

‘We just thought everyone else is going so we might as well’: Middle-Class Parenting
Habitus and Pre-School Swimming.

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We just thought everyone else is going so we might as well': Middle-class parenting and franchised baby/toddler swimming

Abstract

In this paper we examine the continual and rapid growth of privatised baby/ infant swimming franchises (birth to 4-years) (Swimming Teachers Association, 2015) as part of a wider trend and market growth of baby/toddler sports, for example, Rugby Tots, Baby Ballet, and Little Kickers (football). Throughout the paper we apply Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus to understand parents' motivations for taking their baby/toddler to organised swimming classes. These sporting activities are expensive for parents with each session costing between £6-20 for a baby/toddler to participate which means that only parents with economic capital can afford to consume these activities. Our findings suggest that consuming these activities reflect views on good parenting, support the development of physical and social capital and forms of family class distinction which start in the early years. We argue this is significant as such early formative experiences support the development of leisure and sporting habitus which have value and may influence future leisure choices and opportunities.

Keywords: privatised sport, pre-school sport, parenting, class habitus.

Introduction

In this article Bourdieu's theoretical concepts are applied as a framework for considering how the growth of commercial toddler sports, such as swimming, are influenced by broader social factors and why parents pay for private baby/toddler swimming sessions. While there is some research on the pre-school PE context and curriculum (McEvelly, 2015, Petrie and Clarkin-Phillips, 2018), and growing research in the area of intensive parenting, leisure and social class

(Vincent and Maxwell, 2016, Vincent and Ball, 2007), there is little academic attention which has focused on the privatisation and commercialisation of toddler sport and the motivations of parents who utilise these services (Fraser-Thomas and Safai, 2018).

The growth of these activities can only be understood in relation to broader social changes in families which have included the rise in dual-income families, movement to urban areas, a shift in work-life balance and a reduction in free public leisure services (Epp and Velagaleti, 2014). Doing the ‘right’ thing as a parent and providing numerous opportunities in a range of activities has become an expected contemporary component of parenting practice (Gabriel, 2017). Parenting cultures are socially constructed (Gabriel, 2017) and parents are increasingly under pressure to help their children to develop the skills (physical, social and intellectual) needed for a successful childhood. Facilitating opportunities for children to get ahead in education and other social situations (Lareau, 2003; Wheeler and Green, 2014, Stirrup et al, 2015) is deemed ‘good’ parenting.

Franchises offering enrichment activities for under 5’s saturate the marketplace and parents, who can afford to, increasingly select classes that develop skills deemed important for their child’s development (Stirrup et al., 2015). Activities are wide ranging, including classes focusing on arts and crafts, music, languages, sport and physical wellbeing such as yoga. Baby/toddler swimming forms part of this wider trend along with other baby/toddler sports, for example, Rugby Tots, Baby Ballet, and Little Kickers (football), where parents often pay between £6-20 per session for their child to participate in these activities. Such franchises are attracting large membership numbers (e.g., based on franchise website information, UK membership numbers are Baby Ballet = 11,000 children/week, Tumble Tots (gymnastics) = 42,000 children/week, Rugby Tots = 20,000 children/week and Puddle Ducks = 18,000 children/week). These franchises are also popular with parents who want to develop their own businesses in these profitable markets while maintaining a family work balance.

In 2015, the Swimming Teachers Association's (STA) highlighted the cost of lessons in 58.6% of privately owned / franchise swim schools was between £5 and £10 for a 20-30-minute lesson (up from 54% in 2009). 36.2% charged £11 or more (up from 27% in 2009) – the majority (90.7%) are franchised swim schools. Only 5.2% charged less than £5 (down from 19% in 2009). The increase in costs per lesson demonstrates market growth with 81% of franchise swimming schools having a waiting list. While, the number of private franchises for baby/toddler swimming continues to grow, paradoxically, the percentage of children (5-10-year-olds) swimming has dropped since 2015-2016 from 53.5% to 49.5% in 2017/2018. This appears to be a common trend with overall participation rates with swimming persistently declining since 2002 (Evans and Allen-Collinson, 2016). Furthermore, swimming and opportunities to learn to swim are increasingly becoming class specific (Evans and Allen-Collinson, 2016).

Research examining the role of social class and class habitus influencing children's participation in sport during the *pre-school* childhood years is limited, yet it appears that these commercially organised classes play a part in identifying early childhood experiences and family *distinction* which influence children's access to leisure. Swimming is one example of this which we explore in our paper. We start by outlining the theoretical framework used for analysing these trends and explore previous literature on parenting and leisure choices. We present the methodology utilised and our findings are presented in three themes: i) Structured Baby and Toddler Activities: Physical, Social and Cultural Capital, ii) Why Swimming? Water Safety and Class Habitus, and iii) 'Taste' and Swimming as a form of Distinction. We conclude with a critical discussion on the growth of baby and toddler swimming and our findings on current parenting trends and social class.

