

# PARENTS' SUPPORT IN THE SPORTS CAREER OF YOUNG GYMNASTS

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## **Abstract**

*From the very first moment of entrance in sports up to the time of their successful achievements, parents have a pronounced influence on the sport's career of their children. This influence is readily seen when the parent's dedicated involvement and investment, both emotional and financial, put into the support they give to their children in sports is taken into account. This is all done with the objective that their young athlete may stay involved and reach their full potential. To describe the parental support in the context of Brazilian Artistic Gymnastics in formative categories, this study addressed the perceptions that young gymnasts have toward the behavior and attitude of their parents through a field research conducted among 29 sport institutions involving a total of 163 athletes. We have found that parental support enabled and greatly influenced the child's entering into sports, their access to the practice of a sport, their level of participation, their degree of involvement, and their physical and emotional wellbeing. Moreover, the parental support is crucial to the commitment and dedication of the young gymnast. However, when this support is perceived in a negative way it can result in stress, conflicts between parents and children, burnout and may provoke dropout.*

**Keywords:** *artistic gymnastics, parents, youth sports.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

To achieve high performance in Artistic Gymnastics (AG), young gymnasts need to develop complex motor coordination that is associated with the technical accuracy, strength, endurance, speed, flexibility and persistence needed to withstand long hours of training. The technical mastery, virtuosity and courage of the great icons of AG fascinate children and many of them get motivated to be like the new star or gymnastics pro.

The young gymnasts get into the gymnastic culture and soon they are challenging the laws of physics as they learn

to execute technical and precise movements that are only possible with a lot of discipline, commitment, determination and passion.

This passion is defined by Gustafsson, Hassmén and Hassmén (2011) as a strong interest by the individual for the activity that he enjoys and considers important and in which he invests time and effort. Although children and young people can find their own passions in sports for themselves, they need the support of parents so that their participation and athletic success to be possible.

Parents, in their many different ways, play a vital role in supporting the involvement of their children and young people in competitive sports (Côté, 1999). According to Fraser-Thomas and associates (2008), parents are responsible for introducing their children to practice sport and provide the necessary means and resources so that the children remain active in it.

In addition, parents play an important role in the wellbeing of their young athletes. Cogan and Vidmar (2000) considered that without parental support and assistance, both emotional and financial, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for a gymnast to achieve success. Shannon Miller, the great star of women's AG in the U.S. during the nineties, exemplified the importance that parents have in the life of an athlete: "My parents supported me throughout my journey. (...) they made sure that I knew that no matter what happened; I knew they loved me, as a daughter, not only as a gymnast" (Cogan & Vidmar, 2000, p.112).

Parents are a great source of support during childhood and, in AG, they are essential and are the primary reason for children entering this sport, since, the initiation to this sport must occur at a tender age due to its specific demands. Baxter-Jones and Maffulli (2003) reported that 42% of the interviewed gymnasts in their study attributed their inclusion in sports to the influence of parents. Furthermore, children depend on the parents to transport them to practices, to encourage a correct diet, to give emotional support, to cover costs of training, among other factors.

Although the involvement and support of parents in sports, to a large extent, are associated as being positive, Karen and Vidmar (2000) warn that many parents who are overly enthusiastic in their support of their children, can damage the careers of their young athletes. Some parents have difficulty perceiving that their degree of involvement in sports can be understood by the children, in some cases, as a source of stress (Kanters, Bocarro & Casper, 2008).

According to Nunomura (2008), some parents require results, impose strict diet rules and interfere with the work of the coaches. Although the goal of these parents is to provide everything that can help and encourage the athlete to achieve their sporting potential, their involvement can harm and negatively influence the child's participation in sports (Woolger & Power, 1993). Jowett and Timson-Katchis (2005) and Hellstedt (1987) point out that when parental influence becomes excessive and negative, it can cause anxiety, stress, sport fatigue, burnout and dropout.

Many parents are influenced by the contemporary sporting culture and establish standards of success in which victory is over emphasized, and, in some cases, they use their children's progress for their own status and personal objectives. According to Doherty (1999), this parental attitude has consequences that can cause physical and psychological damage that will last the entire lifetime of the athlete.

