

International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education

Volume 8 | Number 3

Article 3

8-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Ross, Sally R.; Irwin, Carol C.; Irwin, Richard L.; Martin, Nathan T.; and Ryan, Timothy D. (2014) "The Development of Swimming Skills for African American Youth: Parent and Caregiver Perceptions of Barriers and Motivations," *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education*: Vol. 8 : No. 3 , Article 3.

DOI: 10.25035/ijare.08.03.03

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/ijare/vol8/iss3/3>

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The Development of Swimming Skills for African American Youth: Parent and Caregiver Perceptions of Barriers and Motivations

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African American urban youth participate in swimming at an alarmingly low rate with 69% self-reporting low or no swimming skill (Irwin, Irwin, Martin, & Ross, 2010). This lack of participation translates into a drowning rate three times as high as than their White/European American peers (CDC, 2009). To investigate this issue, 12 focus groups were conducted with parents and caregivers of swimming and nonswimming children at YMCAs in six American cities. Parents/caregivers who self-identified as Black or African American shared attitudes and values that impacted their child's swimming participation. Some participants in the study identified structural barriers such as a lack of time, money, or facilities. Others shared attitudes of fear and discomfort in being in and around water. Parent/caregiver attitudes had a substantial impact on children's opportunities to learn to swim. There was evidence that cultural expectations about swimming impacted the choices parents in this study made regarding swimming participation. Focus group participants shared strategies of effective messaging to influence caregiver attitudes to positively impact participation.

Keywords: African American swimming skill, negotiating barriers to swimming participation, parental attitudes toward swimming

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African American children aged 5–14 years fatally drown at a rate 3.1 times that of European American children in the same age range (CDC, 2009). Hastings, Zahran, & Cable (2006) found “being Black reduces the odds of participation in swimming by approximately 60%, even while adjusting for age, sex, and household income” (p. 908). Irwin, Irwin, Martin, and Ross (2010) found that 68.9% of African American and Black urban children had low or no skill in swimming. This lack of skill may contribute to high drowning rates and suggest many African American children may not be safe in and around water. In observing participation numbers at the highest levels of competitive swimming, it is clear that African Americans are much less involved in competitive swimming than their white peers, comprising only about 1% of the membership of USA Swimming (USA Swimming, 2010).

Leisure Constraints and African American Swimming Participation

Identifying factors that prevent African American individuals from swimming is critically important. One such framework from which to examine the relatively low participation numbers and lack of swimming skill of African Americans is through leisure constraints theory. Over the past three decades, an impressive body of work has emerged in an attempt to understand constraints to people’s leisure, and more specifically reasons why people do not participate in certain activities. Jackson (2000) defined leisure constraints as “factors that are assumed by researchers and/or perceived or experienced by individuals to limit the formation of leisure preferences and/or to inhibit or prohibit participation and enjoyment in leisure” (p. 62).

Initial studies on leisure constraints focused on limitations of a structural nature that impacted participation after leisure preferences had already been formed or established (Shaw & Dawson, 1991; Jackson, 1991). For example, the assumption was that individuals would participate in an activity if they had enough money. Structural constraints tend to be external to the participant, and if these external factors can be overcome, leisure participation patterns can then change. Additional examples of these structural limitations (whether perceived or real) include the more obvious ones like a lack of time or a lack of available recreation areas, as well as the less obvious constraints like imposed cultural norms (e.g., requirement of a fundamentalist Christian sect that every member go to church on Sunday morning; Godbey, Crawford, & Shen, 2010). A recent survey of 1,680 adults in low socioeconomic areas in six U.S. cities found that a lack of financial resources and access to swimming facilities did indeed negatively impact swimming participation rates of African American respondents (Irwin, Irwin, Ryan, & Drayer, 2009).

Woodard (1988) purported that race complicated models of structural leisure constraints and that simply overcoming structural constraints did not always lead to new leisure experiences, claiming a fear of discrimination and prejudice influenced leisure choices of African Americans. Philipp (1995) linked this discrimination with marginality and socialization that impact leisure choices and opportunities. If a person did not feel welcomed in a leisure activity and/or was not encouraged by others to participate, this activity would not be considered a viable option.

More recently, Shinew, Floyd, and Parry (2004) stated “understanding the relationship between constraints and race is important not only for furthering our

knowledge of access, choice, and enjoyment of leisure pursuits, but also for gaining greater insight into broader societal issues surrounding race” (p. 182). Leisure activities of racial and ethnic minorities are not only impacted by lack of access and resources, but also stem from culturally constrained value systems and social norms that result in certain leisure socialization patterns (Hastings et al., 2006; Floyd, 1998; Floyd & Shinew, 1999; Gramann & Allison, 1999; Philipp, 1999; Wiltse, 2007).

Chick and Dong (2005) proposed that culture, often described as beliefs and values that are learned and shared with others, proscribes and prescribes behaviors, thereby impacting leisure participation and nonparticipation. They presume that cultural expectations provide information on what people should and should not do. Such information was revealed in the current study whereby expectations about swimming impacted the choices parents made regarding swimming participation. Shinew, Floyd, McGuire, and Noe (1996) called for research that takes into consideration the unique constraints associated with the social and cultural experiences of minorities, recognizing that varied experiences often cloud the definition of structural (as well as intra- and interpersonal) constraints because they often operate differently and thus vary across cultures (Godbey, Crawford & Shen, 2010). To best understand how one’s leisure activity may be constrained, researchers must take into consideration how culture can determine one’s structural, intrapersonal, and interpersonal constraints. Furthermore, a hierarchy of social privilege exists that confounds race and culture as variables related to leisure constraints (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991; Jackson, 2005)

In the book *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, Wiltse (2007) explained how public bathing pools in the United States changed in the early part of the 20th century into constrained and contested recreational spaces that commonly barred African Americans in both the North and South. Jim Crow laws prohibited African Americans from swimming at public beaches and pools for several more decades. Philipp (1999) examined leisure pursuits of African Americans and found that when any individual feels uncomfortable or unwelcome in a leisure environment, s/he is less likely to participate, thus the relatively low numbers of African Americans who currently swim may be partially explained in an historical context.