Bourdieu, Social Class and Family Habitus

Bourdieu's conceptual triad of capital, habitus and field explains the complexities and practices involved in the social reproduction of social class and is widely applied to understanding leisure practices. Bourdieu (1984) refers to the different resources that people have access to as capital. Forms of capital include economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Economic capital is the economic resources that people have access to, through income and family inheritance. In *Distinction* Bourdieu (1984) highlights the relationship between economic capital and consumption to identify how patterns of consumption can relate to different social classes and their tastes, as well as judgements about which tastes are more refined. Cultural capital refers to culturally valued tastes, and judgements about taste are related to economic capital. Cultural capital reflects how what people can afford to consume (education, food, leisure) becomes a symbol of social class and taste. Social capital alludes to relationships and access to valuable social networks which can enhance your access to economic capital. While Bourdieu himself did not define physical capital, the term is used by Shilling (2012) as a way of conceptualising how important the body is in Bourdieu's work. Physical capital recognises the body has value and power and embodies forms of distinction. Physical capital is particularly useful if it can be converted to other resources, for example, economic, cultural or social (Shilling, 2012).

Habitus is a term which indicates a durable system of structuring tastes and preferences, which are formed from an early age. Habitus is embodied and although habitus is continually shaped by capital, it can appear like it is second nature. Bourdieu (1984) identifies how class experiences shape habitus, and in turn, different social classes develop different 'tastes' and practices. Habitus then, is the embodiment of social values, dispositions, and tastes developed through the process of socialization and the role of the family is significant from a young age (Dagkas and Quarmby, 2012). The role of sport participation and class habitus is discussed by Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1984) where he highlights how physical activities and

their class distribution cannot be understood by just looking at economic conditions. Instead he is able to identify how participation in sport and leisure is influenced by habitus and taste which are strongly related to socializing techniques needed for entry to different sports with social spaces defined by cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2013). In the field, which refers to shared spaces, the shared class habitus means it becomes a space where we seek out people like us (individuals with similar capital), these activities contribute to reinforcing existing social structures (Bourdieu, 2013).

Leisure, Intensive Parenting and Family Habitus

Although little is written directly about family habitus, it is widely accepted that the family is a key site for the reproduction of social order, and social and biological reproduction of social structure (Schmitt et al, 2020, DeLuca, 2013). This is because families want to secure their social class through the accumulation of capital and techniques which support the development of specific types of habitus. This is also apparent when it comes to forms of sport and leisure as research has established how certain ideologies and practices are reproduced through sports participation (Dagkas and Quarmby, 2012).

The family and early childhood experiences influence the types and amount of capital that people have access to, as well as shaping habitus. The family is a significant unit for influencing tastes, which become embodied and these may appear as if they are natural or biological (Schmitt et al, 2020). Other research has highlighted how family, particularly parents, have the most influence on their children's development of capital and habitus (Stirrup, et al, 2015). Vincent and Ball's (2007) study explored how cultural capital was introduced in the early years through educational investments and accrual of class resources. They found that the paid for activities that children are introduced to in mainly middle-class families develops readiness for learning and prepares children for school. These ideas emphasise parents as being

accountable for the success of their children. Similarly, Vincent and Maxwell (2016) examined how the enrolment of children in extracurricular activities is related to the intensification of parenting and an expectation that good parents secrete these opportunities for their children. It is well understood that class divisions impact on parenting and that middle-class parents are in a position to invest in their children's habitus and development of capital through enrolling their children on to enrichment activities, often demonstrating intensive mothering in the early years (Vincent and Ball, 2007, Stirrup et al, 2015).

The term intensive mothering used by Vincent and Ball (2007) is a term coined by Hays in the 1980's to depict a parenting trend that at the time was noted to be undertaken by mothers. The ideology emphasises how a child requires consistent nurturing from a primary caregiver (normally the mother) who is best placed to provide such care and full-time devotion (Hays, 1984). 'Copious amounts of time, energy and material resources' are lavished on the child (Hays, 1984: 8) with such devotion meaning that mothers often self-sacrifice in order to fully address the wants and needs of the child. While Hays argues this approach is not adopted by all mothers, she argues that the 'child-centred, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive and financially expensive' (1984: 8) approach is 'understood as the *proper* approach to the raising of a child by the majority of mothers' (1984: 9). More recently, intensive mothering is a pattern of parenting that has expanded to include intensive forms of parenting practiced by men and women.

