



## **SWIMMING AUSTRALIA LIMITED**

### **Member Retention and Acquisition** **Research**

22<sup>nd</sup> February 2006

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Females comprised a slightly higher proportion of members (56%) than males

Forty-percent of respondents had obtained a bachelor degree or higher (compared with 13% of all Australians over 15 according to the 2001 ABS Census).

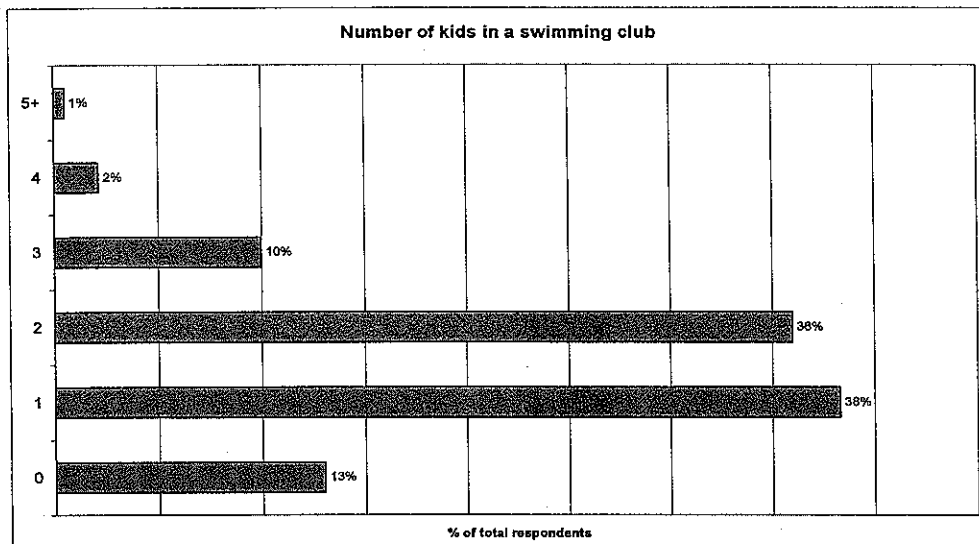
Significantly, 46% of members household incomes are over \$80,000 compared to 20% for the Australian population (according to the 2001 ABS Census).

Respondents were much more likely to be married (82% compared to 2001 Census figure of 51%) and live in larger households (70% living in 4 or 5 person households).

81% of the respondents indicated that their place of birth is Australia. The 2001 Census found that 69% of couple and one parent family households had at least one parent born in Australia.

### 1.3 Family membership

Over half of the respondents had 2 or more children in a swimming club.



Approximately 80% of members have at least one parent involved in their swimming club, underscoring the strong family involvement in the sport.

### 1.4 Choosing a sport – ‘buying’ behaviour factors

The most important attributes in deciding which sports children participate in are whether it is associated with the attributes ‘healthy’ (73%), ‘Personal satisfaction’ (43%), ‘character building’ (38%), ‘essential skills training’ (28%) and ‘sociable’ (27%).

**A major irritant for parents is 'double dipping'. Double dipping at events included having to pay entry fees to watch their children compete and having to pay a perceived large fee to compete in each event, coupled with their child not getting free entry into the venue. Members expressed frustration that they were volunteering to help run events and still having to pay entry costs.**

## **1.7 Clubs**

The most common answers to "what is special about your swimming club?" are: great coaches (17%), the friendly and welcoming atmosphere (12%) and the family atmosphere (10%).

The areas which respondents are most likely to indicate need improvement are: encouraging teenagers to stay, providing welcome kits to new members and developing more team spirit.

## **1.8 Retention of members**

Amongst respondents who don't believe their children will still be in the sport in 2 years time, time commitments was the main reason cited (25%) for not continuing. This was especially the case for parents of teenagers, who expected a sharp increase in study, work and social commitments to present a barrier to ongoing involvement in the sport

As a consequence of the high commitment levels only high achievers remain in the sport, providing no avenue for those who prefer a less intense, casual approach to the sport.

**There is currently a 'vicious cycle' driving defection from the sport. The lack of less competitive streams is driving time-impooverished students from the sport. This then deprives their more gifted and competitive peers of the sociability that is key to retaining interest in the sport. Less intense programs of activity will directly improve retention of those seeking such programs, but will also improve retention, indirectly by helping to create a more collegiate environment for the more elite swimmers.**

## 1.10 Summary of Key Recommendations

1. Establish retention as a KPI for clubs.
2. Recognise the need for a two-tier approach – those destined for competition and those preferring the healthy aspects and benefits of swimming.
3. Devise 'light' participation programs.
4. Conduct regular, handicap-based or PB-based interclub events (though not on Friday nights).
5. Target those aged 11 with inspirational stories from current and former champions.
6. Subsidise/reduce the cost of participation in the sport for members. Such pricing subsidies could include:
  - a. A package to provide discounts for heavier involvement
  - b. Free/reduced price parent entry to competitions
  - c. A cost effective program of 'Masters' activities & events for the 45+ members
  - d. A 'family package'.
7. Member 'best practice guidelines' should reflect activities that deliver 'team' experiences. For example, rewards and milestones to keep members focused on goal (interstate / OS trips every 2-3 years), music at club nights, etc.
8. Establish links with ocean swimming & Surf lifesaving.

### 3 KEY OBJECTIVES

The overall aim of this project is to establish strategies for growth and retention of the SAL membership base.

The objectives were outlined as:

➤ Socio-demographic profiling

Gain an understanding of what an SAL member looks like in terms of their geographic and socio-demographic profile.

➤ Involvement in swimming

Understand why members took up swimming, how often they go, why they go, whether they compete, do they attend events etc.

➤ Club membership

Investigate how important SAL membership is to its members and what are the perceived benefits of membership. This will involve identifying what the current benefits are for each individual member and whether or not there is a gap between their expectations and their actual experience.

➤ Buying Behaviour

What factors are important determinants for choosing swimming as a recreational activity?

➤ Other sporting interests

Determine firstly what the key 'competitive' alternatives are, vying for the time and household dollars of members. What other sports/exercise/recreational activities are members concurrently involved in and what other recreational sports and sporting events do members consider as viable alternatives to swimming?

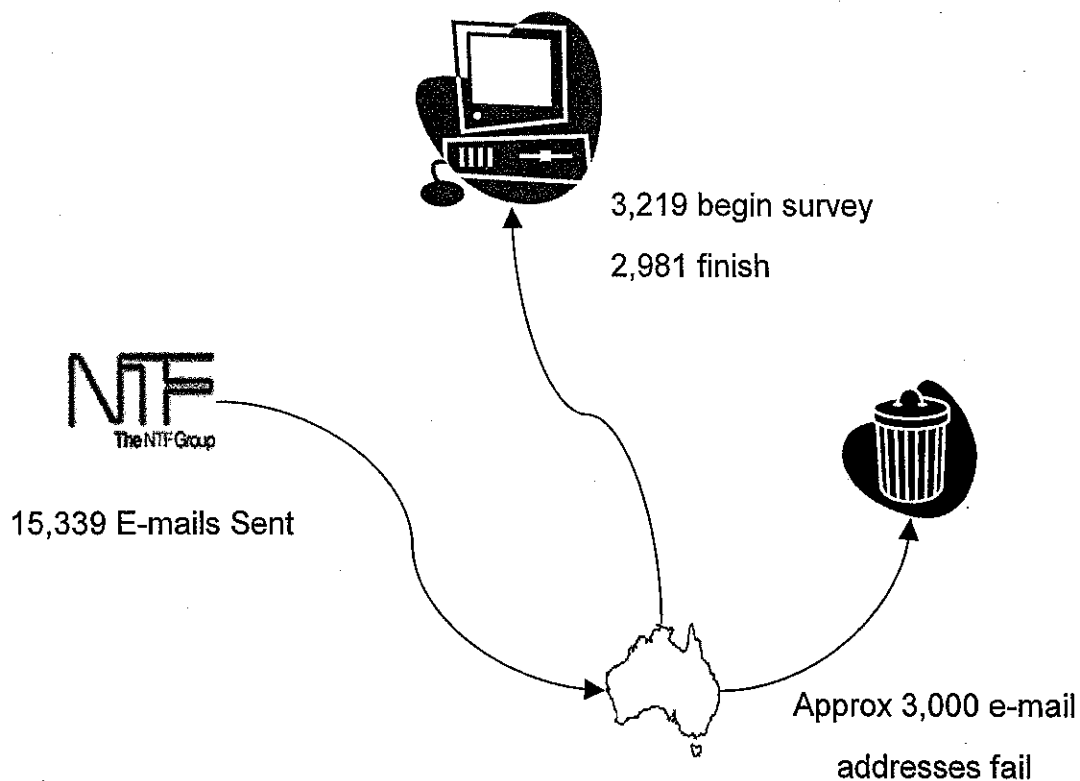
An email invitation to participate in the survey was sent to all 15,339 members throughout Australia who had an email address. This was done over several days starting on the 13<sup>th</sup> December 2006.

