

## COMPETITIVE ANXIETY AMONG YOUNG SWIMMERS: THE ROLE OF PARENTAL INFLUENCE IN SHAPING ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE

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**ABSTRACT.** *Aim:* This study aims to assess the level of anxiety young swimmers experience in a competition and to identify differences between perceived and desired parental behaviours in relation to athletic performance. *Methods:* 16 boys and girls, aged  $12.06 \pm 2.01$  on average, were included in this study with their parents' consent. All participants filled in the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory—2 (CSAI-2; Martens et al., 1983) and the Parental Involvement in Sport Questionnaire (PISQ) created by Lee and MacLean, 1997). Statistical processing was performed using SPSS (version 19). The t-test for paired samples was used to compare the results in terms of perceived and desired parental behaviour in relation to young swimmers' performance. The significance threshold applied in this study was  $p \leq 0.05$ . *Results:* Young swimmers have increased confidence in their own abilities ( $M = 17.25$ ,  $SD = 2.49$ ). The total anxiety score ( $M = 33.50$ ,  $SD = 4.66$ ) shows that young swimmers are quite concerned about competition. The data show that there is no statistically significant difference between genders in terms of total anxiety score ( $\chi^2 = 17.92$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p = 0.59$ ). According to the statistical analysis, the average scores of perceived and desired mother behaviour differ significantly ( $M = 4.81$ ,  $t = 5.4$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The difference between perceived and desired father behaviour in relation to competition is not statistically significant ( $M = 0.68$ ,  $t = 0.6$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $p = 0.55$ ). There is a statistically significant difference between the average scores of perceived mother and father behaviour ( $M = 6.87$ ,  $t = 4.74$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). There is a statistically significant difference between perceived pressure and desired parental behaviour ( $M = 6.12$ ,  $t = 4.21$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). *Conclusions:* Children show confidence in their own abilities before competition ( $M = 17.25$ ). There is no statistically significant difference between girls and boys in terms of total anxiety score. Both parents are involved in supporting athletes, with the father being deemed to be the one

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who puts more pressure on children. Children state that they would like their mothers to be more concerned with their results, which would give them support and encouragement. Swimmers at this age feel pressure but would like their parents to be even more involved in supporting them when it comes to participating in competitions.

**Keywords:** swimming; anxiety; perception; desire; behaviour.

## INTRODUCTION

Those who have practiced high-performance sports know how important it is for athletes to be able to control their emotions before, during, and after a competition. Emotional instability contributes to technical errors, which will impact the results of a competition. Prolonged high levels of anxiety in children lead to cognitive problems that can affect their adult lives (Arantes de Araújo et al., 2020). But at the same time, in the absence of a certain degree of anxiety, people would not be as motivated to study or work responsibly (Feldman, 2011).

Parents offer emotional and financial support to ensure that they children will be involved in sport activities (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005; Holt & Knight, 2014; Gao et al., 2024). When it comes to sports, parents are the ones who bring their children into the sporting environment, and they are also the ones who will provide them with material and emotional support throughout their careers (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Bonavolontà et al., 2021). Parents play an important role in athletic performance, influencing their children's emotional states, both satisfaction and anxiety (Holt et al., 2008; Baciú et al., 2015). This study aims to assess the level of anxiety young swimmers experience in competition and to identify differences between perceived and desired parental behaviours in relation to athletic performance.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

16 boys and girls, aged  $12.06 \pm 2.01$  on average, participated in this study.

We used two questionnaires to collect data. The first one is Competitive State Anxiety Inventory—2 (CSAI-2) (Martens et al., 1983), which uses a 1 to 4 Likert scale - 1: Not at all; 4: Very much so; this questionnaire helped us get scores on cognitive state anxiety, somatic state anxiety, and self-confidence. The second questionnaire is Parental Involvement in Sport Questionnaire (PISQ), which uses a 1 to 5 Likert scale - 1: Always; 5: Never.

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The data were collected from 16 children before their participation in an official swimming competition. The children were assisted by their parents in filling in the questionnaires.