While intensive mothering is not associated with one social class, Hays found differences in the beliefs and practices of those from working-class and poor backgrounds and those from the middle and upper-middle classes. Although putting their child's needs first was deemed as 'good' parenting by both social groups, middle-class mothers emphasised the need to be role models that promote their child's self-esteem and provide them with choices (Hays, 1984). However, providing children with choice requires economic capital. Such cost can most

easily be absorbed by middle class families who can afford to provide a range of activities and choice for their children.

Middle-class parents have the economic capital to be able to invest in enrichment activities for their young children to develop their skills (Stirrup, 2015). These practices are important to understand because those with limited economic capital are not able to 'buy' these experiences for their children, creating social inequalities in the early years. Middle-class families are able to buy an advantage early in life, giving some children an ability to enhance at a younger age (Vincent and Maxwell, 2016). The marketplace suggests that formal organized sport programmes are a popular enrichment choice for many parents. However, these programmes do not just develop children's physical capital, they also enable the development of valuable forms of social and cultural capital and contribute to a class habitus by allowing young children to develop skills on how to succeed in organised competitive structures (Coakley, 2005).

Coakley's (2005) research explores how children's success in youth sport is not just about social class and opportunity but is also linked to parental commitment and a way of demonstrating good parenting. Coakley (2005) argues that parental commitment to sport is grounded in an emerging family habitus centred on middle and upper-class families in post-industrial societies, where such commitments to the child are commended and provides further evidence for the growth in intensive forms of parenting. In a UK context, Wheeler and Green (2018) explore children's involvement in extracurricular leisure activities and identified family patterns and family influence on social class when considering children's sporting capital. While exploratory, the findings suggest that class influences the type and number of structured activities available to children. Their data relating to swimming highlights how children from lower-class groups did not have access to formal lessons. Some children had been taught by parents, whilst others were unable to swim. All the middle and upper-class children had

previously had formal swimming lessons and were either still involved in swimming or had moved onto other water-based activities that required swimming skills (Wheeler and Green, 2018).

In a study explicitly exploring family swimming, DeLuca (2013, 2016) interviewed members of a private American Swim and Tennis club. The study was an ethnographic examination of Valley View swim and tennis club. The research applied Bourdieu to understand how facilities and practices enable and reinforce upper and middle-class family habitus. DeLuca (2016) also stressed that swimming, in private clubs is a class-based activity, pursued mainly by middle and upper classes. Attendance at the club also enabled ‘family time’ where the family were all in the same place. The interviewees highlighted this helped to develop a sense of symbolic family identity as well as cementing opportunities to spend time with other families like them. Most of the women interviewed in DeLuca’s (2016) study were part of the same network and everyone they knew had pool membership or committed to family swimming. These mothers emphasised family time as essential, however, this was not just about spending time on any activity but was also related to the transfer of family habitus and class reproduction. Through attendance at the private club, children had an opportunity to acquire sensibilities which facilitate the intergenerational transmission of class privilege.

Yet, little research has explored the reasons why parents might choose this expensive structured swimming lessons for their baby and toddlers. In our paper we explore the expansion of privatised swimming lessons for pre-school children, and why those that have the capital choose to invest in the activity.

Methods

Procedure

The purpose of this research was to explore the reasons why parents in the North-East of England pay for private swimming lessons for pre-school children. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was granted by the lead author's institution. The study included parents (over the age of 18) who had experience of taking their child(ren) (birth to 4 years) to organised swimming lessons for 12 months or more. The nature of the swim class (e.g., group, one-to-one lessons) was not part of the sample criteria but the study did focus on those parents who were paying or had previously paid an organisation to teach their baby or infant to swim. As criteria sampling had been applied thus far (i.e., over 18, had previously paid for private pre-school swimming lessons), parents who had children attending pre-school swimming classes, and who met the sampling criteria, were then randomly selected and asked if they would be willing to take part in the study. The third author, who conducted the interviews, was known to the organisations and parents as she worked across the leisure facilities but not as a swimming teacher. Knowing the parents helped her to establish trust, ensuring rapport was developed during the recruitment and interview phases. When the research team reflected on this relationship, we felt the casual acquaintance helped with recruitment and initial rapport but the relationship between researcher and interviewees was not sufficiently developed in order to impact on the responses made during interviews.

All standard research recruitment processes were followed (e.g., providing information sheets, gaining written consent, and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity). Before the interviews took place, a short survey was handed out to each parent in order to gain participant demographic information such as age, gender, educational status, occupation, annual household income, and the length of time parents had been attending pre-school swimming classes. These characteristics are presented in Table 1 and 2. In brief, all parents ranged in age from 25-44 years, self-identified as middle-class, and based on their annual household income

all families were from the lower-middle-class and mid-middle-class strata of society (see Table 2).