Hoping to ascertain what parental support does in the context of Brazilian formative categories in competitive AG, this study addressed the perceptions of young gymnasts as to the behavior and attitude of their parents through a field research conducted in 29 sports institutions that involved a total of 163 athletes.

Through the interviews it will be possible to better understand how the gymnasts perceive parental support and how their attitudes and behaviors can influence, positively or negatively, the process of the training of their athletes. The data obtained in this study may provide a basis for the work of coaches and parents in order to provide positive experiences that can contribute to success in sports and other areas of life of the young gymnasts.

## METHODS

In this study, we chose the qualitative research approach. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, for we believe that this technique with the presence of the

researcher enhances and allows individuals to have the freedom and spontaneity necessary to collaborate with the study (Triviños, 1987).

For the selection of participants in the research, we consulted the state federations aiming to identify the sports institutions who had participated in the state and national competitions in the age-group categories of our research scope. In men's AG the Pre-Infant<sup>1</sup>, Infant<sup>2</sup>, Infant-Juvenile<sup>3</sup> and Juvenile<sup>4</sup> categories were addressed; and in women's AG Pre-Infant<sup>5</sup>, Infant<sup>6</sup> and Juvenile<sup>7</sup>.

The range of the study was restricted to the State of São Paulo and the cities of Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba and Porto Alegre due to the representativeness of these places in the competitive scenario of Brazilian AG. The subjects were presented by the abbreviation A (athlete) followed by a number, a feature adopted for purposes of organization and identity secrecy.

The participation of the gymnasts was of a spontaneous nature and the interviews were conducted on-site. Thus, we interviewed 163 gymnasts that were distributed in 29 sport institutions, as follows: 40 boys and 123 girls.

For data processing we used the Content Analysis technique proposed by Bardin (2010). The collected data was organized and analyzed in three steps: pre-analysis, the study of the material and then inference. We emphasize that our interest was not to perform a quantitative analysis of the testimony of the gymnasts, but to analyze and expound on the latent content of the messages given.

The study was submitted to the Ethics and Research Committee of the School of Physical Education and Sport, University of São Paulo, and received a favorable assent for its realization. It also received financial

support from the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP).

According to Van Rossum (2004), sport performance is influenced by the result of the interaction of factors relating to the quantity and quality of training, besides the innate talent of the individual. However, the authors affirm that social and cultural factors and parental support are essential to achieve the sport's high level of performance, an opinion corroborated by Hedstrom and Gould (2004) and Côté (1999).

In recent decades, sports for the Children and Pre-Teen were being constituted in practices that have become "increasingly privatized, regionally located, expensive, performance-oriented, and highly structured in terms of participation schedules" (Coakley, 2006, p. 159). These factors make the children to be more dependent on parental involvement so that their participation in sports is possible. According to Cogan (2008), in the case of AG, parents are always involved, because the gymnasts start their systematic training at a tender age.

In literature, authors such as Holt et al. (2009) cited in Ede et al. (2012) define this parental involvement as the level of interest, the degree of their knowledge and the active role that parents play in the participation of sports for their children. And, according to Hedstrom and Gould (2004), this involvement may vary from a driver to a role such being an assistant coach or official.

The parental involvement can influence the career of the young gymnasts in different ways. In the opinion of Vilani and Samulski (2002), a successful career in sports depends, to a large extent, on the family members because they can provide a favorable environment conducive to the development of the athlete. This can be proved by analyzing the athlete process of training, because we realize that parental involvement is proportional to the competitive level of the children. This fact is evidenced by the massive involvement, dedication and emotional and financial

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<sup>1</sup> 9-10 years of age

<sup>2</sup> 10-12 years of age

<sup>3</sup> 12-14 years of age

<sup>4</sup> 14-18 years of age

<sup>5</sup> 9-10 years of age

<sup>6</sup> 10-12 years of age

<sup>7</sup> 12-15 years of age

investment that parents have to apply to provide an environment where young athletes can remain involved and manifest their full potential in sports (Weiss & Weiss, 2007)

In AG, parents are essential in the formation, development and stability of the career of the young gymnast and are considered as a key factor for success in this sport as they are the instruments used as a catalyst for successful sports (Cogan, 2008). Their influence is prominent and, in the opinion of Lally and Kerr (2008), parents are responsible for inserting their children in this sport, and besides that, for encouraging and directing their children and young teens into competitive teams. In the words of the authors, "this early introduction was followed by years of strenuous training and competing for the athlete and years of imposing material, financial, and emotional sacrifices for the parents" (p. 43).