Irwin et al. (2010) discovered that a lack of participation among African American individuals as compared with European American respondents often stemmed from concerns about personal appearance and a significantly higher fear of drowning, which depending on the culturally defined nature of each of the constraint categories (i.e., structural, intrapersonal, and interpersonal) could be considered culturally based, race-based, or even social privilege-based. This relative lack of participation applies to the current study because African American respondents perceived a lack of encouragement among parents and caregivers to ensure children were competent in the water.

Shaw and Dawson (2001) found leisure choices most often are learned within the family, and parents greatly influence their children’s play and leisure pursuits. Cultural beliefs and expectations influence interests, attitudes and behaviors, and shape decisions within families. Thus, while leisure experiences within families may be limited by structural factors such as lack of time and resources, decisions about individual leisure experiences are made within the wider cultural context.

Chick and Dong (2005) believe cultural constraints precede individual level constraints (interpersonal and intrapersonal). Shinew et al. (1996) called for research that takes into consideration unique constraints that are associated with the social and cultural experiences of minorities. To best understand how one's leisure may be constrained, researchers must take into consideration how culture can guide intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships.

Results of a follow-up study, compiled for USA Swimming and reported on the organization's website, confirmed fear of injury and drowning as strong predictors of no and/or low swimming skill, with African American respondents reporting a significantly higher fear of injury and drowning than European American respondents (Irwin, Irwin, Martin, & Ross, 2010). Lawrence (2010) corroborated these findings and hypothesized that the seeds of this fear were sown within segregation practices and beliefs thereby limiting swimming as an option for African Americans today.

In the current study, we built on the exploratory work of Irwin et al. (2009) and set out to further examine reasons for low swimming participation rates and skill among African Americans. We sought to discover attitudes toward swimming held by parents and caregivers so that we could gain information that may ultimately increase swimming participation and skill and lower unintentional drowning risks in the African American population. Thus, the two research questions guiding this study were: (a) what barriers to swimming participation are identified by African American respondents and (b) in what ways do parent/caregiver attitudes impact the swimming opportunities of their children. We also hoped to gain anecdotal information from parents and caregivers on ways to improve swimming participation rates and swimming skills of African American children.

Method

To gain a greater understanding about swimming participation and skill among African Americans, we conducted focus groups with adult parents and caregivers who were asked to share opinions and experiences about their own swim participation as well as the participation of the children in their care.

We sought to discover reasons that parents and caregivers could provide as to why their children did not swim. We also sought information from parents who encouraged their children to swim to find out reasons they gave for supporting their children in this endeavor. We asked parents and caregivers in these focus groups to brainstorm ways to increase the number of African American children who could swim and safely enjoy being in the water. Ultimately, researchers hoped to gain information that could inform strategies to improve swimming participation skill and decrease drowning rates among African Americans.

To provide a comprehensive picture about attitudes the parents and caregivers held about their children's swimming participation and skill level, we present quotes from individuals to illustrate and support various themes. Occasionally, we offer whole segments of conversations from a focus group interview to show the interactions among parents and caregivers. We discovered that participants expressed some common themes across focus groups and shared some compelling information in the process. For the purpose of this report and confidentiality, we assigned pseudonyms to all participants and identify them by city.

Participants

We purposefully and conveniently selected participants in the study from among those who used the YMCA of the USA (YMCA) branch facilities located in low-income communities with considerable numbers of minority members, as identified by YMCA administrators. A total of 72 parents or primary caregivers of young children (53 women, 12 men, and 7 who did not report their sex) from six U.S. cities (i.e., Atlanta, Boston, Denver, Memphis, Minneapolis, and San Diego) took part in the current study. Forty participants identified by YMCA staff members as having children who could swim were grouped together for the purpose of the focus groups, as were 32 individuals whose children were identified as nonswimmers. Using 2010 U.S. Census categories, 33 individuals identified their child's race as Black or African American (43.4%), 22 as Hispanic or Latino (28.9%), four as White (5.3%), three as Black Hispanic (3.9%), two as Asian Black (2.6%), two as Native American (2.6%), five in categories other than those listed above (6.5%), and one person did not report. To address our research questions, we focused on the attitudes and opinions of those participants who self-identified as Black or African American.

Procedures

Once study procedures were reviewed and approved by the university's institutional review board, researchers contacted YMCA administrators in target cities and provided, via e-mail, study objectives, interview protocol, focus group questions, and consent forms. YMCA staff members were then identified to recruit members to participate in focus group interviews to be held at their facility. Incentives offered for participation in the focus groups included light meals, beverages, a \$25.00 grocery or general merchandise gift card, and childcare provided by YMCA staff during the duration of the focus groups.

At the beginning of each focus group, introductions were made and researchers briefly described the study. Participants were told they would be sharing information about their child's swimming skill and interest, as well as their own attitudes about swimming and opinions about swimming opportunities. We asked participants to complete a demographic questionnaire and provided them with a consent form to read and sign if they wished to continue participation. All focus groups were audio and video recorded, and participants were informed that only the researchers would have access to recordings and that each participant would be assigned a pseudonym for any written reports.

At least one member of the research group facilitated each focus group session. The researchers consisted of tenured and tenure-track faculty, one who had experience in focus group methodology and who trained others in appropriate focus group facilitation techniques. All researchers collaborated on the development of the interview guide that comprised of a list of open-ended questions regarding child and parental swimming involvement and skill level, attitudes about swimming participation, and parental support for swimming lessons or other water activity. In addition to relying on the interview guide, the moderator(s) probed and requested elaboration or clarification, and compared and contrasted statements made by group members (Mariampolski, 1988). At the conclusion of each focus group the researchers met to debrief and review interview notes, discussing the recent process, and

enhanced interview questions in response to especially salient or novel responses from focus group members. The interviews were transcribed verbatim from audio tapes and video was used when necessary to identify speakers.

