporate physical activity into their lives. As a coach, encouraging young adolescents, particularly girls, to continue participation in physical activity and sport is always a challenge. An observation that I made early on in coaching was that as a coach, I could have a certain level of impact on the continued participation of adolescents during their transitional periods, such as the entrance into high school. However the greatest adherence to physical activity occurred when parents were supportive of their children within that activity. From this observation, I perceived that some forms of support seemed effective. What makes the difference? What do adolescent girls understand to be supportive behaviors during the times of transition, and what information can coaches and health care workers offer to parents to help them support their children and promote adherence to physical activity?

The Health Need for Physical Activity

Physical activity reduces the risk of premature mortality in general and more specifically coronary heart disease, hypertension, colon cancer, and diabetes mellitus. As well, physical activity has importance for the health of muscles, bones and joints and improves mental health (Corbin & Pangrazi, 1996; US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). Research shows that physical inactivity, along with dietary patterns and tobacco use, ranks among the leading preventable contributors to death, well ahead of infectious diseases (Chen & Millar, 1999; McGinnis, 1992).

The Office of the Provincial Health Officer (1995), in Health Goals for British Columbia: Identifying Priorities for a Healthy Population, states the importance of physical activity.

The choices individuals make about life style also influence health. Personal practices such as smoking, use of alcohol and other drugs, food choices, physical activity, and other life style decisions affect health and well being. Research shows that many of our most common health problems are linked to these practices (p. 13).

These public health concerns are echoed by American health authorities who state that promoting physical activity is a public health issue. Audrey F. Manley, the Surgeon General (Acting) stated that “because physical activity is so directly related to preventing disease and premature death and to maintaining a high quality of life, we must accord it the same level of attention that we give other public health practices that affect the entire nation” (Corbin & Pangrazi, 1996, p. 4).

Health professionals believe that sedentary people could substantially improve their health and quality of life by including moderate amounts of activity in their daily lives. The Canadian Physical Activity Guide (Health Canada, 1998) and the Surgeon General’s Report (US Department of Health & Human Services, 1996) recommend moderate physical activity and endurance-type activities. These documents recommend that individuals engage in life style activities such as walking (30 minutes per day), doing yard work, and/or climbing stairs on a daily basis. For increased health benefits, aerobic activities that involve large muscle groups (biking, jogging, and swimming) are recommended at least three days a week for at least 20-60 minutes. These activities have to be performed at a level that increases the heart rate to an optimal working range (50% of maximum heart rate) to ensure health benefits. Active sports (e.g. tennis, volleyball) and recreational activities (e.g. hiking) are not truly aerobic activities but can be considered beneficial if done without long periods of rest (Oja, 1995).

Physical activity opportunities for youth are varied and include life style activities (e.g. household chores), active aerobics (e.g. running while playing, biking), and recreational and sport activities (e.g. dancing and soccer) (Corbin & Pangrazi, 1998). For youth, school and community programs dominate physical activity patterns, with sport activities, i.e. swimming, basketball, gymnastics, being a focus of many programs. Physical activity patterns have been investigated by researchers in physical education, exercise science, health education and public health. However, many researchers have chosen to focus on youth's adherence to sport/physical activity and on the development of sport excellence rather than on factors that contribute to the development of individual health behaviors into adulthood. Sallis et al. (1992) suggest that public health research on physical activity for children and youth constitutes a different focus than the current research on sport. They contend that the focus of research needs to shift to studies that explore how the experiences of children in physical activity (part of which is sport) can be developed in order to result in more physically active life styles that will continue in adulthood.

Parental influence on children's health beliefs and physical activity behaviors has been found to be greatest while the child was living at home, with the peak of this influence occurring in adolescence (Lau et al., 1990). Parents who are active with their children and model physical activity for their children have a great impact on their children's physical activity patterns (Anderssen & Wold, 1992; Lau et al.). Youth's adherence to physical activity is increased by linking physical activity to personal interests or to pursuits that are followed as a family, over the entire life span (Marcus, 1995; Shephard, 1995; US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). However,

research shows that being physically active as a child and adolescent, is not predictive of activity in adulthood (Sallis et al., 1992). Instead, strong predictors of future physical activity are an individual's perceived competence, self-efficacy or confidence regarding their ability to be active, their understanding of encouragement from their social environment, and their self-motivation (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Biddle & Goudas, 1996; Kimiecik et al., 1996; King et al., 1992; Sallis, 1994).

Youth who adhere to sport and physical activity, have been found to have a higher level of self-motivation, tend to prefer challenges, and have higher perceptions of their competence (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Duda, Chi, Newton, Walling, & Catley, 1995). The support and influence of significant others, as perceived by the individual, has been shown to be significant in the development of these characteristics (Babkes & Weiss; Harter, 1978).

Parents' belief of their children's competence, parents' account of their own exercise participation, and parental beliefs of their positive responses to their children has been found to be inconsistently related to youths' activity levels (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Kimiecik et al., 1996). What parents perceive as support and actions of approval, is at times perceived by youth as pressure to perform and as disapproval (Babkes & Weiss). Babkes and Weiss conclude that children's perceptions of what their parents do and think, rather than what their parents claim to do and think, are more important to children's psychosocial responses and their adherence to physical activity.

Statement of Problem and Purpose of Study

The experiences of adolescent girls in physical activity are not well understood. The role of parents in supporting and encouraging girls through the various stages of

adolescence also requires further study as it is not well understood what form of parental support would encourage females to participate and adhere to the sport or physical activity (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Brown et al., 1989; Butcher, 1983; Kidman, McKenzie, & McKenzie, 1999). Little is understood about the effects of parents' behaviors and comments on their children's enjoyment, performance and ongoing participation in sport and physical activity (Kidman et al., 1999). In particular little is known about what parental support means from the perspective of the adolescent girls themselves.

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the experiences of girls between the ages of 13-15 years that enable and encourage them to remain in sport or physical activity. More specifically, this study describes what girls understand parental support to be within these experiences and what they understand its contribution to be to their continued participation in physical activity.

Chapter two reviews the literature on the determinants of adherence to physical activity for adolescent girls with Chapter three presenting the approach taken by the study. The interpretation of the data evolves in Chapters four and five with the final chapter summarizing and presenting conclusions.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Introduction

The present research seeks to gain an understanding of factors, particularly factors in parental support, that influence adolescents' participation in physical activity. Youth give a number of reasons for participating in sport and physical activity. The majority of studies reviewed (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Brown, 1985; Brown et al., 1989; Butcher, 1983; Gill, Gross, & Huddleston, 1983; Hoyle & Leff, 1997) have focussed on sport; however they do provide an insight into some of the issues of adolescents' continued participation in physical activity. The understanding of continued participation in sport for youth, although providing an incomplete picture of physical activity in general, contributes to our understanding of continued participation in physical activity as a life style choice.

Achievement or motivation orientation, team spirit, fitness orientated reasons, energy release, skill development, friendship, fun and other reasons such as parents or close friends wanted them to participate were general reasons that were identified in a descriptive study done by Gill et al. (1983). In this study, a total of 720 boys and 418 girls who participated in a summer sport school offering individual and team sports were asked what degree of importance they attached to their reasons for participating in sports.

Butcher (1983) studied the socialization of adolescent girls into physical activity by looking both at competitive school and community organized activities. Six hundred and sixty one girls from grades 6-10 completed the questionnaire. The analysis showed these variables most related to the girls' participation in physical activity: satisfaction in skills

or perception of competence; parental socialization influence; significant others' encouragement; opportunity to participate (i.e. availability of equipment); socioeconomic status, and self-confidence. There were several significant differences between physical activities offered by the school and by the community. School activities required a high level of physical skill and confidence in one's skills, whereas parental support and socioeconomic status influenced community activities more. Therefore, it appeared that the girls' skill level or their perception of skill level, amount of parental encouragement and support and economic status would limit the girls' physical activity.

In examining the literature, Lindner, Johns and Butcher (1991) found the following reasons for youth withdrawing from sport: there were other things to do, there is not enough time, it is no longer fun, participants have lost interest, finances, not getting enough opportunity, or too much pressure, as well as issues around competence and ability. Other underlying non-sport factors identified by Lindner et al. that were present but not included in the research are factors such as work, study, family commitments, and developmental changes.

Research has indicated that adolescents' participation in physical activity is influenced by a large number of complex factors and variables (Kimiecik et al., 1996; King et al., 1992; Lindner et al., 1991; Sallis et al., 1992). The research on factors that contribute to activity has a sport bias, although some light has been shed on the public health issue of the physical activity of children and adolescents. Sallis et al. (1992), in their review of the literature, state that "few studies have directly addressed issues relevant to improving the health of all children" (p. 252). They go on to say the variables determining participation may be different for different groups at different periods of

their lives. For the development of health, the determinants of moderate to vigorous physical activity as a life style choice are poorly understood (Kimiecik et al.; Sallis et al.). The level at which individuals perform physical activity has not been a central consideration in studies investigating participation within a sport or physical activity. "Participation" is the key word used in studies to indicate that a person is active or not active within a sport or activity. According to Lindner et al. in their review of the literature on participation in physical activity, the level of participation has not been considered within the studies, nor do the studies show if the participant dropped out of a sport and then went into a different sport, or if the participant is involved in a multitude of activities and sports. The focus on sport and its limited scope makes it difficult to look at research results and interpret them in relation to the development of physical activity as a life style choice (Sallis et al.). Key determinants, however, have been identified as influencing physical activity patterns of individuals (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996).

Determinants of Participation for Female Adolescents in Sport/ Physical Activity

Key factors have been identified in the literature as influencing physical activity patterns: opportunities and the lack of perceived barriers to being physically active, perceived competence, self-efficacy, self-motivation, positive beliefs concerning the benefits of physical activity, growth and development, and the presence of a supportive social milieu (King et al., 1992; Sallis et al., 1992; US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). To further review the literature these major categories will be used.

Opportunities and a Lack of Perceived Barriers

Availability of opportunities to be involved in physical activity is fundamental to participation. As well, individuals are more likely to participate in physical activity when they perceive there to be few barriers to participation, such as opportunities that are suitable to their needs, experiences, skill level and stage of life, along with openness to participation by others of their same gender. Their perception of suitability and of opportunities may be influenced by past experiences, and social norms. Dahlgren (1988) concluded that females are not encouraged to participate to the same extent in physical activity as boys and are discouraged from participation in some activities. The influences can be subtle, such as the unequal media coverage of female and male accomplishments, fewer role models, and fewer opportunities for females to participate. Females and males are initiated into activity and it is assumed by society that opportunities are equal. However, Dahlgren indicated that the opportunities for females are limited and not equal. For example, activities for preadolescent males and females are often similar. But at puberty, physical differences, particularly in areas of strength, widen. The opportunities for the selection of activities that address the physical differences are fewer for girls (Sallis, 1994). In educational settings there is less programming for integrated or female only activities and activities outside the educational sector has an over emphasis on male-only sports (Dahlgren). For females to be active in physical activity, there needs to be opportunities available and a lack of perceived barriers.

Perceived Competence

Perceived competence has been associated with physical activity adherence. Several researchers (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Brustad, 1988; Gould & Petlichkoff, 1996)

employed Harter's (1978) theory of competence motivation as a framework for examining youths' participation in sport. Harter proposes that individuals possess an inherent desire to demonstrate personal competence in specific areas of achievement. Harter contends that individuals who perceive that they are competent and in control of consequences in a particular domain (i.e. social, physical, and cognitive) are less anxious, more persistent and more positive during involvement in that domain. The perception of competence is not a global trait of the individual but is specific to the particular domain such as physical activity. According to Harter, the positive feelings, such as pride and enjoyment, that accompanies perceptions of success makes it more likely that individuals will continue in mastering the domain. Gender differences have been found to play a role in perceived competency. Duda et al. (1995) found that females perceived themselves as being less competent than males in physical activity.

Self-Efficacy

Personal beliefs about one's own physical activity have significant influences on physical activity. One of the strongest predictors of future activity is perceptions of self-efficacy or confidence regarding one's ability to be active on a regular basis (Marcus, 1995; Sallis et al., 1992; Sallis, 1994). When a participant is confident about their ability to continue physical activity there is greater adherence to physical activity. Self-efficacy is part of self-confidence. It is an individual's belief and judgement of their capabilities in themselves to achieve certain goals within specific situations such as physical activity (Stipek, 1993).

Self-Motivation

The attribute of self-motivation has been found to consistently correlate with physical activity (King et al., 1992). The attribute of self-motivation is reflected in the presence of self-regulatory skills such as effective goal setting, self-monitoring of progress and managing problems. King et al. indicates that there is limited data available that evaluates specific parameters of such skills and how best to utilize them to enhance adherence to physical activity.

Educational researchers (Alschuler, 1973; Boren, Weir, & Benegar, 1987; Grossnickle; 1989; Johnson, 1984; Stipek, 1993) describe self-motivated individuals as those who learn skills to self-regulate themselves to achieve the goals they want and to demonstrate consistent characteristics. Alschuler and Johnson describe these individuals as being interested in excellence for its own sake rather than the rewards excellence brings. They prefer situations in which they can take personal responsibility for the outcomes of their efforts. They set up their goals carefully after considering the probability of success of a variety of alternatives and learn to identify and to use appropriate tools that help them solve predictable challenges and problems. As individuals, they become more self-determined and self-regulated.

Beliefs Concerning Benefits

Individuals decide their level of commitment to an activity as they evaluate the benefits derived from sport participation compared with the input and sacrifices that are required. Lindner et al. (1991) found participants at risk to be those motivated, highly energetic, high achieving athletes who experienced diminishing returns related to effort, injuries and less personal time and autonomy after putting in many hours of training. For

all individuals, ongoing participation in an activity occurs when there is a perceived balance between performance demands and the individual's ability to meet those demands. As well, individuals who continue in physical activity are found to have the coping skills to alleviate the stress involved in doing the activity and are less anxious (Kimiecik et al., 1996).

Growth and Developmental Factors

Many developmental changes occur for adolescents, physically and psychologically, as they mature through several transitions including puberty and entering and leaving high school. Besides the apparent physical changes in adolescence, there are changes in self-perception and self-concept with differences between males and females (Wigfield, Eccles, MacIvaer, Rueman, & Midgley, 1991).

Pre-adolescent girls have superior balance and coordination, and boys are better at throwing and kicking. With puberty, gender differences increase for physical activity, particularly in the area of strength. These differences may act as incentives for the selection of different activities, particularly in the area of perceived competence (Sallis et al., 1992).

Wigfield et al. (1991), in their study of adolescents in transition, found that between 13-15 years, young adolescents' perceived competence decreases in comparison to their preadolescent period. Their general self-esteem is lower and less stable and their self-consciousness is higher. As is the case for many adolescents of this age, many disruptions occurred for the adolescents in their study. There was a change in school environments between elementary and high school, with a greater emphasis on evaluation and comparison to a standard or to other students, as well as a disruption of social

networks (Wigfield et al.). Self-esteem during school transitions is temporarily affected with changes to adolescents' domain-specific beliefs of competence about themselves in various school subjects (e.g. math), socially and in physical activity (Wigfield et al.). Through early adolescence, girls have a lower perception of competence of their sport ability than boys (Wigfield et al.). Girls also report lower self esteem in general than boys (Smale & Shaw, 1993; Wigfield et al.). However, Wigfield et al. question whether this is a valid finding as boys tend to be more self-congratulatory than are girls.

Horn and Harris (1996), in their review of the literature in youth athletes, concluded that research outcomes of perceived competence vary depending on developmental level of participants. They stated that children's perception of competence remains high and stable between the ages of 8-12. As children get older, they begin using peer comparison to judge their own competence and this process increases in importance steadily across the age span. By the age of 12, peer comparison becomes the most important source of ability information and it continues in early adolescence (13-14 years). Older adolescents show a greater use of self-comparison, skill improvement, and internalized self-determined performance standards to evaluate how competent they are at a particular activity.

Shifts in interests also occur, as adolescents grow older. There are many strong factors outside a sport that draw participants away from the sport and these factors interact with the developmental changes that occur in the individual. Participants in early adolescence begin to strive for autonomy and might resent the restrictions and structures placed upon them by a sport. As well, many are developing alternative interests (Lindner et al., 1991). Activities such as hobbies, "hanging out with friends", relationships, and

increasing responsibilities with school, family and possibly work create a myriad of choices for the developing individual whose interests are shifting (Lindner et al., 1991; Smale & Shaw, 1993).

Social Milieu

Socialization theory and life style models have indicated that there are important components in developing and maintaining patterns of physical activity for individuals. These components have evolved within a social milieu and are identified as family, community, significant others (such as coaches and peers), the media, and the structure of activities (Anderssen & Wold, 1992). Socialization into sport and activity, along with the influence of significant others, has been found to influence the participation of females differently than for males (Anderssen & Wold; Dahlgren, 1998; Greendorfer, 1987; Greendorfer, Lewko, & Rosengren 1996).

