

NEEDS FOR APPROVAL AND RECOGNITION

From USA Swimming

As social beings, humans have a need to be recognized, valued, and cared about by others. From a very early age, children seem to crave attention and to do whatever is necessary to gain it. Many children with behavior problems develop those problems because obnoxious behavior is the only way the children have of guaranteeing the attention of parents and others. Such children prefer the attention that goes along with being punished to simply being ignored.

As children develop they learn to satisfy their needs for recognition and approval in a variety of ways. For one thing, they find out what is praiseworthy to people who matter to them, such as parents, teachers, and peers. It doesn't take most children very long to realize that sports provide many opportunities for recognition and approval. They see how sport heroes are idolized in our culture and they often develop their own sport heroes at a relatively early age. Further many parents communicate very positive attitudes about sports and exhibit a great deal of interest in such activities. Finally, as we noted earlier, physical activities are among the most highly prized attributes of school-aged children.

Approval and recognition provide powerful motivation for athletes at all levels. Almost all of the positive attributes that can be developed through sport participation-achievement motivation, sportsmanship, teamwork, unselfishness-are ultimately strengthened through approval of significant people, such as coaches, parents and teammates. Thus, it is almost impossible to overestimate the importance of approval and recognition to the developing athlete.

As was the case with achievement, there are both approach and avoidance motives connected with approval. On the approach side, there is the positive desire to obtain approval and recognition from other people. This is similar to the positive achievement motive that we discussed earlier. The child wants approval and may be frustrated if approval is not received, but the child is not necessarily afraid of disapproval.

On the other hand, the social behavior of many people is motivated by a strong desire to avoid disapproval at all costs, a motivational state similar to fear of failure. Such people are very concerned about the evaluation of others, and they are fearful of being evaluated unfavorably. Often they automatically assume that all assessments will be negative. As a result, they may experience considerable tension and distress in social situations, and they may be highly motivated to avoid them. Where fear of disapproval is not excessive, these people enter social situations but strive to please others at all costs. They are highly conforming and hesitate to take a position that others might disapprove of. They define their own self-worth in terms of the feedback they get from other people.

Of equally great importance, however, is the child's own self-approval or self-disapproval. Once children begin to set standards for their own behavior, they approve or disapprove of themselves depending on whether or not they meet these standards. Thus, a young boy may feel badly about himself if he does something that he knows is wrong even if his friends approve. The development of internal standards of behavior and of conditions for self-approval and self-disapproval is a sign of developing maturity in a child.

Motivational patterns differ from child to child, of course, but in a recent research project we tried to determine the relative strength of approval motives in child athletes. We devised a psychological test to measure the approval-related reasons that children strive to do well in sports, and we administered the test to a large number of boys and girls of various ages.

Reasons for Trying to Perform Well in Sports			
Reason for Trying to Play Well		Order of Importance	
		9-11 yrs.	12-14 yrs.
1.	Feeling good about how you played	1	1
2.	Making sure you won't blame yourself for losing	2	2
3.	Being praised by your parents for playing well.	6	4
4.	Making sure your parents won't be displeased with your play.	3	8
5.	Making your coach proud of you.	4	3
6.	Making sure your coach won't be displeased with you.	5	6
7.	Making the other kids like you more.	8	7

It is noteworthy that for children in both age groups, their own self-approval and self-disapproval were more important to them than the reactions of peers, coaches, or parents. Where parents were concerned, the younger children were more strongly oriented toward avoiding parental disapproval than toward gaining their approval, whereas the older youngsters were relatively more concerned with getting approval than with avoiding disapproval. It is important to note, however, that this pattern did not hold for all children but only for the sample as a whole. For some children, the reactions of others were of utmost importance. Sometimes the primary motive was to gain approval, while other children were clearly motivated to avoid the disapproval of others.