Data Analysis

Observation and debriefing notes taken by members of the research group who were present for focus groups were shared and discussed among researchers. Coding was performed through a process of repeated readings and interpretation of the transcripts. Researchers deliberated and identified overarching themes and patterns (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). After considering various meanings and interpretations of the data, researchers put conceptual labels on data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and assigned codes to the major quotes, key points, and themes that arose from respondents' comments across all twelve focus groups.

Results

Our analysis resulted in four primary categories emerging from the data, labeled swimming access, cultural constraints to swimming aptitude, parental perceptions that encourage swimming participation, and convincing resistant parents of the value of water competence. Higher-order categories and the themes within them are illustrated in the following text and quotations.

Swimming Access

We sought to determine if our focus group participants were impacted by structural leisure constraints commonly identified as negatively impacting minority access to recreation. Participants with children who did not swim were asked to share reasons for this lack of participation. Probing questions ultimately led to a discussion on four topics: the availability of a comfortable and safe pool in which to swim, access to transportation, sufficient finances, and discretionary time that would permit parents to allow their children to participate in swimming.

Facilities. Parents shared they had access to safe aquatic facilities in which they felt welcome. Our focus group participants were members of local YMCAs and reported being pleased with the condition of the pools, the general environment, and the way they were treated by staff members at the YMCAs.

Transportation. Focus group participants in Memphis, Denver, and San Diego reported owning automobiles and driving themselves and their children to the YMCAs. In the very large, metropolitan cities of Atlanta, Boston, and Minneapolis, public transportation was available and more highly used by subjects in this study; however, some Boston residents shared difficulties related to public transportation. The residents of this cold climate city who did not own cars reported the most difficulty traveling to pool facilities, especially during the winter months.

Finances. A lack of discretionary funds was commonly stated as a reason for nonparticipation. For families with a number of children, concern about finances became more salient as a reason for not participating in swimming lessons where

they would incur a cost above the monthly YMCA membership fees that are scaled according to income. Issues surrounding finances and pricing strategies were explored during this research with some novel findings related to the participants' perceived value of swimming lessons and swimming competence of their children, which we report later in this article.

Time. Working parents did perceive a lack of discretionary time. Parents who did not have consistent employment shared that their inability to have a set schedule resulted in difficulties in planning recurring activities for their children. Other parents admitted that after working all day, they did not always want to spend more time away from their homes, so they did not enroll their child in swim lessons which would constitute another standing commitment for the adult.

Cultural Constraints to Swimming Aptitude

The aforementioned structural leisure constraints were mentioned during the course of focus group interviews and certainly should not be discounted in findings. In the current paper, we place an emphasis on the prevalent dialogue that centered on cultural barriers to swimming participation. Sharyl, an African American mom from Boston, aptly articulated cultural expectations, sharing, "I still stick on the fact that its culture . . . I still think it's that and what you see on TV, you see a lot more of Caucasian kids or adults loving the beach, loving the water you know what I mean, being fish-like, a lot of things play into this; it's not just the statistics; it has to deal with life. I do believe that."

Facilitators explored cultural constraints in more depth to identify shared understandings of swim interest, participation, and skill levels among African Americans. Some common cultural elements that impacted participation included concerns related to personal appearance and socially constructed understandings that may serve to discourage swimming participation in the African American population.

Hair. Following up on the findings of Irwin et al. (2009), we explored issues related to personal appearance and found that conversations on appearance invariably led to discussions about hair, as participants shared a deep understanding of cultural norms and values that have long influenced hairstyles of African American girls and women (Mael, 1995; Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Waller & Norwood, 2009). While her daughter "likes to wear her hair blow dried out and straightened out," Josie, a Boston parent, believes "certain hairstyles limit opportunities for young girls," and a preference for these styles can negatively impact girls' swim participation. Nan, a Boston mom, shared, "I like the pool; I like to be in the water but me and the hair issues, no! Having to do my hair over and over again, and with the chlorine [laughs]. To be truthful, that's why I don't swim."

Rochelle was forthcoming in explaining "most African Americans don't wash their hair every day. White children are washing their hair, so it's a little easier for them." Neither Rochelle nor Josie used chemicals on their daughters' hair. Josie's daughter "will wear braids and a style that can allow her to wear it straight for a little bit but when it gets wet and it shrinks up she's okay with it." Rochelle is unwilling to have her daughter wear popular hairstyles that would limit her swimming participation, stating, "My daughter has locks in her hair so . . . I don't really care what she does." Josie resists popular notions of appropriate and constraining

hairstyles, and has told her daughter, “Beauty is not just because your hair is straight. You can wear your hair in many different styles naturally and still enjoy the sport. Right now, don’t let that be what prohibits you from being able to participate in something that you really enjoy doing.” She believes in “helping [girls] to build their self-esteem and accept who they are, that this is how you have been created by God to be . . .”

Randall, an Atlanta father, further explained, “A lot of [African American girls] won’t get in [the pool] because it will mess their hair up . . . The texture is different . . . A lot of girls do not do it.” Lena, another Atlanta parent, concurred that “the chlorine in the pool will strip all of the protein out of your hair. It’s really bad for African Americans . . .” Robert, also from Atlanta, described the time that goes into styling the hair of African American girls: “You are talking hours; it takes hours. You are talking about the time in the pool but then after the pool the hours that you have to spend getting hair ready for the next day.” Randall followed up this statement by talking about costs, explaining, “And, you are paying \$80 or \$90 to get it done.”

