



Youth sports and physical activity: The relationship between perceptions of childhood sport experience and adult exercise behavior



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Participation in organized youth sports has been shown to positively correlate with increased levels of exercise in adulthood. However, there is limited research to suggest why youth sports participation is related to increased physical activity as an adult. One possible explanation is that positive youth sport experiences lead youth to be more positively inclined to engage in physical activity as adults. Research into the positive youth development aspect of organized sports provides the framework for the current investigation.

Methods: Adult participants ($N = 234$, $M_{age} = 35.35$) were asked to retrospectively assess their youth sports experiences using the “Four C’s” (i.e., competence, confidence, connectedness, character) framework of positive youth development in sport. These assessments were then compared to current physical activity levels and related variables found in the Health Action Process Approach model (HAPA; Schwarzer, 2008).

Results: Bivariate correlations revealed statistically significant and moderate correlations among competence, confidence, and connectedness and all of the HAPA variables including physical activity levels. Further, a MANCOVA analysis revealed that when participants were sub-divided into “non-intenders,” “intenders,” and “actors” using a validated staging algorithm, a general linear trend emerged for competence, confidence, and connectedness such that “non-intenders” rated these constructs the lowest and “actors” rated them the highest.

Conclusion: These findings provide preliminary evidence that the relationship between participation in organized youth sports and adulthood levels of exercise could be contingent on how positively that experience is perceived.

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1. Introduction

Longitudinal research has consistently established a link between participation in organized youth sports and higher exercise levels in adulthood (Kjønniksen, Anderssen, & Wold, 2009; Perkins, Jacobs, Barber, & Eccles, 2004; Telama, Yang, Hirvensalo, & Raitakari, 2006). However, there has been little research conducted on why this relationship exists and the factors that may influence the strength of this relationship. Insight into this relationship would prove valuable due to the fact that despite nearly 70% of youth having some experience with organized sports (Sabo & Veliz, 2008), less than 10% of U.S. adults meet minimum physical activity

guidelines (Tucker, Welk, & Beyler, 2011).

The term “organized youth sports” refers to the varied athletic programs consisting of coordinated practices and competitions for children under the age of 18 (Seefeldt, Ewing, & Walk, 1992). Participation in organized youth sports has been shown to be a predictor of increased exercise levels in adults. In a 10-year longitudinal study, researchers found that the age of initiation and duration of participation in organized youth sports was a statistically significant predictor of physical activity in young adulthood (Kjønniksen et al., 2009). Likewise, a study of 411 Michigan adolescents tracked students from age 12 to 25 and found that adolescent sport participation at medium and high levels predicted physical fitness activities in young adulthood (Perkins et al., 2004). A similar study conducted in Finland tracked participants for 21 years and found that persistent, versus intermittent or a one-time, participation in youth sport resulted in more than a five-fold increase in the odds that a participant would be physically active at

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age 30 (Telama et al., 2006). The current study attempts to offer insight on this relationship by exploring how perceptions of the youth sport experience may impact adulthood levels of exercise.

1.1. The experience of organized youth sports

One factor that may predict whether youth sport participation results in higher levels of adult exercise is the perception of the organized sport experience. The youth's evaluation of their sport experience may be key to understanding the link with adulthood physical activity (Russell & Limle, 2013). Although sports participation has been shown to provide ample learning, as well as enjoyable, experiences (e.g., Pugh, Wolff, DeFrancesco, Gilley, & Heitman, 2000), it is also sometimes associated with negative experiences (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). These evaluations could affect the influence said participation has on delayed outcomes, such as psychological needs satisfaction (i.e., autonomy, relatedness, competence; Koh, Wang, Erickson, & Côté, 2012) and willful exercise behavior (Wang & Biddle, 2007), after formal organized sports participation ends. This is thought to occur due to a formed relationship between the activity and the thoughts and feelings associated with participation in that activity.

Prior studies indicate perceptions of ability and challenge after a sporting event were predictive of fun (Wankel & Sefton, 1989) while enjoyment itself was related to personal development in youth (MacDonald, Côté, Eys, & Deakin, 2011). Positive youth development was also found to be influenced by the social support provided by coaches (Gould, Flett, & Lauer, 2012), another element that characterizes the quality of the youth sporting experience, and one that is relevant to the current investigation.