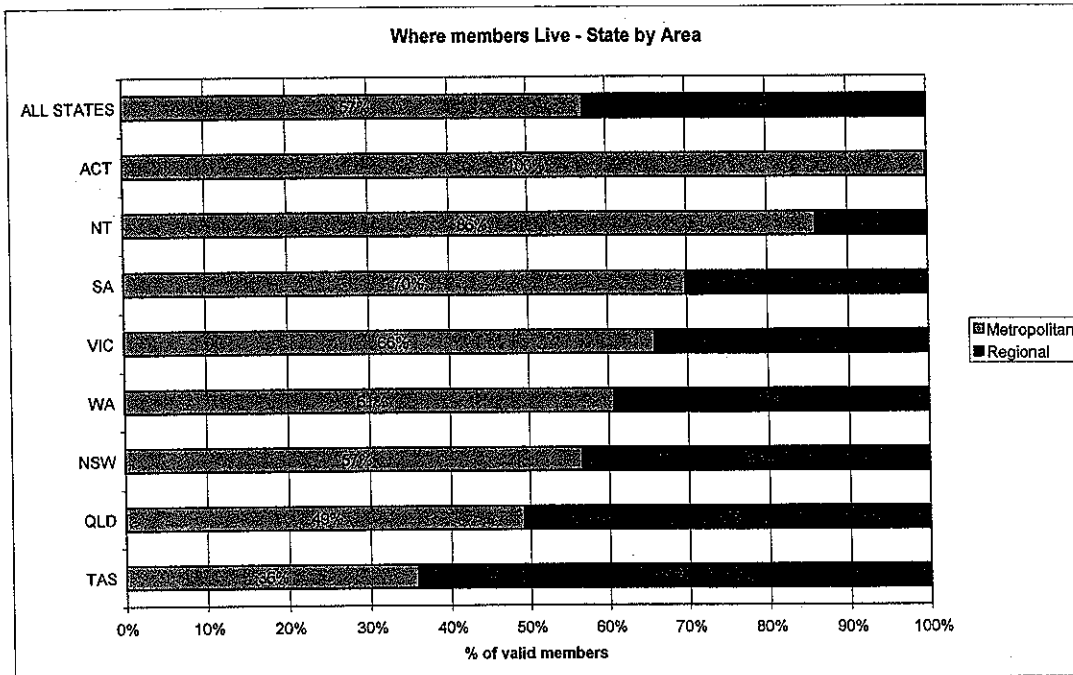
The invitation stipulated that you must be over 16 years of age to take part in the survey. Those under 16 years of age were requested to ask the parent or guardian who enrolled them in a swimming club to complete the survey for them.

The invitation contained a link which could be clicked to go directly to the survey page. To prevent duplication of responses, each invitation contained a password which respondents were required to type before being able to enter the survey.

The survey was available online for members to fill out for approximately 5 weeks running from the first day that emails were sent out. A prize draw was used as an incentive for the survey. First prize was an adult double pass to the Commonwealth Games Swimming Trial Finals and there were two runner up prizes of a Speedo Swimming Pack, consisting of swim wear, goggles and chamois towel.

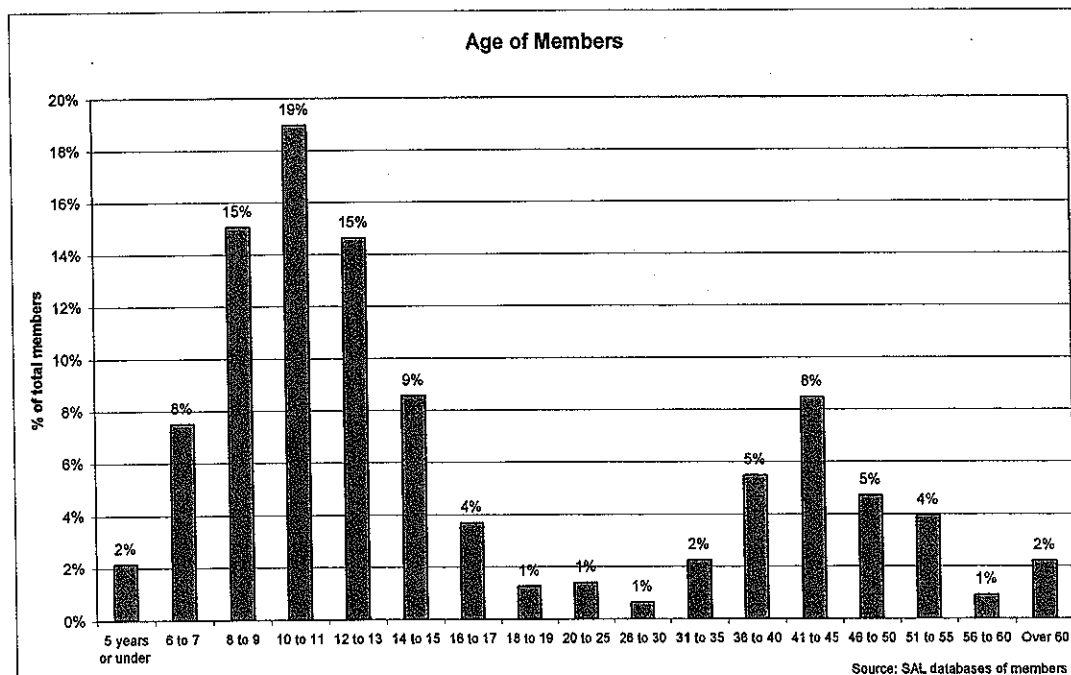
2,981 members completed the entire survey. This gives us a response rate of close to 20%, which is extremely good for this type of project.



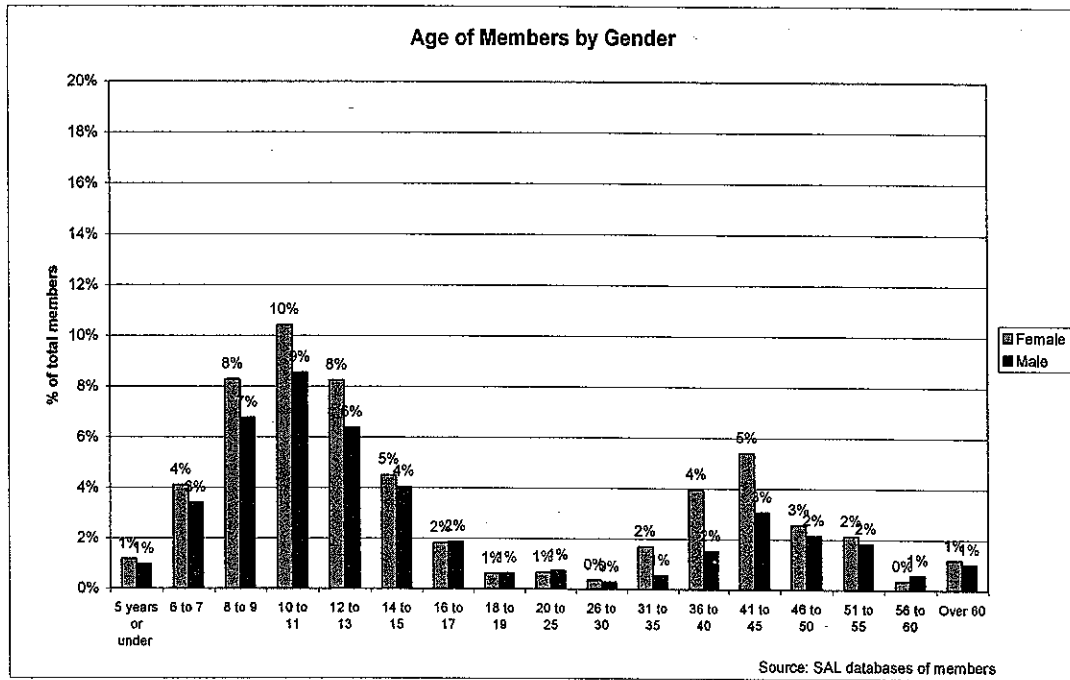


### 5.1.2 Age of Members

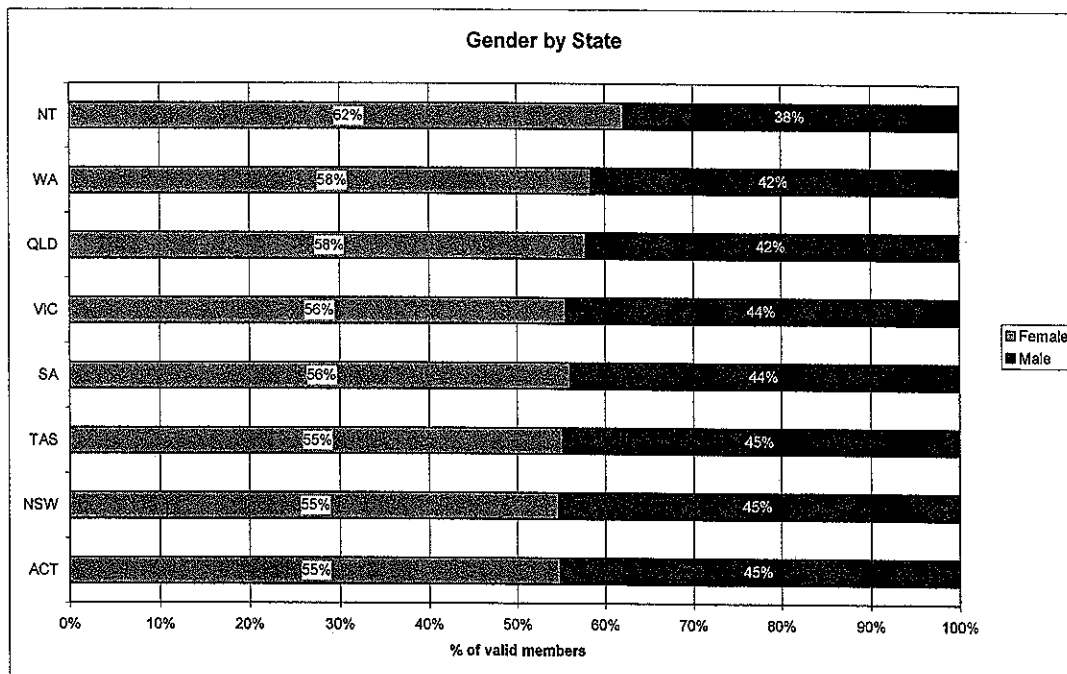
The SAL member database showed that there is a 'childhood' membership with a peak at 11, falling away almost totally in the twenties, with another peak around age 30, falling away again after age 50. This suggests that membership may well be child focused and that adult membership relates to activities with their children, falling off as children reach their teens.