Girls' socialization into sport. The socialization process of children shows pervasive gender differences (Block, 1981). Research on the process of socialization into sport indicates that the process begins early and encourages physical activity for males but not for females. Subtle influences in child rearing tend to direct females away from physical activity. Boys in North American society are socialized to a more active play style and girls socialized into more quiet, expressive forms of activity that does not require gross motor activity (Gottlieb & Chen, 1985; Greendorfer et al., 1996). Boys are exposed to sport. A greater number of social systems influence and encourage their participation in sport and in physical activity, whereas females receive less support in physical activity (Anderssen & Wold, 1992; Brown, 1985; Gottlieb & Chen). Dahlgren (1988) reported overall beliefs in North American society that physical activity is more important for

males than for females and that females are inactive, helpless and not capable of being competent. Winther (1983), in a study of the understandings six year olds in physical activity, found that by the age of six, both girls and boys believed that in physical activity boys were better than girls.

It needs to be noted that criticism has been directed at the studies of socialization of women into sport and physical activity. Greendorfer (1987) indicated that early research of adherence to physical activity does not include women, and those studies that did include women generalized the results to both genders instead of looking at results separately. Many studies did not acknowledge that the structure of sport and physical activity and the institutional influences, which were different for women than for men (Gill & Williams, 1995; Greendorfer). Greendorfer felt the conceptual approach of most studies did not capture the process that applied to women. In many of the early studies, female patterns were considered to be a deviation from the norm and were often considered atypical and too difficult to incorporate into the body of knowledge. As a result, more investigation by researchers of the experiences of women in sport is needed.

Significant others. A recurring theme throughout the reviewed research is the influence that significant others have on the participation of adolescents in physical sport and activities. Parents and peers assume key roles in shaping the psychological outcomes that youth experience through their sport and physical activity, thereby affecting their participation. Although parents and peers play important roles, the nature and extent of each source of influence varies greatly according to the age and the developmental status of the individual (Brustad, 1996).

Parental influence on children's participation in sport and physical activity is quite strong because a large portion of children's time is spent within the context of the family, and children rely heavily on the feedback of parents and other adults in assessing their personal competency (Horn & Harris, 1996). Children's early sport interests, initial sport involvement, and perceptions of physical ability are all strongly linked to parental beliefs, behaviors, and expectations (Anderssen & Wold, 1992).

With age and with cognitive maturity, children demonstrate improved social skills, and the time spent inside the family context lessens while the amount of time spent with peers increases (Brustad, 1996). Horn & Harris (1996) noted that children exhibit an increasing reliance on peer comparison and peer evaluation in assessing their own physical competence, particularly in early adolescence. As adolescents mature, the peer group becomes less influential, with self-evaluation becoming more prominent (Horn & Harris).

In a longitudinal study, Lau et al. (1990) explored the sources of stability and of change in young adults' health beliefs and behavior concerning drinking, diet, exercise, and wearing seat belts. These researchers investigated the role of parents and peers in influencing young people's health beliefs and behaviors as they move from adolescence into adulthood. Although the peer group seems to have an increasing influence on adolescents, parents are more important than peers as sources of influence over health beliefs and behaviors such as exercise. In North America, most children remain in the family throughout their teenage years and parents influence the development of their children's health values and decisions (Lau et al.). These researchers found that peers have a strong impact on changes that occur during major transition periods (i.e. seeking

increased independence and leaving home) in adolescence but found parents to be more significant as sources of influence. Lau et al. concluded that consistency in what parents model, teach, and believe is the most influential factor in the development of their children's health beliefs and life style behaviors.

The development of life style behaviors are important to individuals, as the skills and choices of life style affect health (Bruhn, 1988). Bruhn stated that wellness encompasses life style behaviors that include; learning a point of view, specific tasks, and a means of supporting and reinforcing such a life style.

Research on adolescent participation in sport demonstrates that support from parents plays an important role in the participation of both girls and of boys in sport and activity (Anderssen & Wold, 1992; Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Brown, 1985; Brown et al., 1989; Kimiecik et al., 1996; Smale & Shaw, 1993). Several studies reported stronger associations for girls than for boys between involvement in physical activity and the influence of parents and friends (Brustad, 1996; Gottlieb & Chen, 1985; Gregson & Colley, 1986).

Brown (1985), through self-reported questionnaires, studied factors that influence girls in the process of withdrawal from sport. The study included 211 female former competitive swimmers and 193 female current swimmers from 5-19 years. Brown found the continuing influence of family and peer group to be important in the ongoing socialization of female swimmers to their sport role. Gender-role stereotypes (beliefs of what is appropriate activity for females) played a role in the girls' participation and adherence to physical activity. This was particularly the case when the beliefs were shared by significant others (i.e., parents, peers, boyfriends). Parents may hold sex-

stereotyped beliefs regarding their children's potential and these beliefs are critical parental mediators of gender differences.

As female adolescents grow older, according to Brown (1985), the encouragement from significant others to continue to participate becomes more important as other activities and competing roles become more demanding. Results indicated that females who maintained their involvement in swimming received increasing support and encouragement from significant others as they got older. Those who withdrew from the sport reported receiving decreasing support or stated there was no change over time. Greater support was reported when significant others attached value to swimming and were actively involved in the sport milieu (Brown).

Brown et al. (1989) studied 376 girls between the ages of 13-19 using a forced choice, self administered questionnaire to examine the influence of significant others on adolescents' continuing involvement in sport. They determined that adolescent girls who perceived that significant others view their participation in sport to be an appropriate form of socialization, and who reported increasing support for their continued participation were likely to adhere to the sport activity. Peers became significant in continued participation, in that girls tended to have friends who also participate in the sport. Fathers appeared to be more important as socializing agents into sport than mothers, but mothers were more influential in active sport role modeling, in that active and supportive mothers legitimize participation in the more serious, norm-violating forms of activity (Brown et al.). Brown et al. identified that girls for whom the athlete role is more central to their identity and self-concept are more likely to persist in physical activity.

Significant others play an important role in the development of perceived competence. Brustad (1996) found that children's perception of competence is influenced by their parents' encouragement to be physically active. He recommended that to increase girls' perceived level of competence, encouragement needs to come from home and from other significant adults, with the nature and extent of each source of influence varying according to the age and developmental stage of the individual (Brustad).

Parental effects are the result of a variety of factors such as role-modeling physical activity, being involved in the child's sport, and being encouraging (Anderssen & Wold, 1992). However, as Babkes & Weiss (1999) determined, the value placed on physical activity by significant others, the statements of encouragement, and the reported activity level of significant others are not the key to continued participation. Instead, the major factor is the children's perception or understanding of parental encouragement, along with the children's perception of parental values and beliefs, and of their perception of parents' level of physical activity. Parents have a large impact on how a child perceives her competence within activity and within sport. Parents have their major impact as conveyors of expectancy regarding their children's abilities but this impact remains contingent on how children perceive this expectancy (Parsons, Adler, & Kaczala 1982; Wood & Abernethy, 1991). Parsons et al. determined that children's perception of their parents' beliefs evolve from the conveyed expectations that parents have of them, and are in turn, related to children's beliefs about themselves.

Babkes and Weiss (1999) studied youth ages 9-12 years and their parents through a self-reporting multivariate correlational design. Females (114) and males (113)

participating with soccer teams, were studied to determine their perception of parental support on their motivation. The studies showed that mothers and fathers who were perceived to be positive role models, who had more positive beliefs about their child's competency, and who gave more frequent positive contingent responses to performance successes were associated with youth who had a higher level of perceived competence, enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation. These researchers showed that children's perception of their parent's behavior and attitude about their sport involvement had the strongest relationship to the children's own perceptions of competence and motivation. In contrast, parents' self reported attitudes and behaviors were not predictive of the children's perception of competence and motivation. This is consistent with research, that said individuals' perceived competence, enjoyment, and motivation are linked to the frequency and type of feedback received from significant others as perceived by the individuals (Anderssen & Wold, 1992; Babkes & Weiss; Parsons et al, 1982).

Other researchers found that children and adolescents, who perceived less parental pressure and who had more support, had a more positive sport experience (Hoyle & Leff, 1997). Hoyle and Leff administered a questionnaire to 24 male and female tennis players who had a median age of 13 years. The research examined the impact of parental support and of parental pressure and those factors role in children's sport experience. Hoyle and Leff found that young people who had a high level of parental support reported greater enjoyment of the game, and viewed it as an important part of their lives, and had an objective measure of performance that included more positive appraisals of performance outcomes and of self worth. This is in contrast to the findings in the study in which perceived parental pressure failed to demonstrate an association between players'

participation and performance. Hoyle and Leff also determined that good performance leads to increased enjoyment by the athletes, but only if parents are a positive part of the child's participation. As the sport increases in importance to the youth, and pressure from external sources increases, enjoyment for the adolescent follows only if parents are involved in a supportive fashion. The key throughout the research is the youth's perception of parental support. Although perception is important, the research did not delve into what support actually looks like from the adolescents' perspective.

Wood and Abernethy (1991) surveyed 37 national team member swimmers and 16 non-elite swimmers from clubs regarding their perceptions of supportive parental behavior. The researchers used a 5-point scale on 24 predetermined parental behaviors. The least desirable parental behaviors were those that created pressure on the athletes, particularly parental judgement of the swimmers' self-worth. Parents pushing them to excel or to train harder created excessive pressure for the swimmers. Other sources of negative pressure were living up to adult expectations and facing criticisms. Supportive behaviors included encouragement in participation and congratulations following a race. Wood and Abernethy determined that though perceptions of support are described, they are more complex than simply "good" and "bad" stating: "Parents elicit many behaviors towards their children and the cumulative effect of these actions has to be taken into account" (p. 21). The meaning that adolescents give to support is not described in this study, nor is the perception of parental support described in relation to the swimmers' participation and adherence. The complexity of the support remains to be described.

Research has investigated the effect of support from parents on children and adolescents, and important themes or features of the support have been identified.

Although features have been identified, there has been limited description of the meaning that youth give to these behaviors and to how they understand this perception affects their participation and their adherence to physical activity. For example, research has been done on parents' verbal behavior during youth sport competitions. A study revealed that although the comments at games were positive overall (47.2%) there was a high percentage of negative comments (34.5%) (Kidman, et al., 1999). Kidman et al.'s study did not investigate the effect of these behaviors on youths' sport participation. What are the effects of these comments on the youth? Parental attendance at the games is thought to be supportive but the effects of the support during a game may vary, assuming that positive comments are perceived by youth to be more desirable and negative comments to be less so. The youths' perception of support and the meaning they give to the support and comments are key to understanding what motivates them.

Studies investigating what adolescents consider to be encouragement from parents, and research on how female adolescent girls understand parental support in their continuation in physical activity, has been limited. What encouragement "looks like" has not been described from the perspective of female adolescents.

Summary

Physical activity is an important life style for health. As a society, North Americans are not as active as they should be for health, and females are less active than males. Attitudes and behaviors towards life-style choices develop in childhood and in adolescence. But the development of physical activity as a life style that will continue into adulthood has many influencing factors. Research has shown certain trends in the adherence to physical activity. Individuals, who perceive themselves to be competent,

are self motivated, who believe in their self-efficacy, who believe in the benefits of the activity and who have few perceived physical barriers are more likely to enjoy and to participate in sport and physical activity. Support of others is significant in the development of an individual's perception of competence, belief in ability and in the behaviors that support the adolescents' adherence to the activity; generally parents have a large influence on the lives of their children. Research indicated that there were gender differences, with girls requiring different support from significant others than boys. As well, parental support needs to adjust to the developmental age of the adolescent girls.

There is a good body of evidence that shows that parental support is important and that certain features are key. But missing from the literature is research that describes the adolescents' experience of physical activity and their experience of parental support. Such research is needed if the complexity of what counts as support from the adolescent point of view is to be understood.

Research Questions

What are the experiences of girls in early adolescence that enable and encourage them to remain in sport or in physical activity? Within these experiences, what do girls understand parental support to be? What do they understand its contribution to be to their continued participation in physical activity?

CHAPTER 3

Method

Introduction: Qualitative Approach

A descriptive qualitative method was used to describe adolescent girls' experience of physical activity, with particular attention to their experience of parental support.

Descriptive qualitative research enables the researcher to ask, "What are the salient actions, events, beliefs, attitudes, and social structures and processes occurring in this phenomenon?" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p.33). Descriptive qualitative research investigates the interpretation and the meaning that people give to an experience, enabling the researcher to acquire insight and understanding into that experience (Marshall & Rossman). Qualitative research is generally inductive, enabling the researcher to discover phenomenon without the constraints of specific theories. It can be helpful, however, to use the broad theoretical formulation or themes that arise in the research literature. In highly researched areas such as the study of adolescent adherence to sport/physical activity, there are established themes. These include: perceived support by parents, their motivational characteristics, and perceived competence. The interviews in this study were guided by these broad categories.

Research Design

In this study I was particularly interested in how the participants described and interpreted their experiences. A qualitative approach was used to gather data: eleven adolescent girls, ages 16-17, took part in semi structured interviews. The girls, from a remote northern British Columbia community, were asked about their experiences in physical activity and in sport when they were between the ages of 13 and 15 years. The

adolescents were asked to describe, in detail, their experiences in physical activity and their experience of parental support in relation to physical activity, first during the transition into adolescence, as 13 and 14 year olds, and currently, as 16 and 17 year olds. These age ranges have been identified as having the greatest number of dropouts from physical activity (Canadian Fitness and Life Style Research Institute, 1996; Chen & Millar, 1999; Sallis et al., 1992; Smale & Shaw, 1993; US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). The narratives were analyzed for themes of parental support in physical activity, particularly for the adolescents' motivational characteristics, for their perception of competence and for their reasons for continued adherence to physical activity.

Selection and Recruitment of Participants

Purposive non-probability sampling was used for this study. This type of sampling does not aim at representativeness. Participants were chosen because they met a certain criteria. The sample did not represent a population but was selected based on the principle of generating data across a range of individuals to explore processes, similarities and differences (Mason, 1996).

The cohort of 11 was selected from approximately 25 girls who were active in the local swim club as 13-15 year olds. Each participant was chosen based on following criteria.

1. She was a continuous participating member of the swim club between the ages of 13-15 years.
2. She lived in the community for the duration of the time in question and continues to live in the community;

3. She was willing and able to speak openly and honestly to the experience identified in the research question;
4. She was between the ages of 16-17 years at the time of the interview and was or was not part of the swim club;
5. The participant or her family was not and had not been involved with the researcher on a professional basis;
6. Parental consent was received.

To limit the number of geographical and contextual variables, all the participants came from one local swim club. The swim club provided both a competitive and non-competitive context and promoted moderate to vigorous physical activity with a skill-development focus. As well, the activity of swimming is an individual life-long activity that many adults pursue, and it is not a team sport. Although the context of this physical activity is sports-orientated, the reality is that there are limited non-sport physical activities for adolescents girls, particularly in a small northern town. The swim club is also a community-based activity and has open participation, which distinguishes it from school sports. The club is parent-operated.

I chose 16–17 year old girls as participants, as this age cohort was available; as they remain in high school prior to going off to work or college at 18 years. They had the potential to recollect their experiences during the ages of 13-15 years, which was relatively recent. A retrospective interview was used, as perceived parental support occurs across the transition period, and the girls reported that they were able to reflect back to help determine what was supportive for them. An opportunity existed to provide some comparison between adolescent girls who stayed active in swimming and

adolescent girls who did not stay active during this age. I felt that the sample was large enough to gain a variety of perspectives of their experience, yet not too large to make data analysis unwieldy. The choice of sampling was based on the theoretical position taken as a result of the literature research and from my own experience and observation as a community mental health nurse, as a mother, and as a coach of adolescents.

Permission to recruit the participants was sought through the local swim club (Appendix A) upon approval from the University of Northern British Columbia's Research Ethics Review Board. The swim club gave permission and provided me with the names and telephone numbers of all 25 girls who had been active in the swim club as 13-15 year olds. Of the 25, 15 girls had quit swimming and 10 continued in the swim club. Of the 25 girls, 19 were approached about the study as some girls had moved away or could not be reached. The 19 girls were given the letter of introduction from the swim club (Appendix B) along with the information sheet about the study (Appendix C) and the consent form (Appendix D). Of the nineteen, 15 were available and agreed to participate. Of the fifteen interviewed, 4 did not meet criteria #1 as they had left swimming as 14 year olds. Therefore the study consists of 11 interviews. As the participants were under the age of 19 years, parental permission was obtained and the girls brought the consent forms to the interview.

Since the purpose of the study was to describe the experience of teenage girls intensively rather than extensively, a sample of eleven girls was considered adequate. The sample was able to capture a full range of themes that emerged in relation to the area of interest based on the judgement of personal experience and literature review (Mason, 1996).