1.2. Organized youth sports and positive youth development

Perhaps the most structured investigation into the experience of youth sports has been conducted within the context of positive youth development. Research incorporating the two is extensive, ranging from the broad range of work looking at the impact of coaching on youth development (e.g., Erickson & Gilbert, 2013) to comprehensive manifestos for developing youth through sport (e.g., Côté & Erickson, 2016). Although entire books have been written on the subject (see Holt, 2016), the current study will rely on recent attempts to condense this expansive research into a measurement framework to explore the relationship between organized youth sports participation and adulthood levels of physical activity.

Longitudinal work done by Lerner et al. (2005) on the “Five Cs” of positive youth development (i.e. competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring) provided an early framework for assessing the youth sports experience. This work, which outlined the essential components of experiential youth development, was then used to advocate for a similar approach as applied to youth development through sports (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). Recent research supports a more refined “Four Cs” measurement framework based on an extensive review of the literature (Vierimaa, Erickson, Côté, & Gilbert, 2012). The 4C's represent the desired outcomes from participation in organized youth sports from a positive youth development standpoint. The experience of participating in organized youth sports should leave the child feeling more *competent* in their skills, *confident* in their abilities, *connected* to their fellow athletes and coaches, and instilled with a stronger sense of *character*. In short, the 4C's represent a proxy for the assessment of the positive aspects of the youth sporting experience from the athlete's perspective. This measurement framework has been used to successfully study coaches' influence on athlete development (Erickson & Côté, 2016) as well as the

importance of sociometric status among youth sports participants (Vierimaa & Côté, 2016). Such a measurement tool could be used to test assumptions found throughout the literature that the experience of participating in youth sports bears on adulthood physical activity.

Before the “Four Cs” framework of measuring positive youth development was created, there was research to support the possibility that the youth sporting experience might be associated with higher levels of adult exercise. The link actually begins with how the perception of the youth sports experience influences continued participation as a child. An early review of the research on the quality of the youth sporting experience indicated how such elements as fun and stress influence attrition rates (Chambers, 1991). Skill development too, has been shown to be a key predictor of continued participation in youth sports (Côté & Abernethy, 2012). These are important findings in light of research that has shown both early commencement (Kjønniksen et al., 2009) and persistent participation (Telama et al., 2006) in youth sports are predictive of increased physical activity in adulthood. Therefore, there is already some evidence that perceptions of the youth sports experience help to determine continued participation as a child, which in turn has been shown to influence physical activity levels in adulthood. To explore this relationship between previous participation in organized youth sports and current levels of physical activity, variables comprising the Health Action Process Approach (HAPA) model will be assessed providing one of the most comprehensive frameworks for studying the motivational and volitional constructs theorized to influence physical activity behavior.

1.3. Health Action Process Approach

The health action process approach (HAPA) model (Schwarzer, 1992) is a framework devised to explain the initiation and maintenance of health behaviors via the influence of and relations between a set of constructs commonly found throughout the health psychology literature. Since 1992, the model has undergone extensive revision and empirical validation as researchers have tested the predictive utility of the model across a wide range of health behaviors (Schwarzer, 2008) and with a diverse set of populations (e.g., Adekeye & Sheikh, 2009).

At the heart of the HAPA model is the idea that with respect to health behaviors, individuals can be divided into three camps along a continuum of behavioral change and maintenance. The three camps of “non-intenders,” “intenders,” and “actors” fall within one of two phases: motivation and volition (Lippke & Plotnikoff, 2014). Pre-intenders are in the motivational phase and have yet to make concrete plans on changing their behavior. Intenders are in the volitional phase as they have already begun to take steps to initiate a behavior change. Actors, who are also in the volitional phase, are distinguished from intenders as those individuals who have already commenced performance of the behavior.

Ten distinct constructs comprise the current version of the HAPA (Schwarzer, 2008). The four constructs found in the motivational phase are: Task Self-Efficacy, Outcome Expectancies, Risk Perception, and Intention. The six constructs found in the volitional phase are: Maintenance (also known as “Coping”) Self-Efficacy, Action Planning, Coping Planning, Recovery Self-Efficacy, Action Control, and Behavior. The relative importance and influence of each construct on behavior is hypothesized to depend on the phase in which a particular individual resides (Ochsner, Scholz, & Hornung, 2013). For example, even though perceptions of risk may influence one's intention to act in the motivational phase, they may not affect one's later planning behavior once they've progressed into the volitional phase. Thus, the HAPA was included to assess how affective and cognitive variables hypothesized to

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