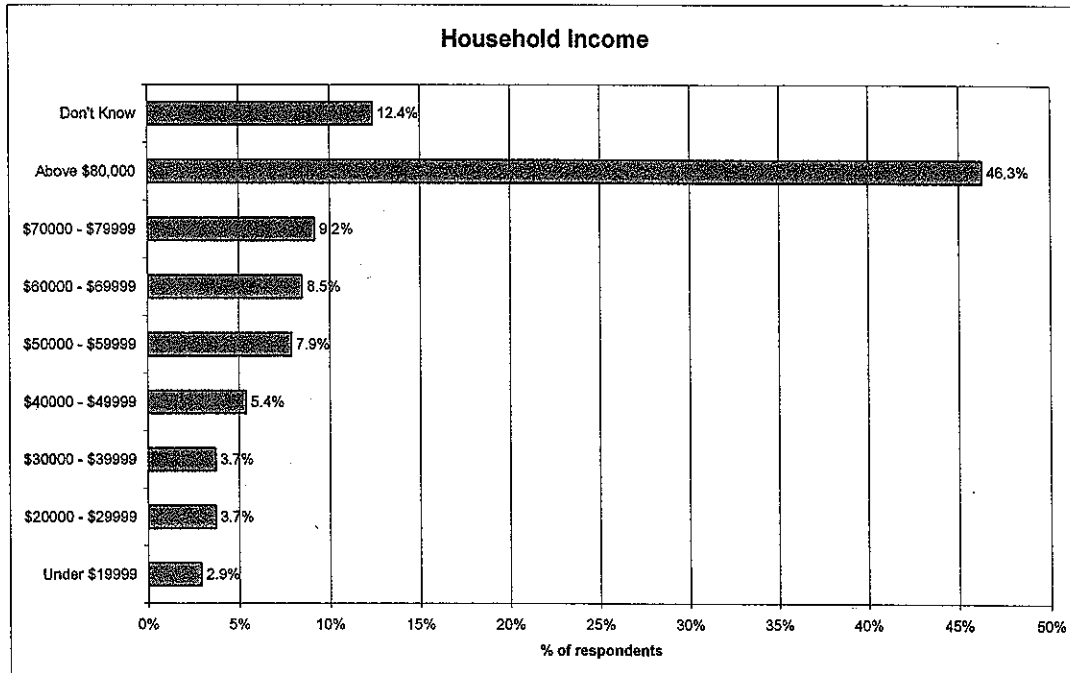


The graph overleaf shows that South Australia has the highest proportion of members aged over 14 years (56%), followed by VIC (48%), ACT (48%) and NT (48%).



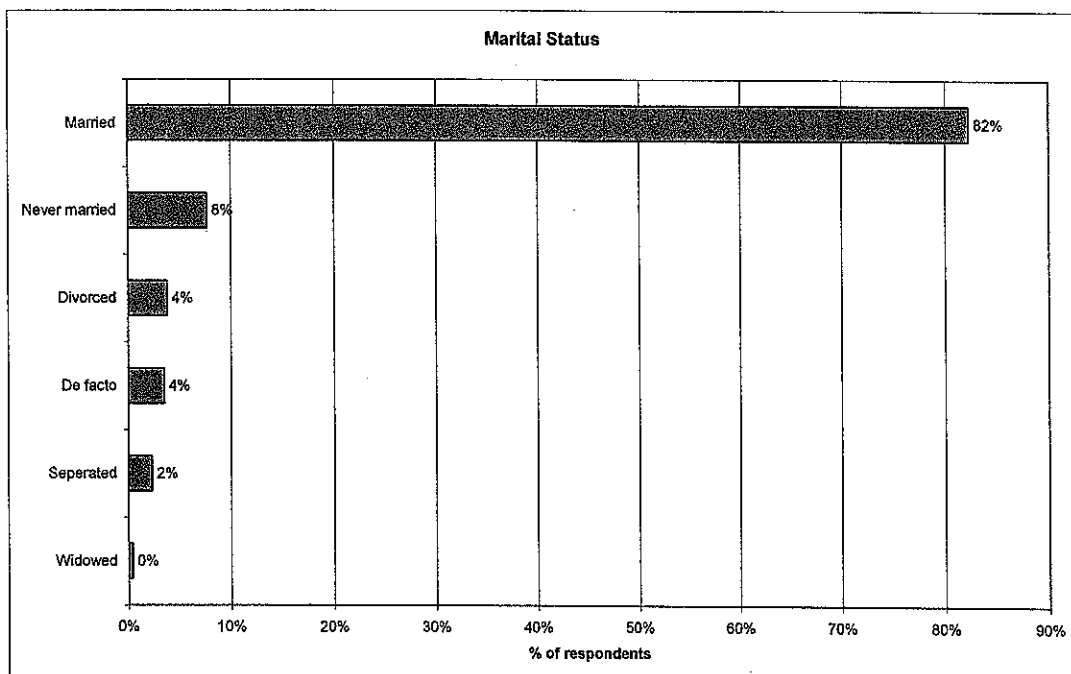
NT (62%), followed by WA (58%) and QLD (58%) had significantly more female members than average.





### 5.2.3 Marital Status

Compared to the Australian population, our respondents are much more likely to be married (82% compared to 2001 Census figure of 51%).



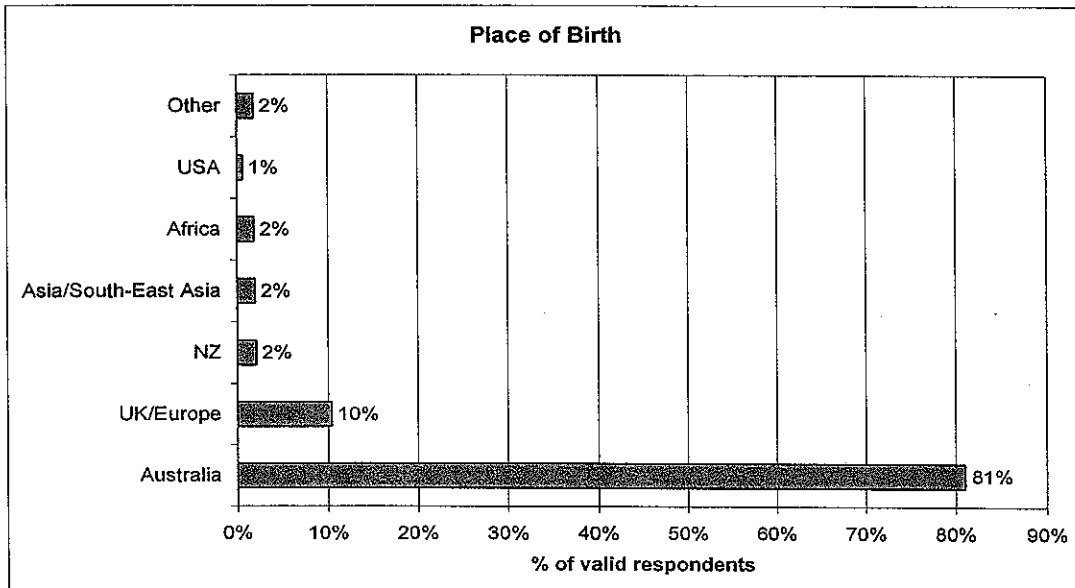
### 5.2.4 Number of people living in household

Compared to the Australian population, SAL members are living in larger households. The ABS 2001 Census reports that approximately a quarter of Australian households have four or five residents, however our sample of SAL member households has 70% with this many people in their household.

### 5.2.6 Place of Birth

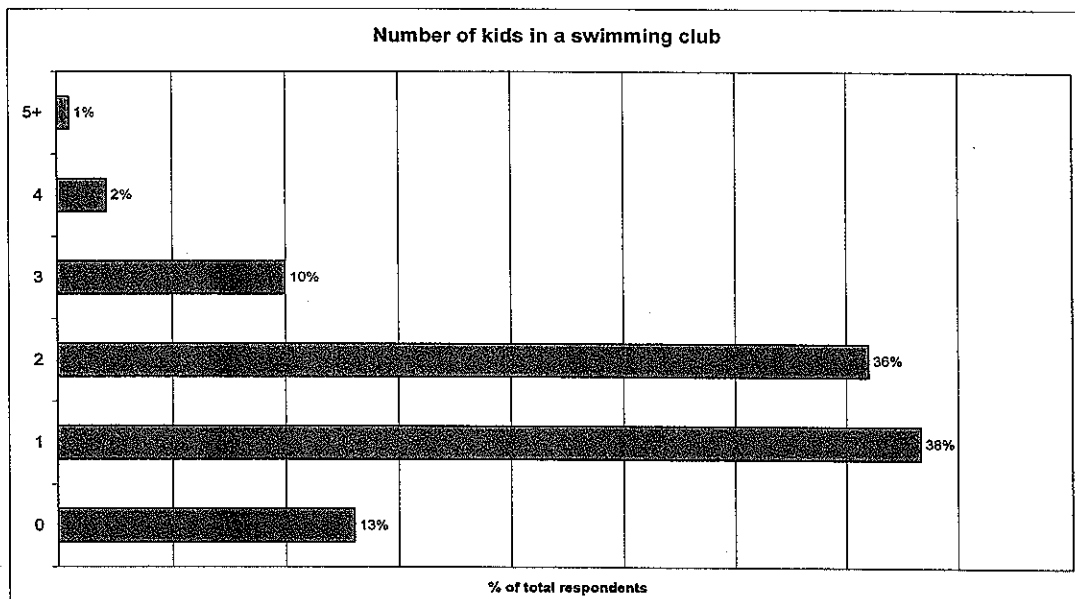
81% of the respondents indicated that their place of birth is Australia. The 2001 Census found that 69% of couple and one parent family households had at least one parent born in Australia.

Of those respondents who indicated that they were born overseas, close to half were from the UK or Europe.



