Controversies surrounding the rapid growth of organized youth sport programs has renewed interest in the study of parent/child relationships. Although little attention has been given to parent/child social conflicts, the research literature has consistently shown that parents play a critical role in determining whether their children decide to become involved in sport programs (Greendorfer, 1978; Lewko & Ewing, 1980), and to a lesser extent, affect children's perceptions of their sport abilities (McElroy & Kirkendall, 1980). More recently, attention has been given to examining the role parents play in developing their children's self-esteem (Magill & Ash, 1979; Rosenberg, 1979). Social scientists have viewed self-esteem, the evaluative component of self-worth, as a central psychological concept. What we think of ourselves and how we feel about ourselves affect behavior and actions (Gecas, 1972). Self-esteem thus represents a barometer of one's acceptance of his/her perceived self. Although parental encouragement and feedback have been related to positive self-esteem development (Coopersmith, 1967; Felker, 1969), little is known about problems that may arise when children's perceptions of how their parents perceive them are different from their own self-evaluations.

Social scientists have recently introduced the concept of self-esteem dissonance. According to Rosenberg (1979), individuals seek similarity between their own judgments and those of significant others (e.g., parents). When differences in judgments are perceived to be present, children begin to question whose judgment is correct (Smith, Zingale, & Coleman, 1978). Because parents are viewed as central significant others by their children, perceived parental judgments that differ from self-evaluations may prove to be particularly critical to children's psychological development.

Discrepancy in parent/child perceived judgments may take one of two forms. As depicted in much of the popular literature, the "overzealous" parent may be perceived as evaluating children's abilities unrealistically high, forcing children into viewing themselves as "failures." A strain or social conflict may also become apparent if children evaluate their own sport abilities considerably higher than what
they perceive their parents’ ratings to be. In this situation, children may wonder why their parents do not “support” their sport involvement.

Using adolescents enrolled in a nationally sponsored summer sports program, perceived parent and child social conflicts were explored. Specifically, it was hypothesized that when children perceive their parents to have the same judgment of sport ability as their own, self-esteem would be higher than when children perceive their parents to have a different judgment of their sport ability.

Method

Subjects

The respondents in the present study were selected from those participating in the summer portion of the 1979 National Youth Sports Program, which is sponsored jointly by the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the Community Services Administration of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The program has been in existence for 10 years, operating programs on 138 college campuses and serving over 40,000 economically disadvantaged youth. Representatives from 11 program sites agreed to participate. The activity directors at each of the participating sites were instructed to verbally administer a short questionnaire to the youngsters. The present sample consisted of 938 males and 958 females ranging from the ages of 10 to 16.¹

Indicators

Perceived Parental Ability Judgment was determined from the responses to the question “How good at sports would your parents/guardians say you are?” Possible responses ranged from very good, good, average, below average, and poor. Child’s Sport Ability Judgment was determined from the question “How good at sports would you say you are?” Response options ranged from very good to poor. For analysis purposes, the perceptions of sport ability responses were collapsed into three categories: very good, average, and poor.

Self-esteem was measured with the use of the 10-item Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Responses for each of the 10 items were: almost always true (5), often true (4), sometimes true (3), seldom true (2), and never true (1). Summation of the scores on the following items resulted in the higher scores reflecting positive self-esteem and lower scores reflecting lower self-esteem.

Are you able to do things as well as most other kids?
Do you ever feel that you are no good?* 
Are you as good as most other kids you know?

¹The data were collected as part of a larger study of the social-psychological impact of the National Youth Sports Program.

*Item was scored in reverse order: almost always true (1), often true (2), sometimes true (3), seldom true (4), and never true (5).