According to Fredricks and Eccles (2004), parents play different roles in the sport life of their children, namely: provider, interpreter and role model.

The role of provider means making the access of children to sports possible. Actions include offering transportation to practices, competitions, training camps and financially supporting the young athlete himself. The function of the interpreter is related to the influence that parents exert in values, beliefs, expectations and the perceptions of competence relative to the involvement in sports. And, being the role model covers that influence the parents have as an example to be followed, including the performance of a motor skill or showing commitment and how to relate to other people in the sport environment (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004).

While performing these roles, parents are involved in the sports career of their children with different intensities. Hellstedt (1987) classifies this parental involvement as being under-involved, moderate, to over-involved. These levels reflect the degree of involvement, interest, knowledge and how the parents act in the sporting lives of their children.

Parents who are under-involved are characterized by the lack of functional support, both emotional and financial. Hellstedt (1987) relates that parents with low levels of engagement show little interest in following competitions, invest fewer resources in the acquisition of sport equipment, do not participate in those actions that are aimed at raising funds for the team and do not seek to discuss the development of children with their coaches.

Moderate parents are characterized by flexibility, but also direct the sports career of their children with much firmness. The decision of the young athlete's participation and performance in sports belongs to the children, although the parents give many incentives. Unlike the parents that are under-involved, moderates seek feedback from the coaches on the development of their children in the sport and they can distinguish their role as parents from that of the coach. In addition, they assist in setting realistic goals by offering financial and emotional support without exaggeration (Hellstedt, 1987).

Parents who demonstrate excessive involvement overemphasize victory and exhibit characteristics of those who cannot distinguish between their needs from those of their children. Part of their own self-esteem is related to the success of their children and they seek to realize their unfulfilled expectations, dreams, and desires through their children by setting goals that, in most cases, are unrealistic. Amanda Borden, one of the stars of the U.S. team for the 1996 Olympics, says "(some parents) live through their kids (...)" (Cogan & Vidmar, 2000, p.114).

According to Hellstedt (1987), parents with these characteristics have expectations that their children's success in sports will bring them financial and/or educational opportunities (such as scholarships). The excessive involvement is reflected also in their monitoring practices and/or competition by offering higher than necessary financial backing as well as interfering in coach-athlete relationships. This comes about because parents with this

over-involved behavior want to make the decisions and play the role of "coach". Cogan and Vidmar (2000) characterize these parents as those who, during practices and competitions, shout more instructions than the coaches do, criticize and over-demand good scores from their children.

Sacks, Pargman and Tenenbaum (2008) point out that we must pay special attention when defining the degree of parental involvement and the use of the definitions cited above because this all reflects a view that is one-dimensional and linear. The authors believe that it would be better to understand the parental involvement in a multidimensional manner in which interactions could be classified and would include "healthy" and "unhealthy" behavior. It is true that a parent can be classified as over-involved, yet in a healthy manner. This means that the important thing is not just the intensity of their involvement, but if their involvement reflects a qualitative and adequate form of interaction.

The multidimensional aspect is also presented in the different ways the children themselves perceive things. One athlete can understand parental support as acceptable and even desirable, while another sees the same type of support as a source of stress (Wuerth et al. 2004). Thus, we can infer that "the impact of parent behaviors is entirely dependent upon the child's interpretation of those behaviors" (Kanters, Bocarro & Casper, 2008, p. 66). Therefore, we agree with Ede et al. (2012) who understand it is fundamental to consider the perceptions of the children to better understand parental involvement in the sporting context, and, in the case of our study, if such is perceived as positive or negative by the children.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### WOMEN'S ARTISTIC GYMNASTICS

Baxter-Jones and Maffulli (2003), Headstrom and Gould (2004) and Araujo (2005), see the family environment as the most important source of influence to meet the conditions the child needs for reaching

success in his life as an athlete. According to reports obtained in the study, we came to realize that most children perceive their parents as major motivators, which is favorable to progress in the sports career. (Sanmartin, 1995; Baxter-Jones & Maffulli, 2003; Headstrom & Gould, 2004). In Table 1, the positive and negative aspects of parental support as perceived by young gymnasts are listed in the Pre-Infant, Infant and Juvenile.

