



Assessing the Need for Eradicating Tiger Parenting in Youth Sports: Effects on Young Athletes Well-being

Alex Chirayath

Introduction

In recent years, there's been a surge of athletes bravely stepping into the spotlight to share their battles with mental health. Specifically, in the article, Thompson: Simone Biles and the most human meaning of courage, Simone Biles, a highly decorated American gymnast, highlights how external pressures contributed to her anxiety about competing in the Olympics and took a toll on her mental health as a whole (Thompson, 2022). In a similar way, many other famous athletes have revealed they have struggled with their mental well-being, but what is a common cause for this mental distress among these athletes? One significant factor that is often overlooked in regards to contributing to poor mental health is the impact that strict parenting in sports throughout childhood can have on the mental stability of athletes. This strict parenting style is also commonly known as “tiger parenting”, and is characterized by parents who place high expectations and push their children to excel at all costs. The term tiger parenting was first coined by Amy Chua, a Yale Law School professor and a mother who raised her children with strict Confucianist techniques, in her book called, “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother” (Chua, 2011). Since the book’s publication in 2011, there has been an increased popularity of tiger parenting and awareness of the adverse impacts it can have on children. This elicits the question: how does the prevalence of tiger parenting in youth sports impact the well-being of young athletes? The strongest arguments for eradicating tiger parenting from youth sports (under the age of 18) is the negative impact it can have on an adolescent athlete’s mental health, motivation, and relationship with their parents.

Parental Viewpoint

Parent’s rationale for tiger parenting often has no ill intentions since they just want their child to succeed, and they believe that it can be accomplished by pushing their child to excel. Also, in this competitive world, parents have pressure for their child to outcompete their peers. Another reason for parent’s use of tiger parenting practices is that some cultures prioritize strict discipline as a tradition, making it challenging for parents to deviate from the norm. Consequently, they often mimic the parenting styles they were raised with. Furthermore, parents often have a hard time with knowing when to let their children be independent and when to trust that their child knows best, this was the case for the main character’s mom in the short story, *Through the Tunnel*, “She was thinking, Of course he’s old enough to be safe without me. Have I been keeping him too close?” (Goldman, 2021).

Impact on Mental Health

One of the most prominent issues of tiger parenting is the detrimental effects it has on a young athlete’s mental health. Tiger parents instill a fear of failure in their children, which can cause anxiety towards being inadequate and low self-esteem in a child if they do not meet their parents' high expectations. This is corroborated by an article published in *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, a journal that focuses on developmental psychology and child psychiatry, when the authors reported, “Parents’ harsh/inconsistent responses to child misbehaviors and discouragement of child emotion expression were associated with high externalizing and internalizing problems and less adaptive behaviors at home” (Huang et al., 2016). The

internalizing problems the authors mention are issues such as anxiety, depression, and somatization; the externalizing problems include aggression and hyperactivity. This article suggests there is a strong correlation between parental response/concealment of children's feelings with the behavior of children and the potential of the child developing mental health issues. One reason for this association is that when children are not allowed to properly showcase their emotions, they are not able to manage their thoughts and feelings correctly, leading to mental and behavioral issues. When discussing a study published by researchers from UC Riverside, Martha Pickerill, A former managing editor of TIME For Kids, asserted that, "[The study] finds that less supportive parenting techniques used by some Chinese parents damages self-esteem and complicates school adjustment, while also putting kids at greater risk of depression and problem behaviors" (Pickerill, 2014). In the article, the author references tiger parenting interchangeably with the chinese parenting style. Pickerill's analysis strengthens the argument from the previous article because they both consider the link between unsupportive/strict parenting styles and the well being of a child. Furthermore, Lyndsey Juliane Chong and Alexandria Meyer, authors in the Department of Psychology at Florida State University, say, "Indeed, a large body of evidence suggests that adolescents growing up with critical or harsh parenting are at increased risk for negative outcomes, such as externalizing behaviors, withdrawn behavior, trait anxiety and clinical anxiety, depression symptoms, depersonalization, interpersonal rejection sensitivity, anger, and poor health" (Chong et al., 2020). The authors of this source would likely agree with the claims Pickerill and the authors of the article published in Child Psychiatry & Human Development made. Additionally, the evidence revealed in the article further confirms that a stricter and condemnatory type of parenting is positively associated with mental health disorders and behavioral issues, this is likely due to the amount of pressure and rules placed by tiger parents. On the other hand, in a video published by the Wall Street Journal, Sophia Chua-Rebenfeld, the daughter of the 'Tiger Mother' Amy Chua, asserts that her mother's tiger parenting style was actually beneficial for her mental development and success. In the video she reflected on her mother's parenting style and states to her, "I really do feel that your approach is more about giving me the confidence and, you know, the work habits from an early age to be able to do what I want to later" (The Wall Street Journal, 2011, 1:03-1:12). This presents a counterargument to the belief that tiger parents only focus on their child obtaining high success, asserting instead that they prioritize fostering their child's skills, characteristics, interests, and cognitive growth.