Jolene discussed the enormous commitment she has made so her daughters could participate in swimming:

I braid their hair for the whole week. They have swimming on Thursdays. On Fridays, I wash their hair for the whole week, and then I do it (braid hair) every weekend. On Sundays, don’t call me, don’t talk to me. I have two girls that I have to take care of. And I want to do it. You have to have a set of mind of that’s what you want.

The effort that goes into hair care particularly impacts the swimming participation of girls, as corroborated by Liane, who recalled, “Looking back I would say my brothers, they did very well because they didn’t have to deal with their hair.”

Peer pressure and overconfidence. Peer pressure was another issue parents and caregivers identified that impacts swimming aptitude and may result in higher rates of drowning for African American children, particularly males. Downplaying fear and showcasing bravado to impress others may lead to poor decisions around bodies of water especially among males. One Atlanta mom was concerned about her 14-year-old son who “thinks he can swim . . . when he’s around his friends and they’re around the water. He swims a little bit across the pool but I don’t know if he could really get out there and last a while.” A Minnesota mom shared the opinion that boys tend to be overconfident, which can jeopardize their safety:

I’m thinking about my own brother and his friends, growing up and they’re like, ‘Yeah, I know how to swim’ and they just jump in the water. I think girls, some girls, have that hesitation. They’re like, ‘I am not about to jump in that water,’ where a boy, he wants to be a boy and act like he knows how to swim, and show his friends . . . It’s kinda like that attitude, ‘oh watch me, we’re having fun, it’s just water’ . . .

An Atlanta swim coach and parent, Jonah said, “I think the people that are lifeguards know that, uh, you hear stories all the time. People walk by a pool or see a pool, especially kids, and if they are out with their peers and what not they’re not going to say I can’t do anything. And if they see their peers do it they are going

to try. Robert agreed, “For a lot of them it looks so easy.” Jonah added, “Oh I see it all the time. The boys, they try out for the school team and (say) ‘I can swim, I can swim’ . . . and you put them in and then you gotta go in after them to save them . . .”

A legacy of fear. Parents and caregivers who did not encourage, or actually discouraged, swim participation, often shared that they were fearful of water. In such cases, the adults seemed to pass their fear of water on to their children. This finding supported the work of Irwin, Irwin, Ryan, and Drayer (2011) which recognized a “legacy of fear” which serves to greatly inhibit swim participation of children with parents who were fearful of water. Boston mom, Karmen, recognized this phenomenon, stating, “A lot of parents are scared and afraid so they make their kids afraid or they don’t feel comfortable taking their kids to a pool.” Angie, from Denver, is an example of a parent whose fear of the water has impacted her children. She stated her children don’t swim because “of the fear of me not knowing how to swim . . .” She recognizes that her fear has prohibited her children from learning to swim and in essence she has passed on this legacy of fear. She shared, “Now it’s a phobia for them.”

Another nonswimming Denver parent, Shar, has a 17-year-old son who has:

. . . a big fear of the water. He won’t go in it. He doesn’t like to get water splashed on his face. He’ll wash his face with a washrag. He doesn’t like put his face in the water. He’ll hyperventilate, because he doesn’t like to have that feeling of water in his face. It’s been since he was very young. When he was a baby and we’d wash his face or his hair and he’d (gasp). You’d have to tell him ‘breathe, breathe.’ He just has never taken to the water. I saw that fear so I never put him in the water because I don’t know how to swim either. I never put him in the pools.

Atlanta mom, Marlene, cannot swim and has a 12-year-old son who is “just afraid of the water.” He’s been going to a neighbor’s pool for two years but “just sits there on the side and plays.” When asked if he could save himself if he was thrown into the pool, she was convinced, “He would just drown.”

Rather than viewing swim lessons as a means to protect their children by making them safe in and around water, parents who had a fear of water themselves hoped to keep their children out of the water altogether believing this to be a mode of protection. Liz, a mom from Boston, was one such parent who did not encourage her children to swim. She disclosed, “It’s not important so . . . I never looked into lessons for my kids because it just wasn’t that important to me. And then I’m kind of scared of them swimming.”

Fear and finances. Low socioeconomic status and a resulting lack of discretionary funds predict leisure participation patterns (Shinew, Floyd, McGuire, & Noe, 1996), and for some, swim lessons are not affordable. Tess, from Minneapolis, exemplified the very real struggle that many parents face in prioritizing swim lessons when on a limited income: “I’m not gonna say we poor or nothing, I just think it’s like us Black folks, we have more things that’s like important to be doing. I’d rather pay some life insurance on all my people . . . or my car insurance, instead of my kid going swimming. What’s more important?”

A number of focus group participants initially suggested offering free or reduced-cost lessons when asked how to increase participation in swimming. With further probing, we found that finances in isolation rarely kept children out of pools. Our findings suggest that parent/caregiver concerns about finances, couple with fear of deep water, impact swimming aptitude and opportunity for African American children. In some cases individuals were unable to overcome this fear to even consider paying for swimming lessons. Yvonne, from Denver, expressed her agony as she illustrated this point. "You're already uncomfortable and scared. You're like, 'I'm paying them so I can have heart palpitations on the sidelines.' It's not worth it. It really isn't. Why should I have to pay money to be afraid?"

Arlin, another fearful parent shared, "My baby, he's scared, so he has a fear of water . . . I fear for my baby, something might happen . . ." While Evelyn, from Minneapolis, also identified cost as one reason her daughter didn't swim, her overwhelming fear was evident. She volunteered, "I'm scared . . . I'm scared for her . . . it's the cost, and um, I'm scared . . . I'm scared for her, I don't know, I'm kinda scared, but she's not afraid. I'm scared."