[Insert Table 1 and 2 near here]

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 8 parents: 6 mothers and 2 fathers. The study aimed to understand why middle-class parents decided to take babies and toddlers to private/franchised swimming lessons. Our findings suggest that parents did not make the decision to engage their child in private swimming lessons on an individual basis parent but were making the decision jointly (see Table 1). Although more mothers were taking their child to the pool for their lessons, some fathers were also taking their children and therefore a decision was made to interview both mothers and fathers. Obtaining a gendered perspective was not the purpose of this study but rather the focus was on intensive parenting and habitus of middle-class parents and it appears both mothers and fathers buy into formal toddler sport classes.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in a quiet space across two local swimming venues at a convenient time for the parent (i.e., when their child was attending their swim lesson) and were audio-recorded. Interviews focused upon experiences of toddler swimming lessons, motivations for toddler swimming, and the use of organised swimming classes.

Once data had been transcribed verbatim, Clarke and Braun's (2014) recursive six-phase thematic analysis process was adopted. Phase 1 required familiarisation of, and immersion in, the data. Transcripts were read multiple times, allowing for an overall impression of the data to be formed. Areas of particular interest were identified through the adoption of a colour coding system (e.g. pen and paper/hard copy format) and note-taking during Phase 2. Phase 3 resulted in a mix of semantic and latent codes being produced and grouped as themes were formed. Ensuring coherency, the themes were reviewed (phase 4), appropriately defined

and named accordingly (phase 5). These themes were then readdressed, revised and renamed after feedback during the peer-review process. The final phase included the dissemination of results.

The authors are aware of the debate surrounding inter-rater reliability and its effectiveness in determining rigour (Smith and McGannon, 2018), with this in mind, inter-reliability was not undertaken. However, the first and third author met regularly to discuss the analysis of data. This process was to ensure data processes were followed, to discuss the findings and reduce any bias during the coding phase. Furthermore, the first author acted as a 'critical friend' (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) throughout the research process. The first named author did not collect data directly and as a result was able to provide guidance and recommendations both as a critical friend and also to aid the reflective and reflexive processes. This critical dialogue allowed the authors to challenge interpretations made throughout the analysis process to enhance the rigour of our findings (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Results and Discussion

In the following section we apply Bourdieu to understanding 'choice' and habitus', these themes are discussed individually under the headings: i) Structured Baby and Toddler Activities: Physical, Social and Cultural Capital, ii) Why Swimming? Water Safety, and iii), 'Taste' and Swimming as a form of Distinction.

Structured Baby and Toddler Activities: Physical, Social and Cultural Capital

During the first section of the interview, parents were asked about the activities that they took their young children to. These activities were varied and included several structured and unstructured activities, but nevertheless they reflect different types of activities across a week as Parent 2 highlights:

We also go to gymnastics once a week which has been quite a learning curve....

and she loves going to parks and especially the Gruffalo trails. She likes to do

the walk through the woods there with the App where you can see the Gruffalo.

In this example the week is varied in relation to types of activities, for other parents the activities were not just structured but took place in range of spaces. These activities are also valued because of a belief they help to develop a range of skills and include socialisation:

We go to the local playgroup in the village once a week. We like to go for walks sometimes we will take the balance bikes with us. We do a craft class and we do cake building classes and we go to Lego Club as well. We've done Little Kickers football which he loved. We've done the balance bike classes; he loves to run or play football. What else have we done? Trampolining and Baby Gym is really good as well, so we've been to that quite a bit (Parent 5).

The number of activities that are part of the week for parent 5 highlights a heavy scheduling of activities and the range of activities that the pre-school children are able to access. These activities are varied and seem to be a mix of scheduled classes. This was a common theme within the interviews: 'We go swimming and the other thing that they [both children] do is dancing so ballet and tap, and the reason that they do this is because they love dancing. (Parent 1).

The parents who were interviewed as part of this study were able to introduce their pre-school children to a range of activities such as, gymnastics and dance, and swimming. Parents seem to choose a range of activities, not all sport related but many activities did support their toddlers to develop physical capital, and parents stressed how physical skills such as good co-ordination were worth investing in. Through investing in early years activities parents recognise that this can secure their children access to a range of leisure opportunities both now and in the future. This is highlighted by parent 6 who explains, 'other than swimming she goes

to gymnastics once a week and that's a group gymnastics session just to try and help her balance and co-ordination'. Other parents discussed the number of activities they did, other than swimming,

He does the swimming lesson and he does Soccer Tots (football session). The Soccer Tots were so he had another sporting activity other than swimming. It wasn't particularly that we were drawn to football it was just that we wanted him to do something else that was sport related, and particularly sort of more team centred so that he sort of develops those skills of working in a team as well as just being a sporting activity.

