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## The Contribution of Sport to Prosocial Behavior in Youth

### Abstract

For proper organization of sport and physical education in general, it is necessary to obtain empirical evidence on how sport influences youth's social and moral development. To that effect, the research aim was to provide empirical data on the existence or non-existence of a connection between doing sport and prosocial behavior of the young. An appropriate questionnaire of pro-social behavior estimation was implemented on the sample of 61 students aged 12–14. The research findings show that there is a significant difference in the level of display of certain forms of prosocial behavior among the young athletes and their peers that are not engaged in organized sport activities. Further, it was established that the type of sport influences the level of pro-social behavior manifestation. It was not found whether the length of doing sport is correlated with the pro-social behavior of adolescents. The results obtained point that organized sport activities represent the context having positive effects on the development of pro-social behavior of the young.

*Keywords: the young, sport, prosocial behavior, physical education*

### Introduction

Positive social behavior represents an essential characteristic of interpersonal relationships and interconnections with other people. In fact, the behavior intended to benefit another person represents one of the basic values interpersonal relationships are based on. What is more, it influences a person's quality of life. As such, it

is important for achieving competence among young people in different aspects of life: academic, social, family, professional. Led by the development of scientific thought, an idea arises in social pedagogy. The idea is that sport can have beneficial effects on the social development of adolescents. However, the claim that sport may develop pro-social behavior of the young through their inclusion in “helping relationships” is often criticized for being empirically unfounded. It is because of the proper sport organization as a comprehensive social-pedagogical intervention that it is necessary to obtain empirical evidence related to the relationship between practicing sport and social behavior of the young.

Positive effects of sport on the social development of the young have been explained by a range of relevant factors of various degrees of generality, from the moral or prosocial behavior of the coach, through the quality of peer relations in the context of sport, to fostering a positive motivational climate (McKenney, 2001; Rutten et al. 2007). One of the perceptions refers to sport’s cathartic effect. According to this view, regular participation in sport, especially in aggressive forms of sport, provides opportunities to discharge negative energy and release aggression in a socially acceptable manner, so that the person doing sport is to be less aggressive in situations beyond sport. Previous research has not supported the notion that involvement in sports has a cathartic effect on young athletes (Endresen & Olweus 2005).

The authors that start with the theory of social learning, point out that sport “provides a forum for teaching responsibility, cooperation, subordinating oneself to higher goals and shaping moral behavior” (McKenney 2001, p.15). By observation of the pro-social behavior exhibited by teammates, the opponent or coach, young athletes learn such behavior and will tend to express it, especially if it is in some way rewarded (Joksimovic and Vasovic 1990). Sports activities require respecting certain standards of sportsmanship, which can contribute to learning to resolve conflict, develop a greater perspective and self-control and other social and cognitive skills. Some authors suggest that sport is an advantageous therapeutic context in which adolescents with behavioral disorders can learn pro-social behavior (McKenney 2001).

However, the world of youth sports also allows different interpretations. Theorists and researchers suggest that practicing sport at a high competitive level is coupled with the stress and anxiety of young people, even outside the sport context. Some authors further indicate that youth sport has become professionalized, marked by extreme training, early specialization and focused solely on the maximum score (Theokas 2009). Competition as the main feature of sport may contribute to reducing young athletes’ empathy for the needs of others. Training in martial

arts, for example, requires acquisition of a repertoire of aggressive behaviors, and this exercise can boost aggressive behavior, not only in the situation of training and sparring, but in other circumstances as well. Excessive emphasis on winning in sports can lead to young people behaving in interactions with their peers as antagonists and less willing to help others. Vindictiveness can develop among athletes, and even victimization (e.g., of poorer players), suggesting that for many young people sports is not always a positive experience (Light Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi & Power 2005).