Nina was also extremely fearful. She said she intends to put her 9-year-old son in swim lessons every year and shared that he often asks her if he can swim. Nina confessed, "My problem is every year 'I'm gonna put you in swimming, I'm gonna put you in swimming,' but I always delay." Some of the other parents began to challenge Nina, saying things such as, "Does he want to learn to swim?" and, "You better knock it off and let that boy swim!" Nina admitted, "I was just scared that something was going to happen to him." She then asked the group about costs and was concerned that \$60 for an 8-week session was "a lot of money." She also wanted to know, "How long does it take to swim?" to which others in the group responded that it "depends on the person." It was clear Nina cared a great deal about protecting her son and kept him out of the water because she feared water and could not bear to put her son in danger. When the interviewer turned the discussion away from swimming proficiency to being safer in and around water, Nina clearly saw the unmistakable value of lessons: Interviewer: "How much would you pay for your child to be safe in the water if he did fall into a lake or into a pool?" Nina: "Wow, see, that's hard. You made it tricky now . . . It's any amount."

Parental Perceptions That Encourage Swimming Participation

Adults who could swim saw the value in making sure their kids could swim also. We found no parents or caregivers who claimed to have an average or above-average swimming skill level who discouraged their children from swimming. Every one of the parents of nonswimming children described themselves as nonswimmers as well and provided a variety of reasons for their lack of skill. Although a number of nonswimming parents were nervous about or fearful of water, some had sought to overcome this legacy of fear. Dierdre, a Boston mom, maintained parents must contend with a fear of water to have a swimming child: "We all have our personal fears. We need to tell our kids about what they need to do. Because we're all freaked out. You know what I mean? So it's pushing . . . forcing yourself to look away from that mentality." Liane also expressed, "I think if the parents feel comfortable, it's easier for them to transfer that comfort to their kids."

Parents and caregivers who wanted their children to swim prioritized this activity. Some wanted to provide an opportunity for their children that they did not have when young. Others expressed a desire to feel secure when their children were around water. Regardless of the reason parents and caregivers shared for wanting their children to swim, a common theme among these parents was their willingness to fully commit to swim lessons—emotionally, financially, and temporally. Jonah, an African American dad from Atlanta who described himself as an accomplished swimmer, discussed the need for parents to value swimming enough to make the necessary commitment for their children to learn.

[Swimming is] a learning [sic] sport. It requires you to have someone teach you to do it. To teach someone to do the sport, it requires money and you have to pay for lessons. If you have the money to do it . . . then it requires time . . . I make it a priority. No matter what comes up I know have to be at swimming from five to six because it is a priority and anything else is just going to have to wait. And those two things, that's money and making it a priority, I think Black folk, African Americans, have not put the time and effort into doing that. They don't put their money into teaching their kids how to swim.

Gloria responded to Jonah, sharing that she did prioritize learning to swim and had her child in lessons. The struggle to pay for these lessons remained a concern. While she acknowledged the financial hardship, her will to ensure she has a swimming child is apparent in the following sentiments, "It's very expensive because . . . I started my daughter with private lessons, and it was like \$55 a lesson. We were doing 2 lessons a week so you know, it gets very expensive over time. I was like 'how many lessons is this going to take?'" Jonah reiterated the commitment that is necessary by adding, "It requires time and time and time," to which Gloria replied, ". . . I can see the improvement so it's not like I am going to stop. You see the progress being made . . . it just has to be a priority you know, but if I had one or two children then I don't know if I could do it."

While free or reduced cost lessons were sometimes mentioned as a way to get kids in the water, Rachel from Boston defended charges for swim lessons with a professional:

In order to get a professional to teach your child how to swim they have to get paid, too. The cost has to come from somewhere. You can't expect anything for free because that person has a family or that person has bills and responsibilities. If you want to just sort of get anybody to teach your child to swim then you won't have to pay for it, but if you want to get a professional that knows what they're doing, and you care about that person and their welfare, you are going to have to pay.

Felicity described the commitment she made to make sure her daughter could swim by persevering in swim lessons:

It took her more time and more classes (than her sister) to really learn how to swim . . . I didn't stop the lessons and I didn't push her either. And they were very good, the instructors were very good over here, and they really didn't push them. They sort of had them feel their way into the water. So it worked

out well . . . We just kept coming and we were determined. We kept spending money but we were determined.

Sharyl revealed that while she loves sitting around the pool or being at the ocean, she does not swim. She attributes her lack of skill to the fact that her parents also did not swim. She wanted her children to be swimmers and stated, “My son can swim because I felt it was important to have them be able to get in the water and not be afraid of it. My daughter, she’s just starting so she’s not as advanced as my son, but I think with just more swimming lessons she’ll get better.” Sharyl clearly realized that swimming skill takes time and she is treating swim lessons as a long-term commitment.

Gail from Boston, also a nonswimmer, found comfort in the fact that her child had learned to swim, “My son is a swimmer. It was important to me because I am not. I always wanted my children to know to swim so at a young age I began to get her lessons. She has had a lot of private lessons. I didn’t know if anything would happen and I wouldn’t be able to help her because I can’t swim.” Donna from Boston stated, “[My girls] wanted swimming and I know it’s better for them. I don’t know how to swim . . . I don’t want to limit my kids. I want them to get the best of what I didn’t get which is swimming lessons.”

Keeping kids in the water. Of those who had enrolled their children in swimming lessons, many expressed feeling most comfortable when they could supervise their child’s actions. Some shared that the nature of swim lessons, where a parent/caregiver turns their child over to a swim instructor, lessened their degree of comfort. Some adults who could not swim were adamant that they would not leave the pool area during swim lessons. If their children protested these caregivers would not hesitate to pull them from the water. Others shared a belief that it was best for them to leave the pool deck when their child was initially learning how to swim. Still others thought their encouragement was important and made it a point to overcome the inclination to protect their children by removing them from a potentially uncomfortable situation as they were first learning to swim. Nan, whose child does not swim, admitted, “I’m one of those nervous mothers . . . and once she cries I take her out . . . she knows, ‘If I panic, if mommy feels like anything is going wrong, it’s over.’ She knows that about me, like as soon as she starts getting uncomfortable I jump right in.” Similarly, single mom, Liane, who has a 3-year-old son who is comfortable getting into the pool for lessons, said she would not entertain leaving the pool area during lesson time. She said, “I just don’t have the comfort level of other people . . . So it’s more of my issue, not his. He doesn’t really care one way or another.”