## RESULTS

Cognitive anxiety, related to thoughts about performance, has an average score of ( $M = 6.75$ ,  $SD = 2.24$ ), which indicates that concerns about performance are moderate. Somatic anxiety, characterized by physiological changes, has an average score of ( $M = 9.13$ ,  $SD = 3.16$ ), which indicates significant physiological changes before competition. Confidence level has an average score of ( $M = 17.25$ ,  $SD = 2.49$ ), which shows that young swimmers have increased confidence in their own abilities around competition time. The total anxiety score is quite high; the mean anxiety score of ( $M = 33.50$ ,  $SD = 4.66$ ) shows young swimmers' concern about the competition. (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Anxiety scores

	<b>N</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Total anxiety score	16	23	41	33.50	4.662
Cognitive Anxiety	16	4	10	6.75	2.236
Somatic Anxiety	16	5	16	9.13	3.160
Confidence	16	12	20	17.25	2.490
Valid N (listwise)	16				

The Likert scale that we used in our study ranges from 1 to 5 - 1: Always; 5: Never. As one can see, the average score of desired mother behaviour ( $M = 30.12$ ,  $SD = 6.55$ ) is lower than the average score of perceived mother involvement ( $M = 34.93$ ,  $SD = 6.43$ ) (Table 2). This shows that young athletes would like their mothers to be more involved in their performance in competition, which would provide them with support and encouragement.

**Table 2.** Perceived mother involvement and desired mother behaviour scores

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>
Perceived mother involvement	34.9375	16	6.43396	1.60849
Desired mother behaviour	30.1250	16	6.55108	1.63777

Child swimmers would like their mothers to be more involved in their participation in competitions. According to the statistical analysis, the perceived involvement scores and the desired involvement scores differ significantly. ( $M = 4.81$ ,  $t = 5.4$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Difference between perceived mother involvement and desired mother involvement average scores

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
Perceived mother involvement Desired mother behaviour	4.81250	3.56312	.89078	5.403	15	.000

There is a subtle difference between children's perceived father behaviour ( $M = 28.06$ ,  $SD = 7.37$ ) and desired father behaviour ( $M = 27.37$ ,  $SD = 5.69$ ) in relation to participation in competitions. Both means are below the average score of desired mother involvement, which shows that athletes chose low values on the Likert scale - 1: always, 2: quite often (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Perceived/desired father involvement scores

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>
Perceived father involvement	28.0625	16	7.37987	1.84497
Desired father behaviour	27.3750	16	5.69064	1.42266

The similar scores of perceived father involvement and desired father behaviour show that fathers are involved in supporting their children to achieve sport performance. The difference between perceived and desired behaviour is not significant ( $M = 0.68$ ,  $t = 0.6$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $p = 0.55$ ) (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Difference between perceived father involvement and desired father involvement average scores

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
Perceived father involvement Desired father behaviour	.68750	4.54193	1.13548	.605	15	.554

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If we compare the average scores of perceived mother behaviour (M = 34.93, SD = 6.43) and perceived father behaviour (M = 28.06, SD = 7.37), we notice that fathers are perceived as being more involved in relation to their children's participation in a competition (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Perceived mother/father involvement scores

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>
Perceived mother involvement	34.9375	16	6.43396	1.60849
Perceived father involvement	28.0625	16	7.37987	1.84497

As regards parental involvement, fathers are perceived as being more concerned with their children's competition results. There is a statistically significant difference between the average score of perceived mother involvement and that of perceived father involvement (M = 6.87, t = 4.74, df = 15, p < 0.001) (Table 7).

**Table 7.** Difference between perceived mother involvement and perceived father involvement average scores

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
Perceived mother involvement	6.87500	5.79511	1.44878	4.745	15	.000
Perceived father involvement						

There is a difference between children's perceived pressure on them (M = 63.62, SD = 12.97) and how they would like this pressure to be (M = 57.50, SD = 11.89) around a competition.

The Likert scale - 1: always, 2: quite often, 5: never - and the fact that the average score of desired behaviour is lower than that of perceived behaviour reveal that child athletes would like more involvement from their parents (Table 8).

**Table 8.** Perceived and desired pressure scores

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>
Perceived pressure	63.6250	16	12.97626	3.24407
Desired pressure	57.5000	16	11.89398	2.97349

According to our data, children feel pressure from their parents but would like them to be even more involved in supporting them when it comes to participating in competitions. There is a statistically significant difference between perceived pressure and desired parental behaviour ( $M = 6.12$ ,  $t = 4.21$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) (Table 9).