In some studies, adolescent athletes reported that they are more likely to participate in risk behaviors, such as alcohol abuse and delinquency, compared to adolescents who do not do sports. In their longitudinal study, Endresen and Olweus (2005) found that participation in sport is related to the development of anti-social behavior among young people. Further, the findings, according to which young people who train team sports indicate a low level of social skills and moral reasoning, are worrying (Fredericks & Eccles 2006; Lai, Stoll & Beller 2006).

## **Research method**

*The research aims:* How does doing sports affect social and moral development of young people? That is the issue that has both educational and broader social significance. Previous research on this issue has obtained contradictory results (Endresen & Olweus, 2005; Rutten et al., 2007). For the correct organization of youth sports activities and physical education in general it is important to examine the relationship between organized sports and young people's social behavior. The overall goal of this study was to examine whether sport contributes to the development of pro-social behavior among young people. The specific goals are related to understanding the similarities and differences in the impact of sport on the pro-social behavior of young people, in terms of: a) type of sport, and b) the length of training. In accordance with the presented goals, the research started with a general hypothesis that there was a significant positive correlation between sports and pro-social behavior in adolescents.

*The sample:* The design of accidental sampling was applied in the research. The sample consisted of youth aged 12 to 14. The sample consisted of 31 adolescents who were involved in sports and 31 adolescents who did not participate in organized sport activities. The sample included young people who trained team sports: basketball, football and handball.

*The instruments:* In the paper, pro-social behavior is defined as any social behavior that contributes to the well-being of another individual or group, regardless of the degree and type of personal gain or the victim (Krnjajić, 2002). Pro-social behavior is determined as a composite variable whose parameters are: a) readiness to help others; b) willingness to cooperate; c) nurture, d) empathy and e) altruism. For the testing of pro-social behavior, questionnaires were designed for adolescents who participated in sports and adolescents who did not train. Questionnaires were parallel (identical questions) and had been modified only in the aspect that related to the participation in organized sports activities. Formulation of items (questions) and offered alternatives was performed so that the participants could express the degree of agreement with each of the mentioned statements.

In addition to the basic descriptive statistical procedures, also used in the study were t-test, Mann-Whitney test, and Cruskal-Wallis test. Application of the above statistical procedures was determined by the nature of the data collected.

## **Results**

In order to analyze the impact of sports on the development of pro-social behavior, the significance of differences at the level of expression of all forms of pro-social behaviors of the adolescents who did sports and adolescents who did not do sports was tested. The testing was performed by t-test at the significance level of  $p < 0.05$ . The results of data analysis showed that a significant difference between the two groups of subjects was found only in two dimensions of pro-social behavior. These were the following dimensions: willingness to help others and nurture (Table 1). As for the remaining forms of pro-social behavior, significant differences between the adolescents who did sports and their peers who did not train were not established.

**Table 1.** Readiness to help other persons in relation to doing sport

	N	M	SD	t – test (df)	p
train	31	29.73	.69	2.434 (60)	.01
do not train	31	25.28	1.16		

Table 2 shows the results pointing that among the adolescents who trained and the adolescents who were not involved in sports there were significant differences at the level of the expression of nurture. The direction of the differences was such

that it showed that young people who were involved in organized sports activities exhibited a higher level of nurture than their peers who did not train.

**Table 2.** Nurture in relation to doing sport

	N	M	SD	t – test (df)	p
train	31	28.60	.83	2.33 (60)	.02
do not train	31	26.45	1.07		

Further analysis was focused on testing the statistical significance of differences in the level of pro-social behavior among the young people in relation to *the type of sport* they were involved in (basketball, football and handball). A nonparametric test, Kruskal Wallis, was applied because conditions were not met (too small subsamples) for the application of standard parametric tests of the analysis of variance (ANOVA). The test results showed that among the groups of athletes there were statistically significant differences at the level of expression of willingness to cooperate with others and care for others. The obtained results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Willingness to cooperate with others and care for others in terms of the type of sport

type of sport	N	readiness to cooperate with others			nurture		
		Middle rank	Chi-square (df)	P	Middle rank	Chi-square (df)	P
basketball	11	22.09	9.02 (2)	.01	21.82	7.03 (2)	.03
football	9	15.22			12.83		
handball	11	10.55			12.77		

Further analysis showed that there was a significant differences in the expression of willingness for cooperation between the adolescents who trained basketball and the adolescents training handball ( $p = 0.008$ ). When it comes to nurture, significant differences were found among the young people playing basketball and those playing handball ( $p = 0.05$ ).