Finding the courage to leave. A number of adults recognized that having parents and caregivers at swim lessons may be problematic. Another Boston mom, Lana, was adamant in her opinion that parents should not attend lessons: “If you don’t have a parent at the lesson, the child will most likely get over the fear as long as there’s a good instructor because the instructor is going to say ‘It’s ok. You can do it.’ That way parents that have their own fear can step away.” Sheila provided the following example: “My children, they like for me to be there, but I know that if they look like something is going on, then I have to step back because if I am always right there and I grab them, maybe that’s not the good thing to do.” Macy

admitted, "I had to [leave]. If not, they would have always looked at me when they were getting nervous, so when [my child] was 3, I stepped out."

Dierdre originally stayed in the pool area during her daughter's lessons, but then found it to be more beneficial if she was not on the pool deck.

The director did ask me to just kind of peek in [and said], 'Go somewhere you can see her but she can't see you,' so that's what I did. At the beginning I was trying not to stay because I thought she was just not doing as well as she should or could because she was getting frightened and looking back at me . . . She's doing a lot better. I let her fight through it. It probably hurt me more than it was hurting her. The director just kept saying, 'She'll be fine.' That face, it was just, 'Please help me,' but I did let her cry and I fought through those feelings . . .

Combating fears to encourage kids. Stephanie did stay in the pool area during her son's lessons, but resisted the temptation to interfere and instead made a decision to be encouraging despite her own fears. When her son looked to her she would say things such as, "Yes. Good job!" She also shared, "And he just wanted that little thumbs up" reinforcing her son's thoughts of, "I'm doing a good job, Mommy, right?"

Karmen was resolute in stating, "I'm one of those parents that's like 'you can do it' and 'you're gonna do it' and 'my will is stronger than yours.' My daughter had a strong will but I was like, 'Okay, you can cry it out, or you can do it.' She's young now so I can make her do it, but when she gets older if she chooses not to swim that's one thing, but she will have the ability to swim. Trina talked about her son's first lessons and despite his reservations she insisted he continue. "It was truly torture. He was the kid screaming on the side of the pool the whole time. He went every time, but he would scream his head off. For whatever reason, it's in the past and you really can't get him out of the water now."

Liane described a troubling event at a recent swim lesson in which her young son let go of the wall and went under water without the instructor's permission or supervision. He had to be pulled from the water. She explained,

I started asking him if he was okay and he said his belly was hurting and (was) sort of rubbing his belly and I was like, 'George, you have to stay on the wall. You know you're supposed to' . . . Then I was like, 'Are you ready to go back in?' . . . I'm trying to be very forward thinking about the situation and not have him develop a fear so I'm just trying to keep encouraging him even though that situation happened and it freaked me out afterwards. But I [believe] you have to go back in the water, you can't develop a fear about this, that's why I'm here. I just said 'everything is okay, you're alright, go back in.' And, he went back in and had a good time.

Karmen asserted, "I believe in the push, I mean mine, I don't think she was afraid . . . she's just stubborn. I just believe in pushing and if you can do it you're gonna do it. I mean I think that's how my daughters work . . . I told my baby girl 'you're gonna swim,' and she did. So, you know, it's all in the push."

Getting parents in the water. Angeline, a nonswimming mom from Atlanta, shared the helplessness she feels as her fear of the water precludes her from even

watching her children swim, “When you don’t swim, you do have a fear . . . I don’t try and stand out there and watch them because if they drown, there ain’t nothing I can do but scream.” While some parents retained a fear of the water, others enrolled in swim lessons as adults. These parents eagerly shared attitudes of determination and willingness to conquer fears or overcome obstacles that have kept them, and could have prohibited their children, from learning to swim. Rita has started taking lessons so that she would not feel vulnerable around the water, “If I don’t know how to swim, and say if my child is in the water or anywhere, how would I save them? You know?”

The parents who made an effort to learn how to swim as adults mentioned that they wanted to inspire their children. There were also some parents who were contemplating learning and, in fact, after some of the focus group sessions, there were parents who proclaimed they would commit to learning. Crystal, from Boston, was one such parent, sharing, “I think it is important for me to get back in the water because I did take [lessons] a couple of times . . . I think it’s important for us to get in there because if we get in there . . . We’ve got to get our hair wet [causes group to laugh]. If they’re afraid, we’re afraid too, but I think they learn from us.” Crystal believed parental encouragement was especially important, stating, “We’re all leaders, and we’re the ones that can direct them.”

Kristina was another nonswimming parent who committed to lessons. Her will to learn how to swim in support of her daughter is apparent in the following dialogue with the interviewer:

Kristina: I don’t swim. I’m taking swim lessons. I am currently taking lessons because my daughter wanted to learn to swim. She started in September, and we’re not a swimming family.

Interviewer: So no brothers, sisters, parents [swim]?

Kristina: Nope.

Interviewer: But you’re learning?

Kristina: Yeah.

Interviewer: How’s that going?

Kristina: It’s going [group laughter].

Convincing Resistant Parents of the Value of Water Competence

While there were nonswimming parents and caregivers who realized the value of providing swim lessons for their children, there were others who had not yet made the commitment to have their children learn to swim. Focus group sessions provided an opportunity for individuals to learn from one another and at the conclusion of some sessions, group members stated a future intention to encourage their children to swim in spite of their own hesitation. Despite having a child who does not swim, Drina, a Denver mom, understood: “. . . if you know what you’re doing, if someone teaches you, you don’t have those accidents where you ingest too much water.”

