

## **THE ROLE OF SPORTS IN OVERCOMING AGGRESSION IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS**

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(Original scientific paper)

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### **Abstract**

*This paper addresses the question of whether aggression in children and adolescents can be overcome by enrolment in sports activities. It reviews relevant literature regarding the potential role that individual and team sports have in this process. Aggressive behavior with years becomes more frequent and more diverse in its nature. Aggression among peers that was mainly manifested in physical and/or verbal forms mostly in school settings, in 21<sup>st</sup> century is present on social medias (Facebook, twitter, etc.) as well. Here, a major concern is that significant number of school-age children have access to some of these networks and are possible targets of bullies and other types of predators. According to relevant studies, extracurricular sports activities have significant influences on the changes in adolescents' aggressive behavior with age. Therefore, active enrolment in sports activities could be considered as one important aspect in the intervention programmers aimed for diminishing aggression in children and adolescents.*

**Key words:** sports, aggression, children, adolescents

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### **Introduction**

In the scientific literature, aggressive and violent behaviors stand out as the most serious form of asocial behavior (as cited in Китканъ, 2009). In this regard it should be noted that there are conceptual, as well as substantive differences between the terms aggressiveness, aggression and violence. According to Murdzeva-Skaric (Мурцева-Шкарик, 2007), aggressiveness is a predisposition for selection of aggressive and competitive behaviors contrary to other alternative behaviors, such as cooperation, obedience, escape, etc. It should be taken into account that a predisposition for behavior is a congenital tendency to adopt a type of behavior by a person, as opposed to another type of behavior. Such predisposition may easily be removed under the influence of effective epigenetic information, which means that it is not building the behavior. Aggressiveness, as predisposition, has qualitative affect on the aggressive behavior, leading to different degrees of aggressiveness among individuals.

The term *aggression* means a behavior which is causing damage to the body and / or soul of another person, and seeks personal egoistic benefit and / or benefit for his group. Aggression may also be aimed toward competition for resources, food or defense. In this context it should be noted that we are talking about behavior. Behavior is a functional product of the nervous system and at the same time it is the most important characteristic of a person. Aggression in humans is only a functional potential, which is typical for the human species only and it does not occur during absence of appropriate epigenetic information necessary for its final development and determination. The term violence is considered a complex concept which relates to the institutions, cultural attributes and behaviors that restrict and prevent the development of human potential and endeavor to control his body, behavior and social environment. In this context we talk about three types of violence: structural, cultural and direct.

Origin and causes of aggressive behavior vary among different living species. Causes of aggressive behavior may be aggressiveness and violence. However, aggressiveness as a predisposition to aggression as behavior, is not associated with a gene. For it to become aggressive behavior, certain cultural information should act. Accordingly, which kind of behavior will develop, depends on the culture in which the person is socialized. Aggression and violence are aspects of social behavior which is formed through bio-cultural

evolution. Hence, social behavior is not determined by congenital factors, so nor aggression nor violence as aspects of social behavior may be considered congenital. That leaves an opportunity to act in a direction to transform the violent and aggressive behavior in non-violent and constructive behavior (Мурцева-Шкарик, 2007).

### **Asocial and antisocial behavior in childhood and adolescence**

Asocial behavior precedes the antisocial i.e. the more serious form of offense behavior. According to Kitkanj (Китканъ, 2009), children and adolescents manifest asocial behavior in the family, at school and within the wider social environment. Unlike antisocial, this type of behavior is not legally incriminated, but causes moral condemnation, because the doers of the action do not comply with the social moral norms. Disobedience and disrespect for the authority are the first signs which indicate that an individual has problems in adapting to the demands of various microsystems in which he/she functions every day. Some of the more serious forms of asocial behavior are: escape from school, refusing to go to school, running away from home, hanging out all night, alcohol and drugs, begging, aggressive and violent behavior.

These occurrences are most often caused by the influence of a whole group of factors that originate both from the external environment and the person himself. Most liable to these forms of asocial behavior are emotionally unstable and socially immature individuals who are at the same time also impulsive, suggestible and educationally neglected. Often the cause of asocial behavior is bad atmosphere in the family with unbearable situations (physical and mental harassment and abuse, frequent conflicts, unsatisfied basic needs of the child, etc.). The importance of family and development in the early stages of life for the asocial and antisocial behavior is emphasized by several authors (e.g. Durkin, 1995; Farrington & Welsh, 2007; Heilbrun, Sevin-Goldstein & Redding, 2005; Pejović-Milovančević, 2001; Singer and Mikšaj-Todorović, 1993). Over time, this behavior causes social isolation, withdrawal and loneliness of the individual, or association with others similar to him and involvement in gangs and criminal groups.