For the purpose of testing the third research hypothesis, the significance of differences at the level of expression of all forms of pro-social behavior in relation to *the length of doing sports* was tested. The nonparametric Mann-Whitney test was applied. No significant differences between the young people who had been

involved in organized sports for a period shorter than 3 years and the young people who had been training for more than 3 years were established.

## **Discussion**

The analysis of the relation between involvement in sport and young people's pro-social behavior was the primary aim of this study. What was the most important finding was the fact that doing sport encouraged two types of pro-social behavior: readiness to help others and nurture (concern about others' welfare). This only partially confirms the initial expectation that doing sport promotes the development of pro-social behavior of adolescents, which is consistent with other research findings (Rutten et al. 2007). Such a situation leads to the conclusion that sport represents a context for learning pro-social behavior among the young through their interaction with teammates, opponents, coaches and parents.

According to this finding, one could assume that with more intensive inclusion of sports activities in prevention programs oriented towards schools we could create the environment which would contribute to the prevention of youth problem behavior and the development of pro-social skills. Therefore, sports programs related to school have a series of advantages, such as availability to all students, absence of outside pressure directed at achieving the maximum result, possibility of integrating sport in other curricular and extracurricular activities. Furthermore, while analyzing the connection between involvement in sport and pro-social behavior of the young, it is important to point out that developed pro-social skills are an important condition for realizing positive social relationships, but they also affect the process of adjusting to the school environment and achieving school success. Cooperative and helping behavior, for instance, contributes to establishing a positive, academically relevant interaction between the teacher and the peers, which represents a desirable context for the realization of the process of learning and teaching.

As for other forms of prosocial behavior – readiness for cooperation, altruism and empathy – no significant differences between the adolescents involved in sports and their adolescent peers who did not train were found. These findings are not consistent with the results of other research (Gasic-Pavišić and Janjetović, 2007), in which it was found that engaging in team sport develops in young people the most readiness to cooperate with others. This finding poses a few questions and suggests, among other things, that doing sport does not develop the ability to adopt someone else's perspective among adolescents. Such a capability represents

the basic correlate of pro-social behavior (Carlo et al. 1999). What is more, it seems that sport does not develop the ability to identify with the other person. Bearing in mind that empathy is one of the basic forms of pro-social behavior, it would be useful to conduct research on the relationship between involvement in sport and the development of empathy in the young.

From the perspective of social pedagogy, and from the aspect of decreasing and encouraging the possibilities for development of youth's pro-social behavior, the quality of the experience the young have in sport mostly depends on the influence of their natural mentors – parents and coaches. Coaches and parents, through adequate supervision and establishment of clear and mutually synchronized expectations, can satisfy the developmental needs of the young and therefore ensure their motivation for the internalization of norms and standards of pro-social behavior. Unfortunately, situations in which coaches and parents pressurize their players, tolerate bad sports behavior, or even force them to cheat, hurt their opponent and argue with referees are quite common. Those are the factors that can inhibit the development of moral thinking and pro-social competence of the adolescents involved in sport.