Interviews

The standardized open-ended interview was the data collection technique of choice for focusing on individual's perspectives of their own experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Each interview took approximately 3/4 hour. The interview is an appropriate method to gain an understanding of an individual's experience of herself and her situation. The semi-structured but open-ended interview was used to enable the participants to respond in their own words and to express their ideas and their perspectives. The interview questions (Appendix E) explored the following issues with the adolescent girls: their experience of support from parents, their experience of how the support changed over time, their level of enjoyment of the activity, their perceived level of competence, their thoughts of changes in their life that affected the activity, and their perspective as to how their parents could have supported them in other ways. Demographics were collected to provide a description of the participants including their age, the number of years swimming, and level and type of activity at present.

The questions (Appendix E) enabled the researcher to explore a few general topics to help draw out the participants' perspectives, but overall, the questions were designed to respect how the participants framed and structured their responses (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). These questions had the potential to draw out the more important opinions of the participants, as people tend to mention first those things that are most matter to them (Palys, 1992). The questions provided a guide to ensure topics were covered in the interview, but additional prompts were necessary to encourage further clarification. The role of the interviewer was to put the individual at ease so that the respondent could feel comfortable about expressing her honest opinions.

The individual interview was chosen as it allowed privacy and enabled the individuals to give their own perspectives. Adolescents are highly influenced by their peer group (Conger, 1973; Pruitt, 1999). A group interview could potentially confound and influence the results of the individual's understandings of their experiences. The participants knew that other adolescents were participating, but to protect confidentiality, no names were given, only a portion of the girls who met the criteria were interviewed, and interviews were held at the public health offices at different times over the course of two weeks. In reality, the adolescents probably did discuss the interviews among themselves. To help prevent this, I asked the participants to refrain from discussing the interviews with their friends for a two-week period.

Interviewing has limitations within the context of the interpersonal relationship that evolves from the interview. Interviewers must be able to develop a rapport with the participant; this rapport enables the interviewees to express themselves openly and honestly. Interpersonal skills of listening, clarification, reframing, and gentle probing in an empathic manner on the part of the interviewer will enable the participant to express their experiences and perspectives in a safe and comfortable manner (Mason, 1996). As a mental health nurse, I am sensitive to these issues. As these are adolescents, the role of the interviewer is to establish trust without the role of authority (Marshall & Rosmann, 1999). The interviews were informal, ensuring privacy, and, as the interviewer, I made an effort to remain unbiased and to be open to all comments.

Ethical Considerations

The participants were volunteers and remained anonymous in all reporting of this study, and the researcher protected confidentiality and protection of privacy as fully as

possible. As the participants were under the age of 19 years, parental permission was obtained in addition to their own consent. Potential participants and their parents were given a full description of the proposed study (Appendix C).

The interview began with a discussion of informed consent, which was initially addressed through the consent forms (see Appendix D). At the beginning of the interview there was a review of confidentiality and an explanation that excerpts of the raw data might be shared with my supervisor for the purposes of reporting on my progress. All names and identification were removed before this. A discussion of my professional responsibility to report any disclosure of abuse to the Ministry of Children and Families also took place. I confirmed that I had not worked with any of the families in my professional role as adult mental health nurse and ensured that this study did not pose any threat to any client/nurse relationship nor influence my understanding of the adolescents' perspective. Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Permission to audiotape the interview was also included in the written consent and all agreed. Written field notes were taken during the course of the interview and upon reflection afterwards. These notes were used to write down my observations, my interpretations, my impressions, and my feelings about different aspects of the interview that might become helpful with the later analysis of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The field notes were helpful in noting initial patterns and my impressions of them. The audiotapes were transcribed. The tapes and field notes were then analyzed for themes.

Data Analysis

An analytical strategy to retrieve data involved the use of organizing data around themes, patterns, and categories for the purposes of data coding. These categories included the experiences within swimming, the characteristics of motivation of the participant, the perceived level of competence by the individual, and the perceived support positive and negative by parents.

With the transcription of the interviews, additional categories, themes and patterns emerged from the data and became new categories or sub-categories. The process of category generation involved noting patterns evident in the setting and expressed by the participants. Though an initial analyst-constructed typology was being applied to the data, I was conscious to try not to impose meaning that better reflected my world than the world of the participants under study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). I tried to engage in the data to search for categories of meanings expressed by the girls beyond those described by the literature.

A category system included the use of highlighters and coloured pens to identify key words, representative stories and thematic quotes. Summaries of the interviews were developed. As the patterns and categories emerged from the data, I critically challenged my categorization by looking for alternative explanations, and by adding the ones indicated by the participants. Writing about qualitative data and the analytic process using inductive logic occurred simultaneously. Interpreting the data was done through description of the girls' stories and perspectives with analytical points about the social significance of these stories (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Themes are descriptively presented by identifying common patterns.

Data Quality/Rigor: Limitations and Strength

Three criteria can be used for establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative data: auditability, fittingness and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Auditability was achieved through regular review of the data analysis, which ensured that data generation and analysis was appropriate to the research question, and was careful, honest and accurate. Careful recording of data and systematic analysis of data were undertaken. Regular review of the data analysis was undertaken with my supervisor. The information leading from the research question was taken through various steps of analysis to interpret the findings in a way that best reflected the intent of the participants. Reflective notes were kept throughout the process of analysis. These notes raised questions about the data and enabled me to examine my emotions, biases and conflicts that may have interfered with my understanding of the experiences of the adolescent girls.

Fittingness of the findings from this study are ensured by the clear description of the specific group of adolescent females; others will be able to evaluate the applicability of the data to other contexts. It is not the intention of the study to provide broad universal generalizations about adolescent girls and physical activity. Rather, it is to allow the experiences of these girls to be heard and understood.

Credibility of this study will be enhanced if other adolescent girls in other communities are able to recognize these descriptions of experience. Researchers from other disciplines will be able to acknowledge the findings from the study as being consistent with their understandings of the experiences of adolescent girls.

There were several limitations to the methods chosen for this research project. The study group was asked to retrospectively reflect on their experiences as 13 to 15 year

olds. Issues that were of concern in the study are the length of time between the experiences as 13-15 year olds and their age at the interview (16-17), along with the changing perspectives of the girls related to their psychological development and their personal experiences. It was acknowledged that these factors would impact their discussion of their experiences: a certain amount of rationalization might have occurred. However, it remains their perspective.

The group studied was small and the study of their experience of physical activity studied within one context, an organized swimming club in a small northern community. As a qualitative researcher, however, I studied the phenomenon of interest rather than the group extensively. It could be argued that swimming is a sport and that sport is not representative of the development of physical activity as a life style choice. However, the reality of adolescent life in a northern community is that there are few opportunities for the development of physical activity for girls within a context that has few restrictions on entry (i.e. certain level of skill), that require a moderate aerobic level of activity, and that is not sports-team driven. It has been argued that opportunities for physical activity for all females are limited in our society. In northern communities, as a coach, I find many girls join and persist in an activity not for competition but for skill development, activity, enjoyment, and socialization. Therefore, in northern communities, it seems fair to use an organization such as the swim club. It also needs to be recognized that sport is a component of physical activity and that it is an integral part of the socialization of youth to physical activity. Ideally, a variety of contexts for physical activity should be available, but in reality, organized physical activity for youth is based in large part in

sport. Its relevance as a context for the development of physical activity is significant, and its impact needs to be understood within life style choices.

CHAPTER 4

The Experience of Swimming

Introduction

The cohort of girls expressed specific likes, dislikes and difficulties with their experience of swimming. It is within the context of this experience that they spoke of how their parents supported them. It is necessary to understand their experience as adolescent girls to gain their perspective of parental support. The girls had clear reasons for participating or not participating in swimming, but also spoke of other more subtle reasons for being active in swimming and for being engaged in physical activity. Their experience within swimming changed for the girls as they matured through adolescence. They spoke of difficult transitions within their lives as a result of school, relationships, expectations within their lives, and choices they had to make that affected their participation in swimming. The girls were required to examine the balance between the benefits of swimming and the effort that was involved and make the necessary adjustments. They described what it took to be active in swimming.

Introduction to the Cohort, Their Participation in Swimming and

Their Level of Physical Activity

The cohort consisted of eleven girls: seven were currently swimming and four no longer swam. All the girls had swum for at least four years with some of the girls swimming competitively, some not. Of the girls in the cohort who were no longer swimming, two quit at age 15 years and the other two at age 16 years. Three of the four girls who had quit swimming remained physically active even though they were no longer involved in the swimming club (see Table 1).

Table 1.

The Girls and their Swimming Activity

Participant	Swimming at time of interview yes / no	Swam Competitively yes / no
Grace	Yes	No
Maggie	Yes	No
Paulette	Yes	No
Tara	Yes	Yes
Bryn	Yes	Yes
Sarah	Yes	Yes
Ruth	Yes	Yes
Judy	No	Yes
Gayla	No	Yes
Betty	No	No
Liz	No	No

The cohort of girls expressed different reasons for participating in swimming at the level they did, or for not participating in swimming. Of the seven who continued to swim, four girls swam competitively at the provincial and national level and talked about having specific goals of improving times to a specific level, of winning certain levels of races and of getting the opportunities for scholarships. Their week would consist of swim practices most days, including two early morning swims, as well as a dry land training component that consisted of working with weights and running 2-3 times per

week. These girls attended these practices on a regular basis. They were involved in competitive swim meets in their own community and in other communities in the north as well as attending provincial and national meets.

The other continuing swimmers swam at a less competitive level, or at a recreational level. The same number of practices would be available to them as to the other girls, but they participated in a less rigorous training schedule. They did not go to the early morning practices and some of the other available swim times, and chose to go to only some of the dry land training. They competed in some out of town competitions, or only when there was a local swim meet. As a group, they spoke of goals to improve their swimming, to improve times or just to do better. The main reasons this group gave for being active in the sport included the following: "it makes me feel better", "I want to stay in shape", "I don't want to get fat", and "I like it and it is a healthy thing to do".

Two girls who had quit swimming at 15 and 16 years said they remained physically active either in school and in community team sports or in individual pursuits such as jogging. The reasons they gave for continuing to be involved in these other activities included, "I want to stay in shape", "I want to look good", and "I like being active".

Two girls, who were no longer active in physical activity, and who had quit swimming at the age of 15 and 16 years, were focused on academic achievements. One said that she regretted leaving swimming and regretted not being involved at her desired level of physical activity. She continued to walk and jog occasionally. The other girl said she was confident in her decision to leave swimming. She stated she did no physical activity except for walking, though she said she valued physical activity and regretted not

having the opportunities to be physically active through a compulsory high school gym program.

Even though the individuals in the cohort had different experiences in physical activity the themes they spoke of, both with regard to their experience in swimming and their experience of parental support were similar. They spoke of difficult transitions and the factors that enhanced their interest and participation in physical activity. They described what it took to be physically active.

Moving Through Difficult Transitions

The girls spoke of difficult times in their lives between the ages of 13 and 14 (Grades 8 and 9), and of difficult times again when they entered the upper grades of high school. As students in Grades 11 and 12, they were all beginning to anticipate the next transition of leaving high school and spoke of the uncertainty surrounding it. They spoke of their frustrations and disappointments during these transitions; they had increased doubts about why they were doing what they were doing, and where to focus. It became more difficult and complicated for them to continue in physical activity through these periods of transition. Most of them spoke of their difficulty in early adolescence of doing any physical activity and not wanting to go anywhere, including swimming. They were either tired, didn't feel like it or felt sick.

Back in grade 8, I wouldn't slack all the time but some days I'd just be too tired and I wouldn't try as hard I guess. (Sarah, p. 4)

During the transition from elementary school at the end of Grade seven to the high school into Grade eight, all of the girls were in the swim club, though two had just started with the club. Most of the girls spoke of their difficulties and issues revolving around the changes in early adolescence: changes in friends as they changed from the elementary

schools to the high school, and changes in expectations at school. Grace spoke about a difficult time in swimming:

For a while, when I first started (swimming), I liked it for the first year and then the next two years I couldn't really get into it again. ...I guess it was just getting harder working, school and everything. (p. 5)

I had a lot of different friends. A lot of my old friends, I kind of dropped, and hung out with new people. And I guess school, too. You do harder schoolwork so you try to spend more time on that, trying to figure it out. (Grace, p. 8)

Grace talked about her struggle during this time with her commitment to swimming.

Changes made it difficult for her to decide in what she should be involved and this caused her a great deal of confusion. At these times, in an increasingly complicated life, the girls made adjustments or quit their involvement in physical activity.

How the Girls Perceived the Experience of Swimming

All of the girls stated there were many things they liked about swimming, though there were some aspects that they didn't like. They also spoke of the times that were difficult for them within the experience of swimming and how they got through these difficulties. From their perspective, numerous factors influenced their participation in swimming and physical activity.

Friends

Friends became an integral part of helping girls remain active in swimming and physical activity. The girls enjoyed their time with their friends while swimming and the friendships that evolved within the experience of swimming strengthened and were valued. Girls who remained in the club spoke of the cohort as being their primary social group. It was difficult for the cohort to maintain friends outside of swimming because of swimming demands on their time, particularly for the highly competitive swimmers.

Bryn stated;

...all my good friends basically are in swimming, too, so when I go there it is kind of fun because they are people there that I associate with all the time. If I didn't have anyone there, it would be harder to like go there and do the same things. (p.9)

Friends in the club had become integral for Bryn to be able to swim at a competitive level and she identified how important it was for them to be there while she trained. Bryn had spent a lot of time training with these same people at the expense of having opportunities to be with friends outside the swim club. They had become a support for her in swimming and made it easier to be involved in the sport at a competitive level.

All the girls acknowledged the value of friends in being involved in physical activity: it was a paramount factor for them to be involved between ages 13-15. Liz, in retrospect had the following thoughts about friends when asked directly what she thought enabled girls to stay in physical activity.

I think the social thing is a big one, I mean girls, especially the age group you're looking at, 13 to 15. It's a major stage for girls when they're going through, they're needing acceptance and they're already at a spot that they're concerned about their bodies. ...If they have other female friends that they can exercise with and they can partake in sports with, that they're friends with on a regular basis, then it would encourage them and they would feel part of the whole. Which is very important for girls especially at this age. (p.6)

Liz relates that as 13 to 15 year olds, struggling with body image and self esteem, friends were key to their participation in swimming. The group experience of girls enables them to participate, as they feel accepted and not alone.

If there were issues with friends, it created problems and discontent within the swimming experience for the girls especially at the ages of 13 to 15. Some of the girls said that they didn't really fit in and the lack of relationships between the girls in the club had implications for their continuation in swimming. They struggled to resolve the issues. Paulette stated:

They weren't nice. I don't know; they were just kind of snobby towards me. So I really didn't like those girls. ... It just became too much. (p. 7)
 ...some of them (my friends) quit, other ones just moved up and they met other friends. I didn't like the other friends. So I didn't really like it (swimming) anymore. And I didn't have any friends in my group either. ...But then I went back into swimming because my friend moved up to my group. (p.6)

Paulette talked about conflicts that existed within the swimming groups and how, over time, existing groups of friends disappeared, resulting in her feelings of isolation.

Paulette managed the situation, not by having a group of friends in swimming, but by having a particular friend who swam, as well. This friendship enabled her to keep swimming.

The girls, as 16 and 17 year olds, said they had a different perspective on friends and swimming/physical activity than they did as 13 and 14 year olds. As young adolescents, they said friends were important in their involvement in activity. As they grew older, the girls valued friendship but it did not dominate their decisions and choices about physical activity. Girls who left swimming said that as they left the swimming milieu, they changed friends, and their interaction and relationship with their friends within the club changed. Judy reflected about her understandings of this transition.

...the friend aspect, that makes it difficult particularly when you are in grade 11 going into grade 12. You have to switch all your friends at that point.
 ... it is different because I don't have the same friends. Those were my swimming friends and so we don't have the same time together. ... I had swimming friends and not swimming friends just because we saw each other every day so that's why we were friends. And then after I stopped swimming we didn't talk as much. But we are still friends, though but it is just you don't see them every day. Because we were like a little family (in swimming). (p. 1)

Judy acknowledged that in hindsight, the choice to leave the social milieu of swimming was difficult, but she had a realistic perspective of what that choice meant for her. She acknowledged that friends within the swim club had been important to her and remained

so but that often the friendship was related to the context of swimming. She stated she was now involved in other activities and that new friends had evolved. This was a new perspective for her as swimming and the social environment around the sport of swimming had been paramount in her life until she turned 16.

As the girls matured through their adolescent years, friends remained important but other reasons increased in significance in their continued participation in swimming and other forms of physical activity. Having friends present while being physically active was deemed supportive and was thought to make the experience more enjoyable. However, it was not as pivotal to their participation in physical activity as when they were 13 and 14 year olds.