Nonswimming mom, Sharyl, believed,

You have to educate the person on the benefits of it. How it is going to help not only them as a family? It will help their child, as well as their future and future generations of their family because I think to limit them when you don't understand something, you fear it and that is in all realms of life. When you don't have an understanding or really the gist of what's trying to be promoted then you fear it or you argue against it because you don't know . . . There should be something where parents can sort of sit and watch and be educated . . . Once you see things happening sometimes you tend to be able to say, 'Oh it's not that bad. The kids are loving it. Why am I so fearful of it?'

Mom Caty immediately agreed, stressing, "Parental involvement is crucial. It is."

Parents and caregivers must gain awareness of the importance of swimming proficiency, and for many to encourage their children to swim means they must contend with their own fear of the water and lack of swimming skill. Rita, from Boston, was one parent who experienced a change of heart about swimming as she participated in the focus group: "I think it's important for us to encourage them. Sitting here thinking about it, the more I think I really need to get back in [the pool]."

Sharyl also stressed the following: "We need to educate the parents of the importance of swimming as a lifesaving skill . . . Cause they didn't swim. They survived. [They think] 'so, why do I need to bother?'" Liane, who also does not swim, followed up with an idea about sharing the sobering statistics about drowning rates of African American children to influence parents: "I don't think people know the statistics. Letting the parents know the real statistics I think can make a big difference." Cassandra from Minneapolis also believed promoting swimming by focusing on drowning statistics would be helpful: "I definitely think that it would scare people, but it definitely would get them in the door." Sophia from Boston was herself influenced by hearing about drowning risks to African American children: "In reality too, you won't even think that swimming is that important until you're actually saying drowning because now you're like 'what about if my child drowns?'" It never crossed my head. What would be . . . what would I do?"

Additional Focus Group Recommendations

Consider the messenger. Flyers handed out in YMCAs or in schools were not parents' preferred method for receiving information. In fact, one San Diego parent bluntly stated that "flyers don't work." Parents in this focus group wanted the message delivered to them by someone in their community that they could relate to who had taken advantage of swimming programs for their own children.

A Boston parent recalled seeing a video of very young children saving themselves after falling into pools. This video left a powerful impression on this mother, and others in the group also recalled seeing the same video. Building on this concept, some parents suggested sending DVDs home with children, as parents would be apt to view a video. Building on the concept of video messages, one Boston mother suggested having a popular character advocate swimming in a video entitled, "Elmo Swims!"

Educate parents through healthcare professionals. One Boston mom who worked with the federal Women, Infant, and Child (WIC) program in her city suggested training healthcare workers and WIC employees to educate young mothers on the importance of swim lessons for young children.

Inform parents of future opportunities for swimming kids. Parents in a Boston focus group discussed future job opportunities their children could be eligible for because of their swimming skill. They shared that positions in lifeguarding and swim instruction paid much better than other summer jobs and that there were always opportunities available. Parents also discussed the potential for expert swimmers to gain scholarships to continue their participation on a college team.

Affordability, convenience, and incentives. Insuring that lessons were affordable was mentioned as a desirable approach to convince parents to get their children in the water. Low prices and incentives for completion were ways some parents thought others would be convinced to get their children enrolled in swim programs. Others believed mandatory swimming programs in schools would be a good way for kids to learn the skills they needed.

Discussion

Responses from this research study revealed numerous assorted reasons African American children participate in swimming at much lower rates than other groups. The focus group participants expanded upon prominent cultural values that become barriers to swimming and parent/caregiver attitudes that work in concert to positively or negatively impact swimming aptitude of African American children. Some research has found that after controlling for income, race was still a significant variable associated with drowning. Saluja et al. (2006) suggested that income is only partially responsible for the discrepancy in drowning rates between ethnicities. Lower-income families may have an increased risk because they have fewer opportunities to participate in swimming lessons, and thus lack swimming skills and experience in the water. "Cultural factors also may be important when examining drowning risks. These factors need to be defined, understood, and targeted toward drowning prevention efforts" (Saluja et al., 2006, p. 731). Although experts have noted that a higher exposure to swimming would lead to an increase in the number of fatal and nonfatal drowning events (Smith, 1995), recent research has pointed to the importance of swimming skill instruction to prevent drowning (Brenner, Taneja, Haynie, et al., 2009; Yang, Nong, Li, Feng, & Lo, 2007).

Structural constraints to leisure such as lack of transportation, time, and finances can limit access to aquatic facilities and learn-to-swim programs. Although a limitation of our study may be the fact that focus group participants were members of their local YMCAs that use a sliding scale based on income to assess membership, this convenience sample certainly yielded some interesting findings. Throughout the various focus group interviews, individuals commonly noted a deficiency of adequate swimming pools in their communities as a reason children do not learn to swim. Despite the impression that local pools were absent or substandard, these parents/caregivers had joined a YMCA branch that was accessible, had a sufficient pool, and offered swim lessons. However, only some of the parents were taking advantage of these lessons. Many parents shared structural and cultural barriers as

reasons for a lack of enrollment in swimming classes (for their own children and others), even though there was a sufficient, welcoming facility available.

Some individuals, particularly those in large cities who were dependent upon public transportation, had more challenges getting to their YMCA than others, though all were willing and able to attend. Financial constraints sometimes precluded the ability to participate in activities that were not covered in general membership fees, such as swimming. A learn-to-swim program that is perceived to be affordable may be beneficial in increasing swimming participation rates. To get African American children into the water, it became clear from our focus groups that parents and caregivers must contend with a myriad of cultural constraints and a history of discrimination that has impacted activity preferences and values. They must be convinced that swimming is a requisite skill that will help their children be safer.