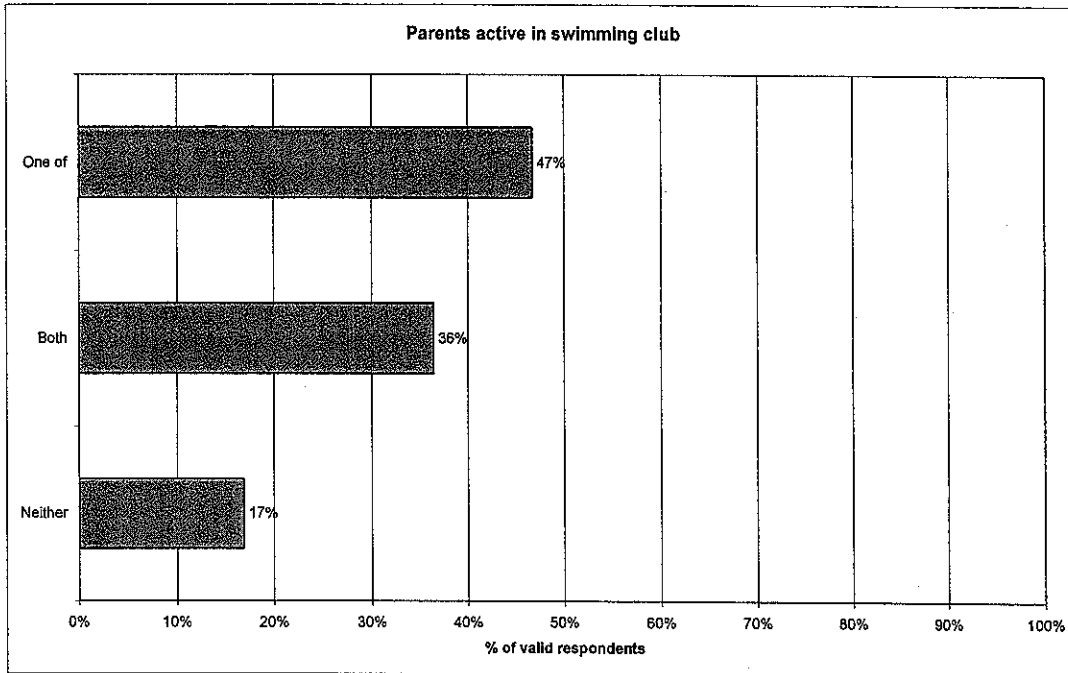
### 5.2.7 Number of children in a swimming club

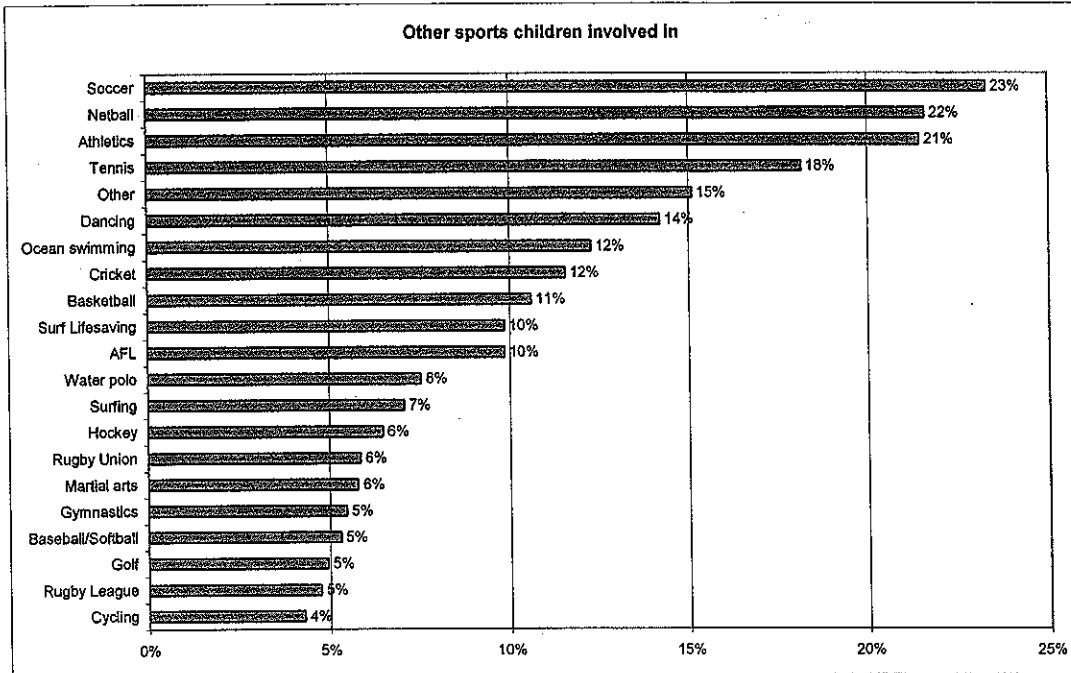
Close to two in every five respondents had one child who was a member of a swimming club and close to one-half had more than two children who are members of a swimming club.



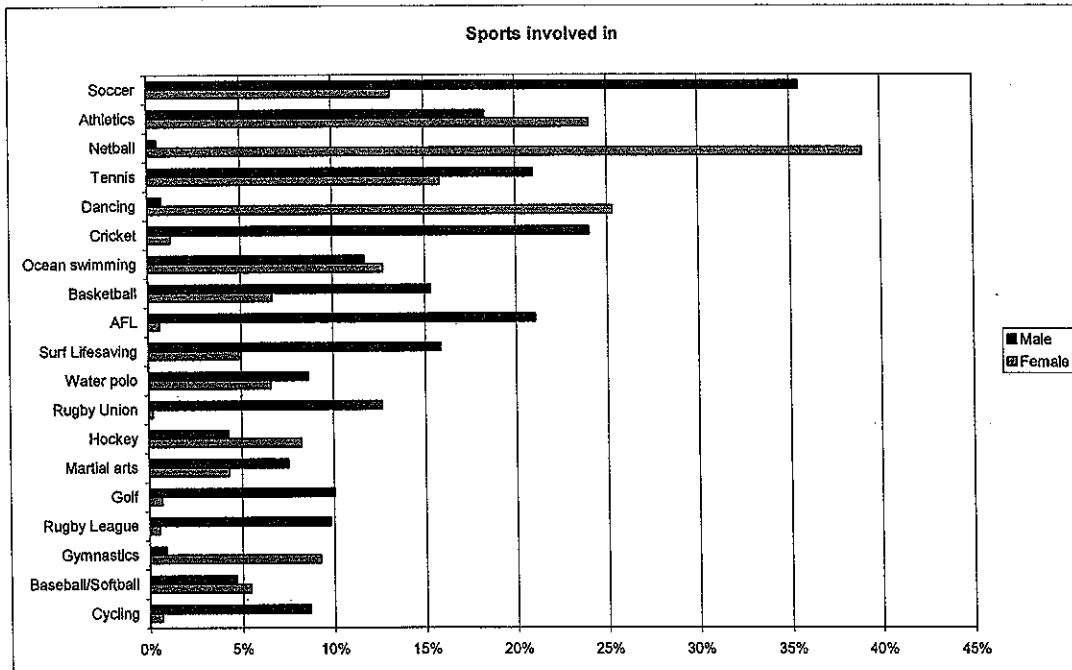
### 5.2.9 Parental Involvement in Clubs

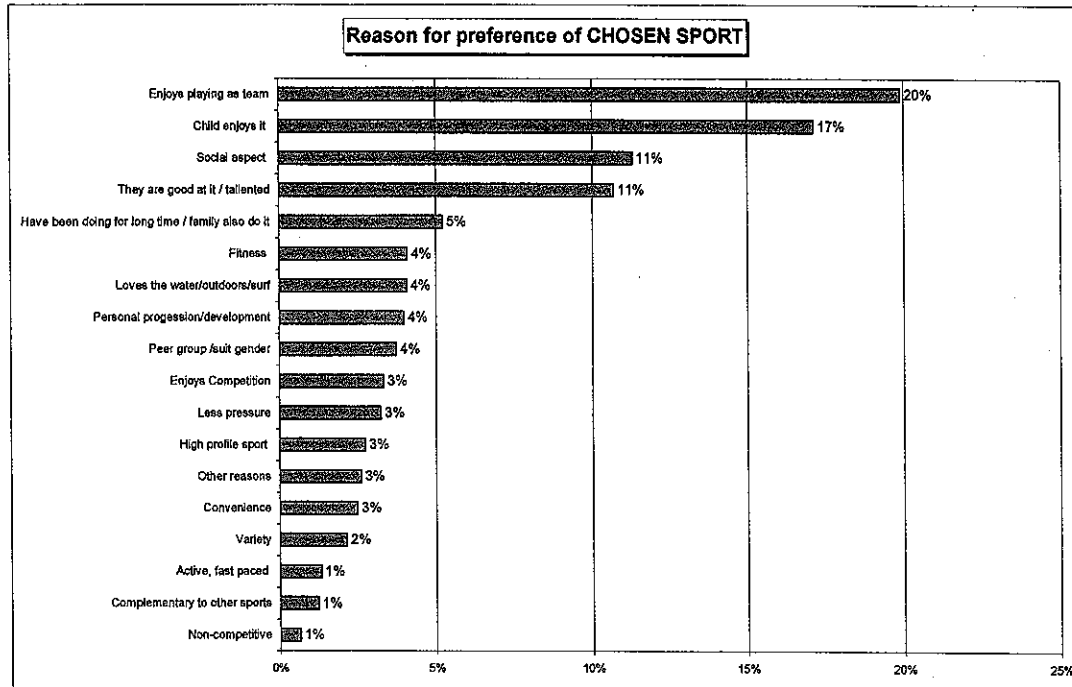
Approximately four in every five members have at least one parent involved in their swimming club, strongly suggesting that swimming is a family sport.





There were marked differences between boys and girls in the sports in which they were involved. Girls were most likely to be involved in netball (39%), dancing (25%), athletics (24%) and tennis (16%). Boys on the other hand were most likely to be involved in soccer (36%), cricket (24%), and AFL (21%).





Many parents feel that swimming can be a lonely sport with insufficient opportunity for social interaction and so have encouraged their children to participate in a team sport, alongside swimming as the following comments suggests.