Working Towards Goals

Within the context of the sport of swimming, goals are set. This is a common practice in sport where the coach, in particular, helps the athlete to establish goals to work towards. Goals can be long or short term, or both, and are developed with the individual athlete, taking into account their abilities and their life circumstances. The goals are developed with the criteria of being measurable and realistic. Setting goals provides focus, a way to gauge increments of success and a framework on which to implement a plan. All the girls in the swim club were exposed to the skill of goal setting at some point and used the language of goal setting.

Within the swimming cohort, the girls who remained competitive in swimming spoke of specific goals, such as making a particular standard, i.e. a national time. Other girls, who swam but viewed themselves as less competitive or non-competitive, spoke of “best times”, but they emphasized goals such as staying in shape, being able to improve

their times, and doing “more” than before in their swimming. When they spoke of being involved in other physical activities, such as volleyball or soccer, the girls spoke about goals of doing things better, of working well with teams, of learning new things and of keeping in shape. The goals seemed to be less tangible but were measurable from their perspective.

The effect of goals on the girls. During their swimming experience, the girls swam to meet personal goals to improve themselves. The goals varied in focus, but the achievement of the goal or working towards it produced a positive emotional experience that was self-reinforcing.

It feels so good after you did a good practice and like you feel like you are working towards what you want. I like how you feel after. (Sarah, p. 6)

The girls often were delighted with themselves when they were able to achieve a goal they strove towards. Bryn describes the power of setting goals and the impact of reaching them.

I just love it. The feeling that you get after you’ve made a goal and you’ve accomplished it and when you go to a big swim meet and you know that you deserve to be there just as much as the people that win, stuff like that. That’s for me. (Bryn, p.8)

Bryn established a realistic goal and she worked toward it. It gave her a positive sense of self worth and the confidence to compete with other swimmers of similar ability. The achievement of the goals enhanced self-esteem, their sense of ability to strive towards goals, and a positive emotional experience for Bryn and Sarah. They perceived their behaviors to be self-determined and the outcomes, as determined by the goals, to be achievable.

Traveling and Competitions

Traveling to and participating in competitions is part of the activity of the swim club. All of the girls liked travelling as part of the swim club. They indicated, however, that when they first started travelling to competitions they felt uncertain and anxious. But after they knew the expectations and became comfortable, they liked the opportunity to go to different places and to socialize with swim club members and swimmers from other communities. Betty made comments about competitions:

The competitions. Well, when I first joined I was kind of scared – oh. Go in the swim club but I don't want to compete. No, I don't want to compete. But then I got used to it after a while and just liked going out of town and meeting new people. It was just fun. (p. 3)

Some of the girls found the competitions too stressful and as they continued to swim they decided that they no longer wanted to compete, except in local meets. Maggie likes to swim but when asked about participating in the swim meets she stated:

Not really. I don't know why. I guess because of my nerves. I got really nervous for them and stuff. ...No, I don't miss swim meets right now. (p. 4)

Maggie was one of a number of girls who swam in the club but decided not to compete as the competitions were not the highlight of swimming but instead were a large stressor. The swim club enabled these girls to continue to swim and respected their choice but also asked for a certain level of participation at local meets.

The girls competing for provincial and national times had another perspective to add to the competitions and to travel. Competitions were a step on the way to meet long and short-term goals and Sarah gave her perspective.

...I don't know if I would be that motivated if I wasn't (making her goals) and since I was making them and I was getting to travel far away and go places and stuff. It was exciting and it was fun with friends. (Sarah, p. 5)

For Sarah, the competitions were fun and the payoff of making her goals was that she got to travel to meets that were further away.

The impact of competition as experienced by the girls. Competition at swim meets is a focus and an indicator of success for swimmers. In competition, the girls are able to compare themselves to a standard by competing against other girls; they thereby compare and validate themselves within swimming. When the girls were successful in competition, the effect could be exhilarating with a positive emotional experience. Tara spoke of competition in this way;

Yes, you are anxious. Because you want to beat them so bad. And when you do it is the best feeling. (p. 5)

Tara acknowledged the anxiety of competing but this was more than made up for when the competition was beaten with the exhilarating feelings that resulted. Judy also loved to compete and would get emotionally high from it. "I just loved it. Just like the nerves before the race and when you were done" (Judy, p. 4). Competition energized her.

However, though a competitive situation energized some girls, it also had the potential of becoming a deterrent.

Many girls spoke of the negative effect on themselves when they could not meet a standard or were unable to beat a particular competitor. For some girls, the inability to maintain a best time or to be able to do their best at competitions was a reason not to continue swimming. When the girls felt they did not have the ability to maintain their expectations, they would quit swimming and would not consider going back in any capacity or at any time. Judy spoke of the frustration.

...I wasn't making best times anymore. It gets frustrating when you train that much and you keep getting sick and you can't improve. ...I don't know if I would still be on the competitive level because I know I wouldn't be in the same abilities as

everyone else. They have been training way more, so I don't know if it would be as fun, because I wouldn't be as competitive with everyone else. (p.6)

Not being able to continue to improve and do well became for Judy a reason to stop swimming. Judy also felt she had swum at a particular level and would only consider swimming competitively again when she was able to perform to the same level, in comparison to other swimmers. The comparison to a standard and to others became a deterrent to her participation in swimming. As well, Judy had a certain expectation of her performance within her perceived level of competence; she hesitated to participate if she could not maintain those expectations. Judy loved the positive feelings of competition that sparked her, but her previous success in swimming created concerns about demonstrating ongoing competence. Competition can be exciting and can have a positive effect, but only if a person perceives that she has a chance of doing well.

Some girls felt overwhelmed by expectations of competition. When comparing themselves to a more skilled competitor, they perceived that it was impossible to do well, so would not try.

Some people when it was individual, they were like "you can't swim as fast as her. She's way better than you". So you don't even try and go against her. (Betty, p. 9)

Betty used the comparison to the other swimmer as being important in determining her effort and her enjoyment of the activity. She perceived the other swimmer in competition to be so much better and found it discouraging. She felt that she could not do well enough so she did not want to try. Tasks that are challenging but possible give a positive experience. If they are not, they are no longer positive and may not be continued.

At times the reasons to participate in swimming seemed to come from within the individual; for example some wanted to reach a personal goal such as bettering a time in

comparison to their previous time. But, at other times, there seemed to be in the swimmers a drive from external sources such as competition and wanting to win in competition. The girls' words reflected, at times, a sense of confusion between these two focuses. Many found themselves trying to identify what was important. Sarah describes trying to sort out her confusion and make it feel right.

Well, winning doesn't really matter too much. It is mostly about my time. But if I don't do a best time and, say, I do lose or just by a little bit, it kind of makes me mad and I'm just, "oh I wish I had just went that little bit harder and I would have beat her". And that would have made me feel better. It would have overcome not getting a best time. But usually I just forget about it after a little while and so it happens. It is not like it is rare or anything. It will happen quite a bit and I'm not used to it but it happens to everyone. (p. 7)

Sarah tried to rationalize that winning was not important. Making a best time was her focus. But she really wanted to win and to feel good about herself. In fact, winning would have enabled her to tolerate the fact that she didn't make a best time. Sarah experienced confusion and ambivalence. Competition had some negative consequences which Sarah had to deal with.

Like if you just won a medal or something it is not really that important, but it is hard for me because I lose confidence when I look at my competitors (p. 4). Sometimes competition is good in that you know you can beat her and you are confident and you do and you feel so good. But sometimes when they do beat you, you are, "oh man". Like, you are upset and it makes you feel worse. But most of the time it is good because it helps push you harder. (p. 7)

Sarah acknowledged that all the experiences of competition, of winning and of losing, were taking her to a larger long-term goal. The competition made her work harder towards her goal, but at the price of threatening her sense of self worth and self-confidence. Overall, Sarah acknowledged that she wanted to achieve the goals. They came with a price but there was growth and a maturity of self-awareness that was evolving for her.

The Perceived Benefits

I like swimming too. Just sometimes I get really sick of swimming in the swim club because it gets harder and only doing laps over and over again. But I still like it just because I love swimming. I think it is the best sport because it works every single muscle in your body. (Tara, p. 5)

When Tara spoke of swimming, she spoke not only of her love of swimming but acknowledged that it involved hard work and a lot of repetition. Within that context, she was also aware of the importance of the physical activity of swimming. All the girls, including those who were no longer active in swimming, spoke of the benefits of the physical activity of swimming. They talked of body awareness, of being in shape, of being athletic, of stress relief and feeling good as well as of being more confident and of being able to do things.

Body image. A dominant theme that emerged from the girls, when asked what they liked about physical activity and swimming, was body image. They girls spoke highly of the benefits of being physically active in terms of controlling weight and looking good.

“...I don’t want to get fat or anything. So I stay in shape, be athletic.” (Maggie, p. 2)

Others liked the image and the perception of being athletic, and it kept them involved in physical activity.

“I like when people say, “Ooh yeah, she trains so much. She is in such good shape”, and stuff like that. It is all so encouraging. Like I want to do more and stuff I like that. The image that it gives off. I feel better. I don’t want to be one of those people who are known as lazy and stuff like that. And doesn’t do anything. I’d rather be known as, like athletic. (Sarah, p. 9)

Sarah liked the compliments from others when they acknowledged her training and her level of fitness. She liked the image of being fit and athletic, feeling it held some prestige.

Positive affect. Body image was the first thing the girls usually mentioned, but when asked how physical activity made them feel, the girls gave a different perspective; it made them feel good and energized them. Maggie makes the statement:

It makes me feel good. If I didn't do it, I think I would feel kind of lazy, like a slob you know. It just keeps me motivated. (p. 3)

Besides feeling energized, the girls also recognized that physical activity made them feel good by helping them to manage stress. Bryn described how the experience of swimming relaxed her. She became absorbed by the actual immediate experience as it produced a sense of comfort.

I relied on swimming a lot to help me get through stuff, like when I go swimming; I sort stuff out in my head and stuff like that. It's kind of like a place where I go, just like it's my place or whatever. I feel comfortable there and everything and comfortable with what I do and stuff like that. (p. 6)

Through their experiences of participating in physical activity the girls recognized the personal benefits that the activity gave them in the management of their lives.

Self-confidence and self-esteem. Initially, as the girls talked of physical activity and their need to be in shape, they related it to looking good. As they spoke, it became evident that physical activity gave them other benefits that they liked. They acknowledged that activity made them feel better about themselves, and gave them a greater sense of self-esteem. Betty expressed it well:

Like if I didn't do anything, I'd feel like nothing, I'm useless, whatever, I'm not doing anything. I'm not good for myself. But now I am more physically active, like I've grown and I'm going to become more physically active. I'm just so proud of myself. I'm just like, -ok I look good, and I won't think anything negative of myself. (p. 8)

Betty found that physical activity enhanced how she felt about herself. She was no longer swimming competitively but the physical activity that she continued to do helped how she viewed herself. Paulette, another participant, stated her thoughts this way.

I used to stay in (swimming) just because I feel good when I do it. If I don't exercise, I feel tired and bloated and not too pretty. I feel I don't look nice or anything. So when I do exercise and stuff I feel a lot better. I feel better about myself and I'm a lot more positive. (p. 14)

Paulette, like the other girls, acknowledged that physical activity enhanced her self-esteem. They felt good about themselves and what they were doing. The amount of focus the girls had on "looking good" is interesting. It was a major factor in how the girls felt about themselves. They talked about a mix of things regarding the perceived benefits of physical activity but body image along with self-esteem stood out.

Perception of Competence

A high level of perceived competence in swimming was a main theme for all the girls in the cohort, whether they were active or not. They all viewed themselves as having personal competence in the skill of swimming, stating that they could do it well.

Most of the girls started swimming in the club between 6 and 10 years of age but a number of them only started with the club at 12 or 13 years of age. The girls who joined the swim club in early adolescence took swimming lessons at the local pool. They said they had joined the swim club for numerous reasons, ranging from needing more opportunity to get stronger with swimming, to looking for an activity in which to be involved. The reasons in most cases were parent initiated and directed. The girls initially concentrated on learning and improving strokes. They eventually trained to become faster. Grace started with the club at the age of 13 and she stated how it evolved for her.

...I'm okay, because I haven't been in the swim club long and I am not as big as the other girls my age, so I guess I am slower than them, but I'm okay. (p. 4)...I just decided that I was ready to start doing swim meets. ...I felt like I was able to swim better then. When I first started, I wasn't really too good of a swimmer. I could swim okay and now I am better at it and I know the strokes. (Grace, p. 8)

Grace felt she was getting skilled at the strokes and as she trained more she felt more confident in attending the swim meets. She perceived she had a level of competence in swimming but she qualified her skill level in comparison to the girls who had been swimming longer.

Self-confidence in Ability to be Physically Active

There is always a challenge to do something better and or faster. For the girls, the process of overcoming challenges increased their sense of competence in swimming and self-confidence (self-efficacy) in their ability to be physically active.

Many of the cohort were active in additional physical activities, in which they also felt competent, including volleyball, basketball, jogging, and soccer. In fact, several of them indicated that their competence in one physical activity and their sense of confidence in being in shape enabled them to feel comfortable and to feel confident in trying new activities.

I really like being in shape and being able to do things. Say I want to start a new sport at some point. I know that I am already going to be in shape because of all the other sports that I do. So that will be a start to that. Also, I like building muscles. I like that. (Tara, p. 6)

The fact that the girls felt competent within the skill of swimming seemed to enhance their potential to engage in other physical activities. There was an increase in their overall confidence in their ability to engage in physical activity.

Flexible Opportunities that Matched Personal Needs

Individual girls were involved in activities to the degree that the activity met their current needs within the context of their lives. If the activity (i.e. swimming) did not fit or was not workable, the individual did not participate. Girls who competed at the higher levels of swimming said they felt they had the opportunities necessary to achieve their goals of competing and/or achieving swimming scholarships for post secondary education. The club opportunities enabled them to develop the needed competencies within a supportive club milieu.

The girls who continued to swim but not at the higher levels, said they liked the fact that they could swim at the level that was comfortable for them. They did not feel the pressure to compete or to do more than they were able within the context of their lives. They were able to pick and to choose practices within the level at which they swam and were prepared to continue to swim because it fit for them. A level of "Senior Sprint" was available in the club for those girls who did not feel they wanted to compete or they had the time to train. Maggie described how this level fit for her and why she continued.

I'm in Senior Sprint now because I don't really have the time...So Senior Sprint is just three times a week. It is not really competitive anymore. ...It is basically like an out skirt sort of. For people who still want to be with the club but don't have time for gold or black or anything. ...I love swimming and I like keeping busy and I like staying in shape. (p. 2)

The girls swam within the regular practices of the club but chose the practices they attended. The club has the flexibility to enable girls to participate at the level they want and has enabled them to remain active within the club. Paulette had a difficult time with competition and did not like the commitment. She changed her involvement to attend the practices that suited her and gained a different perspective on things.

I like it better because the pressure is off. There is no more pressure for me to move up. It was as if the club had cleared and everything was okay. Ever since then, I haven't been as serious as I was about swimming. (p. 8)

The context of the club provided an opportunity for physical activity that matched the needs of the girls; this allowed them to remain active. Most of the girls found something that fit within this comfortable supportive environment and continued to swim.

What It Takes to be Active in Swimming

The cohort of girls spoke of the difficulties they encountered in continuing swimming but also indicated what characteristics and skills enabled them to adjust and continue.

Self-discipline and Persistence

All the girls did not like certain aspects about swimming. They spoke of the tedious repetition of the practices: the monotony.

Lots, lots, lots of practices. Every day. There is something like 9 practices a week. And it takes off a lot of time. And it gets boring really quickly. Like we have long sets that you have to do. Twenty times the same thing. Over and over again. It gets tiring and boring. (Tara, p. 5)

They would relate being tired from going to school and to swim practice and then having to go home, to stay up late and to do homework, and then to do it all over again the next day. There were early morning practices, which they didn't care for. On these days, there would also be an after school practice. A level of commitment and discipline was required.

I swim and then I get home and then I eat and then I do my homework and then I go to bed, get up early. (Bryn, p.8)

Each of the girls experienced difficulties as a result of fitting swimming into their lives in order to meet particular goals. Swimming competitively became more

demanding and took up to 15-19 hours per week, the equivalent of a part time job. The girls, at all levels of swimming, had to do a lot of juggling of time to fit the activity into their lives to meet their particular goals. The girls spoke of the difficulties of being physically active: it involved a lot of adjustments and perseverance. Time management was a paramount skill that enabled the girls to be involved in physical activity, and self-discipline was key. The girls were aware of the skills that they had developed. Judy acknowledged what swimming produced for her.