**Table 9.** Difference between perceived involvement and desired involvement average scores

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
Perceived pressure – Desired pressure	6.12500	5.81808	1.45452	4.211	15	.001

We wanted to find out if there was a significant difference between boys and girls in terms of perceived parental pressure, but no significant differences were found. An almost significant difference was found in perceived mother pressure, as girls reported higher scores than boys ( $\chi^2 = 29.78$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p = 0.07$ ). (Table 10).

**Table 10.** Chi Square test: gender and perceived mother behaviour

	<b>Value</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</b>
Pearson Chi-Square	29.778 <sup>a</sup>	20	.074
Likelihood Ratio	24.899	20	.205
Linear-by-Linear Association	.673	1	.412
N of Valid Cases	16		

The data show that there is no statistically significant difference between boys and girls in terms of total anxiety score ( $\chi^2 = 17.92$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p = 0.59$ ). (Table 11).

**Table 11.** Chi Square test: gender and total anxiety score

	<b>Value</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</b>
Pearson Chi-Square	17.926 <sup>a</sup>	20	.592
Likelihood Ratio	18.307	20	.567
Linear-by-Linear Association	.764	1	.382
N of Valid Cases	16		

## DISCUSSION

A series of studies show that, as a rule, children appreciate their parents' interest in offering them sports activities, as long as their interventions provide a positive emotional environment (Anderson et al., 2003; Wilson & Spink, 2011; Bonavolontà et al., 2021).

A study involving children participating in a tennis competition reveals that girls perceive a higher level of pressure from their parents than boys (Bois et al., 2009). In our study, data analysis shows that there is no statistically significant difference in terms of gender and total anxiety score. There is also no significant difference in terms of gender and perceived parental pressure.

According to one study, the presence of one or both parents influences the degree of anxiety differently. The presence of both parents is associated with a high level of pre-competition anxiety, especially among girls participating in a tennis competition (Bois et al., 2009).

In a competition, young wrestlers showed joy due to the positive involvement of their parents and their satisfaction with their children's activity (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986; Holt et al., 2008).

In our study, both parents were present at the competition, and the data show that swimmers would like their mothers to be more involved in emotionally supporting their participation in the competition.

As for fathers, it appears that they are more involved than mothers in supporting their children's participation in competitions, and there is no statistically significant difference between perceived and desired father behaviour.

In a study involving 37 swimmers aged 12.22 on average, more than half of them state that they were supported by both parents, one third perceived their mother's support as more relevant, while 10% perceived their father's support as more relevant (F. Javier Ponseti et al., 2016).

Data from another study show that swimmers perceive more pressure than they would like (Dasinger, 2014). Another study we consulted states that excessive parental involvement creates an additional source of pressure, and that children would prefer this involvement to take the form of encouragement, praise, and understanding (Mastrorilli & Greco, 2020). Children's perception that their parents are overly involved is associated with burnout and increased anxiety (Gould et al., 1996; Leff & Hoyle, 1995; Holt et al., 2008).

In our study, children feel some pressure from their parents but would like them to be even more involved in supporting them when it comes to participating in competitions.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our study data reveal that although the level of anxiety is quite high ( $M = 33.50$ ), children show confidence in their own abilities before the competition ( $M = 17.25$ ). There is no statistically significant difference between girls and boys in terms of total anxiety scores ( $\chi^2 = 17.92$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p = 0.59$ ).

No statistically significant differences are found between children's gender and their perceived parental pressure.

Both parents are involved in supporting athletes, with the father being considered to be the one who puts more pressure on children. As regards the perceived level of involvement of the two parents, the difference is statistically significant, with the father being more involved.

As for mother behaviour, children state that they would like their mothers to be more concerned with their results, which would provide them with support and encouragement.

The child swimmers in this study feel pressure but would like their parents to be even more involved in supporting and encouraging them when it comes to participating in competitions.

There is a statistically significant difference between perceived parental pressure and desired parental behaviour.

It is important for parents to exert some pressure on their children in sports competitions, but to try and make this pressure beneficial, in the form of praise and encouragement, thus increasing their children's chances of achieving high results and, at the same time, creating a healthy environment for young athletes' mental and emotional development.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All the authors contributed equally to the writing of the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest to declare concerning this study.

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