*“More of a team competitor and the feeling of belonging to a team. Swimming can be a lonely sport”*

*“Enjoys the interaction with team members. Because swimming is more of an individual sport it is a good idea to be involved in some team sport as well. Social interaction is most important.”*

As noted above, another common reason for a sport being preferred was that the child was good at it – that they are having some success in competitions and have a sense of being rewarded for their effort. This is reflected in the following comments:

*“Water based sport that allows him to use his swimming skills. He will never be a state swimmer, but is a very above average swimmer, water polo is an ideal progression.”*

*“Enjoys the tennis because he can win on his own accord. With his age group of swimming he says he cannot win because he has too many better swimmers to compete against.”*

*“Because he does it well and he can see how he improves on a weekly basis. He also sees the benefits of swimming eg enables him to surf, sail with confidence. He also sees that swimming gives him an overall fitness so he can play other sports and assists him in achieving well at school.”*

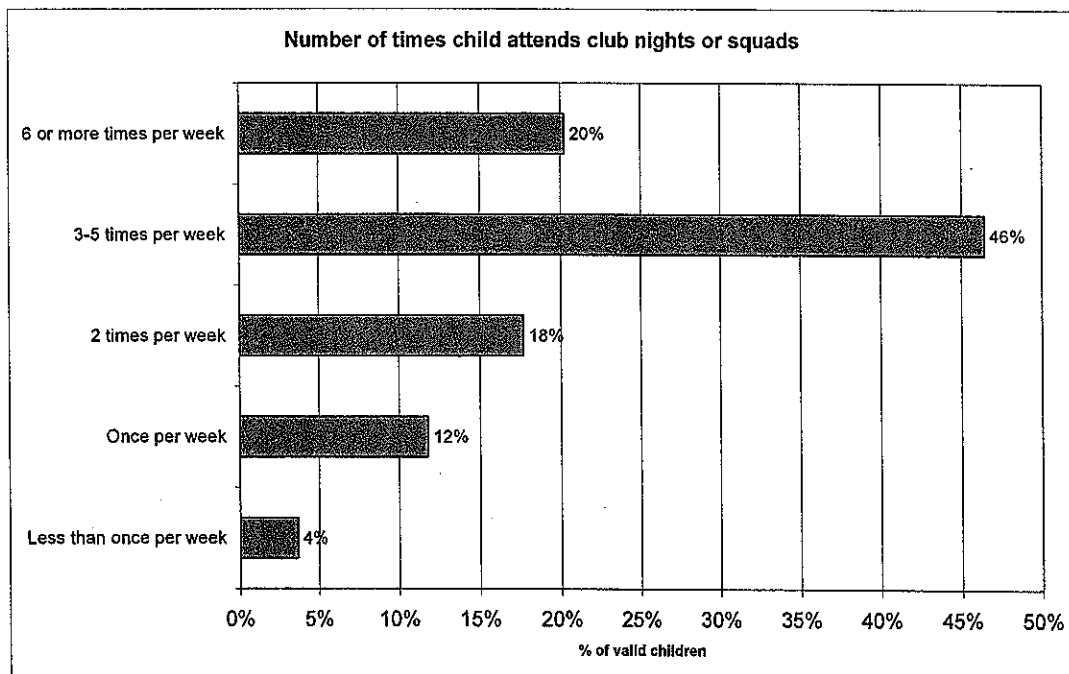
## 7 INVOLVEMENT IN SWIMMING

### 7.1 Attendance at club nights or squads

The majority of members (66%) attended club nights or squads three times a week or more. Swimming can be a heavy commitment for some swimmers as the following comments from our groups show:

*“There is more commitment than other sports if you swim twice a week, you’re not going anywhere”*

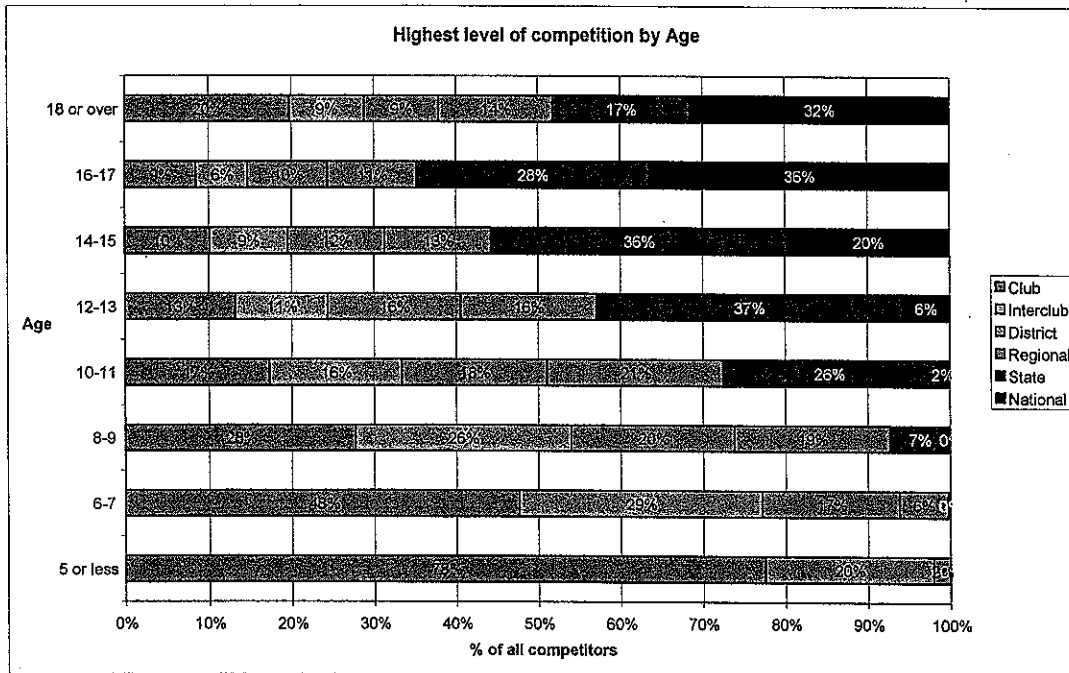
*“I know that my kid falls asleep at school and he’s 15. He comes home from swimming at 6:30pm, he eats tea and then he is swimming again at 5:30 the next morning”*



The chart overleaf shows that attendance has several major turning points. Up until the age of 7 the majority of children attend swimming once or twice a week. However from the age of 8, the proportion of children attending 3 to 5 times a week more than doubles. Then at around the age of 12 the proportion of children attending 6 or more times a week doubles. At 18, we see a drop-off in the level of attendance – with close to one quarter of members aged over 18 attending less than once a week. One mother at the groups commented about the importance of progressing:

*“It changes at different ages and different levels that they are swimming at. If they do make a certain level then suddenly there is a lot more passion there and if they miss out, then they drop off and lose their passion”*

The following chart shows that from the age of 12, (this is also the age at which training increases to at least 6 times week for most swimmers, refer to Section 6.1) a minority of members compete at club level only. Within the 12-13 year age bracket 43% have competed at either State or National level. This increases to 64% within the 16-17 year age bracket.



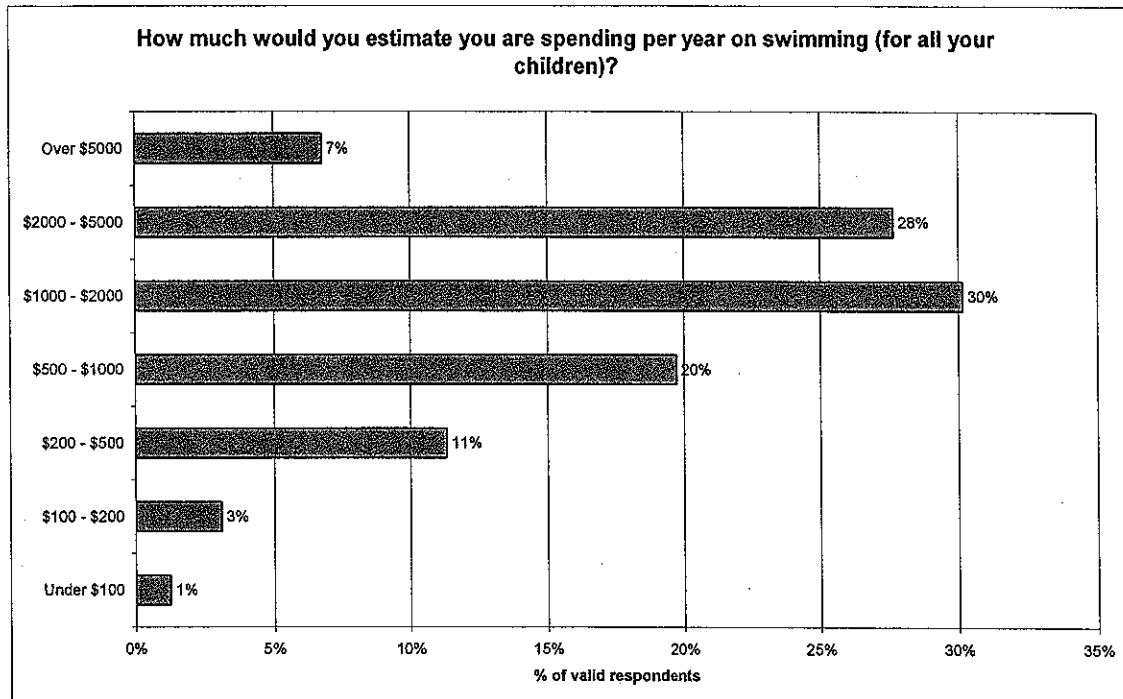
### 7.3 Spectator at Elite Swimming Events

Nearly all member families (94%) have had at least one member attend a district competition as a spectator in the last 12 months. Fifty six percent have attended a State or National competition.

For more 'elite' events such as Skins, the Grand Prix series, a Commonwealth or Olympic Games Trial or other major international event, the proportion who has attended shrinks to around 1 in every 15 member families.

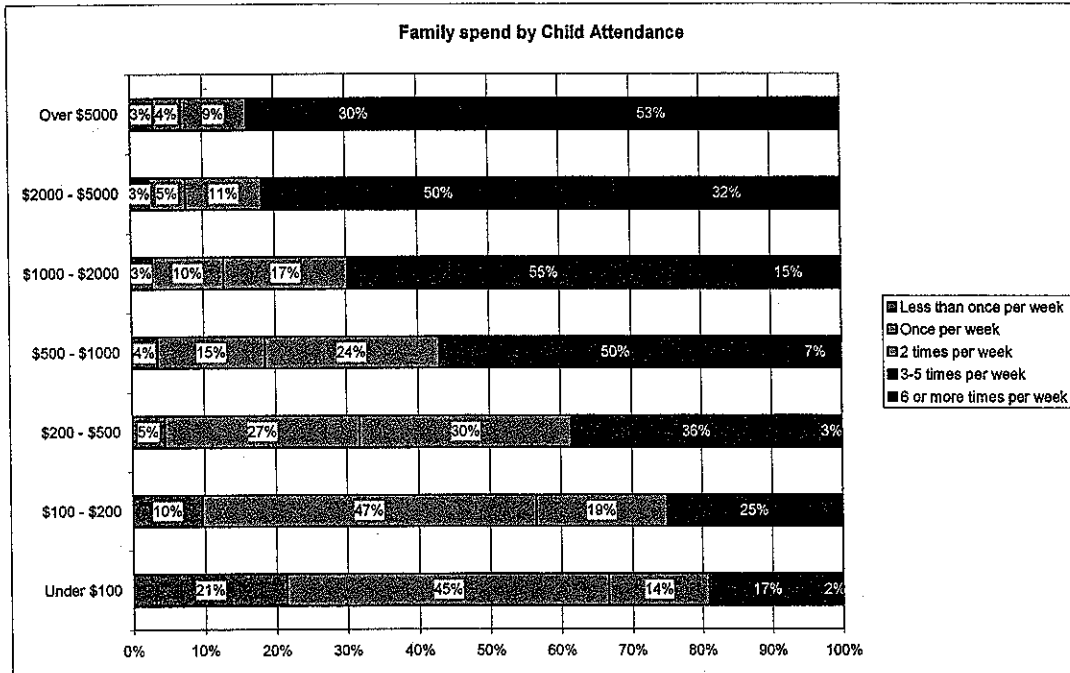
## 7.4 Expenditure on Swimming

Over half of the respondents indicated that they are spending over \$1,000 per year on swimming. This is a substantial amount considering that participation in other sports such as soccer or netball costs around \$200 per season (in many instances this also includes the cost of a uniform).