Swimming just teaches you lots of things. Like discipline and stuff. ...Everything I have taken out of swimming has been positive. (p. 11)

Dealing with Setbacks

The girls, both the competitive and non-competitive swimmers, began to experience injuries and illnesses that caused a great deal of disruption to their training and to their enjoyment. They talked about how injuries affected their abilities to meet their goals, and made it difficult for them to enjoy the swimming or the physical activity.

Disappointment and aggravation over the situation predominated.

At that point, I was at my peak. I was doing really good swimming. That was when I was 14 and 15. That was when I was getting really good as a swimmer. Last year was really the year I wanted to quit everything. I was so sick and I couldn't swim and I hated it. I was getting out of shape. I just wanted to quit everything and just stay home and do nothing. (Tara, p. 9)

Injuries had to be dealt with and they often came at an inopportune time. As for Tara, injuries and illness often tested her resolve to continue in swimming. The illness would not allow Tara to progress, but instead took her backwards.

The girls dealt with the setbacks through problem solving and through adjustments. The girls were able to place the situation into perspective, to recover and then to continue

on afterwards, often with greater self-understanding. This is part of the conversation with Bryn.

Bryn: I'm injured right now. I'm recovering. ...I had to redo all my training. I was doing so good and everything and then I had to not train as much and was like swimming five hours in that week because I couldn't do it because it hurt and everything.

Interviewer: So it frustrated you?

Bryn: It was very frustrating. Then I had a swim meet coming up right after that and I knew that I couldn't ... That was really hard.

Interviewer: It was hard on you?

Bryn: Both physically and mentally. But you kind of have to face the facts. ...Yeah. You always try to find a way to work around though. (p.4)

For Bryn dealing with the injury resulted in her becoming self-aware: she developed an ability to deal mentally and physically with the impasse in order to meet her goal.

Understanding Limitations and Making Choices

The girls' interests and goals between the ages of 12 and 17 years changed as they matured. They had to make choices about their level of involvement in activities, including swimming. Each of them had to examine what was important and what was not. Maggie gave her perspective on the change in goals for her and her involvement.

When I was 13 and 14, I was just trying to find a different sport to do that wasn't hockey or wasn't figure skating. I was trying to find a different one. And swimming worked. I liked that and I was basically there just to try and find something else and as I went up in levels, I got more competitive. And then I didn't really like competing like I did. When I first started it was just something to do and now it is part of my life. You know, like something I have to do and want to do. (p. 4)

Maggie's initial goal was to find an activity that she liked in which she could be involved. As she became better in swimming, competition and the goals around it became more important. But Maggie found that competition did not fit for her and her

goals became more focused on swimming for the sake of swimming and on being physically active.

Expectations of what they could do in swimming changed as they acknowledged their limitations and the amount of effort required. The girls would relate how they improved greatly when they initially started to compete. As it became harder to improve, they were not as successful and they did not like it and would stop competing. The majority of girls identified this as a key concern in the difficult transition years from age 13 to 15 years. Maggie described what happened for her.

I think at first I did like it (competition) because when you first start you improve lots every time and you go, "oh yeah, I was fast". But then when you start getting faster you improve less and less and I think I stopped liking that; I didn't improve every time and I didn't like it as much any more. (p. 4)

The reward of achieving a standard and of improving became difficult and did not hold Maggie's interest. A shift occurred in her focus of her activity and she made adjustments in her swimming. As for Maggie, the girls either changed their focus in swimming or quit if they could not resolve their issues.

When the choice was made to become a competitive swimmer, there were adjustments around increased expectations in the sport, and their participation required a greater effort to achieve the results. Tara spoke of it this way.

Well it keeps getting harder obviously because levels of swimming are getting higher and harder all the time and the times are getting faster. So it gets harder all the time basically. It is still hard now. Even right now at 16 it is hard because school takes up a lot of time and also a lot of other interests other than swimming. If I want to improve in swimming I have to be there all the time and keep focused because it is the only thing. Like school takes up a lot of work in grade 11 and 12. So now it always gets a lot harder and I really have to focus on what I want to do. (p. 4)

Tara relates the difficulty of achieving the standards that she wants in swimming and of achieving in school and being engaged in her other activities. She acknowledges that if

she wants to achieve her goal in swimming she has to be prepared to put more effort into it and focus on what she wants. Tara had a lot of expectations of herself and acknowledged the work that it would take.

All the girls spoke of the stresses they experienced from their expectations in swimming, school and extra curricular activities. Some made definite choices about limiting their activities but others tried to do “everything”. Choices were difficult and created stress.

The demands placed on all the girls were great with increased effort required, more time, and increased expectations. They made a lot of adjustments to engage in a life style that they determined to be beneficial for them.

Rationalization of Effort

The girls talked with some regret about the things they thought they would miss out on such as activities with friends or the opportunities to do other activities. Most of the high level competitors acknowledged their total focus of activity was swimming to meet their goals, and this commitment restricted their participation in other activities.

Sometimes I'll miss out on something really important that I want to go to or something. ...Just something that all my friends are going to and I can't go because I am going somewhere. ...Sometimes I just want to go home after school and be like a normal person and just go to bed or take a nap and then do my homework and go to bed early or watch TV or something. I don't know. I wouldn't really want it; I would be missing it too much if I didn't have something. And it would be so boring. (Sarah, p. 6)

Sarah spoke with regret that she missed out on other activities, and longed for “normality”. She felt ambivalent but had rationalized her position by stating that being normal would be boring and would not enable her to meet her goal. The goals were

difficult to achieve and the girls in competitive swimming struggled and had to continually rationalize their effort and commitment.

All the girls who swam rationalized the level of involvement and the degree of effort that they were prepared to do. For each one it was an individual choice that they decided upon based on their overall life choices. For some the choice was not to swim and it involved rationalization of their decision.

Dropping out of swimming. The four girls who no longer swam did continue until ages 15 and 16. They had different responses when asked why they no longer swam. The girls gave careful consideration to the question of quitting swimming, and some common themes emerged.

Well last year I had lots of trouble making it to every practice because of schoolwork and other commitments... It just takes up so much time and grade 12 is important to do... (Judy, p. 2)

For Judy, the reasons for leaving swimming were that the demands of school and other commitments took precedence. All the girls felt the pressures of school, but for some this pressure forced them to quit swimming. Others could no longer see progress in their swimming.

I just got kind of bored with it. I wasn't getting really better and stuff. I felt like I couldn't go any further. I just quit. (Gayla, p. 4)

All the girls, but some more than others, liked to see improvement and to show progress in swimming; it was an incentive to continue. Gayla perceived that she could not get any better with the amount of effort she was prepared to give. The fact she made no progress made her interest in swimming unsustainable.

Other girls lost interest and wanted to have more social activity.

Just wanted to have more fun and I didn't want to swim that much. I started drifting away, by not going to swimming as much and then I didn't compete in too many meets. ... So I just ended up quitting. (Betty, p. 4)

Others felt they were under too much pressure to accomplish the things they wanted to do.

I just sort of felt drained. A lot of swimmers that I've talked to felt the same way where they just felt overworked or over pressured. It's not so much that there were other people pressuring me, but just that the more responsibilities that I had, the more things that I had to get done, the less swimming was becoming a priority. (Liz, p. 3)

The pressure of many different commitments and goals made it difficult for the girls to continue. Swimming was another thing in Liz's increasingly complex life. The benefits of the activity of swimming were not enough and she decided not to swim.

The girls compared the perceived benefits and the perceived difficulties of the activity of swimming. They chose one of the following options as being in their best interest: quit swimming and change to a different activity, change the level of involvement, or continue in swimming and pursue higher goals. Transitions and the change created new and increased stressors in the lives of the girls and the adjustments were not comfortable. Factors emerged within the lives of the girls who quit swimming that indicated to them that swimming no longer met their needs, and the amount of the return for the effort they put in was no longer great enough. Those who kept swimming perceived the amount of benefits from the activity as worthwhile and kept swimming. They rationalized their effort.

Anticipating Difficulties

For the most part, the girls said that they set achievable goals, but they anticipated the possibility of not succeeding, and had developed alternatives:

Well, the first year I will try out for the swim team there (university) and if I make it, I will probably serve that year and see how it is. If it is really hard and it is affecting my grades and stuff like that, affecting school. It depends on how I feel. If I like it and I'm doing well, then I will probably continue it but if I'm not and it is not getting me anywhere and it is harder for me then I might just drop it and do it every once and a while to keep in shape. Probably work out and stuff like that. (Sarah, p. 8)

Sarah had a goal to swim on a university swim team but acknowledged that this goal may need to be reviewed within the context of other goals, and in the context of swimming, whether or not she was achieving at the level she wanted to. Sarah was setting priorities and planning for the future. She was prepared to take risks and was not afraid of her potential failure, but recognized that there may be considerable challenges with which she may need to deal.

Accepting Responsibility for Own Actions

As 16 and 17 year olds, the girls accepted responsibility for their own actions as they worked toward their self determined goals. They worked within their expectations of themselves and developed a realistic perspective on what they could achieve.

There were a lot of people faster than me. Now I'm faster than some people. That's just how it is. (Tara, p. 2)

They often stated that the decision to participate at a particular level in physical activity had been theirs and they were comfortable with it.

...there's a lot of pressure to do good. But I think mostly it's from myself to make myself do better. (Bryn, p.4)

The values of swimming became important; they became socialized into swimming and from that took on more responsibility within the swimming club. Bryn talked about her expectations of herself and how she managed them. Management involved self-discipline and also integration into her life, the values of physical activity and swimming. Bryn viewed herself as a role model.

...because you're older, I'm a senior swimmer, so I have to set examples for the littler kids and you have to be more dedicated and everything. There's a lot more stuff that you have to do, so its like big time management skills and stuff. (p. 3)

The ability to set realistic, yet challenging goals, to take risks and to anticipate difficulties, and plan for alternatives were characteristic skills to various degrees, of this cohort. The girls were able to plan and to manage their lives to meet the goals they wanted to achieve, to accept what they needed to do and to rationalize the effort and the regrets. They were developing skills in self-regulating behaviors.

Summary

The initial response of the cohort as to what they liked about swimming was friends and fun. Issues around friends, such as not fitting in, conflicts and changing friends needed to be resolved to enable the girls to remain in swimming. As the girls matured, their main focus of friends and fun became less important and other issues surrounding why they liked physical activity began to predominate.

Travel to swimming competitions was a highlight for the girls, but competition met the needs of the minority. Competition had positive and negative impacts for the swimmers. For some, the competition was an energizer, but for others, it became a deterrent.

The girls talked about the social environment and the opportunities that the swim club gave them to be physically active within the context of their lives. They felt that they had made gains by being introduced to the skill of goal setting; this enabled them to reach their potential.

The girls also talked about the perceived benefits of the physical activity of swimming. They liked the body image of being in shape, athletic, and looking good.

They acknowledged their level of competence in the sport of swimming and felt that it gave them a sense of confidence to participate in other physical activities; as well, their competence increased their overall sense of self-esteem and self-confidence. They valued the increased level of energy it gave them, the “feeling good” and acknowledged the stress reducing qualities of physical activity.

But the girls acknowledged struggles within physical activity and within their lives through early adolescence. They spoke of changes as they made adjustments through these difficulties and related these experiences within swimming. Changes in schools, friends and expectations complicated their lives. They began to recognize and to acknowledge their personal limitations in swimming and otherwise, as well as in their life context, and the choices they had to make. They also ran into some major obstacles: illness and injury, time and energy. They had to weigh the benefits of the activity of swimming with the amount of effort and sacrifice that the activity required. The choices varied for the girls, with some remaining in competitive swimming, some girls swimming, but non-competitively, and some girls quitting. They all valued physical activity as a life style enough that they intended to commit to it at some level.

Throughout the conversations, questions arose of how the girls were supported in their endeavors. How did they manage the difficulties of swimming and get through the difficult transitions? How were they able to rationalize the effort and to make the choices? In the answers to these questions, the girls’ provided their experience and understandings of parental support.

CHAPTER 5

The Experience of Parental Support

Introduction

Parental support has been identified as being significant in the continued participation of girls in physical activity (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Anderssen & Wold, 1992; Hoyle & Leff, 1997). The data from the interviews indicate several common themes of parental support in physical activity: being involved as a parent in the club, providing physical support, supporting the girls' goals and choices, providing emotional support, encouraging consistency and commitment, and having expectations.

Parental Support

Parental Involvement in the Swim Club

When asked about support, the girls spoke of the parent involvement in the club. Parental involvement in the swim club took mainly two forms. One was providing organizational support; the other was attendance at swim meets. The girls often said that parents managed the swim meets, performed fund raising, and acted as chaperones.

They (parents) help with the selling of chocolates and all the other fundraisers that we did. They, my mom, organized one particular fundraiser that they did once a month or something. They were right into it. (Liz p. 3)

Liz acknowledged that parents helped with the organization and the operation of the swim club. From the perspective of some girls, this involvement of parents in the club counted as support at a distance.

The girls stated they had different levels of tolerance for the presence of parents at practices and swim meets. Tara states what it meant for her.

They (my parents) never got involved with me. But mostly with the swim club. It has only really been because of what I wanted. Like I never really had somebody

telling me “why don’t you make that. I would like you to make that”, other than my coach. My parents never really got involved with me. (p. 7)

For Tara, the involvement of her parents in the club organization was a form of support that suited her. Tara did not want her parents in her swimming program. She and other girls directly stated they preferred that their parents did not come to the swim meets or the practices. Tara states it this way:

Tara: It (swim meet) was far away and I wanted to go myself without my parents and she (mom) came. So, in a way, it kind of ruined my trip because I wanted to be, like, by myself and with only the swim club. No parents. And she came and I didn’t really like that.

Interviewer: She probably thought it was being supportive

Tara: Yeah. But I told her that too. I’m like “I didn’t want you to come”. (p. 11)

After the girls became accustomed to the expectations of travel, to the experience of billeting, and began to make friends within the club and in other towns, many of them preferred that their parents not come on the trips. Tara, along with other girls, liked travelling without parents, as she was able to experience new things in a supportive chaperoned environment. The support at a distance best suited many of the girls’ needs.

However, other girls spoke highly of parents being at swim meets. “They were always at swimming meets and they were always helping out with the swim club.

Always behind me 100%” (Gayla p. 7). Other girls stated they enjoyed their parents being at meets but they were not dependent upon them. Grace stated this perspective.

It didn’t really matter to me because I didn’t hang out with them (parents) a lot when they did come. They would come after a race and I would talk with them for a minute. ...It was nice of them to come and watch. And then I could talk about my races with them. (p. 10)

Grace acknowledged that she managed to go to the races independently from her parents but when they did come they did not interfere and she was able to share the experiences of competition with them.

The girls acknowledged the parental involvement in the swim club within the limits of their understandings. The reality of the situation is that the swim club is parent-driven and the success of the club depends upon parents. It was interesting that the girls did not really understand that parents were essential to their experience of the swim club. In other words, the swimming experience within the club would not happen unless the parents organized it. The girls could only acknowledge what was relevant to them at that point in time, whether it was that their parents came to the meets, that they chaperoned or that they helped them to sell chocolate.

Providing Physical Support

When girls were asked how parents supported them, the girls acknowledged foremost the physical support given by parents. Physical support was three fold: being there to take them to the swimming pool and to pick them up, providing financial resources, and being flexible with meals and chores.

As 16 and 17 year olds, they acknowledged how important it was for them when they were 13-14 years olds that their parents took them to swimming practice. The continued support was important later on, but some of the girls were now able to drive themselves to the practices. If parents were not available to drive, the girls would get rides from other swimmers and the role of driving would be shared among the parents. Maggie describes the typical scenario.

When I was younger, they drove me down, and picked me up and we had a car pool because a girl on my street swam so we all took turns. Parents driving us down and picking us up. And now I just drive myself down. (p. 5)

The girls stated that parental financial support of their efforts was important. Only two girls out of the 11 worked at jobs other than babysitting: one had quit swimming and the other continued to swim. The girls acknowledged the cost of swimming, and of travelling to the meets. A few girls perceived the high cost of swimming to place financial pressure on the family, and it was a factor in their quitting swimming.

Families were flexible in scheduling meal times and in dividing chores between siblings and parents, enabling the girls to be at swimming practices. They spoke of meal times being adjusted and of negotiating chores to accommodate their swimming. They perceived that expectations at home, in terms of “helping out”, continued even though they viewed themselves as very busy. One is unable to ascertain what these expectations meant in real terms for these girls and families, but the fact remains the majority felt there was an expectation for them to participate in household duties.

A theme that was heard from many was the “presence” of mom or dad in enabling them to get to the activity and enabling them to be there fed and rested. Suppers were made and served late and snacks brought to the pool. Some parents left work early to drive the girls to the activities and then returned back to work. Families and individuals made sacrifices and adjustments in routines to enable the girls to swim. The girls at 16 and 17 years of age were able to acknowledge this, as stated by Liz.

