



## The link between children's sport participation and self-esteem: Exploring the mediating role of sport self-concept<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

**Background and Purpose:** Sport participation is positively associated with indices of adjustment, such as self-esteem, among adolescent participants. Less is known about the processes through which younger children benefit from their sport participation. The purpose of this investigation was to test whether children's sport self-concept mediated the longitudinal associations between time spent in individual- and team-oriented organized sport activities and later self-esteem.

**Methods:** We used four waves of data from the Childhood and Beyond Study collected from three cohorts of elementary school-aged children ( $N = 987$ ), their parents, and their teachers.

**Results:** Findings indicated that children who spent more time in team sports, but not time in individual sports, reported higher sport self-concept, which, in turn, was associated with higher self-esteem than their peers. Multi-group analyses suggested that these relations did not vary across gender, sport ability, sport importance beliefs, or peer acceptance.

**Conclusions:** Study results suggested that the relations between time spent in sports and children's sport self-concept depends, in part, on whether the time was spent in team or individual sports. This investigation highlighted the value of examining mediating processes so as to better explicate the association between time in sports and self-esteem.

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An estimated 40 million boys and girls in the U.S. participate in organized sport activities each year (Ewing & Seefeldt, 2002). Researchers posit that the sports domain is an important developmental context because it promotes positive adjustment by providing opportunities to learn emotion regulation, hone interpersonal and athletic skills, and build peer relationships and nonacademic competencies (Larson, 2000; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005; Smith, 2003; Smith & Smoll, 2002). Although recent investigations suggest that sport participation among elementary school-aged children is associated with later positive adjustment, such as heightened self-esteem (e.g., McHale et al., 2005; Simpkins, Fredricks, Davis-Kean, & Eccles, 2006), the majority of research on the outcomes associated with sport

participation has focused on adolescents (e.g., Gore, Farrell, & Gordon, 2001; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

Several developmental theories point to the importance of sport participation for children's self-esteem during the middle-to-late childhood period. Erikson (1963) theorized that children during this period of development are in the industry and inferiority stage. During this stage, building competencies is the central psychological crisis. Indeed, more recent theories on the development of self-esteem also suggest that this period is marked by tremendous change in children's competencies, as well as, their ability to evaluate their competencies (Harter, 1993, 1999). These theories suggest that time in activities that build children's competencies may be particularly critical in shaping development given children's heightened focus on their competencies during this period (Mahoney et al., 2005). Time spent in sport activities affords children opportunities to build sport competencies and, in turn, their self-concept of their abilities (Fox, 2000; Sonstroem, 1997). Theories suggest that time in sports has implications beyond children's sport self-concept to include children's overall self-esteem (Eccles, 1993; Harter, 1993). Therefore, the goal of this investigation was to examine the relations between time spent in organized sport activities, sport self-concept, and self-esteem during elementary school.

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## Sport participation and self-esteem

Sport participants report higher self-esteem than their non-participating counterparts (Fletcher, Nickerson, & Wright, 2003; McHale et al., 2005; Simpkins et al., 2006). However, theory on the nature of self-esteem suggests that this link between sport participation and self-esteem may be mediated by children's sport self-concept. Researchers have theorized that self-esteem is multidimensional and hierarchical in nature, such that children's self-esteem is built on their self-concepts in academic and non-academic areas (Harter, 1993; Marsh, Craven, & Martin, 2006). Furthermore, children's broad academic and nonacademic self-concepts further divide into children's self-concepts in more specific areas. For example, children's nonacademic self-concept is based on their physical, social, and emotional self-concepts (Marsh, 1990; Marsh & Hattie, 1996; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976).

The Exercise and Self-Esteem model (EXSEM) suggests that people's physical self-concept is a key mechanism through which individuals' time spent in sports is associated with their self-esteem (Sonstroem, 1997; Sonstroem, Harlow, & Josephs, 1994). In line with the skill development hypothesis, researchers have found that adults' and adolescents' perceived competence in sports is related to increases in self-esteem (Marsh, 1986; Sonstroem, 1998). For example, sport participants' perceived physical competence and physical self-worth predicted heightened self-esteem (Bowker, 2006; Richman & Shaffer, 2000). Children's sport self-concept, or perceived sport ability, is a component of physical self-concept and thought to be a key correlate of children's self-esteem (Fox & Corbin, 1989; Harter, 1999; Sonstroem, 1998). In sum, theory suggests that time in sports is associated with children's self-esteem through their sport self-concept (Fox, 2000; Sonstroem, 1997). Therefore, we hypothesized that sport participation would be positively associated with self-esteem via sport self-concept.