These activities are not just about spending time doing any activity but are about purposeful activities. Structured activities that have a clear purpose/outcome have become a favoured part of middle-class parenting and early year enrichment activities (Vincent and Ball, 2007). Parents had chosen activities based on what skills could be developed and nurtured through a range of structured activities outside the home. As Parent 2 notes they are aware of the importance of developing skills that can be taught through socialising in a sporting structured activity: 'in terms of social skills y'know I could see that she was chatting to other children'. Other skills that are valued is listening to others, 'to learn to listen to the teacher and do as she's told' (Parent 2). Developing the ability to listen to others and socialise are key skills which help support children in their transition into school and spaces that facilitate learning.

For new parents the transition to parenthood is complex, with conflicting advice and market practices impacting on parenting trends (Gabriel, 2017). Baby swim classes, like other organised sporting classes for babies and toddlers may also offer structure to parents, especially mothers, who may have worked full time before having their baby. These classes arguably offer an opportunity to seek out people like them with new babies as well as scheduling in classes like work appointments (Vincent and Ball, 2007). These private franchises/organisations are

providing a service that is structured and marketed in a way that encourages demonstrating good parenting, through consumption.

The parents in this study are aware of valuable forms of social and cultural capital, and how these contribute to a class habitus, which can give young children mastery within a number of formal settings. This is important, as noted in other research, participation in organised structures can give them a later advantage in a range of educational and sporting settings (Coakley, 2005). While not explicitly stating this is about formal learning for school, enrolling children in structured activities helps to support children to develop physical, social and physical skills that can be transferred in school and may make them successful in these spaces (Vincent and Ball, 2006).

Why Swimming? Water Safety and Class Habitus

In this section we discuss parents' reasons for participation in baby and toddler swimming more specifically. Water safety initially appeared to be a significant motivation for choosing swimming over other potential activities. Most of the parents used words such as 'safety', 'safe', 'fear', and 'danger' to explain why they took their infants swimming, reflecting a fear that many parents have with regards to water safety and drowning. When asked why she chose swimming as an activity for her baby, Parent 4 said 'Water's everywhere. There's a risk in a lot of things you do around water, they have to be able to swim to do lots of other things in life'. Yet, the extent to which lessons teach babies and toddlers to swim is debatable. Water Babies and Puddle Ducks both highlight many benefits for baby swimming on their websites, however, Water Babies state that it is not until age three that babies and toddler can be expected to *swim* on the surface.

Marketing baby and toddler swimming as a way to prevent drowning has drawn criticism from Moran and Stanley (2006) who have raised concerns about the growth of pre-

school swimming lessons and argue that these lessons may give parents a false sense of security. This is reflected in our interviews, for example, Parent 3 had been taking his infant to swimming sessions for over two years. When asked if his child could swim, he replied: ‘he’s a lot better than what he was, but I wouldn’t necessarily say he’s safe.’ When asked how confident they are when their toddler is in the water, Parent 3 said:

I’m not that confident, I certainly wouldn’t, well, I would always be in the water with him or another adult would be in the water with him. I think if it was a like paddling pool type of depth obviously that’s sort of different, in the bath is different, but in a swimming pool, the sea, you know, an open water situation, I don’t think he’s necessarily got the ability yet to do that safely.

The message surrounding swimming and water safety is rather mixed in the UK. Swim England (2016) state that drowning is still one of the most common causes of accidental death in children. Yet, statistics from WAter Incident Database (WAID) (www.nationalwatersafety.org) suggest child fatalities due to drowning are demonstrating a general downward trend, with 5 children under the age of 5 drowning in the UK in 2018 (see Table 3). It could be argued that parental fear relating to children drowning is irrational given the relatively small number of UK deaths per year. Ironically, data shows most children under the age of 5 are likely to drown at home in either a bath, pond or paddling pool. As Parent 3 highlights above, it is possible that despite their fear, parents do not recognise the danger of shallow water or may become overly confident in their child’s ability when the depth of water is low.

[Insert Table 3 near here]

Water safety and learning to swim as early as possible were compelling rationales for baby and toddler swimming, however, it seems that this rationale is somewhat of an oxymoron.

Parents encourage children to be fearless in a swimming pool but several of the parents also acknowledged that taking a child to swimming lessons did not mean they could swim confidently any quicker. Several parents in this study had been taking their child swimming for over three years but were still not confident that their child could competently swim on their own. This oxymoron may in part relate to the marketing of activities and benefits they bring, while at odds with parental common sense that infant swimming does not increase swimming ability. Such marketing plays into parents fears about water safety and their responsibility to ensure that their babies and toddlers are water confident and safe, and therefore parents are 'sold' a way of consuming something that can aid their child's safety.

Parents in this study also discussed class habitus and the extensive marketing of such activities as 'good' parenting in order to keep children safe as a reason for participating in such classes. Parent 6 started organised swimming classes when her little girl was just a baby:

Right from being a baby she went to Water Babies for two terms, and then she started group lessons and one-to-one lessons. I knew lots of people who took their little ones to Water Babies, I'd seen adverts on Facebook and in the mother-to-be packs that you get, and things like that that were advertised quite heavily. I registered when I was still pregnant. There was the video of the baby falling in the pool and then learning to kick and float, so I think that was a big part of my decision to go swimming. We started going when she was about four weeks.