Impact on Motivation

Along with intense pressure, tiger parents also place a spotlight on their children at a young age in sports, this builds up and eventually causes the adolescent athlete to burnout and lose their intrinsic motivation to participate in the sport. Unfortunately, this is the case for many young athletes who pursue sports, not out of passion, but out of obligation to their parents. A journal published by Frontiers, the 6th largest scientific publisher, reported, "Negative involvement, characterized by directive behavior, pressure, and performance expectations, correlates with adverse motivational outcomes...a controlling parenting style has been shown to yield negative motivational outcomes. Such parents dictate behaviors and outcomes, exerting pressure and criticism, which disrupts adolescents' needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence" (Gao et al., 2024). This underscores how children of tiger parents often lack intrinsic motivation due to

them being driven by the external pressure and fear of criticism provided by their parents. Similarly, an article published in PLOS One, a journal published by the Public Library of Science, said, “Indirect effects emphasized that parental pressure also negatively predicted intrinsic motivation and enjoyment, and positively predicted boredom...this issue will lead to less enjoyment of practice, amotivation and boredom, which, in the long run, will be translated into a lack of commitment, concluding with dropout from an activity.” This statement underscores how the presence of parental pressure can diminish the pleasure and intrinsic motivational drive associated with the activity.

Impact on Child-Parent Relationship

Another effect that is commonly associated with tiger parenting is that it interferes with a healthy child and parent relationship. This is due to tiger parents emphasizing success in sports over an emotional connection with their children, inducing rebellion and disdain in their children, lacking trust in their children, causing anxiety or depression, and promoting a feeling of inadequacy. This is best expressed by an article published in Verywell Mind, a mental health and wellness platform authored by credentialed health professionals, “The authoritative approach of tiger parenting can strain parent-child relationships, as children may feel controlled, misunderstood, or unconditionally loved only when they achieve success” (Harrison, 2023). This underscores the tension in the relationship between tiger parents and their children, since the parents often only provide affection, support, and warmth to their children when they reach their standard of success. Moreover, Dr. Emily Guarnotta, an expert clinical psychologist for parental and infant mental health, shared, “A tiger parent may withdraw love or affection to punish children. For example, parents may express intense dissatisfaction if children misbehave or appear distant when children fall short” (Guarnotta, 2023). This substantiates the previous claim that tiger parents commonly express conditional love when their children surpass their expectations of them. An extreme example of the toll tiger parenting can have on child-parent relationships is the story of Jennifer Pan. Marco Margaritoff, a staff reporter at HuffPost that has also published at People, VICE, and Complex, summarized the background Jennifer Pan had. He revealed that Pan had strict tiger parents that restricted her from pursuing her own interests, love life, and social life. This ended up pushing Pan to the breaking point, which caused her to plot and carry out the murder of her parents (Margaritoff, 2024). In contrast, Society for Personality and Social Psychology, an academic organization of personality and social psychologists, claimed, “[Asian American students] also experience greater pressure by their mothers, but did not report feeling any less supported by their mothers because of that pressure. That is, Asian American children can still feel supported by their mothers regardless of increased pressure placed on them” (Santisi, 2014). This proves that children of tiger parents can maintain a healthy relationship with their parents, despite the expectations and pressure they place upon them. This is likely due to tiger parents still providing emotional support for their children which mitigates the adverse effects of the pressure they place on them.