By analyzing the positive aspects, we found that the Recording Unit "accompany the activities" is present in all three of the women's categories approached in the study. The gymnasts reported that the parents accompany their workouts and, more frequently, participate in the competition. As examples, we list the following statements: *"always come to watch the competition"* (A157), *"they come to see the practices"* (A73), *"come to follow the competition"* (A125), *"accompanying the competition"* (A152), and others. According to Cogan and Vidmar (2000), some parents engage with great interest when accompanying the practice sessions of their children. And many of them come to know the terminology of the sport and the judging process. When they are present during the competition, the authors believe that "parents can share in the triumphs and accomplishments and assist to cope with the disappointments" (p. 112). Only one gymnast said that she does not appreciate that her parents come to the competition because it is distracting. This may be related to the fear of failure that may come from the parent's expectations as a source of stress (Gould, Horn & Spreemann, 1983).

Another Recording Unit categorized as positive and that emerged in the three categories was "encouraging". The answers did not have a vast explained content, but they lead us to understand that parental involvement is expressed through different ways and intensity of encouragement such as: *"they support me a lot"* (A47), *"their encouragement gives me strength"* (A35), *"gives strength when I'm tired"* (A68), *"when I want to quit, they say: you have*

chances" (A24), "wish me good luck in the competition, congratulate me for a good practice" (A131), "(encourage me to go to

training) saying that I cannot miss" (A109), among other reports.

Table 1. *Positive and negative aspects of parental support as perceived by the gymnasts.*

CATEGORY	PRE-INFANT	INFANT	JUVENILE
	RECORDING UNIT		
POSITIVE ASPECTS	Accompany the activities Encouraging	Accompany the activities Encouraging	Accompany the activities Encouraging
	Concerned with health issues	Concerned with health issues	Concerned with health issues
	Seek financial resources Have expectations Logistic support	Provides Comfort	Provides Comfort
NEGATIVE ASPECTS	Concerned with health issues	Concerned with health issues	Concerned with health issues
	Source of pressure	Source of pressure	
	Worry about studies	Source of distraction Discouragement	Source of pressure
NEUTRAL	Apathetic/Indifferent	-	-
DID NOT KNOW HOW TO RESPOND	Not able to define support	-	-

We observed that the parent's behavior, in a great measure, regard to the emotional support. According to Martens (2001), parents should provide their children with an environment that corroborates with the practice of sports and encouragement is crucial in this context. Babkes and Weiss (1999) quote that the perception of children and young people about the behavior and attitudes of parents, in support of sports, is related to their sense of competence and motivation, something corroborated by Brustad (1988) and this confirms the importance of parental encouragement.

The interviews also revealed the interest of parents for the satisfaction and well-being of their children. In Pre-Infant category, the gymnasts A5 and A50 mentioned that their parents accompany the development of their athletic career and ask them if they feel good about practices and if this is what they really aspire to do. Martens (2001) emphasizes that it is the parents' responsibility to know the philosophy behind the work of the coaches and to know whether their actions are beneficial for their

children. In the Pre-Infant category, there was a report about "Concerned with health issues" with emphasis on the gymnast's diet: "they say that I need to eat well to be able to do things (skills)" (A75).

Another form of support reported by the gymnasts is related to the need for financial resources to stay involved in the sport. The youth sport has considerable costs for membership and permanence of the children and teens in the sports programs. Bailey et al. (2010) consider that the socioeconomic status of the family is vital in creating strategies and actions that will support the athlete development from a very early age. The authors relate the expenditures of membership in a club/gym, costs for workouts, transportation costs and the purchase of items/equipment used for practices. In the interviews, this aspect emerged in the categories Pre-Infant and Juvenile, in which the gymnasts mention that parents "seek for sponsorship" (A33), "helped them arrange sponsorship" (A3). Weiss and Hayashi (1995) show that parents of the children involved with AG dedicate

between 5-25% of the family budget to pay for the gymnastic activities of their children. In analyzing the interviews, we realized that parents engage in actions that aim to seek sponsorships to minimize the burden of these costs on the family.