Parent 6 highlighted that Water Babies was popular with parents she knew and that advertising via social media was an effective way of ensuring that parents were willing to spend money on these classes and such advertising played on fear and offered a way to mitigate that through consuming classes.

Parent 2 shared a holiday experience that prompted her to take her children to swimming lessons:

I think swimming's a life skill that you need to have. Two years ago, when we were on holiday my little boy fell in the pool actually and thankfully, we were right there with him so managed to pull him out but he couldn't swim at the time and he was almost five. So, we started him on swimming lessons and Sophia [younger sibling] as well because we thought they can't learn too young really. Sophia can't swim without armbands on yet on her own but at least she knows the basics and safety of the pool.

The extent to which children can assess risk and learn to swim is also debatable. Learning pool safety through franchised swim lessons suggests these activities play into parental fear about drowning, especially on holiday which indicates a particular class habitus. For many parents, a holiday is not an available option, which reflects how economic capital and cultural capital are linked. Pool safety on holiday is only a concern for those parents who have the economic capital to consume holidays. Parent 5 echoes how vital swimming is a skill for holidays, 'I wanted them to be able to swim and we would go on holiday every year there would be a pool and I would want them to be confident'. The need to develop physical capital to swim is driven by accessibility to leisure interests which are dominated by those with economic capital to have specific forms of family leisure time (DeLuca, 2016). The pace of family life differs in families from different class backgrounds and this impacts on their tastes and leisure biographies.

The marketing of baby and toddler swimming is targeted at parents who can afford to invest in their child's leisure, and part of the appeal may be to have structured formal activities where parents find other like-minded parents as well as children developing their leisure habitus around a range of activities that enhance their cultural and physical capital (of parents and children). Introducing young children to activities is related to influencing taste, choice is constrained by material resources and these parents have the means to introduce their young

children to a range of activities in order to develop their physical, social and cultural capital and to secure their class habitus and comfort for formal learning and organised activities. Choosing baby and toddler swimming to aid and facilitate future involvement in holidays and other water sports become a means of explaining the structured, formal, organised swimming classes. These often take place in predominantly private pools and these skills are related to developing a form of class *distinction*.

'Taste' and Swimming as a form of Distinction

The reasons that parents choose swimming at such a young age (from birth onwards) appear to be more complex and multi-faceted than just learning to swim. During the interviews with the parents the discussion about why they paid for 'lessons' varied but for Parent 3 it was essential to go to baby swimming because close friends and '*everyone else*' they knew were taking their children:

We'd heard a lot of the other kids were doing it [swimming] and my wife's friend's son, well he'd been doing it pretty much since he was born, so we just thought everyone else is [taking their children] so we might as well try as well. We wanted him to learn to swim for when he's at school. If he does start lessons at school, he'll already know what he's doing.

Social pressure, and being part of the same social networks is a significant part of class habitus. This is reflected in Bourdieu's argument on social reproduction, as it is likely that the majority of people known by this parent are of a similar class habitus. It is not a case that *everyone* is taking their babies/toddlers to these activities, but those that have the economic capital to do so, and those in a similar social network to these parents. There is also increasing social pressure around being seen to do the same activities as others and parents want to give their child the same opportunities as other children in their networks. This was linked to perceptions of good

parenting by giving children a rich range of experiences (Vincent and Maxwell, 2016). For parents, consuming activities that might develop their babies and toddlers signals their commitment to parenting and ‘shows’ others that they are committed to their child and being a good parent, reflecting an intensive form of parenting.

Throughout the interviews there was also a concern from parents about readiness for school and ensuring children develop physical capital to be able to swim at school. This seems to reflect a desire that their commitment to their child reflects their class habitus and commitment to the child. This appears to be the same across mothers and fathers, suggesting that it may be more appropriate to refer to intensive parenting when it comes to leisure. The need for children to be able to swim by the age of 5 appeared to be very important to the parents in this study, despite little evidence to support such an approach:

My son he was five when he learnt to swim so he was at school and I think because we left it a bit late. He did pick it up quickly, but we had his lessons the year before he started swimming with the school as I was conscious I didn’t want him to be one of the ones in his class that couldn’t swim. I thought that it might affect him in terms of self-esteem a little bit. I know that obviously [my daughter] goes to the same school and she’ll have the swimming lessons in year two and I would like her to be able to swim beforehand. I know a high number of the class can swim so I think she would struggle a bit if all of her peers can [swim] and my children don’t know how to do it. I think if I had waited until she went to school possibly she might have been more nervous going in for the first time with her class and people she doesn’t know whereas I feel like we’ve built it up quite well going from lessons where I go in, to handing her over to one instructor to then going into a class, I think that’s been quite a good transition for her (Parent 6).