They drive me there all the time. They pay for me to go everywhere. It's really an expensive sport. They encourage me all the time. They don't discourage me at all. ...They sacrifice a lot. (p. 6)

Supporting Goals and Choices

The development of the skill of goal setting is a focus of sport and provides an avenue to incremental success in competitive swimming. Goal setting includes identifying goals that are realistic and achievable. Parents have an important role in helping the girls develop this skill and in then providing the support to allow the girls to work toward their goals.

Acknowledgement of the girls' effort towards goals. The girls in the cohort talked about their goals in swimming and in school. Some goals were not specifically defined but others were concrete and involved specific measurable outcomes such as achieving particular times for a stroke over a certain distance. Ways that the girls perceived support included parental interest in the girls' goals. Parents would demonstrate this interest by asking the girls about their swimming experience and by helping them document the times from swim meets to see their progression towards the goal. Grace states:

...they help me keep track of my times and when I'm getting close to an A or AA time they know. ... We get ribbons when we are done a swim meet and they have our times on them. So you can write them down. ...I would tell them my times and we would look at what was a time for that stroke or in that swim and see how close I was. (p. 7)

Grace's parents showed active interest in what Grace was doing and what she was trying to achieve. They performed the specific task of documenting times that focused on the results for which Grace was striving, acknowledging her progress and her effort.

Other girls spoke of parents helping them to focus on the goals they had chosen.

Sarah explains how her parents helped to focus her by acknowledging her effort.

They know it is hard and they say "Yeah I know it is hard, Sarah". They just told me to keep it up and I'm doing fine and stuff. (p. 6)

Sarah's parents' acknowledgement of the difficulty and of the required effort facilitated Sarah's ability to focus on the goals she had chosen to work towards as a highly competitive swimmer. They validated her effort and confirmed to her that she was managing within a framework that was achievable. Sarah needed to hear that confirmation as she was having difficulty recognizing it.

Helping the girls develop alternative perspectives. There were difficulties encountered in striving towards goals. The girls spoke of being overwhelmed and of being confused by the demands of swimming, school and other activities. The girls talked about how parents enabled them to place the swimming, goals and accomplishments into realistic perspective. Sarah's goals for a scholarship meant that her school marks had to be at a certain level. She struggled with whether or not she was trying hard enough in her endeavors.

Like, if I bring home like a good grade or something, they act, like, surprised and stuff because they don't know how I do it, and stuff like that. It makes me feel better because if I'm not happy with it but it is actually is a really good grade, when they say stuff like that, it makes me feel better. So then I don't feel half as bad. (p. 6)

The message that Sarah heard from her parents was that she had done a good job and it was accomplished within difficult demands on her time and energy. It was reassuring to her that she was doing well scholastically within the demands of swimming. She needed the confirmation, as she did not have the experience to have a realistic perspective by which to judge her successes.

At times, parents would question and challenge the girls' choices. The girls in the cohort were active in many different activities. At times this varied activity seemed overwhelming to the girls, and parents questioned the amount of things the girls were doing and their focus. Maggie explains it this way:

This year they have been pretty not supportive. It is grade 12 and they want me to get really good marks and I have a lot of hard classes. They haven't really been that bad. They haven't said, like, "Oh no, you can't go swimming, you can't run, you can't do this, you can't do that". They are kind of, like, "Well, are you sure you can handle this, you know? Well, if your marks start going down you have to quit something". But that hasn't happened yet. There is the potential for them to discourage but they haven't really. (p. 10)

Maggie liked to be active and involved in things as well as viewing school as important. She acknowledged the cautionary concern of her parents but also recognized they supported her right to make decisions, and they will support her decisions. Maggie's parents, through their cautionary note to her, provided alternate perspectives about the focus of her activities. Through these conversations, Maggie became aware of their perspective and her own decision-making about her level of involvement. She gained the potential to better problem solve her amount of involvement in future activities.

Respecting choices. At the ages of 16 and 17, the girls reflected that throughout adolescence, they had been encouraged to set goals, and were helped with problem solving around the goals, but stressed the final choices had been theirs. The support from parents included help with problem solving and respect for the girls' choices. Tara spoke of it in this way after having to reduce her swimming due to illness.

And they are, like "Well what do you want to do? Do you want to quit?" I'm like, "No I don't want to quit, but I don't want to swim anymore this year." They said, "Okay that is your choice. And personally I think it is a good choice because you are sick and you want to do it that way this year". So they kind of supported me in a way. They were, like, "okay, it is your choice and we'll hope next year will be good too". (p. 10)

Tara's parents acknowledged with her that it was unrealistic for her to continue swimming but helped her to see that she could swim in the following year. Their conversation enabled Tara to problem solve around an impasse to her goal. It gave her the perspective that she needed to understand that she could continue to swim

competitively after her illness, but the break in training was necessary and appropriate at this time. Tara's thinking had been along the line of "all or nothing". However, her parents enabled her to see the potential for next year. All the parents helped their daughters with problem solving, developing new perspectives, and enabling them to make choices, which they would respect.

The support by parents in goals and choices included: acknowledgement of the effort towards the goals, respecting choice of goals, opportunities to problem solve issues around the goals with discussion to help develop alternate perspectives about the goals and negotiate around obstacles. The girls required continued support from their parents in their growth in becoming more adept at working toward goals. As the girls' lives became increasingly complex, they required more support and continued assistance in developing problem solving skills.

Providing Emotional Support

Girls spoke of parental support during times of success and of disappointment throughout their swimming experiences. As well, difficult times and increasing stress required more emotional support from parents.

The girls spoke of feeling emotionally supported during disappointments at competitions or of times when it was difficult to attend practices. Some girls viewed as reassuring the attendance of parents at competitions. Some girls felt that talking about the race and the results with parents was useful. Grace relates how she felt about parents coming to swim meets.

It was nice of them to come and watch. And then I could talk about my races with them. ...They talked about how I could maybe go faster and what I did wrong if I got disqualified. (p. 10)

Grace felt she was able to talk about the races after the competition because her parents had been in attendance. As a result, she could solve problems associated with the race with their help.

Other girls were impressed by the fact that their parents watched practices. "They were always like watching practices too. I find they are quite boring to watch. It is pretty surprising." (Gayla, p. 7) They felt this was supportive.

The adolescent years included a number of transitions and changes for the girls, which were described as stressful. When they spoke of difficult times, emotional support by parents was identified as being important. Several girls talked about self-esteem issues and acknowledged the fact that they required help during the times they were not feeling good about things. They acknowledged from their perspective as adolescents of 16 and 17 years, that support from parents is helpful to get the girls through these times.

Just their (parents') support and everything, which helps me, keep on going and being active. How they give me confidence, boost my self-esteem, which I need because usually when I'm having low self-esteem, I don't feel too great about myself. Like most teenage girls sometimes feel that way. (Betty, p. 8)

These transitions caused confusion for the girls and they had difficulty making decisions, asking themselves if they wanted to continue in swimming. They would struggle with questions such as, "Why am I doing this?" and "Why am I trying so hard?" (Sarah, p. 5). There were issues around change in friends, around not being able to do the activities they wanted to because of the demands of swimming, and, around the increased demands of school. They often struggled with decisions they felt they had to make; some said they had few skills to help themselves. They described their ambivalence about making decisions. They would turn to others for guidance, and that would often result in further confusion.

They (parents) told me I should do what is best for me and what I thought. And I thought I should have quit and my dad is kind of a go-getter and he was just, "Come on, you can do this, I know you can." And I'm just worried and he'd say, "don't worry about it, just don't worry about nothing- you'll do fine." And then I ended up doing fine. (Betty, p. 4)

Support needed to come in different forms. Betty felt confused and overwhelmed by the decisions. Her parents offered support and stated that they would support her choice.

But when the confusion persisted and Betty remained "stuck", they gave suggestions and, at times, specific direction. Parents would allow the girls to struggle and would support them emotionally during this time but would often provide specific guidance with certain expectations. Parental emotional support meant that the girls felt they were not alone with their feelings or issues and that someone cared for and listened to them.

As the girls matured through adolescence, their confidence in their choices and goals increased but they stated that they actually required more emotional support.

If anything, more (support). They know that I want to make senior nationals and I want to get a scholarship and stuff like that before I graduate. So they are not pushing me harder but they are wanting me to do better. I think they are there for me more and, like, they know how important it is... (Sarah, p. 5)

Sarah knows that her parents are behind her through the difficult times, acknowledging her goals and the effort it takes for her to swim. The stressors in her life became greater and it took more effort to reach her goals. Sarah's parents let her know that they understood how much it meant for her to achieve her goals, and that they knew she had the ability. Overall, they were "there" for her. Sara, like all of the girls, felt her parents' ongoing emotional encouragement and presence to be highly supportive.

Encouraging Consistency

All the girls described how parents expected them to continue, particularly during early adolescence when they talked about not wanting to go to swimming or to the swim

meets. They stated that parental encouragement promoted consistency through times that were difficult and they viewed this as supportive. All the girls spoke of how necessary it was for their parents to encourage them to be consistent in practices and swim meets and in any physical activity.

If I was tired, I wouldn't have gone (swimming), but they made me go, or if I wasn't feeling well I wouldn't have gone swimming that day, but they kind of made me.
(Maggie, p. 7)

The girls stated that even though they may have been interested in the swimming, they needed the focus and the encouragement to continue in the activities. As well, their other interests and new focuses were distracting. When they were asked how they got through these times, their usual responses were, "I had no choice. My mom would say we have swimming and we are going down" (Grace, p. 9). "They always supported me. Like my mom, whether I want to go or not, she would always drive" (Judy p. 6). Grace described how her parents helped her through the difficult times of ages 14-15.

Grace: They just encouraged me to keep going in it even when I didn't really feel like it.

Interviewer: How would they do that for you?

Grace: My mom would make me keep going.

Interviewer: And how did she manage to do that?

Grace: She just wouldn't let me quit. (p. 7)

The majority of the girls spoke of this enforced consistency. There was an expectation that the girls would attend the practices that were organized. Moms and dads were consistent in their routines of getting the girls to the pool and were consistent in their expectation of the girls' attendance. In retrospect, the girls acknowledged this as being supportive. The girls stated that the expected consistency got them through the

times that they just didn't feel like continuing. The parental expectation to go, and to go regularly, along with actually taking the girls to the practices seemed to provide stability through these turbulent times. The girls, as 16 and 17 year olds, now engage in physical activity without pressure or coercion.

Having Expectations

Throughout the conversations, the girls acknowledged that the overall choice of goals was theirs but there was an understood parental expectation of physical activity. The girls' comments indicate that parents encouraged them to go to swimming or to be involved in physical activity as well as expected them to try hard and to do as well as they could. Some girls felt that it had been such a part of their life that they didn't question it. Swimming had been introduced early into their lives and it had always been an expectation.

Yeah, it's (swimming) always been there. My friends would always say, like, "Whoa, don't you get tired from swimming, or don't you get bored of swimming back and forth?" I just do it. It's just the way it has always been. (Judy, p. 10)

Judy spoke of the situation for a majority of the girls. They had started swimming as pre adolescents or younger and it was a way of life for them. During the transition years of 13 to 14 years of age, girls were often taken to swimming as a matter of course. They had to go to please their parents and their parents expected them to go. Their lives at this age were more regulated by parental influence and they went swimming. The girls expressed that they felt that their parents overtly expected them to be physically active.

Maggie made the following statement:

Maggie: They didn't want me not to do anything. I don't think they would have let me just sit at home and watch TV.

Interviewer: Was that something you wanted to do?

Maggie: No that is not something I wanted to do. I never wanted to do that, but like if I did, I don't think I would have been allowed. (p. 5)

Maggie understood the value that her parents place on being active; they expected her to be physically active in some way. Maggie later incorporated these values into her lifestyle.

Gayla spoke of the impact of parental expectations through their modeling of physical activity and their expectations of their daughters to engage in physical activity.

She stated it this way:

I think parents have a lot to do with it (being physically active). Because I know this one girl and her mom is so active and she is just like right up there with her mom. She is just always active. So I think it has a lot to do with the parents. Like the way your parents perceive activeness. And they kind of help push you to doing that. Because if they don't and just say it is alright that you are at home watching TV, then you are not going to feel pushed and you are not going to really want to try it. (p. 11)

Gayla's succinct summary reflected what a majority of the girls related. Parental expectation was a critical component for getting the girls active and for keeping them active. Parents had to encourage the girls to be involved in physical activity.

Expectations to continue resulted in some conflicts during the transition years of 13 and 14. Parents examined the reasons of the girls for wanting to quit swimming but the overall expectation was for the girls to continue the activity and to figure out how to deal with the issue. This is Paulette's story:

I think they (parents) were just kind of frustrated because in grade 8 I had lost all my friends and grade 7, I was losing all my friends. So by grade 8, I didn't have very many friends and I wanted to quit swimming. They (parents) always felt that swimming and exercise is very important. So they were supportive to me. They said, "Well, you will just have to deal with it. It is okay". They tried to get me through. But I didn't really like it too much. (p. 8)

Paulette's parents expected she would continue to swim. In the end, Paulette did resolve the issues through supported problem solving of the situation in order to find a way around the apparent roadblock.

The impact of expectations on the girls. The values of physical activity and effort are indicated through the expectations of the parents, which the girls understood.

Expectations of parents for their children have dramatic effect. They were often direct but they were often subtle. Girls spoke of swimming to meet their own goals or expectations, but, at times, there would be, for some, an expectation to please parents:

They always congratulated me after I did something good and they were always there and just as excited as me if I made a good time or something. So for them becoming happy, it made me happy and then it helped me stay in it longer and want to do better. (Sarah, p. 5)

Sarah spoke of achieving for others, such as her parents, and gaining self worth. The understandings that her achievement made her parents happy gave her a positive emotional experience, but also undermined the degree that the experience was orientated toward herself. Part of the source of acknowledgement and participating in the activity came from outside Sarah.

Liz gave insight about the impact of the expectations of parents.

I was very happy when I could better my own times or when I could set a specific time that I wanted to make and then make it or just little goals that I would set for myself. I think that's also another thing that deters girls from participating in sports is that they look at it say –“Well if I don't get this medal or if I don't get this specific time”,– then they really beat themselves up about it. I think it does have a lot to do with parents as well. I mean there were lots of people in the swim club that did not feel that they could just do it and do it to their own expectations. They were very pushed by their parents. I was lucky enough not to have that. (p.7)

I never felt I had to please them or get a certain time to make them happy (Liz, p.2)

Liz indicated that parental expectations can be beneficial or be detrimental. Liz stated she was encouraged and was supported within her own determined goals and that was a

positive experience. She stated she was aware of girls trying hard for the expectations of their parents and that it was hard on them. These girls could never just swim for themselves and often questioned if their effort was good enough. These girls' self esteem would be jeopardized. Perceived pressure may come in a variety of forms and can be subtle. The girls' understanding of the situation is important and can have varying impact on them.

The girls acknowledged that as they matured the overall choice of goals was theirs, but there remained for them an underlying understanding of their parents' expectations. Judy describes her parents' expectations of her doing well and her trying hard.

Judy: Well they never pushed me. It was always my choice whether I wanted to go to practice and such. It was my choice, so they didn't ever push me but they always wanted me to do good.

Interviewer: How would they tell you that they wanted you to do good? How would you know that?

Judy: They would never tell me before, but when I was done they would be like "oh you know you should maybe gone to practice more or something", but I would always know that they were right. That if I had of gone to practice more I could maybe have done better or something. But they never pushed me hard.
(p. 6)

Judy made a choice about how much she wanted to swim. She felt the expectation of her parents to do as well, with the best effort, and she did that. Judy acknowledged that perhaps more practice would have helped, but felt she had achieved within the limits that she herself had defined. She knew that her parents respected her effort.

Shift of expectations. As the girls grew older, the source of expectation shifted. The girls spoke of their own expectation to be active and to achieve their goals within swimming. Maggie, when asked how her parents helped her be motivated and to be interested in physical activity as a 17-year-old, stated:

I think it is mostly myself. Sometimes, they try to tell me I do too much and discourage me but I think there is something wrong with me. I just like to be busy like this. They want me to be active but sometimes they almost want me to be less active. (p. 6)

Parents encouraged Maggie in the activities but Maggie stated that she perceived that her motivation to be active now came from herself and was self-determined.

When I was younger they encouraged me more to keep me interested. Like back then I kind of needed encouragement to stay interested. You know and now I don't. They still encourage it, they just encouraged more strongly back then and now they're more just in the background. (p. 6)

Maggie related how her parents helped her to remain active in swimming as a younger adolescent and how their support changed between her ages of 13 to 17 years. She described how her initial motivation to be active had been more external, with parents helping her to stay interested by providing "stronger" encouragement and expectation. Her parents still encourage her but Maggie now swims with more self-motivation.