Research to date has supported portions of this model among children. Sport participation positively predicts children's sport self-concept (Donaldson & Ronan, 2006; Roberts, Kleiber, & Duda, 1981; Simpkins et al., 2006). In addition, children with higher sport self-concepts also have higher self-esteem than children with lower sport self-concepts (Harter, 1993, 2006). However, researchers have not tested whether sport self-concept mediates the longitudinal link between sport participation and self-esteem among school-aged children.

## Type of sport activity

An important second goal of this study was to examine team and individual organized sport activities separately. Preliminary evidence suggests that team-oriented sports, as opposed to individually-oriented sports, provide experiences more closely linked with positive indices of adolescent adjustment, such as a higher sense of initiative and life satisfaction (Hansen, 2006; Vihjalmsson & Thorlindsson, 1992). Team and individual sport activities may have different implications for children's sport self-concept as these types of activities often vary in terms of feedback and comparison among peers (Horn & Hasbrook, 1987; Horn & Weiss, 1991; Roberts & Treasure, 1992).

Time spent in individual sport activities may afford participants clearer information regarding ability and standards for performance given the salience of individual performance in sports outcomes (Zaccaro, Peterson, & Walker, 1987). Further, individual sport participants may be more likely to attribute performance outcomes to their abilities rather than to the abilities of their teammates. This clarity in individual sports suggests stronger relations between time in sports and children's sport self-concept for individual sports in comparison to team sports. On the contrary, empirical research suggests that time spent in team sports rather

than individual sports predicted sport self-concept in adolescence (Jacobs, Vernon, & Eccles, 2005; Pedersen & Seidman, 2004). In sum, theory suggests that time in individual sports should predict later sport self-concepts; whereas, previous empirical research shows that time in team sports predicts subsequent sport self-concepts. We expected time in both types of activities to be positively related to sport self-concept, and in turn, self-esteem. Limited extant evidence hinders prediction of differential relations between team and individual sport participation. Thus, this study aims to demonstrate whether each type of sport activity is tied to sport self-concept and self-esteem.

## Moderating factors

Guided by motivational theory, the present study also examined if the relations between time spent in sports, sport self-concept, and self-esteem varied across several key indicators (Eccles, 1993). First, a sport is a gender-stereotyped domain. Boys often participate more frequently in sports and report higher sport self-concepts, as well as, stronger beliefs about the value of sports than do girls (e.g., Eccles & Harold, 1991; Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfield, 2002; Marsh, Gerlach, Trautwein, Ludtke, & Brettschneider, 2007). If boys highly value sports and sports are closely tied to boys' self-esteem (Harter, 1993), it is likely that the relations will be stronger for boys than girls.

Theories on motivation and self-esteem also suggest that an individual's continued engagement in an activity in which she or he performs poorly can lead to lower sport self-concept and adjustment (Eccles, 1993; Harter, 1993). In other words, although time in sports is generally related to higher sport self-concepts, time in sports should predict lower sport self-concept if children have low ability in sports. We hypothesized that time in sports would predict higher sport self-concepts and self-esteem among children with high sport abilities, but predict lower self-concepts and self-esteem among children with low sport abilities.

Time in sport activities is also likely to have a larger impact on participants' overall self-esteem if they value sports (Harter, 1993). Research has shown that sport self-concept was more strongly associated with self-esteem among children who valued sports than among children who did not value sports (Rodriguez, Wigfield, & Eccles, 2003). We expected a stronger link between sport participation, sport self-concept, and self-esteem among children who reported they highly valued sports than among children who did not highly value sports.

Finally, this study explored peer acceptance as a fourth moderator. Sport participation could be particularly advantageous for children who have low peer acceptance because peers highly value sport ability and the sport context has the potential to address both peer relationships and individual aspects of development (Smith, 2003; Weiss & Duncan, 1992). Importantly, participation in extra-curricular group activities, such as sports (Sandstrom & Coie, 1999), as well as, participation in physical education interventions targeting athletic skills (Marlowe, 1980) is associated with improved adjustment among low socially-accepted children. Thus, we hypothesized that the relations between sport participation, sport self-concept, and self-esteem would be stronger for children with low, rather than high, social acceptance.

## Study hypotheses

The primary aim of this investigation was to examine whether sport self-concept mediated the relations between time spent in sport activities and subsequent self-esteem. Specific study hypotheses were as follows: We hypothesized that time spent in both team and individual sports would positively predict sport self-concept one year later. In turn, we expected sport self-concept to be

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