Some reports indicated that parental support is demonstrated through "comfort" given in times of discouragement and frustration, as can be seen in the following reports: *"when I fail, they, support me"* (A130), *"if you lose, do not be upset, do not get discouraged, keep looking forward"* (A120), *"they give strength; they try to make me feel upbeat"* (A125). According to Cogan and Vidmar (2000), parents should share the victories and the disappointments of the children. "It is natural for parents to want to share in the winning moments and congratulate their child after a stunning performance, but parents also can be there just as strongly for the mistakes and frustrations" (p.112). This positive interaction of parents works with the child's self-esteem and fosters psychological well-being of young gymnast.

"Logistics" support was another aspect mentioned in the interviews. In addition to offering emotional and financial support, parents also help their children on the issue of having access to the sport. Dixon, Warner and Bruening (2008) explain that this form of support ranges from transportation, the cost of classes and even the care for their uniforms. Gymnasts A34 and A21 respectively exemplify this point: *"They come get me (after practices)", "pay for everything I need."*

Hoefler et al. (2001) point out that providing transportation to the physical activities is a form of support in the physical and social context in which parents act as facilitators of the sport opportunities. Weiss and Hayashi (1995) and Stein, Raedeke and Glenn (1999) report that the involvement of parents in sports in the offering of transportation to training and competition, is essential for the maintenance of the young athlete, especially in those types in which the initiation and development occurs at a tender age, as is the case with AG.

Gymnasts related "expectation" as another form of support. The athletes reported that parents: *"know that I can be something in life"* (A147), *"keeps saying that I'll earn medals and be able to do things"* (A18). According to Côté and Hay (2002), some studies show a positive relationship between parents' expectations, success and pleasure in their child's sport involvement. Nevertheless, Brustad (1988) states that these parental expectations can become the sources of anxiety, stress, and pressure that would interfere with the athletic experience of their children. We need to be aware that expectations can become pressures and demands that, according to Vilani and Samulski (2002) can "promote an atmosphere of strict rules and unrealistic expectations" (p. 91). This would jeopardize the future of the athlete if he does not meet those expectations (Candeias, 1998). Nash (1987) cites that it is common for parents to require their children to increasingly try to strive for perfection, and that this pressure, perhaps, is responsible for physical and psychological illnesses.

"Source of pressure" was included among the negative perceptions of parental support. Hellstedt (1990) defines this pressure as the degree of motivational influence that parents have on their child-athlete to participate in competition, to perform on a certain level and to continue in the sport. The gymnasts revealed that parents: *"do not let me quit because otherwise I will lose opportunities to do other things"* (A147), *"tell me to strive harder, bring back a medal, they tell me that I cannot miss (a practice) even when I am tired"* (A117) *"My father says I must stay here (training) until I am 18 and I do not know why"* (A22), *"my father said that if I quit, it might not be a good action towards other people"* (A148).

Wuerth, Lee and Alfermann (2004) relate the pressure to the direction and control of the behavior of athletes by parents. This parental pressure is associated with those who emphasize winning, have high expectations, are very involved in the

sport and require success from their children (Lauer et al., 2010). Brustad (1988) and Anderson, Funk and Smith (2003), state that the pressure exerted by parents is associated with the low levels of motivation and the loss of enthusiasm for sports. This can result in stress, burnout and dropout (Fraser, Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2008).

Another Recording Unit associated with a negative perception is "concerned with health issues". This item relates to fatigue, the sacrifices and the risks of injury inherent in the sport: *"My father thinks it is tiring"* (A61), *"My father get nervous, he is afraid that I fall"* (A64), *"they think that what I do in practice is too much"* (A63), *"my mother cannot watch me because she is afraid; she gets sick"* (A52). We infer that parents believe it is an exaggeration all the efforts that the gymnastics must to do to be successful, perhaps, because of the canalization of efforts for the sports training, or worries about the trips to compete. In addition, parents are afraid that the gymnasts will get hurt during training and competition due to the characteristics of AG.