The 16 and 17 year old girls made their own decision to be active. They chose their own activity and their level of involvement. Ruth, when asked if she felt any pressure to swim replied:

Not really from other people. I was like pressuring myself I guess. (p. 6) ... I just do it because I know I have to. (p. 9)

Ruth emphasizes that she does what she does for herself and that no one pressures her. She perceives that to meet the goals she is striving towards requires a certain level of commitment. The girls took ownership of the activity and the degree of effort that they were prepared to invest, but parental support remained important. Parental support had changed in its appearance and meaning.

Perception of ability. The girls' perception that their parents believe in their ability is powerful. It is another form of expectation. Ruth spoke of the support this perception

gave her and of the power of it. When she was 13 years old, she didn't know if she would get "any-where" in swimming. She had a dream but didn't know if it was possible. Now it has crystallized.

Now, I actually think I might get somewhere. But back then I always wanted to but I didn't know if I actually would (p. 6).

Ruth related how it became possible for her to believe in herself and strive for herself.

Ruth: I got a lot of support from other people.

Interviewer: Who would those other people be?

Ruth: My coach. And my mom.

Interviewer: What did your mom do for you?

Ruth: She drove me to practices and she always figured that I could get somewhere I guess.

Interviewer: Did you feel that kind of understanding that she had that belief in you that you could go somewhere?

Ruth: Well I did, but not like that. I knew that she thought I could do good (p. 6).

Ruth understood and knew that her mom believed in her ability to do well, and that understanding was powerful because it provided support for Ruth; it was evident of her mother's commitment to the work Ruth had performed and Ruth's desire to achieve her best. Ruth felt there was an expectation that she would strive toward her ability. Ruth's experience demonstrates that expectations from others need not be blatant.

Parental expectations had definite impacts on 13 and 14 year old girls and these expectations became an external factor in their continued participation. Parents had strong expectations that the girls would remain physically active and made concessions and arrangements for the girls to be active. They took them to swimming. As well, parents held and communicated to the girls their expectations of the girls' continued

involvement in physical activity, along with their beliefs in the girls' abilities and their expectations of the girls' effort in swimming. These expectations and beliefs were often communicated subtly and remained present throughout adolescence. But as the girls became older, they recognized that expectations to participate and to achieve in swimming had shifted from their parents and now came from within themselves. The support provided by parental expectations changed through adolescence. The girls recognized the values that parents held but the girls themselves now held similar views about physical activity and the degree of effort required to achieve success. The continued belief in their children's ability to strive toward their goals remained a significant continuing source of support for the girls. The girls felt and expressed those expectations.

How much should parents expect from their children? How much expectation from parents is enough? How much is too much and what does it look like? Expectation is a powerful form of support. At what point does an individual take ownership of their interest and perform the activity to please themselves and not just their parents?

Things Parents Could Have Done Differently to Support the Girls

All the girls said they felt their parents had done the best they could do to support them in swimming and their physical activities. The girls as 16 and 17 year olds had developed a perspective that rationalized the current circumstances.

Interviewer: In what ways do you think the type of support you got from your mom and dad made a difference for you staying in swimming?

Grace: I guess they kept me going to it so that I wouldn't quit. They just supported me to keep going and not give up on it even though I felt like it.

Interviewer: How is it now that it makes a difference for you?

Grace: I'm glad they kept me going.

Interviewer: What do you think that they need to do for you now in terms of support? Or is there anything that they need to do that could make it better for you.

Grace: I don't think so. No.

Interviewer: So what they are doing right now?

Grace: It's about perfect. (p. 6)

This conversation was typical among all the girls when I asked them about what their parents could have done differently to support them, and about how they viewed the support they now receive. Whether or not the girls continued swimming at age 16 and 17 years, they all agreed that their parents had done their best for them. Grace's comments regarding support referring to the difficult times when she wanted to quit, were similar for all the girls. They had all struggled at one point and had been highly encouraged to get through those times, particularly during the ages of 13 and 14 years. The girls also reflected a mature and insightful reflection about their parents' support.

Interviewer: Is there any way that your parents could have supported you a little differently? If all the best was there, ways that it would have been better.

Paulette: No. I think they just did the best they could.

Interviewer: That is a good perspective to have.

Paulette: Well I don't know what they could have done differently. I mean it was just all in my mind. It had nothing to do with them. The thoughts and the conflict that went through my mind. I don't think they could have done any more than they did.

Interviewer: They supported you during those times when the conflicts were happening. What was there for you?

Paulette: I don't know. It was just stuff that I knew that I had to deal with.

Interviewer: Did they say things, or do thing for you or give you perspective that made you kind of understand what those conflicts were about? To make you feel more comfortable with them.

Paulette: Yeah, they did that, except I just refused to let it help.

Interview: Pardon?

Paulette: I refused to listen to them. ... I just had to deal with it. (p. 11)

The girls had been helped through difficult times by parents with problem solving and with support. Paulette acknowledges that her parents were supportive and, in retrospect, acknowledged that the problems had been hers.

Though the girls felt that the support they received from parents had been appropriate and continued to be so, some girls felt that parents would have limited understanding of their experiences in swimming and physical activity. The girls perceived that their lives had been so different from their parents, they felt their parents wouldn't understand and wouldn't know how to support them.

They weren't as busy as me when they were younger so they don't really know what to say. (Maggie, p. 11)

Many of the girls viewed themselves as athletes and some trained at a high level. They did not perceive their parents' activities of an occasional jog or a racquetball game as a significant degree of physical activity. They acknowledged their parents as being busy but from their perspective their parents were not, in most cases, physically active.

The girls tended to compare the active lives that they had to the lives of their parents. It was difficult for them to see and to ascertain the actual level at which their parents engaged in physical activity. Maggie, when asked if her parents were active stated; "No. They walk and they ski sometimes in the winter. But that is about all" (p. 9). However she had previously described a family life full of different activities in which she was

excited to participate. Because of this perception gap, it was difficult to get an accurate sense of how physically active families were, and how supportive girls felt this to be.

Despite the girls' perception that their parents did not understand what was really happening to them, they acknowledged that what their parents did and were doing for them as being right and was "about perfect". There was a sense from the girls that their parents were there for them emotionally and physically in all the circumstances of swimming. They were supported within the choices and goals they made, and they felt the choices they made were respected. Liz spoke eloquently about parental support.

I never felt that I had to attain a certain goal unless I had set it for myself. My parents supported me completely and they congratulated me when I did well and they sat with me at the end of the swim when you feel disappointed and you feel bad about yourself. I never felt like I had to please them or get a certain time to make them happy. (p. 2)

Liz spoke of the power of unconditional support. It had no strings attached and it was viewed as perfect or just about right.

The girls felt their parents had been and continued to be supportive in the best possible ways in their experience of swimming and physical activity. This response though unexpected was indicative of where the girls were taking ownership of being engaged in physical activity. They felt that the decision to be physically active was their choice, as was the decision about their degree of involvement. They were becoming self reliant in their own endeavors and their own views. There was a degree of rationalization within their statements of parental support as the girls acknowledge their limitations as well as the limitations within the context of their lives.

CHAPTER 6

Summary and Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the experiences of girls in early adolescence that enables and encourages them to remain in sport or physical activity. Specifically, what do the girls understand parental support to be within these experiences, and what do they understand to be its contribution to their continuation in physical activity? From a community health perspective, these questions are important, as continued participation in physical activity is beneficial for the development of girls' life style behaviors that promote health. The understanding of factors that enhance adherence to sport and physical activity is an important public health initiative.

Sallis et al. (1992) state that public health research on physical activity for children and youth has a different focus than does the current research on sport. They contend that the focus on enhancing participation in physical activity needs to shift to studies that explore the experiences of children in physical activity in order to further understand factors that help develop life style development in this area. This study took this recommendation to heart and approached the study of the adolescent girls' physical activity from the perspective of their experience.

The sport of swimming was used in this study as a focus of physical activity because it is an activity of moderate to vigorous intensity, an individual sport, not team, and there were accessible subjects in a small northern community. The local swim club had a large number of girls swimming in early adolescence (13–15 years) and a significant number were currently swimming as 16 and 17 year olds. Interviews occurred with 11 girls, all of

whom swam as 13 to 15 year olds. Seven continued to swim, and four had quit swimming in the last two years. There was caution at the beginning of the study that using a group focused on a sport that was considered competitive may not provide the perspective that would be valuable to public health concerns. Although this is a valid concern, for adolescents, competitive sport is one of the major forms of physical activity; swimming itself can be a lifetime sport. Additionally, the swim club in this northern community provides opportunities for both recreational and competitive activities.

The study looked at the perspective of girls who had been in the swimming cohort as 13 to 15 year olds, both those who continued to swim and those who had quit swimming in the past year or two. The girls spoke of reasons why they participated in the sport or why they quit the sport that had been cited in past research such as losing interest, and other things to do (Lindner et al., 1991; Sallis, 1994; Sallis et al., 1992; Weiss & Petlichkoff, 1989). The girls provided a perspective of why they were active at the level they chose, of how they got there, of why they made the choices they did and of what being supported by parents felt like.

Factors Impacting Participation in Physical Activity for the Cohort

An understanding of the girls' experiences in physical activity is important as it provides the context in which to understand the girls' experience of parental support in their continuation in physical activity. This experience was characterized by a supportive and flexible swim club environment, the opportunity to develop swimming skills, self-regulatory skills, self-motivation, the values of continuing participation in physical activity, and confidence in themselves and their ability to be physically active.

Friends were an important factor in adherence to physical activity in early adolescence, but became less significant as the girls matured. Within the swim club the girls liked to travel to competitions, but competition suited less than half the cohort. Of the cohort of eleven, seven continued to swim past age 15 but not all were competitive. The swim club offers a flexible program of involvement that enabled girls to continue to swim within the context of their lives. The girls appreciated these opportunities as it enabled them to remain active in the physical activity they enjoyed.

The cohort of girls held strong values about physical activity, with most of the girls as 16 and 17 year olds currently involved in some level of physical activity. They all intended to continue physical activity as a life style choice. But the fact that a girl is currently physically active does not ensure she will be physically active as an adult (Sallis, 1992). However, researchers (Babkes & Weiss, 1999; Biddle & Goudas, 1996; Kimiecik et al., 1996; Sallis et al., 1992; Sallis, 1994) identified some characteristics of individuals who adhere to physical activity: perceived competence, self-efficacy or confidence regarding one's ability to be active, perceived benefits of exercise, and self-motivation. As well, self-regulatory skills, such as goal setting, self-reinforcement, self-monitoring and decision-making based on positive and negative aspects of physical activity are predictive of exercise participation (King et al., 1992; Marcus, 1995; Sallis et al., 1992). These skill sets, attitudes and values associated with physical activity were developed and were present within the cohort.

The girls had a high level of perceived competence in swimming. The girls stated that they felt confident and that enabled them to remain active in swimming and to become involved in other physical activities. The evolution of perceived competence

took time and took persistence on the part of the girls. They related that their parents were supportive of them with this development. This is consistent with the research done by Brustad (1996) which found children's, particularly girls' perception of competence was influenced by their parents' encouragement to be physically active.

All the girls expressed the perceived benefits they received from physical activity. These benefits included meeting specific goals but also included perceptions of body image, of social status, and of feeling good about themselves. They concluded that the perceived benefits outweighed the negative aspects of the activity. They stated that being involved in physical activity was a life style choice that they valued and that they all intended to be involved in physical activity in the future.

The girls engaged in the physical activities because they wanted to engage in them; they were self-motivated. They demonstrated characteristics of self-regulation: self-regulation enabled them to make the choices and to be involved at the level they chose. The girls spoke of developing achievable goals and of implementing plans to strive toward them. They had self-discipline to continue with the effort required to achieve the goals they sought. They all spoke of the difficulties during adolescence that they had managed, along with their parents' support. The characteristics of self-regulation and the learned behaviors that evolved developed with practice, with experience and with support (Boren et al., 1987; Grossnickle, 1989; Stipek, 1993). As the girls developed self-regulation skills, the girls developed increasingly higher levels of autonomy and of independence in the management of their lives. They spoke of their confidence in themselves in being able to be physically active.

The Experience of Parental Support in Physical Activity

All the girls perceived parental support to enhance their involvement and their interest in physical activity. The interviews revealed that parental support was a key factor in the girls' continuation to swim, particularly through difficult times in early adolescence when a large number of them stated they would not have gone swimming had it not been for their parents' support. The girls spoke of the enforced consistency their parents requested of them as the girls swam in their earlier years. They acknowledged their parents' assistance in the girls' development of skills that enabled them to problem solve the issues of being involved in physical activity. The girls stated that, as they matured, they became physically active for themselves and for what they perceived to be benefits of physical activity. Looking back, they realized they did not have that perspective when they were in their early adolescence. They had become more self-regulated and self-reliant within the context of physical activity. The choice of being involved was now theirs alone.

The girls' parents played key roles in enhancing the development of the girls' self-regulating skills and increasing autonomy in physical activity. Their roles included helping in the development of skills in managing goals, providing consistent support, having expectations and belief in the girls and providing them within an environment of unconditional support. These roles enabled the girls, eventually, to perform the physical activity for themselves with a sense of confidence in their ability to do so. There were some struggles within the relationship of support but parental expectations, along with consistency of support was of paramount importance. From the perspective of the cohort, a key aspect of parental support to the girls' physical activity was for parents to remain

consistent and persistent in their approach and to be there for them. The support and encouragement looked different as the girls grew older but it was always there.

Helping with the Development of Skills to Strive Towards Goals

Physical activity at any level demands a commitment of time and energy. For the girls, problems arose and setbacks occurred. There were unavoidable failures and parents gave encouragement about what the girls had learned. Parents had a key role in providing support and helping the girls to problem solve issues. The girls viewed as helpful their parents' role in developing alternative perspectives. Through discussion with parents, the girls became realistic about their level of possible involvement in swimming and physical activity based on what else was happening in their lives. The girls as a result of these decisions realized they did not need to abandon swimming when their lives became more complicated as they grew older.

Consistency

Consistency was a key characteristic of parental support. It changed as the girls grew older but there was consistency of providing physical and emotional support, along with consistent expectations and belief in the girls.

The girls spoke of the importance of their parents' physical support, as it enabled them to organize themselves and to be physically active. The girls acknowledged that to be physically active took a lot of organizational effort and that their parents were a part of that effort. Parents provided a consistent framework: they provided meals, took them to the swimming pool, and supported them as they learned to manage themselves. As they grew older, the girls took more responsibility for self-management such as getting themselves to swimming. Overall, the parents high level of support enabled the girls to

be active, and, in fact, the parents' support became greater as the demands on the girls' lives increased.

The girls viewed the enforced consistency of attendance at swimming as being supportive. They said, in retrospect, that if they had not been taken to swimming, they would not have gone and would have quit eventually. The statements of the girls who stayed with the sport can be attributed to some degree to rationalization, as swimming required a high degree of effort. As 16 and 17 year olds, the girls now valued swimming, and appreciated the fact that at one time; they would have quit if their parents had not kept them going. The persistent and consistent approach of parents kept the girls involved in swimming through difficult times. Grossnickle (1989) referred to the need for a consistent approach for the development of self-regulating behaviors in children. The girls needed the opportunity to learn these skills within a structured environment. What was interesting to the researcher was that the girls talked about the need for enforced consistency. A family decision had been made for them to be involved, and they were expected to go and their parents took them there.

Boren et al. (1987) determined that the skills of self-control or self-discipline are learned throughout childhood, with the expected outcome that children would learn to initiate and to sustain self-regulating behaviors and to internalize expectations. Boren et al. acknowledged that "exceptional" adult perseverance of patience is needed to help children compensate for their lack of inner structure. This perseverance or consistency is what the girls were acknowledging as being supportive in their experiences of physical activity throughout their adolescence.

Expectations

Parental expectations, both in blatant and in subtle forms, can be powerful in influencing participation in physical activity. The parents had the explicit expectation that the girls would go swimming, particularly in early adolescence, and at this point, the girls were compliant with the expectation. The expectation to continue to swim remained as the girls grew older, but took a different form. Throughout their swimming experience, parents helped the girls with goal setting, and supported their short and long term choices. The girls' goals, along with the level of commitment, changed over time but the girls perceived that their parents expected them to continue in physical activity. In early adolescence, the expectation was firm and later on it was more subtle. Over time, the girls began to swim because they wanted to swim for themselves, valuing the benefits of physical activity and of swimming. The girls spoke of the more subtle forms of expectations that echoed their parents' values of physical activity and of the degree of effort involved. As the girls matured through adolescence, the theme of these values emerged as their own. They spoke of now being involved in physical activity because they wanted to and it was a life style. They had become self-motivated in physical activity. They perceived that they had the ability and self-discipline to be active. The expectation to be involved was now theirs.