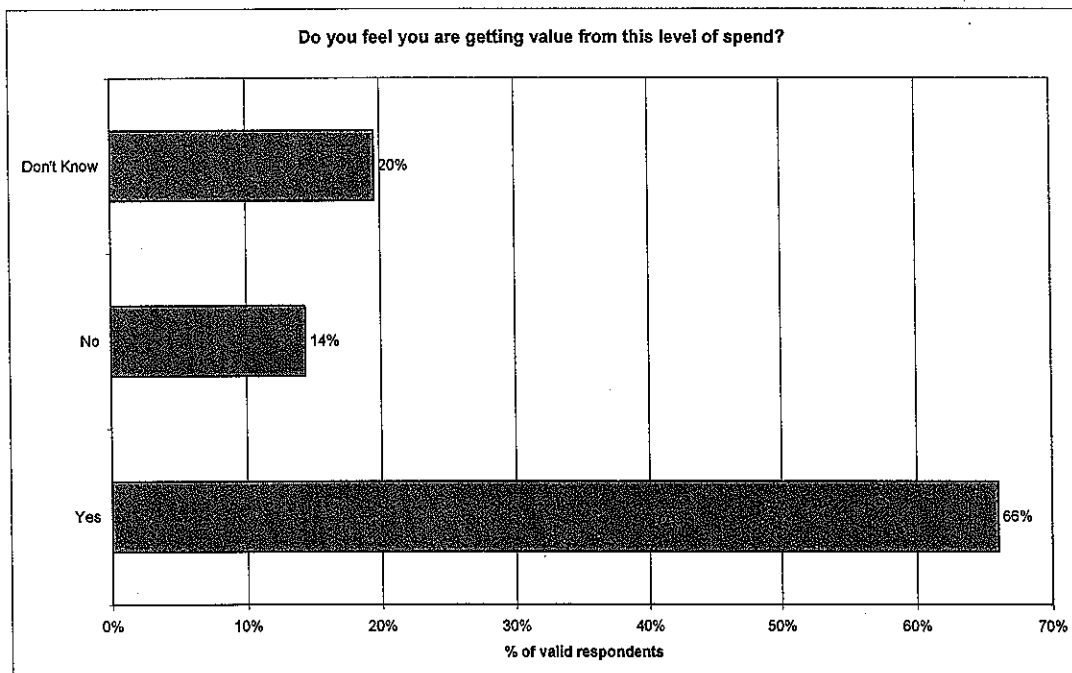
The chart below shows the level of spend on swimming by the number of children a family has involved in the sport. Over half of the families with only one child swimming will spend somewhere between \$500 and \$2000 per year. For families with 3 or more children, well over half will be spending over \$2,000 per year just on swimming; more than one fifth will spend over \$5000. This represents a significant drain on most family budgets. As one mother with four children commented:

*"It costs \$5 entry just to get into the pool, if you include my entry that's at least \$25 gone just for one casual visit. When you put the cost of squads, competitions etc and not to mention the time commitment on top of that each week – we simply can't afford to have our children get serious about swimming."*



### 7.5 Perceived Value for Money

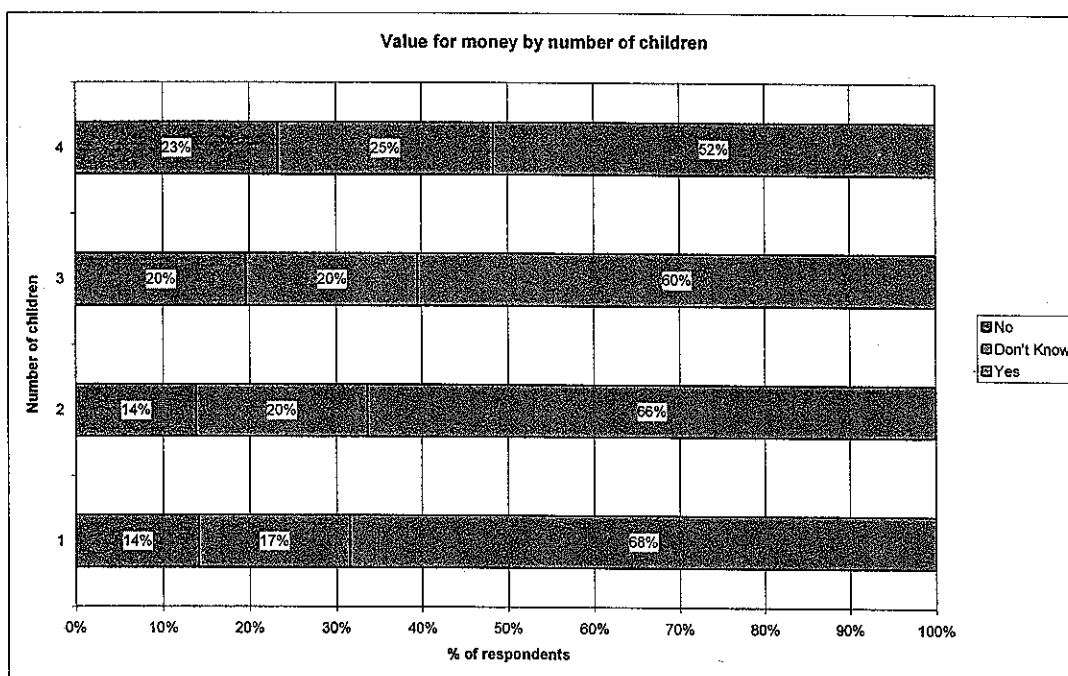
Two thirds of respondents indicated that they believe they are getting value for money from their level of spend in swimming. One in seven respondents however felt that they were not getting value for money and 1 in 5 were unsure.



However the group comprising those that attend least often (i.e. less than once per week) contained a large proportion of members who perceived a lack of value (at 16%). Some comments suggested that there are swimmers who are having to pay for a 'program' when they only want to attend casually.

### 7.5.3 By number of swimmers in the family

The perception of not getting value for money increased with the number of children in a family who are members of a swimming club. Some comments indicated resentment that there was no discount for having more than one child participating in swimming.



*weren't so high. It is a struggle to fund involvement in this sport but we find the money because our child wants to swim so much that we would hate to deprive her of the opportunity."*

*"I think swimming is a very expensive sport and is not accessible to a large section of the community. I have seen in my role as registrar of a swimming club that many families enquire about joining but then do not actually join because of the cost of club fees, coaching, pool entry fees, meet entry fees, equipment etc."*

#### 7.5.4.3 Travel and Accommodation Costs

This feeling was exacerbated amongst respondents from regional areas, where traveling to competitions was a significant cost factor

#### 7.5.4.4 Coaching

There were a number of issues surrounding coaching. The most common concern was that not enough individualised attention was being paid to stroke correction – that coaches were too focussed on getting their squads to do laps (some indicated that this was because of the large size of squads). A number of respondents felt that some coaches were too focussed on getting their swimmers to State and National times rather than taking a more holistic approach.

These issues were linked to what was perceived by some to be a low standard of coaching – many felt that better training programs and coaching standards are required.

The other issue was the financial aspect of coaching – it is expensive. Some respondents were also annoyed that they had to pay for attendance for a program regardless of whether or not their child attends the sessions; there was little flexibility.

*"Better coaches in the system. There appears to be a need for the coaches get the children to swim in National championships and not just to keep the children interested in swimming for good health and enjoyment."*

*"Coaches concentrate on a select few and whilst one of my sons benefits from this the other is neglected because he is only a 'triathlete' - with a bit of encouragement he could also be a swimmer!!"*

*"More broadly available education in nutrition, physio, handling the stress of major competitions and balancing study and training would be great - but I think you do a very good job - our experience with swimming has been very positive!"*

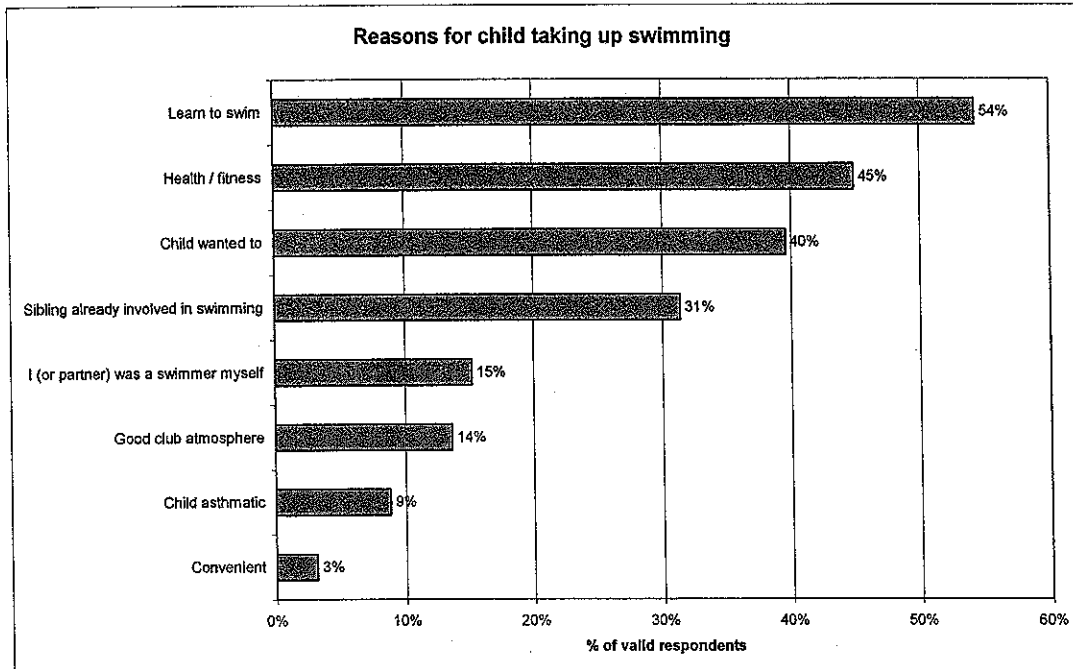
#### 7.5.4.5 Lack of proper facilities

There was also a number of complaints about the lack of proper facilities at not only local club pools but also at competition venues – there was a feeling that the money they were putting into the sport was not being adequately spent on improving conditions. This feeling was particularly strong among South Australian members – where a number of comments indicated that the current state venue is inadequate. Access to pool lanes was also problematic for some clubs.