Conclusion

After analyzing the impacts tiger parenting can have on young athletes, it can be concluded that the tiger parenting style should be extirpated from youth sports. The best potential solution to address this issue is to provide group counseling for parents of young athletes. The counseling would include education on the importance of supportive, forgiving, and unconditional parenting. In addition to that, counseling will include education on the risks and characteristics of tiger parenting in order to prevent it from being used. This solution is feasible because the general consensus among all the sources is that fostering a non-judgmental and reassuring parent-child relationship will produce the best developmental outcome. For instance, an article published in the American Psychological Association, the leading scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States, stated, "Supportive parenting was the most common style and linked to the best developmental outcomes...children of tiger parents reported higher rates of depressive symptoms than children with easygoing or supportive parents" (Chamberlin, 2013). How this solution would be implemented is by mandating the parents of athletes in youth sports organizations to fulfill a group therapy course with a uniform lesson plan. The course will provide education on healthy parenting approaches and also provide a network of like minded parents to support each other in the process. Trained professionals in the mental health field, such as counselors or psychologists, will collaborate with the local sports organizations to enforce the program. The implications of this solution are that it would improve the overall well-being of the child. It would also make parents more self aware of harmful parenting, provide a sense of community amongst parents, and help them acquire new parenting strategies. However, some limitations arise and include the counseling being ineffective due to parents' participation being mandatory. This may cause the parents to resent or resist actively engaging with the counseling sessions. Another limitation is that some cultures view counseling as a sign of weakness or have a tradition of prioritizing strict discipline. The biggest limitation though is the cost of counseling services. An article published by Hartgrove Hospital, a leading psychiatric hospital in Chicago, said, "While individual sessions can cost upwards of \$150 an hour, while group therapy can cost as little as \$40 to \$50 an hour." If implemented, this solution will protect the mental health of adolescent athletes along with educating parents on the harm tiger parenting can have on their child, in order to prevent parental manipulation and exploitation of child athletes.

References

Amado, D., Sánchez-Oliva, D., González-Ponce, I., González, J. J. P., & Sánchez-Miguel, P. A. (2015). Incidence of Parental Support and Pressure on Their Children's Motivational Processes towards Sport Practice Regarding Gender. *PloS One*, 10(6), e0128015. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0128015>

Chamberlin, J. (2013, September). 'Tiger parenting' doesn't create child prodigies, finds new research. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2013/09/tiger-parenting>

Chong, L. J., Mirzadegan, I. A., & Meyer, A. (2020). The association between parenting and the error-related negativity across childhood and adolescence. *Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience*, 45, 100852. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcn.2020.100852>

Chua, A. (2011, January 11). *Battle hymn of the Tiger Mother*. Google Books. https://books.google.com/books?id=dB11aTeQ7s4C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

Gao, Z., Chee, C. S., Wazir, M. R. W. N., Wang, J., Zheng, X., & Wang, T. (2024). The role of parents in the motivation of young athletes: a systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1291711>

Goldman, L. (2021, October 14). *Through the Tunnel*, Doris Lessing | The Short Story Project. The Short Story Project. <https://shortstoryproject.com/stories/through-the-tunnel/>

Guarnotta, E. (2023, December 10). Tiger Parents: Definition & Impact on Mental Health. Choosing Therapy. <https://www.choosingtherapy.com/tiger-parents/>

Harrison, T. (2023, November 20). What is tiger Parenting? 5 Key characteristics and impact. *The Minds Journal*. <https://themindsjournal.com/what-is-tiger-parenting/>

Huang, K. Y., Calzada, E. J., Cheng, S., Barajas-Gonzalez, R. G., & Brotman, L. M. (2016). Cultural Adaptation, Parenting and Child Mental Health Among English Speaking Asian American Immigrant Families. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 48(4), 572–583. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-016-0683-y>

Margaritoff, M. (2024, March 21). Jennifer Pan and her deadly revenge against her “Tiger parents.” *All That's Interesting*. <https://allthatsinteresting.com/jennifer-pan>
Pickerill, M. (2014, September 24). Tiger Mom, hold that growl. *TIME*. <https://time.com/3426536/tiger-mom-amy-chua-new-study/>

Santisi, J. (2014, May 14). How Asian American “tiger mothers” motivate their children. *ScienceDaily*. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/05/140516203232.htm>

The Wall Street Journal. (2011, December 27). Child of Tiger Mom speaks out [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivqYcbIMBjo>

Thompson, M., II. (2022, January 21). Thompson: Simone Biles and the most human meaning of courage. The Athletic. <https://theathletic.com/2735178/2021/07/28/simone-biles-2021-olympics-courage-mental-health/>

Zhang, H., Qin, X., & Zhou, J. (2020). Do tiger moms raise superior kids? The impact of parenting style on adolescent human capital formation in China. China Economic Review, 63, 101537. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chieco.2020.101537>