Belief in Their Ability

The beliefs that individuals understand others to have of them are powerful. The girls understood that their parents expected them to be involved in physical activity. The girls stated the choice of goal, along with the degree of effort, was theirs. They also felt that their parents believed in their ability to strive towards their goals. In other words,

parental expectations for the girls to strive toward the girls' goals included the parents believing in the girls' ability. Children's understanding of their parents' belief in them evolves from the conveyed expectations that parents have of them, and are related to children's beliefs about themselves (Parsons et al., 1982). The support of parents was felt to be powerful, as the girls would strive toward difficult goals with a sense of their parents' support. Overall, these expectations had a positive effect on the girls. They enhanced their belief in their ability (self-efficacy) to strive toward their goals. At times, however these beliefs placed extra demands and stress on the girls

Unconditional Support

The girls saw unconditional support as being particularly powerful. Parents were described as always "being there", as helping them through difficult times and through good times. The support involved talking about problems and trying to solve them. The parents' ability to provide a new perspective on the girls' problem was often viewed as beneficial, and, at times, served as a turning point for the girls. Parents validated the girls' efforts, and helped them to continue. The girls often found it difficult to recognize whether or not they were trying hard enough. Parents helped the girls to put the degree of effort that they were putting out within a framework that was reassuring. The parents showed an interest in the girls' activity and demonstrated a level of involvement in the club milieu that was considered appropriate and was not intrusive. Support without pressure has been found to be most effective (Hoyle & Leff, 1997), and that is consistent with what most of the girls indicated they experienced.

The girls felt that their parents were always there for them in some capacity and at the level that fit for them. The girls spoke of the support that parents gave them as

“perfect” or “they did the best they could”. As 16 and 17 year olds, they had put the storms of early adolescence into perspective and had rationalized a lot of their issues.

In sum, from the experiences of the girls, parental support can be described as helping the girls develop self-regulating skills within a framework of consistency in physical and emotional support, expectations and belief in the girls, all within an environment of unconditional support.

Parental support continued but changed throughout the girls’ adolescence. The parents initially helped the girls to develop the skills of self-reliance by using a degree of persuasion, and later, by using a degree of subtlety that encouraged the girls’ self-choice about their involvement in physical activity. The girls stated that they were now involved in physical activity because they wanted to be and that their parents continued to support them. In fact, they felt that the support had increased. The girls acknowledged various forms of support: the support in increasingly complex decision making, the unconditional support of, “I am there for you whatever your choice”, the belief in their abilities. Brown et al. (1989) indicated that as girls become older, increasing support in physical activity is essential regardless of the context stating that “in the face of competing role demands and alternate activities, maintenance of involvement in forms of social participation that violate normative expectations for women require more intense reinforcement” (p. 406). Perhaps this was what the girls were alluding to. Involvement in physical activity became more difficult due to a variety of factors in their life and though parents did not necessarily become more physically supportive as they became older, they became more emotionally supportive. Parental support is powerful. Parents walk a fine line of

effective support, which enables the girls to develop their own integrity within physical activity and other domains.

Implications for Enhancing Health Behaviors

An overall strategy for health care teaching of young people could be the inclusion of the skill sets to develop self-regulating behavior. Young adolescents need to develop the skills of goal setting and planning, along with problem solving and self-discipline, to become self-motivated in physical activity. Children develop life style skills in keeping with their progress on the continuum of growth and development; parents are an integral part of promoting and supporting that development (Bruhn, 1988; Lau et al., 1990). The teaching of health behaviors involves not only the rationale of the behavior but also the skills to self-regulate. A wellness life style includes characteristics and skills, such as being able to perceive physical activity choices, having problem solving skills, anticipating problems, being flexible, being able to learn new skills, and having a sense of personal control (Bruhn). These particular characteristics are self-regulating or self-control behaviors (Boren et al., 1987). Self-control is defined as a specific set of skills needed in order to maintain goal directed behaviors, and researchers indicated that children need to be taught these skills (Boren et al.). Parental support is a factor in the development of self-regulating behaviors. The parents of this cohort enabled the girls to develop and use these skills. Their support enhanced the self-efficacy of the girls to be active in physical activity.

The forms in which parents provided support to the girls changed throughout adolescence; this enabled the girls to take more ownership of the responsibility for physical activity. The parents seemed to know how to deal with the turbulence of

adolescence; this knowledge enabled the girls to develop their own interest and skills in managing their physical activity. What was that skill and how did it get there? The writer suspects that the parents of this cohort had particular skills and understandings that enabled them to support their daughters in effective ways.

The parents' skills enabled the girls to learn the skills and make their own choices. The knowledge held by parents can be useful to other parents to help them understand how to enable their children to develop self-regulating behaviors within a supportive environment through the continuum of growth and development. Although parents frequently have skills to help their children learn how to gain skills to make their own choices in many areas of their lives, some parents may benefit from receiving information specifically about how they may teach these skills within the domain of physical activity.

Parents must understand the impact of parental expectations on their children, particularly within physical activity. The parents' expectations for their children to be involved at some level of physical activity, particularly the expectation of consistency, was felt by the girls and had a significant influence on their adherence to physical activity. The emphasis seemed to be physical activity, not the sport. From the perspective of the girls, expectations, along with the assistance in the development of self-regulating skills, had considerable impact on their participation and their development of positive values toward physical activity. The focus of sport was always in the picture, but the girls as they grew older, viewed sport as an avenue to meet their need for physical activity. These parents were teaching the girls an important life style choice and how to engage in physical activity and to maintain it.

The girls acknowledged that they required more support, as they became older adolescents. Parental support continues to be important in later adolescence even though girls may seem to be more self-sufficient. Parents just need to be there for them, respecting their choices. The social norms of females are not conducive to participation in physical activity (Brown, 1985). If females are to be more active in physical activity, they need continued support throughout the life span. Parents have a particularly large role in supporting the girls as they engage and remain physically active during adolescence.

Current community health initiatives have emphasized the need to increase the level of physical activity through out the life span. A component of the initiative needs to consider the development of awareness of skill sets that promote continued adherence to physical activity particularly for youth. A public health initiative could be based on developing an awareness of what is effective parental support in physical activity throughout the child rearing years.

Sport continues to dominate the avenue of physical activity for children and for adolescents. Health initiatives need to acknowledge this context and to work within the context of sport as well as within the context of other recreational areas. The emphasis within these areas could be to increase the awareness of the health benefits of physical activity and the usefulness of sport in supporting the development of self-regulating skills that are so important for future health.

Implications for Sport

Parents often introduce their children to sport and to physical activity. Parents come with limited knowledge and with preconceptions about what their role needs to be to

support their children. Coaches could help parents to be as effective as possible in supporting girls in physical activity. According to the literature (Brustad, 1996; Brown et al., 1989; Brown, 1985), girls require more support in physical activity and in sport because of the social norms around sport that do not support females. Coaches need to be aware of these understandings. They require training to help parents to support their adolescent girls, as well as to provide a conducive environment for females within the sport. The swim club in this study seemed to have particular success with enabling girls to be physically active at the level the girls wanted. Sport needs to ensure the opportunities are there for girls to be involved at all levels within a quality environment.

Implications for Further Research

The cohort lived in a small northern town with limited access to other parts of the province. As a group, they presented as capable, positive thinking young people, engaged in life as it was offered. The cohort appeared to have ideal circumstances in their lives that enabled them to be goal orientated and to strive for a post-secondary education as well as for opportunities in swimming. But this study only looked at the experiences of these girls within their swimming background. It did not ask about family experiences or about difficulties or about economic backgrounds. Their life circumstances were unknown. As well, the family structure is changing within society, with different support systems present for different adolescent girls. Further research needs to define the characteristics of a support system that enable girls to adhere to physical activity within a variety of family contexts.

A basic theme from the girls' narratives was their ability to be self-regulated and a confidence in their ability to be physically active. Educational researchers such as

Alschuler (1973), Boren et al. (1987), Grossnickle (1989), Johnson (1984) and Stipek (1993) speak of self-motivation as a learned characteristic for the individual. They suggest that although everyone is motivated, not to the same intensity or toward the same goal. Each person responds differently to attempts of others to motivate and to encourage. Ultimately, the initiative to be motivated comes from individuals themselves. However, self-motivation must be practiced in order for it to become a habit. A person can become more self-regulated. Others can assist individuals to learn and to motivate themselves by helping to clarify their needs, to choose and to seek their goals, and to learn ways that have worked for others (Alschuler; Boren et al., Johnson; Grossnickle; Stipek). It became evident in the transcripts that a key to the adherence of physical activity was not the motivational orientation of the individual but the degree of self-motivation, the skills of self-regulation, and degree of self-efficacy. Sport researchers (Duda et al., 1995; Gill & Williams, 1995; Gould & Petlichkoff, 1996) tend to focus more on motivational orientation rather than on skills of self-regulation. Researchers (Sallis et al., 1992) in public health speak of the skills of self-regulation within life style behaviors and recommend more research in these areas. The cohort of girls in this study, through their narratives, indicated that the strength of their adherence to physical activity was their ability to self-regulate and their confidence in themselves to do so. More study of the impact of the learned skills of self-regulation may be warranted to allow health professionals to understand the influence of those skills on individuals' continued participation in sport and physical activity as a life style.

A combination of factors enabled these girls to remain active in physical activity through the transitions in their lives. The understanding of why adolescent girls

participate or not participate in physical activity is incomplete. What is known is that these girls were self-motivated and had developed skills of self-regulation that were expressed within their swimming experience. Their parents provided support that appeared to help the girls to become self-reliant, self-confident individuals in their experience of physical activity. The girls held strong values about physical activity, and spoke of it as a life style choice. They all referred to their continued physical activity as something they wanted to do. The fact that the girls appeared to have key determinants present for the continuation in physical activity suggests that they may continue in physical activity as adults. A follow up study of their participation as adults in physical activity may be of value for future research.

But what is significant for health professionals to acknowledge is that parents helped to hold the girls in physical activity in the stage of early adolescence through enforced consistency. It gave the girls the time and the opportunity to learn skills of self-regulation. It also enabled the girls to learn the values of physical activity and to make choices that fit for them.

The girls in this study are approaching the transition of leaving school and for most, leaving their home and community. They will be called upon increasingly to self-manage their lives. The skills of self-regulation they learned through adolescence and their self-efficacy are important to their continuation of physical activity. But what is not known is whether or not the girls will engage in physical activity as young adults. Researchers must gather more information about the transitions into young adulthood and about ways that young women can continue to be supported during these transitions to maintain healthy life style choices.

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Appendix A

Consent for thesis research project participation
Early Adolescent Females' Perception of Parental Support of Physical Activity

Dear executive of the A Swim Club:

I am a graduate student in the Masters of Science in the Community Health degree program at the University of Northern British Columbia. I am also a community mental health nurse and the head coach of the A club. As Part of my degree I am undertaking a research project that will explore the experience of being a physically active female teenage during the ages of 13-15 years from the perspective of the girl herself. This perspective will be gained retrospectively from girls who are now 16-17 years of age. The purpose of this study is to gain insight into what encourages adolescent girls between the ages of 13-15 years to continue in physical activity.

I am asking you to assist me in this project in enabling me to contact female swimmers who were the club as 13-15 years olds (born 1983-1985) in the years 1996-1999. The study will include girls who are currently swimming with the club as well as girls who have discontinued participation. I will need to have the girls currently swimming identified in this list. I will contact them by phone and letter to see if they are interested in participating in the study and obtain participant and parental consent. For purposes of demographics I require the total membership of the club for 1996 to 1999 along with a breakdown in the number girls and boys swimming in these years who were born in 1983-1985.

Participation in the interview is voluntary and one can withdraw from the study at any time. Each participant will be interviewed at the Health Unit or another location of their choice for approximately one hour. The interviews will audio taped and then transcribed and analyzed for themes in the adolescent girls' experience. The themes will be written into the thesis and perhaps published in a journal or used in classroom setting. The participants will not be identified by name during the interview or in the write-up of the study, and all responses will be kept confidential. The published report will mask the name of the participants and the name of the community.

Research results will be available to the swim club at the end of the study. The benefit of the study is the increase awareness of what keeps adolescent girls in physical activity and how coaches and parents can provide support.

This study has been approved by the University of Northern British Columbia's Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions, or wish to contact me please feel free to call me at the Health Unit or my supervisor Dr. Martha MacLeod (250)(960-6507). If you have any concern regarding the ethical conduct of the study you can contact Dr. Max Blow at UNBC, Chair of the Ethics Committee:250-960-5820.

I hope to hear from you shortly and I appreciate your consideration of this study.

Cheryl Brown
Health and Human sciences
UNBC
3333 University Way
Prince George, BC V2N 4Z9

Appendix B

Dear Swim Parent:

Enclosed you will find a letter from Cheryl Brown regarding a research study she is undertaking. The Executive has discussed this study and are supportive of it. We feel that the information she will gather will be very helpful to parents of all girls involved in sport, and to us as a club.

Please read her letter carefully and decide whether you wish to participate in the study or not. The decision is entirely yours.

Some people receiving this letter are no longer swimmers in our club. Your input is as important to the results of her research as the people who are still swimming.

Finally, I would like to reassure you that your name and address was given to Ms. Brown only after we were fully comfortable with the nature of her project, and that she had the full support of the Ethics Committee at UNBC. The Swim Club does not normally divulge information about its' membership to anyone outside of the club. We have done so in this instance because we feel this project has many benefits for the club and its' members. As you will see in her letter, Ms. Brown will not provide this information to anyone else, and the participants in the study will remain anonymous.

If you have any questions in regards to this study, please feel free to contact myself @ or Ms. Brown, her supervisor, or professor at the numbers given in her letter.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Swim Club President

INFORMATION SHEET

Appendix C

Consent to Participate in Research Project**Early Adolescent Girls' Perception of Parental Support of Physical Activity**

I am a community nurse and a coach who works with children in community of X, and a student in the Masters of Science in the Community Health Degree program at the University of Northern British Columbia. As part of my degree I am undertaking a research project that will explore the experience of being a physically active female teenager during the ages of 13-15 years from the perspective of the girl herself. The purpose of the study is to ask girls what they found to be supportive in participating in physical activity.

You have been selected because of your participation in the swim club when you were 13-15 years of age. I am asking you to assist me in gathering information about your experience during this time. I am interested to hear how you felt about physical activity during this time and what kind of things enabled you to be active.

You will be asked to attend one interview with me that will be approximately one hour in length. Our meeting will be at the health unit at a date of your convenience. The interview will be audio taped and then transcribed and analyzed for themes in yours and others experience. Following the interview, you will have the opportunity to review and comment on the transcripts. Your responses will be kept confidential but will contribute to the themes. Examples of the themes will be written into a thesis and perhaps published in a journal or used in a teacher's class.

You will not be identified by name during the interview or in the write up of the study. Participation in the interview is voluntary and you can withdraw from this study at any time. In the published research report both your name and the name of the community in which you live will be masked by false names. The data from the study will be kept in a locked cabinet in my office and will be destroyed 5 years after the completion of the study.

I have received permission from the A Swim Club to obtain your name and address and phone number and this study has been approved by the University of Northern British Columbia's Research Ethics Board. I will phone you to determine your interest in participating in the study.

If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at the Health Unit X or my supervisor Dr. Martha MacLeod (250-960-6507). If you have any concerns regarding confidentiality you can contact Dr. Max Blow at UNBC, Dean of Graduate Studies (250) 960-5820.

Your signature and one of your parent's signature on the consent form indicates that you have agreed to participate in the study described and that you have adequate understanding of what this involves. Please sign two copies and keep one. Thank you for your assistance.

Cheryl Brown
Health and Human Sciences,
UNBC
3333 University Way
Prince George, BC V2N 4Z9

To be completed by the research participant

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

Please circle appropriate response

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research project? Yes No

Have you read and received a copy of the attached Information Sheet? Yes No

Do you understand that the research interviews will be tape recorded? Yes No

Do understand the benefits and risks involved in participating in this study? Yes No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? Yes No

Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time? You do not have to give any reason. Yes No

Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you? Do you understand that you will have access to the information you provide? Yes No

This study was explained to me by: _____

I agree to take part in this study.

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Signature of Parent

Printed Name

Printed Name

I believe that the person signing this form understands what is involved in the study and voluntarily agrees to participate.

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix E

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about when you started to swim with the club.
2. At what level do (did) you swim and how often?
3. What do (did) you like about participating in swimming?
4. What do (did) you not like about participating swimming?
5. How did the activity change over time for you and when?
6. Describe how your parent(s) supported you in the swimming.
7. How did that support change over time?
8. In what ways did the level of support from your parent(s) make a difference for your participation in swimming?
9. What other ways do you think your parent(s) could have supported you in the swimming?
10. How did other activities influence your participation in swimming?
11. What kinds of activities are you engaged now?