



Loneliness and life satisfaction of boys with developmental coordination disorder: The impact of leisure participation and perceived freedom in leisure

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Abstract

A theoretical model linking motor ability with perceived freedom in leisure, participation in team sports, loneliness, and global life satisfaction was tested using linear confirmatory path analysis. Participants were 173 boys aged 10–13 years who filled in self-report questionnaires about perceived freedom in leisure, loneliness, and global life satisfaction. Parents of boys completed 7-day diaries and 12-month retrospective recall questionnaires about their son's leisure-time activity participation. Results of path analyses confirmed that the fit of the hypothetical model was consistent with predictions. The inferred direct pathways of influence between both total loneliness and global life satisfaction on motor ability were in the expected directions (i.e., inverse and positive relationships, respectively). Perceived Freedom in Leisure (PFL) and participation in team sports were two intermediate variables indirectly influencing these relationships. Although PFL was identified as a motivational process influencing participation levels in team sports it was noted that other psychological and environmental factors must also be considered when evaluating child–activity–environment fit for boys with developmental coordination disorder.

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1. Introduction

Global life satisfaction is lower (Poulsen, Ziviani, & Cuskelly, 2006) and reported loneliness higher (Poulsen, Ziviani, Cuskelly, & Smith, 2007a) for boys with developmental coordination disorder (DCD) compared to boys without DCD. These self-perceptions have commonality, in so far as they both relate to subjective evaluations of quality of life and well being. While life satisfaction refers to self-perceptions of global need and goal fulfilment (Huebner, Suldo, Smith, & McKnight, 2004), loneliness refers to dissatisfaction with social relationships (Goossens & Beyers, 2002). It is important to understand why boys with DCD, who have disproportionately higher referral rates for intervention than girls with DCD, report lower global life satisfaction and more loneliness than their well coordinated peers. DCD is not an inconsequential condition but one that can have immediate and long-term psychological and physical morbidity. Therefore, understanding the links between motor ability, participation, life satisfaction, and loneliness will inform interventions and preventive programs to improve quality of life for these children.

DCD is a condition where motor ability is below that expected for age and cognitive ability, but is not attributable to any diagnosed sensory or neurological problems. Motor coordination difficulties furthermore significantly interfere with academic achievement or participation in everyday activities, such as sports (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). One factor found to influence the relationships between motor ability and both global life satisfaction and loneliness perceptions in boys aged 10–13 years, is leisure-time or out-of-school activity participation (Poulsen et al., 2006, 2007a). Boys in this age group are in transition from childhood to early adolescence and trajectories of functioning may be influenced by the activities in which they are involved.

A theoretical model linking motor ability with self-perceived quality of life has been constructed (see Fig. 1). This model proposes that relationships which have been previously identified between motor ability and dissatisfaction with social/peer networks (or loneliness), and satisfaction with life as a whole, for boys aged 10–13 years, are influenced by intermediate variables (Poulsen et al., 2006, 2007a). In particular, participation in team sports, a highly controversial physical activity context for boys with DCD has been found to mediate these relationships. Although team sport participation is unusual for boys with DCD, it is important to understand the contributing factors that support participation in these social–physical activities that are so popular for upper primary school-aged Australian males (CAPANS, 2003). Determining environmental conditions and individual characteristics that support boys with poor motor skills to participate in physical activities, without the negative experiences that can occur, will help guide interventions.

It is proposed that a direct negative relationship between motor ability and loneliness, and a direct positive relationship between motor ability and global life satisfaction, can be changed by participation in team sports, but that participation in these structured social–physical activities is influenced by PFL. PFL is a motivational construct tapping an individual's self-perceptions about participation in self-chosen leisure activities. Those who experience PFL feel a sense of competence and control over both the process and

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