Value of the Messenger

A key solution that we not only heard about in several focus groups, but actually experienced during a few of these interviews was the issue of the “messenger.” A trusted, enthusiastic neighbor who has a widespread audience of friends and family is vital to helping other neighbors, friends, and family members become comfortable with registering their children in swimming lessons. The trust factor helps to motivate any fearful parent or caregiver. The messenger is central to many social marketing plans, and swimming programming initiatives are no different. Research demonstrates that a communications campaign delivered by a source, or spokesperson, deemed by recipients to be *attractive* and *credible* is significantly more likely to influence recipient attitude and behavior (Irwin, Sutton, & McCarthy, 2008). A key characteristic of source attractiveness is cultural understanding while source credibility is heavily affected by traits such as expertise and trustworthiness. A source’s expertise is drawn from their knowledge, skill, or experience with the topic (Irwin, Sutton, & McCarthy, 2008).

In addition, it may be of value for adept messengers to reframe the discussion on swimming depending on their audience. Having a credible messenger promote the value of teaching children how to swim will be sufficient to encourage some parents and caregivers to invest time and money in swimming lessons; however, others may need an alternate message.

Value of the Message to the Audience

Promoting swimming in other ways, such as a life-saving skill, an excellent physical activity throughout the lifespan, and as having the potential for educational and employment opportunities, may be convincing to those limited in finances and/or time, and who might not prioritize swimming over other interests or needs. Barriers to swimming lessons are then potential constraints to each child’s future. Aquatic employment opportunities such as lifeguarding, swimming instruction, and pool facility management require a basic understanding of swimming. Having no opportunity to learn how to swim completely eliminates any possibility for a college athletic scholarship in swimming. In many areas of the U.S., police officers are required to pass a swimming test, so entry into this profession may preclude anyone who does not know how to swim. In a study of cadets at the U.S. Military

Academy, Mael (1995) found that as a group, African Americans were less proficient at swimming, largely because fewer of these cadets learned to swim at a young age. The U.S. Navy's Sea, Air, and Land team (SEALs) recently cited a need for more diversity due to a continued lack of minority youth possessing the requisite swimming competence. A lack of diversity in this special operations force has been considered a threat to national security, and there have been several recent initiatives by the U.S. Navy to overcome this deficiency (Fuentes, 2012). Mael (1995) found that with intensive training, all cadets could achieve some swimming proficiency before graduation, but he noted that most accomplished swimmers learned swimming skills at younger ages.

Value of Recognizing Cultural History

Reasons for the swimming and drowning racial gap are likely partially founded in history. The focus group respondents talked about the historical roots of fear, and discussions touched on how the Jim Crow segregation era involving swimming pools was an important factor in why they did not learn how to swim. Wiltse (2012) highlights this past division of race and pools as a logical explanation for today's swimming skill ineptitude.

Further, swimming instruction was included in many U.S. physical education programs during the 1950s and 1960s as many junior high and high school facilities were built with pools. But as the post-World War II Baby Boomers entered the school systems in massive numbers during the 1960s and 1970s, economic limitations created greater consequences for school districts. Thus, swimming pools, which are expensive to build and to maintain, were eliminated from both newer and older school facilities, and swimming was eliminated from school-based curricular programming in the U.S. At the same point in time, there was a large increase in the number of private backyard pools being built in the more affluent suburban areas of large cities, while a substantial number of municipal pools inside the urban areas of cities were being closed (Wiltse, 2012). It may be possible that elevated minority drowning rates could be an unintended consequence of these relatively recent historical events. As a side note, the United Kingdom has for many years mandated swimming instruction in their National Curriculum for all school-aged children (United Kingdom Department of Education, 2013). The drowning rate for this island was 0.6 per 100,000 in 2007 while the U.S. rate was 1.13 (International Life Saving Federation, 2007).

Educating adults about the importance of encouraging their children to learn to swim and become safer around the water while also providing support to overcome structural and cultural constraints is important to positively impact the swimming aptitude of African American children. If more African American children learn to swim and are safer around the water, they can competently enjoy the water, and the high drowning rates would likely decrease. Parents must be educated in the value of swim lessons. One focus group attendee who was a former employee of the federally supported WIC program expressed that it would be helpful to have counselors in the WIC program provide new mothers with information about swimming lessons and ways to keep their children safer around water. Perhaps an effort to convince parents that swimming skill level is a vital life skill would allow cultural values to mirror those of Bill, an African American dad from Atlanta who

learned to swim as an adult and is making sure his children have that opportunity: “It’s a matter-of-fact experience. [Swimming] is just something that we do. When I was growing up, we didn’t have access like that . . . So, it is just something that my kids do. So, they expect to be swimmers.”

This research explored why minority African American youth are less likely to learn to swim and thus less frequently participate in swimming activities. A lack of parental support for acquiring swimming skills was apparent in some of the individuals interviewed for this research study. This may be one reason drowning rates for African American children are disproportionately higher in U.S. society than for other groups (Laosee, Gilchrist, & Rudd, 2012). The tragedy of these deaths is compounded by the fact that many fatal drowning incidents may be avoided. Our study found that many barriers to swimming participation are modifiable. Parent/caregiver perceptions and attitudes, cultural norms related to swimming, motivation, and access all impact participation. Convincing parents and caregivers of the importance of swimming skills for their children is paramount. Focus groups provided recommendations to improve communication by having a trusted messenger deliver poignant messages about safety, fitness, education and occupational opportunities that would be salient for diverse audiences. Meaningful education for parent/caregivers about the benefits of swimming skill is necessary combined with the critical appreciation for the extraordinary level of fear of drowning that may preclude other didactic efforts. Faced with this knowledge, aquatic experts and swimming instructors should be ready not only to teach the child how to swim, but to assist parents emotionally through the lessons as well. Understanding and dealing effectively with these obstacles and barriers will help save lives.

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