



## Children's active play imagery

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The purpose of the present study was to examine how children's use of imagery in their active play can facilitate Deci and Ryan's (2002) three basic psychological needs (i.e., competence, relatedness, and autonomy) in their active play. A secondary purpose was to examine the content of children's mental images associated with their active play.

**Design:** Focus Groups.

**Method:** One hundred and four participants (male and female) aged 7–14 years old were recruited from various summer camps.

**Results:** The results indicated children use active play imagery and their use of imagery facilitates the satisfaction of the three basic needs (i.e., imagery → behaviour → need satisfaction). With respect to autonomy, children imagined activities that are their favourite, enjoyable, and they do often. For relatedness they imagined friends, family, and others (e.g., professional athletes), while for competence they imagined themselves being good at the activity. Age and gender differences emerged for relatedness and competence. Furthermore, the content of children's images included when participants imagined as well as the speed of their images (i.e., slow motion, real time, or fast).

**Conclusion:** These findings may enable the development of imagery interventions to increase children's motivation to be physically active.

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A recent report from Active Healthy Kids Canada (AHK, 2010) has identified the increasing prevalence of sedentary lifestyles among Canadian children. Physical activity during childhood is associated with numerous physical and psychological benefits resulting in research focussing on ways in which to increase children's physical activity levels (AHK, 2010). Although there are many forms of physical activity (e.g., leisure-time, occupational, commuting), leisure-time physical activity has been the most extensively examined as it is the most self-directed and susceptible to change (Laaksonen et al., 2002). Leisure-time physical activity for children may be either structured (e.g., organized sport) or unstructured (e.g., active play) (Veitch, Salmon, & Ball, 2008).

Active play may provide an opportunity for children to accumulate the recommended daily levels of physical activity; as AHK (2010) notes that at least half of children's physical activity should entail unstructured sessions of active free play. Active play has been defined as "unstructured physical activity that takes place outdoors in a child's free time" (Veitch et al., 2008, p. 870). Although active play may take place indoors or outdoors, outdoor active play was emphasized in the

forementioned definition as it provides children a greater opportunity to develop a sense of independence from parents (Ginsberg, 2007). Noted benefits of active play include the distinct contributions to children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005). Given these known benefits and the belief that a sedentary childhood could lead to a sedentary adulthood (Perry et al., 1990), it is important to identify factors which may encourage children to participate in active play during their free time. One such factor may be imagery (Hall, 1995, 2001).

Much of the imagery research in the physical activity domain has focused on sport. Adults and children use imagery for both cognitive and motivational purposes (Hall, 2001; Hall, Munroe-Chandler, Fishburne, & Hall, 2009). More specifically, imagery increases performance and learning (Munroe-Chandler, Hall, Fishburne, & Strachan, 2007) and influences variables such as self-confidence (Callow, Hardy, & Hall, 2001; Strachan & Munroe-Chandler, 2006), and self-efficacy (Munroe-Chandler, Hall, & Fishburne, 2008). Research on children's imagery use in sport has reported some gender and age differences (Munroe-Chandler, Hall, Fishburne, & Strachan, 2007).

With the benefits of imagery use in sport well established, Hall (1995, 2001) was the first to suggest that imagery use may influence exercise behaviour (i.e., leisure-time physical activity). Initial research with adult exercisers found they reported using imagery

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related to exercise technique, exercise routines, appearance, competitive outcomes, fitness and health outcomes, emotion/feelings associated with exercise, and exercise self-efficacy (Giacobbi, Hausenblas, Fallon, & Hall, 2003; Hausenblas, Hall, Rodgers, & Munroe, 1999). In addition, exercise imagery interventions have recently been conducted with the purpose of positively influencing exercise cognitions and behaviour and the results have been quite favourable (e.g., Duncan, Rodgers, Hall, & Wilson, 2011; Stanley & Cumming, 2010).

The previous studies demonstrated that exercisers employ imagery for a variety of purposes (e.g., Hausenblas et al., 1999). The variations in imagery use may, in part, reflect different types of motivation. For example, exercisers using appearance imagery may be more extrinsically motivated (e.g., they want to look good by exercising) while exercisers using energy imagery may be more intrinsically motivated (e.g., they want to feel energized by exercising). Wilson, Rodgers, Hall, and Gammage (2003) investigated the associations between exercise imagery and exercise motivation using a self-determination theory framework (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2002). They found that more self-determined motives were associated with both appearance and technique imagery, while less self-determined motives were associated with only appearance imagery. Their study provided preliminary evidence that imagery use reflects different types of motivation in exercisers. However, all previous exercise imagery studies have been conducted with adults and there have been no similar studies undertaken with children. Accordingly, the present study considered children's imagery use during their active play.