## 8 COMPETITIVE POSITIONING OF SWIMMING

### 8.1 Reasons for taking up swimming

The primary reasons given for a child taking up swimming were to learn to swim (54%), health/fitness (45%) or simply because the child wanted to (40%).

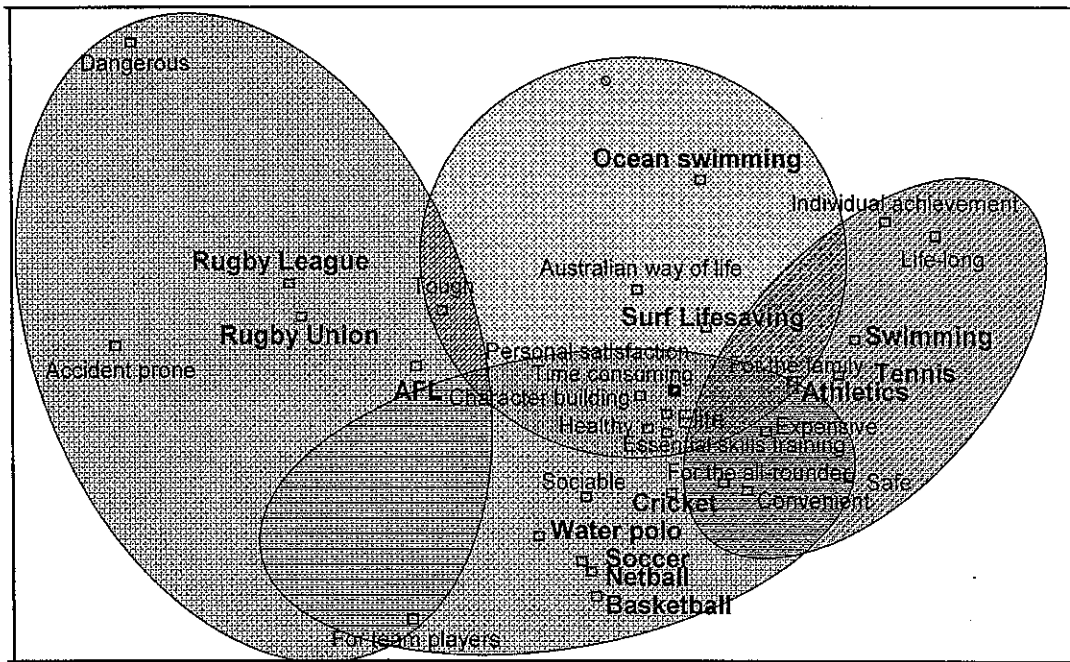


Close to one third of respondents indicated that their child took up swimming because a sibling was already involved, and one sixth indicated that it was because they themselves or their partner are swimmers. This highlights the importance of fostering a family oriented atmosphere.

*"It is very family orientated. It is enjoyable to see that everyone involved in the club appreciates and shows a genuine interest in the children no matter what level of ability they have."*

It can be seen that swimming is linked quite closely with the other individual-based sports - tennis and athletics but also shares some associations with ocean swimming and surf life saving. Ocean swimming and surf life saving are differentiated from swimming by being more closely associated with 'Australian way of life', 'tough' and to some extent with being 'dangerous'.

Interestingly it is also more closely associated with 'life long' than other sports. This could provide a significant opportunity for SAL to capitalize on, given the current pattern of membership.



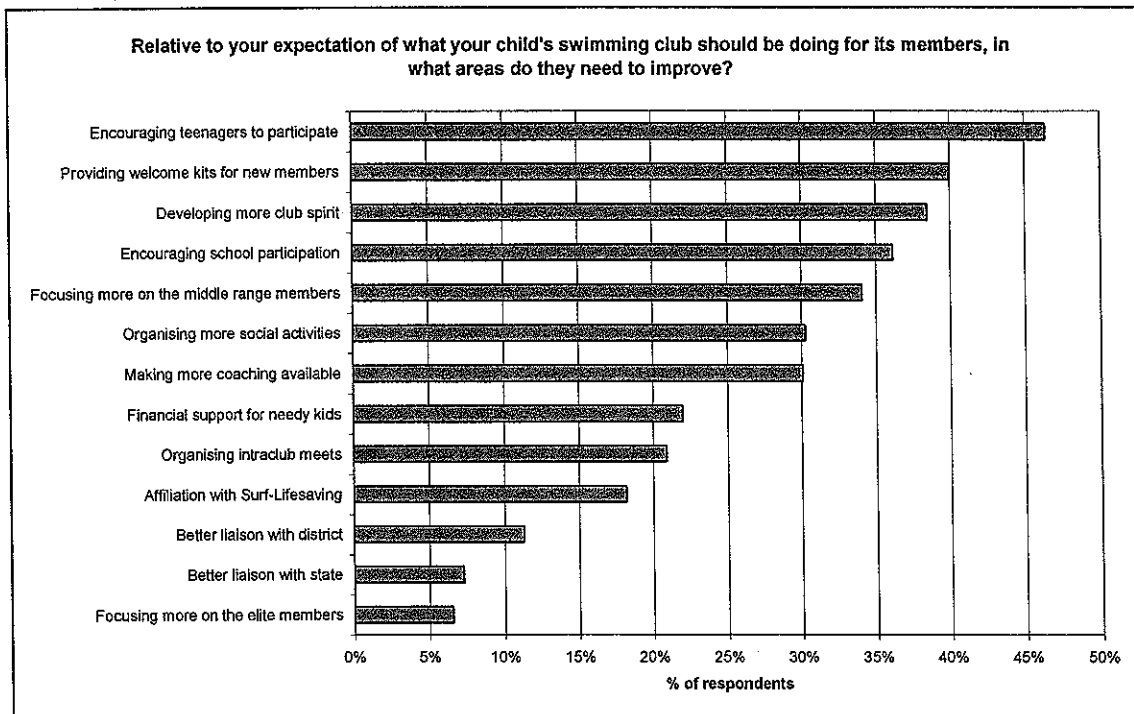
#### 8.4 What is special about your swimming club?

The most common answers to what is special about your swimming club were great coaches (17%), the friendly and welcoming atmosphere (12%) and the family atmosphere (10%).

It is interesting to note that there were few, if any, responses that related to the club being successful competitively. The focus was more on their club being for every type of swimmer, not just the elite. Much credit was given to coaches, who many believed were important for fostering the right kind of attitude within a club.

## 8.5 Areas for Clubs to Improve

The areas that respondents were most likely to indicate needed improvement were encouraging teenagers to stay, providing welcome kits to new members and developing more team spirit.



The most commonly stated area for improvement was encouraging teenagers to participate, an issue which also came out very strongly in the focus groups with parents. Changes in teenager's commitments to school and social life are conflicting with swimming and only the top performers are still swimming in the 13-16 year age bracket.

The reason many of the children are leaving at this age is because they are not advancing at the same rate as their peers. This is seen as a shame as there is a feeling they could well become champions later if there was a way to keep them in the sport longer.

*"Right on the drop out rate at thirteen and fourteen the kids who used to win are getting caught up to by the later developers and in the mean time the later developers may well have dropped out because they are so sick of not winning."*

*"They have got to put in strategies to get kids through that thirteen, fourteen, fifteen and sixteen age bracket"*

*"He doesn't have enough time to do seven sessions a week. He has a lot of homework and he is at a school that is fairly heavy on homework so he will blow out or burn out of something over time."*

## 9 RETENTION OF MEMBERS

### 9.1 Expectations of being involved in swimming club in two years time

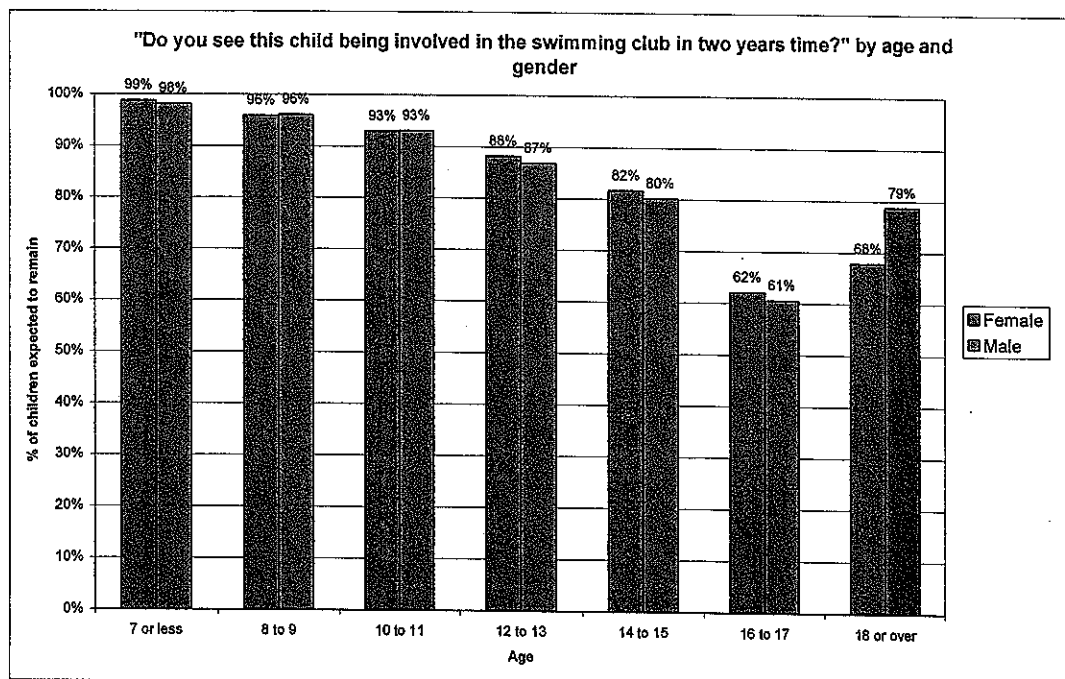
The expectation of staying in a swimming club in two years time decreases steadily until after the age of 15 after which there is a marked drop. This suggests that the age 15-16 is the most vulnerable in terms of retention. It is at this age group that teenagers start to have competing commitments – they are entering senior high school and study becomes “serious”, they are now old enough to have a paid job and their social engagements are expanding. As one mother put it:

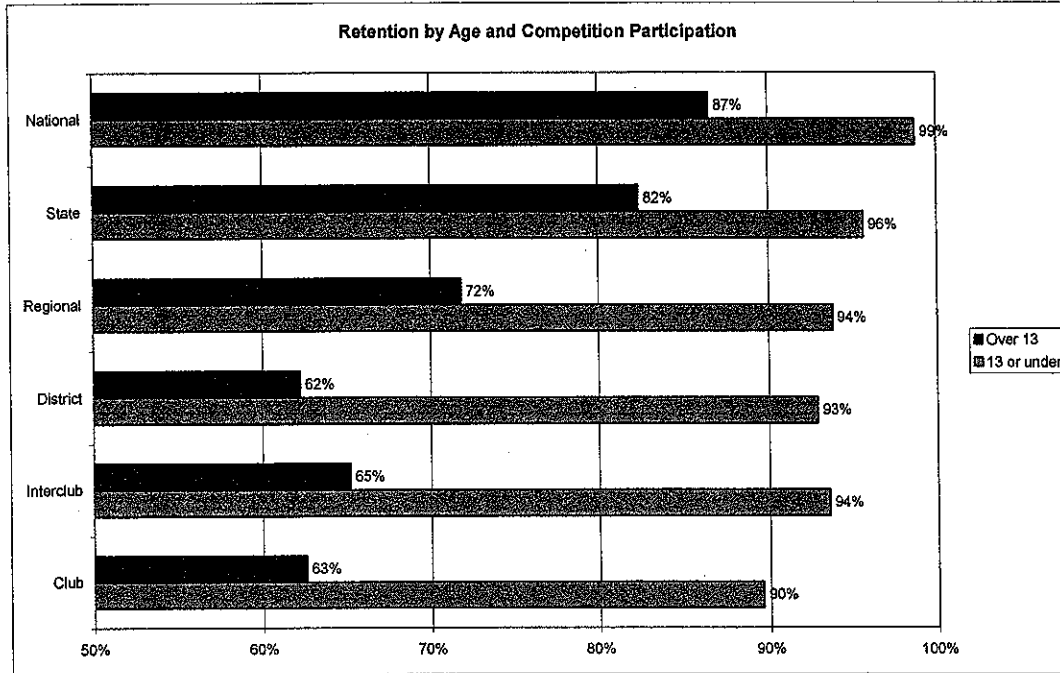
*“They don’t have a social life really and they see their friends going out. My son is sixteen and he sees his mates have a job where they are getting money, he doesn’t get money, he doesn’t have a social life.”*

It also appears to be the time when teenagers realise whether or not they have what it takes to have a swimming career. Many comments suggest that members classed as “average” within this age group may be starting to drop out and find other sporting interests.

*“My son is never going to be Ian Thorpe or represent Australia that is just too hard but hey he might be a good water polo player or he might be a good surf life saver because he has that training behind him.”*

There were no gender differences except within the over 18 age group where males were more likely to indicate that they would be involved in swimming in two years time.





## 9.2 Reasons for considering leaving club within 2 years

Just over one quarter of respondents who indicated that their child will not be continuing in the club within 2 years stated that the reason was because it was too hard to find the time. As discussed previously (refer to Section 6.1) the majority of members older than 8 years of age are attending swimming a minimum of three times a week. Amongst the reasons for considering leaving, it was this level of commitment required that appeared to be causing the main issues.

*"Has just hit teenage years and has a small part time job, which is encroaching on her training time."*

*"Clubs find it hard to retain older swimmers because of competing interests - VCE study, part time employment etc. He enjoys the social side of being a member of a club, but the past year his age group have dwindled in numbers."*

*"She is no longer interested in the competitive aspect because the level of training required to compete satisfactorily requires too much time."*

*"Has developed other interests and find that club focuses on more higher achieving swimmers (i.e. those that can train more often)."*

Many kids seem to lose motivation. Either they find the training boring or too intensive, or are not achieving success in competitions. There is a sense that they feel they are not being rewarded adequately for their efforts.

*"She realises she has probably reached her limit of success and is keen to participate in recreational activities that her commitment to training does not allow her at the moment."*

*"Lack of success eventually leading to de-motivation and then dropping out of competition, and thus swimming."*

## 9.4 Suggestions for keeping teenagers involved in swimming

Retaining teenagers was seen as big issue for most clubs and many were at a loss as to what they could do about it. In many country areas the situation was particularly bad as the teenagers must leave the club for extended periods to attend boarding school or university. In this situation it was felt there was nothing that could be done.

Some comments suggest that swimming becomes “uncool” amongst teenagers as they find more interesting team sports that they can play with their friends. In many instances it was felt that teenagers are not catered to within the clubs, that they are simply lumped in with the junior swimmers as the following comments suggest:

*“Providing training for teenagers (not just 10 year-olds). Respecting teenagers. Providing training outside of working hours (yep, our club does not do this!)”*

*“Holding separate club nights or times for those swimmers over 12yo (5-6 then 6-7 for e.g.). Need to encourage them by providing a club run event at their level so they're not lost in the 5-11 year olds. (Make it sociable afterwards for this specific age by having them compete for donated shopping vouchers). A lot of 13+ swimmers get bored with club events as they wait around for the younger swimmers to complete their events. Need to cater to separate ages.”*

The relationship with the coach was often seen as pivotal to why teenagers continue to swim. While having young enthusiastic coaches may help, it was more the encouragement, recognition and advice that a coach provides swimmers that was most important. Increasing focus on personal bests was mentioned as a good way to encourage development without setting them up for possible failure by relying solely on success in competition.

*“By being extremely supportive of the kids when they might be feeling at one stage they don't want to compete. The coach raced against the squad and they 'beat' her. The kids were excited and very proud of their achievement. Every time they go, the coach and support staff are extremely encouraging and supportive.”*

*“Good coaches getting the best out of the kids. The kids can see the improvement in their times therefore wanting to go swimming.”*

The most common suggestion to retain teenagers in swimming was to encourage the social aspect of sport with movie nights, dances, BBQs etc. Camps and trips to interstate and overseas destinations to swim as a group were also commonly mentioned – one mother in our focus groups suggested if one major international trip was organised every two or three years this would be an incentive for teenagers to remain in the club because they knew they would be going on the overseas trip if they were actively participating. Some clubs are actively trying to make their club more 'social'.

*“I think they must be doing something right as we have a good number of teens in the club. The club is holding monthly club nights with a sausage sizzle social*

Many also suggested some kind of cross-training or affiliation with related sports such as water polo, ocean swimming, surf lifesaving, or triathlon to provide more variety and interest. It was also seen as a way for teenagers to see an 'alternative' purpose for the effort they put into swimming training (especially amongst those who are not meeting competition times).

*"Holiday programs and clinics which use a swimming base but are not specifically swimming related; e.g. water polo, lifesaving, surf camps. We are starting a water polo club as an adjunct to give the kids some reward for all their long years in the pool and hopefully stop them quitting altogether."*

It was also suggested that if teenagers were given more responsibility in terms of contributing to the running of club meets, mentoring junior swimmers, being a 'buddy' to a junior swimmer, helping with learn to swim programs or coaching of junior squads; this would make them more involved in the club and hence more likely to stay. Others also suggested creating a 'Club Captain' position which would provide a leadership role that teenage swimmers could strive for and provide junior members somebody to look up to and emulate.

Financial rewards as incentives were also mentioned. Swimming is an expensive sport and during the teenage years as the sport raises to a higher more elite level it becomes more so. Financially it is difficult for parents to support good teenage swimmers and as a consequence some good swimmers drop out. It was also noted that the thrill of winning trophies and medals has worn out by this age (most swimmers having already acquired many of them); therefore financial rewards become more useful and meaningful as an incentive.

*"We have seen a steady decrease in the numbers of seniors swimmers over the last five years. More flexible training and financial incentives are needed to keep 18+ swimmers in the sport. At that age, they are more focused on part-time jobs and earning money for university over the summer. They can't afford the time to train and to give up work to do it."*

The motivational role of top swimmers was also commented on. Teenagers are at the point where they are thinking about whether to stop or continue their swimming career. If they could hear the inspirational stories from those who have 'made it' about what they have been through and how to deal with the pressures, teenagers may think about continuing.

*"Provide motivational seminars with competition medalists to encourage and support their efforts, and also provide an inspirational bond. I feel at the moment there is not enough done to promote an individuals commitment and interest in the sport, and end up losing very talented youngsters."*

Issue	Recommendation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Parent membership lapses once children stop swimming</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Devise a cost effective program of 'Masters' activities &amp; events for the 45+ members</li><li>• Consider a 'family package'</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Quality coaches, club spirit &amp; atmosphere are key to retaining members, yet perceptions are that there is emphasis on competition achievement</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Devise a program of activities and member communications to specifically enhance the key attributes driving retention.</li><li>• Best practice guidelines should reflect activities that deliver 'team' experiences. For example, rewards and milestones to keep members focused on goal (interstate / OS trips every 2-3 years), music at club nights</li><li>• Establish links with ocean swimming &amp; Surf lifesaving.</li></ul>