In the study by Boufous, Finch and Bauman (2004), the results show that some parents discourage and keep their children back from participating in sports in which they believe that there are issues of safety or risk of injury. According to the authors, "some participants felt that the potential for injury or the seriousness of likely injury associated with some sports was too great and indicated that they had disallowed, or would not allow, their child to participate in playing those sports" (p. 484). Though in fewer in number, AG was listed as one of the sports in which parents discourage or prevent participation. Byrne (1993) cited by Vilani and Samulski (2002) classified these parents as overprotective and they are characterized by constantly threatening to deprive their children to practice sports because they have fears that are associated with the risks inherent in the sport practice.

Lack of support was seen in the item "concern with the studies". One of the gymnasts cited that her parents intend to get

her out of sports so she can focus on academics in order to get better opportunities in the labor market in the future.

One of the gymnasts, A6, cited that her parents do not interfere in her decisions, what we consider a neutral attitude, because the answer did not allow a detailed analysis, which led us to classify it in this category. Another athlete, belonging to the Pre-Infant category, did not know how to give her opinion.

## MEN'S ARTISTIC GYMNASTICS

As in the women's category, the results of the men's point to a range of positive and negative aspects about the support of parents in the practice of sports of the gymnasts. In Table 2, we can see that the number of Recording Units regarding positive perceptions emerged in greater numbers in the interviews of male young athletes.

Just as the women's sector, we can see that most parents were considered supportive and offered positive support to gymnasts, which favors their children's continuity in sports career (Sanmartin, 1995). This aspect was evident because of the frequency of the Recording Unit "encouraging" in all the men's categories addressed in the study. As examples, here are some reports covering this theme: *"They really support me, they like that I train"* (A142), *"they are very supportive"* (A144), *"great encouragement, very supportive, always giving all they've got"* (A1), *"my father is a doting father type, he really cheers for me"* (A2), *"encourages me ever since childhood"* (A81).

Other reports revealed that parental involvement is positively expressed through accompanying competitive events. Only one of the athletes cited the presence of parents in training. We infer, through the reports of the gymnasts, that parents show interest in offering support to their children in competition in the way that they can: *"they come to see competition, training"* (A137), *"they always go to watch my performance"*



(A124), "when it is not far, they come to the competition" (A91), "most of the time they

come to the competition" (A90), among others.

Table 2. Positive and negative aspects of parental support as perceived by the gymnasts.

CATEGORY	PRE-INFANT	INFANT	INFANT-JUVENILE	JUVENILE
	RECORDING UNIT			
POSITIVE ASPECTS	Encouraging	Encouraging	Encouraging	
	Accompany the activities	Accompany the activities	Accompany the activities	
	Have expectations	Have expectations		Encouraging
	Provides Comfort	Financial support	Concerned with health issues	
	Logistic support	Provides Comfort	Concerned with health issues	
NEGATIVE ASPECTS	Logistic support	Concerned with health issues		
	Concerned with health issues	Concerned with health issues	Concerned with health issues	Source of Pressure
	Source of Pressure		Worry about studies	

Three athletes mentioned that their parents have expectations for their sport careers, but they perceive it as a positive support: "My mother wanted to do AG when she was young. So she likes it, and so does my father" (A60), "(they believe) I'll be really good one day and I will have opportunities" (A59) and "they think that I have a future here" (A144). Although parental expectation is beneficial, this can become a source of pressure because some parents relive their own ambitions on the sports field through the children as we identify in the interview of A60. This expectation can become a source of stress and bring about possible anxiety levels, especially during pre-competitive and competitive situations (Nunomura, Araujo & Ferreira-Filho, 2005).

Parental support related to athletes' health emerged also in the men's category. This aspect was linked to nutrition and the benefits of sport for health maintenance, "(they say) take care of your eating, they say to stop eat this, do not eat that, this helps to control weight, because I will not be able to train" (A46), "this side of health, to do sports" (A124). Parents reinforce the

healthy habit of doing sports, which is very favorable for both the continuity of the young athlete in AG, as for an active and healthy life in general.

The unit "provides comfort" reappears as a positive form of support. This fact is very clear in the speech of the gymnasts A8 and A12, respectively: "They talk to me when I am upset" and "if I am sad they ask me what happened, if I cannot do a skill they converse with me and tell me not to quit." This form of emotional support provides security in times of stress, anxiety and promotes the self-esteem of the children (Côté & Hay, 2002).