Due to the concern that they left it late with their first child and disadvantaged him, they decided to go to pre-school swimming lessons with their second child to avoid this potential lack of physical capital. Ensuring that children can swim by the time they go to school seems a concern that reflects more than a lack of physical skill but fear their child may fall behind their peers. Furthermore, the lack of physical capital in a school context may be noticed and may reflect badly on the parent's commitment to invest in the physical development of the child:

We thought if we start as early as possible then that'll be good and then by the time he goes swimming with school, he'll be a confident swimmer. His dad was a really good swimmer and he swam for the county and I was alright, so it was definitely something that we wanted to get lessons for so they could learn. I really don't want it to be that when they go swimming with school that they can't swim (Parent 5).

In an environment of intensive parenting, ensuring that children can swim amongst their peers seems to be a marker of good/successful parenting: 'I know this sounds silly but at school I want her to be confident with her swimming lessons in school and not stand out as being one of the only ones that can't swim' (Parent 6). The development of physical capital, which secures a child being able to swim, reflects positively on the parents and their commitment to their child. This pattern can be seen in an early age range as Parent 8 notes the need to have a child who can swim:

I thought we would start the swimming lessons as soon as possible. We started when they were four months old. Mainly because they would go to school and everyone in their class could swim and my little one wouldn't be able to swim so I want to give them the best start to life as possible.

Giving the best start in life is about developing advantage and is arguably a form of *distinction*. Parents intervene to make sure their children have certain skills and develop capital

and many of the parents were willing to pay for this (Stirrup et al, 2015). Throughout the interviews, many parents acknowledged that they had also paid for one-to-one swimming class, which were often three times as much as group classes, but the parents were able to explain why they were considered value for money. Parent 3 highlighted her reasons why private (one-to-one swimming lessons) were preferred:

I much prefer the private ones to the group ones though. In the group ones there wasn't as much interaction with him [child], he spent more time sort of just bobbing up and down at the side being bored [chuckle] and he just didn't do as much. He progressed a lot slower as well.

Despite the extra cost associated with the private lessons, the parents were in a position to see the benefits of paying extra for one-to-one swimming lessons, as Parent 2 explained:

We paid for one-to-one lessons for my son initially and in terms of cost obviously there is an additional expense there but when we've seen what she gets out of it I don't worry about cost. I certainly don't think Chloe [younger daughter] would have settled in a class like she has if we hadn't put her that in one-to-one first.

One-to-one swimming lessons also placed their child at the centre of attention and ensured their child got specific attention, and these parents have the capital to put their child in a position of one to one learning. Parent 2 explains they do not worry about the cost because they have the economic capital to pay. Similarly, Parent 5 said:

I think perhaps with the groups there's too many children in [the pool] and I think that they just sit on the side of the pool for the most of it and maybe then he gets distracted and mess' around, which they're going to at that age. So, I think the one-to-ones are brilliant and I think they learn so much more than they do in a group lesson. I think it's probably quite an expensive

weekly activity, but I just think that we've done the groups and I think it's worth it. I think that we get so much more out of it. It's worth the commitment. I think perhaps the one-to-ones are expensive, but you get so much more out of a one-to-one.

Middle-class parents feel they can absorb the extra cost in order to ensure their child is at the centre of the class and the classes are professional, formal and organised. During the interviews, participants were asked to discuss why they selected structured and organised swimming lessons for their toddlers. One of the key themes was that parents felt they lacked knowledge, as Parent 2 highlights, paying for professionals to teach swimming skills seems to be part of ensuring the development of physical capital:

I have taken her on my own but I'm not skilled enough to teach her how to swim. And I think potentially because I don't have that confidence she picks up on that, I have tried a couple of times recently when I've taken her swimming to encourage her to take her arm bands off but she doesn't seem to feel as comfortable with me doing it so I thought if she if she goes in with someone who knows what they're doing then she's going to pick up on that and trust what they're saying. I think she's more likely to listen to someone else probably than listen to me and follow the rules.

Just taking your child to the pool yourself is not seen as 'good enough' for the development of specific skills. A professional person is perceived to be listened to more and can negotiate with the child more effectively. Parent 6, also highlighted a lack of personal confidence and the need for extra guidance when it came to teaching her daughter to swim:

I think it's still important for her to go under the water from being a baby to get her used to the water but I think a parent could do that themselves without an instructor doing it with them until their about three and then they

need more guidance, but without going to Water Babies I wouldn't have had the confidence to put her under the water without support.