Dodge, Coie and Lynam (2006) indicate that the most dangerous periods for manifestation of aggressive and violent behavior are the late adolescence and early adulthood. According to these authors, the researches show that different measures for aggressive behavior resulting in different perception of its development. Some of them imply that this construct changes through different age periods. Thus, Trimbley et al. (2005, as cited in Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006, p.724) consider that different measures at different ages (e.g. beating at 8 years, vandalism at 12 years of age and murder at 18 years) may be indicators of some antisocial construct located in their common ground. The aggressive behavior is essentially a complex developmental construct. It is so because there is strong interindividual continuity, although its intraindividual, factor structure and continuity of processes are weak. Adolescence is a period in life when the number of serious acts of violence increases, when younger join the elderly in antisocial behavior and when aggressive behavior expand into new contexts, including romantic relationships.

The studies of gender involvement in antisocial behavior lead to the conclusion that among men and women there are differences which are in function of the developmental stage and type of manifested antisocial behavior. Hence, the gender differences that arise in more serious and more stable aggression become apparent already at the age of three. In this regard, Stanger et al. (1997, as cited in Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006; p.730) state that the scores at the scale of delinquency in their study were higher for male than for female participants in each of the age groups analyzed (4 to 18 years). This leads to the conclusion that in many forms of antisocial behavior, males are more antisocial than females. According to Dodge, Coie and Lynam (2006), the literature indicates a whole range of factors as reasons for the occurrence of aggressive and violent behavior. Considering its source and origin, these factors are divided into: genetic; dispositional; biological; environmental and social factors; factors arising from processes during early socialization; factors in childhood that originate from the peers; processes in relationships in the family of the adolescent; processes in relationships with peers of the adolescent, as well as cognitive and emotional abilities and skills (Dodge, Coie and Lynam, 2006, pp.731-756).

### **The role of sports in decreasing aggression in children and adolescents**

Although many studies are focused on the influence of diverse set of factors on emergence of aggression in children and adolescents, there are only few that has investigated how extracurricular sports activities and physical education in school curricula impact the aggressive behavior in adolescents (ex. Park, Chiu, & Won, 2017), or how sports involvement influence positive youth development (ex. Fraser Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). Referent literature indicate that sports activities have positive influence by increasing

youth self-esteem, while decreasing the stress. Moreover, these types of activities foster positive psychological, social and emotional development (as cited in Fraser Thomas, Côtè and Deakin, 2005). Following relevant research, it can be concluded that sports involvement is also positively related to promotion of citizenship, social success, positive peer relationships, and leadership skills (Evans & Roberts, 1987; James, 1995; Manjone, 1998; Elley & Kirk, 2002; Wright & Côtè, 2003; as cited in Fraser Thomas, Côtè and Deakin, 2005). Other studies suggest that active participation in sport activity decrease the school dropout and delinquent behavior (Segrave, 1983; Sheilds & Bredemeier, 1995; Eccles & Barber, 1999; McMillan & Reed, 1994; as cited in Fraser Thomas, Côtè and Deakin, 2005). Finally, those adolescents who are involved in sport activities, more often demonstrate discipline and commitment (Scanlan et al., 1993; Shogan, 1999; as cited in Fraser Thomas, Côtè and Deakin, 2005).

According to Park, Chiu and Won (2017), extracurricular sports activities promote physical and psychological benefits, especially for girls, by decreasing aggression. These types of activities increase cooperation, mutual respect, discipline, self-control, self-confidence and so on. They could also, both directly and indirectly, influence the decrease of delinquent behavior in adolescents. Therefore, participation of adolescents in extracurricular sports activities should be considered as one important factor for diminishing aggression and as such should be considered by all relevant parties who create educational policy. When it comes to positive youth development, Fraser Thomas, Côtè and Deakin (2005) propose that youth sport programs impacts positive outcomes through implementation of developmentally appropriate designs and supportive child–adult (i.e. parent/coach) relationships. These authors also highlight the importance of sport programs in stimulating the positive development of competence, confidence, character, connections, and compassion.

As a conclusion, the policy-makers must assure inclusive youth sport programs which will be available to children and adolescents of different socio-economic status, race, culture, ethnicity and gender. Coaches and parents should also be included in this process, because they play a crucial role in determining the quality of youths' experiences and subsequent outcomes in sport. In that sense, the holistic approach is needed in order to achieve better development of children and adolescents using sports activities adapted to different developmental periods as a main tool. It will have various positive outcomes, both on individual and group level by providing positive sport experiences and by stimulating development of competent, confident, just and compassionate individuals.

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