As in the women's category, parents really help the male gymnasts on the issue of logistics, as we follow the reports of A163 and A89: "they bring me to practices" (A163), "my father brings me here (to training)" (A89). This form of support allows young gymnasts to overcome the barrier of access and of opportunity that is imposed on many individuals who would like to practice sport, but face barriers to have access to practice sites, equipment and sports programs (Wiese-Bjornstal, Lavoie & Omli, 2009).

Among the aspects related to the negative perception of parental support, the gymnasts mentioned health considerations, such as: "My father thinks the sport is a little extreme" (A137), "they almost do not come to any of the practices, because they think that it is awful, they sometimes feel pity for me" (A90), "they like the sport, but my mother does not come to watch me train because she is afraid (that I got injury)" (A127), "they wanted me to stop, but it is my dream" (A138). The reports of the Recording Unit "concerned with health issues" found in the men's AG resemble the women's category and reflect that the parents have concerns about their children's safety and the risk of injury and therefore they tend to discourage or even prevent their children from participation in sports (Boufous, Finch, & Bauman, 2004). Through analysis of the attitudes mentioned above, we believe that parents may develop a negative image of sports or the AG for their children. Although the volume of training is considerable, parents could help their children to try to balance their sport's activities with their studies and leisure time. They could also talk to their coaches about the risks inherent in this sport and how these are prevented during training.

Another Recording Unit belonging to the negative aspects of parental support covers the issue of "worry about studies". The report of gymnast A127 reveals that his mother believes that his dedication to AG is detrimental to his academic formation and therefore asked the young athlete to abandon it. In the study by Bara Filho and Garcia (2008), the authors cite a lack of time for studies as the reason for the higher incidence of *dropout*.

Although less frequently, compared to the women's sector, parents seen as a source of pressure arises as a negative aspect in the discourse of male gymnasts, "my mother requires a lot of me; she picks on me" (A2) "(if I try to stop) I think they would tell me to keep going, because I would lost the transport, my scholarship, and a lot of other things" (A152). We agree with Hellstedt (1990, p. 141) which states that "parents

who pressure their children excessively take the risk of eliciting a negative response and need to be aware of the possibility that excessive pressure to participate may result in parent-child conflict or youth sport withdrawal". Moreover, the gymnast may feel trapped by this pressure and develop a sense of obligation to continue in AG to satisfy the expectations of parents (Weiss & Weiss, 2003), as in case of A142, who felt pressured not to give up due to material losses mentioned by parents.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this study revealed different perceptions of positive and negative support of the parents according to the reports of the gymnasts in formative categories of AG. We found that the amount of the Recording Units that included positive aspects was presented in greater volume and frequency, compared to the negative ones, in male and female categories and in the different competitive levels.

The children appreciate the participation and interest of parents in monitoring their sport activities. However, parents must be alert and aware of the level and manner of their engagement so that the experience of their children in the sport context be positive. As the literature discussed and the results obtained in the study show, depending on the degree and form of this involvement this can be perceived by the child in a negative way.

We also agree with Headstrom and Gould (2004) who claim that children need to feel pleasure and satisfaction in their experience with sports and be involved by their own choice and will. When parents hold high expectations, require too much and push their children to achieve certain results or to continue in the sport, it is very probable that the children will feel trapped and many will remain in sports so to not disappoint their parents or for fear.

We found that young gymnasts rely on parental support to be able to participate and develop their sporting potential. Plus,

parents play different roles in which their actions and interests influence many aspects from the introduction to sports, access to it, the level of participation, the degree of involvement, continuity, to physical and emotional well-being and dedication of their children in it. We note that this support is crucial to the commitment and dedication of the young children and teens in AG.

We emphasize that parents should be aware that their actions may result in negative perceptions that contribute to low levels of motivation and loss of enthusiasm towards AG and, consequently, results in stress, conflicts between parents and their children, as well as burnout and dropout.

We agree with Hellstedt (1990) and Sacks, Pargman and Tenenbaum (2008) that report the necessity of parents to be guided by the coaches or through courses and seminars that can provide support, direction and clarification on why and how they can support and participate in the sport life of their children in a positive and non-invasive manner.

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