The role of Water Babies is described above as providing parental confidence and reassurance. Parent 6 acknowledges they could get their child used to water without the class. Yet, there is the desire that their children will develop physical capital and habitus for swimming, but this is better coming from a professional. In the context of busy lives, family time and separating organised formal and professional activities from spending time together is largely a middle-class concern. For other families whose work patterns may be more precarious, this is less likely to be possible (Wheeler, 2014).

Conclusion

This study gives a unique insight into parents and their decision to pay for formal organised baby/toddler swimming. These decisions must be understood as part of a broader trend in parenting which includes the rapid expansion of franchises in baby/toddler sport (Stirrup et al, 2015). As identified here, parents were committed to a range of baby/toddler structured activities, not just swimming. While other research has identified trends in middle-class parenting and extracurricular activities in school-aged children (Wheeler, 2014, Coakley, 2006), this paper suggests these trends are now also evident in the baby/toddler years. Swimming appears to be related to providing their child with an essential life-saving skill- the ability to swim. However, we argue that there is no clear evidence that babies are learning to swim independently any earlier than children who are exposed to swimming at a slightly older age or through swimming with parents. In this respect, our findings support the earlier work of Moran and Stanley (2006) who argued that toddler swimming lessons might give parents a false sense of security. Given that most parents know their baby/child will not swim any quicker as a result of these sessions it is interesting to see the demand for classes continue to

rise. This seems to be part of a middle-class parenting trend whereby there is growing pressure to develop a child(ren)'s skill set at an increasingly younger age (Vincent and Maxwell, 2016). These skills are linked to future involvement in family activities such as holidays, reflecting a middle-class concern.

The growth of formal and often privatised sport lessons in the UK demonstrates a trend towards intensive forms of parenting from an earlier age and access to such activities are determined by access to economic capital. For many parents the notion of intense parenting starts as soon as the infant is born (and in some instances even during pregnancy), with a growing market for activities such as pregnancy exercises, baby yoga, ballet and baby swimming. Involvement in these activities are reflective of current parent trends and provide a form of class distinction. In our research they appear to be reflective of two trends, firstly a parent's desire to secure their child's physical capital and habitus from an early age and secondly, a desire to fit in and meet other like-minded parents (those that share similar habitus and capital). These patterns of parenting have implications for our understanding of how leisure activities reflect class differences and are not just about 'choice' but reflect the strategic involvement of (middle-class) parents in securing the best education and opportunities for their children from an early age.

The current study provides insight into the reasons why middle-class parents facilitate organised private swimming lessons for their pre-school children. Whilst generalising the results to all middle-class parents is not the purpose of this paper, and this study consisted of a small sample based in a particular location in the North-East of England, we argue that it is important to recognise the ways in which leisure is accessed from an early age and how this relates to social class and class habitus. To date research has focused on early childhood and youth around leisure patterns and social class, yet this research highlights a trend in the growth of commercial pre-school sport and leisure and those parents willing to consume such activities

warrants further analysis from several different perspectives. We recommend that future studies should address the social class divisions that may exist in pre-school sport participation and explore the extent to which class divisions are apparent in all pre-school sport or are more evident in certain sports. How these patterns influence leisure ‘choices’ and reproduction of social class, and how leisure enhances educational advantages should also be more extensively considered.

Notes on Contributors

Withheld for review

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Table 1: Participant Demographic Data

Participant	Gender	Age	Education status and current employment	Attending swim classes	Decision to go swimming made by
1	Female	35-44	Degree Management	0-1 years	Mother but both parents agreed
2	Female	35-44	Degree Unemployed	1-2 years	Joint decision between Mother and Father
3	Male	35-44	Secondary School Human Resources	1-2 years	Mother but both parents agreed
4	Female	35-44	College Homemaker	1-2 years	Joint decision between Mother and Father
5	Female	35-44	Degree Human Resources	2-3 years	Joint decision between Mother and Father

6	Female	35-44	College Other	3 years +	Joint decision between Mother and Father
7	Female	25-34	Degree Human Resources	1-2 years	Joint decision between Mother and Father
8	Male	35-44	Secondary School Other	2-3 years	Father

Table 2: Participant/Family Middle-Class Fractions

Middle-Class Fractions	Household Income	Number of Participants/Families
Lower-middle-class	£20,000 - £39,999	2
Mid-middle-class	£40,000 - £89,999	6
Upper middle-class	£90,000 - £180,000	0

Table 3. UK water related fatalities for children 14 years and younger

(nationalwatersafety.org.uk)

Annual Report	0-4 years old	5-9 years old	10-14 years old	Total
2018	5	3	3	11
2017	6	1	3	10
2016	7	4	5	16
2015	4	1	4	9
2014	9	3	5	17
2013	10	2	7	19
2012	7	4	7	18
2011	12	4	8	24
2010	12	7	13	32