It has been discovered that the type of sport affects the level of expression of pro-social behavior. The adolescents who train basketball are more likely to cooperate with others in relation to young people who play handball. When it comes to nurture, significant differences between the groups of athletes are also established. Basketball players show greater nurture than handball players. Several possible factors constitute the basis of these differences. One of them is the difference in the intensity of physical contact in basketball, football and handball. Various levels of physical contact in different types of sport stipulate different goal orientations of young athletes (Kavussanu, Seal & Phillips 2006). Individual (ego) orientation, which can be related to aggressive behavior, is more prominent in the sports which involve a higher level of physical contact. It seems that in basketball, in comparison with football and handball, task orientation is more present. In other words, the young who play basketball mostly assess their competence in relation with their own previous performance and progress. In accordance with this, we are prone to conclude that the ego orientation of athletes is more present in football and handball and that the experience of success is based on social comparison. Success is regarded as the consequence of superiority over others, not due to the effort put in the task. It is understood that, provided they positively encourage progress, making effort and improvement, parents and coaches can contribute to the creation of a motivational climate which encourages task orientation, which will consequently lead to the strengthening of the pro-social behavior of the young. In other words,

if young athletes see that coaches and parents believe that the key to success is making effort, they will develop the same beliefs.

It has not been found whether the length of training significantly affects prosocial behavior of adolescents. Specifically, it has not been found if there are significant differences at the level of expression of pro-social behavior of adolescents who have trained for more than three years and those who have trained for a period shorter than three years. Although this finding suggests that the positive effects of sport on the pro-social behavior of young people are achieved after a relatively short period of involvement in organized sports activities, we believe that further studies on this issue are necessary. The need for further research is imposed by knowing that long-term involvement in sport is characterized by a higher level of specialization and competition (school competition, national and international competition), which can potentially lead to a bad sports behavior.

The results show that doing sport has positive socialization effects. However, these results do not allow us to make a definitive conclusion that sport contributes to the development of pro-social behavior because they are correlated and it is not possible to make an unambiguous conclusion about the direction of the association of these variables. It is possible that the effect of selection determined the results of the research. Namely, it is possible that the adolescents in the sample opted for sports because they were more willing to cooperate and care than their peers who do not do sports. But also, the findings can be interpreted as a significant contribution of sport to the development of pro-social behavior.

## **Conclusions**

The summarized results of this study demonstrate that sport contributes to the development of pro-social behavior in adolescents. It was found that doing sport primarily develops two types of pro-social behavior: readiness to help other people and nurture, by which the thesis of the developmental benefits of the youth involvement in sports was confirmed. However, the lack of connection between practicing sport and other forms of youth's pro-social behavior suggests that sport does not have such a strong influence as one can expect.

Sport contexts are complex, dynamic and influenced by different factors, both visible and invisible. Positive social relationships and interactions with adults and peers in the sports context are a major factor in the quality of the experience of young people in sport. Nevertheless, there are often situations in which parents and coaches are putting pressure on their figureheads, sanction, support unsports-



manlike behavior for the sake of victory over the opponent. In this regard, it is important that open coach-player(s) dialogue on sports games covers important aspects, such as: what is good and bad sportsmanship, personal and team responsibility, respect for teammates and opponents. One of the most important tasks of a coach is to create a positive motivational climate. When the coach creates a climate that emphasizes independent defining of the criteria of desirable behavior, young athletes will form positive beliefs about their own competence, have the feeling of independence and a high level of moral reasoning (Rutten et al., 2007; Theokas, 2009).

From the perspective of social pedagogy, the significance of the findings branches in two directions. The first one is related to the confirmation of the assumption that sport *could* represent a social environment which promotes the development of youth's pro-social behavior. Also, sport can be uniquely positioned as social-pedagogical intervention that provides many opportunities for preventing youth problem behavior. Furthermore, the results of the research are important because they support relinquishing of the traditional approach to organizing sports activities for the young and emphasize the need for more intensive pedagogical guidance (mentorship) of children and adolescents in the process of social learning in sports activities. We believe that the values and the system of beliefs of parents and coaches and behavior towards the young represent significant determinants of the value system, behavior and achievement of the young in sport. In other words, on the basis of the findings of this research it is obvious that achieving a desired role of sport requires all the participants to adopt a new way of thinking about sport and its developmental functions. More specifically, it is about conceptualizing sport as comprehensive social-pedagogical intervention, based on contemporary theoretical and empirical findings of social pedagogy. There is a doubtless potential for this direction of the development of youth sports, which has been proved by the findings of this research.

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