SDT is often used as the theoretical basis for studies examining exercise participation motives (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2007) given its description of the extent to which behaviours are autonomous (i.e., self-determined). SDT posits that motivation varies along a regulatory continuum anchored at one end by purely intrinsic motives (i.e., those behaviours that are engaged in due to inherent interest or enjoyment) representing the most autonomous forms of behaviour, and at the other end by amotivation, which represents a lack of motivation to engage in a behaviour (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The middle of the continuum consists of four types of extrinsic motivation portraying various levels of autonomy. SDT is by nature a meta-theory, and one component is Basic Needs Theory (BNT). BNT is distinct in that it is directed towards those behaviours and environments which facilitate internalization and intrinsic motivation through the satisfaction of the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Deci and Ryan (2000) described these needs as "innate psychological nutrients that are essential to ongoing psychological growth, integrity, and well-being" (p. 229). When these needs are supported, internalization and intrinsic motivation are facilitated (Deci & Ryan, 2007). Autonomy refers to being the perceived origin or source of one's own behaviour; that is, behaviours that are valued by the individual and engaged in as an expression of the self are considered to be autonomous (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Competence refers to feelings of effectiveness in association with an individual's interaction with the social environment, and in experiencing opportunities to exemplify confidence in one's global capacity (Deci, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 2002). Relatedness refers to having a sense of belonging and connection to other individuals and is reflected in the tendency to feel integral and connected to the lives of others (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

A modest body of literature has examined BNT within the context of motivation for engagement in children's leisure-time physical activity, of which unstructured active play is a component. As active play is freely chosen and under the control of the individual, SDT should be useful in describing the process by which an individual may be motivated to engage in these behaviours. Hagger, Chatzisarantis, Culverhouse, and Biddle (2003) found a direct

association between perceived autonomy support and intrinsic motivation for leisure-time physical activity in 13–16 year old students. Standage, Duda, and Ntoumanis (2003) investigated need satisfaction in the physical education environment and intention to engage in leisure-time physical activity for secondary school students. A perceived autonomy-supportive physical education setting fostered satisfaction of all three needs which in turn predicted intrinsic motivation via their intention to engage in leisure-time physical activity.

Based on the aforementioned studies, support for promoting a need supportive environment in increasing unstructured and structured leisure-time physical activity motivation for children is evident (Hagger et al., 2003; Standage et al., 2003), however there is a dearth of research which examines active play behaviours in children. As such it is important to identify factors which may facilitate the satisfaction of the needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence as they relate to active play thereby leading to increased participation in these activities. It is very likely that imagery use is one of these factors, especially given Hall, Rodgers, Wilson, and Norman (2010) demonstrated that exercise imagery is related to more self-determined forms of motivation in adult exercisers.

More specifically, imagery has been recognized as a potential self-regulatory strategy for exercisers to enhance motivation (Giacobbi, Hausenblas, & Penfield, 2005). Also, Wilson et al. (2003) found that exercise imagery use is tied to reasons for exercise engagement in a manner consistent with SDT and argued that there is likely a motivational basis for the role played by imagery in exercise. Given the relationships between exercise imagery and more self-determined exercise regulations (Hall et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2003) and that the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs is related to more autonomous regulations (Ntoumanis, 2001; Standage et al., 2003), it is possible that the use of imagery is associated with basic needs satisfaction. This may be especially true with respect to physical activities engaged in for primarily self-determined reasons, such as children's active play. Behaviours engaged in for autonomous reasons (as opposed to controlled), result in more adaptive outcomes (e.g. greater behavioural persistence, and increased well-being) (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Accordingly, the purpose of the present study was to qualitatively examine children's use of imagery in their active play, and specifically how active play imagery enables the satisfaction of Deci and Ryan's (2002) three basic psychological needs (i.e., competence, relatedness, and autonomy). Of note, however, is that the actual behaviour (i.e., play) satisfies the basic needs in the specific context of active play. Given the exploratory nature of this investigation, a secondary purpose was to understand the content of children's mental images associated with their active play.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 104 males ( $n = 48$ ) and females ( $n = 56$ ) aged 7–14 years old. As suggested by Thomas and his colleagues (Thomas, Gallagher, & Thomas 2001), narrow and distinct age groups were employed. The age groups were as follows: 7–8 years, 9–10 years, 11–12 years, and 13–14 years. The participants were recruited from summer camps in south-western Ontario.

### Design

A total of 23 focus groups were conducted with an average of five participants per group. Efforts were made to ensure homogeneity in age and gender within groups. However, previous research using focus groups with children has noted little difference in responses

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