

ADOLESCENTS' PARTICIPATION IN SPORT ACTIVITIES AND ATTACHMENT TO PARENTS AND PEERS

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We examined the relationship between adolescents' participation in sport activities and their parent and peer attachment, using a quantitative cross-sectional design. Adolescents (1,348; 716 girls and 632 boys) aged 12 to 16 years completed a survey assessing parent and peer attachment in terms of trust, communication, and alienation. Results showed that adolescents not participating in sport scored significantly lower than adolescent athletes on parent attachment, and that involvement in sport activities was important as a factor determining the quality of parent–adolescent relationships. Conversely, adolescents' involvement in competitive sport had no effect on their peer attachment, which indicates that a close relationship with other sport participants does not predict greater peer attachment.

Keywords: adolescents, parent attachment, peer attachment, sport participation, peer acceptance, trust, communication, alienation.

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982) is one of the most important and highly developed psychological theories dealing with human emotions and behavior (Shaver, Mikulincer, & Feeney, 2009). It is stated in this theory that early experiences with primary caregivers (typically parents) influence an infant's future development of close relationships. A central tenet of attachment theory is the notion that early childhood lays the foundations for the development of personality throughout life (Carr, 2013). After childhood, adolescents' attachment relationships with parents are likely to reflect the nature of internal working models that may function as a psychological template during the construction of new close relationships in sport (Carr, 2013). Because sport by

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its very nature is a social context where participants interact with, relate to, and influence one other (Kavussanu, 2008), sport participants have the opportunity to explore and develop their cognitive, physical, and social selves (Carr, 2013).

Parents' role in their children's sport participation can vary dramatically (Palomo-Nieto, Ruiz-Perez, Sanchez-Sanchez, & Garcia-Coll, 2011), including facilitating youth involvement in sport by acting as mentors, referees, managers, or counselors; helping children understand and interpret their sporting experiences; and becoming a key element in their sport careers (Holt & Knight, 2014). Previous researchers have focused on parents' perceptions (Neely & Holt, 2014) and expectations (Brummelman et al., 2013) about what their children gain through participation in organized sport, and the stressors that parents experience in youth sport settings (Harwood, Drew, & Knight, 2010). Knight, Neely, and Holt (2011) and have established that parents engage in a range of positive and negative behaviors in regard to youth sport competition. Some researchers have focused on children's perceptions of supportive and pressuring parental behaviors during competition (Knight, Boden, & Holt, 2010). Other researchers have found that parents may change as a result of their children's sport participation. For example, children's involvement in organized sport positively influenced parent-child communication and relationships, brought the family together, and strengthened family relationships (Dorsch, Smith, & McDonough, 2009; Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009). Knight and Holt (2014) highlighted that optimal parental involvement in children's sport activities is achieved when parents strive to both understand and enhance their children's experience and recognize that each child is an individual with specific requirements, and that sport experience often occurs over an extensive time period.

Although these researchers have found that parents play an important role in their children's sport participation, little is known about the association between children's involvement in sport and family attachment. This topic is important because secure adolescent-parent attachment is related to a range of positive outcomes: development of adolescents' sense of self and autonomy (Morley & Moran, 2011), interpersonal functioning (Carr, 2009), mental health (Bannink, Broeren, van de Looij-Jansen, & Raat, 2013), and adult relationships (Pascuzzo, Cyr, & Moss, 2013).

During adolescence, young people, whose relationships with their parents are undergoing changes, face new challenges, including independence and the development of their autonomous identity. As adolescents spend increasing amounts of time away from their parents, the development of their personality is substantially impacted, not only by their family life but also by their peers (Arnon, Shamai, & Ilatov, 2008). The influence of peer groups becomes more important for adolescents during the transition from childhood to adulthood (Nawaz, 2011). Adolescent interactions and time spent among peers are not only

enjoyable leisure time activities but also an important part of the socialization process (Gentzler, Ramsey, Yuen Palmer, & Morey, 2014). Therefore, in this study, we examined another important area of research, namely, adolescents' involvement in sport and their peer relationships.

There are numerous examples of interpersonal relationships and interactions that impinge on children's enjoyment of, and attraction to, sport activity. Sport activity also helps children make new friends and acquaintances and become part of an ever-expanding social network (Trottier & Robitaille, 2014). The focus of previous researchers of perceived adolescent sport friendships has been primarily on issues such as *peer acceptance*, the perceived quality of mutual, dyadic friendships involving a degree of affection, or levels of popularity within a broader circle of peers (Carr, 2013). Although scholars have often focused on adolescent attachment in sport (Carr & Fitzpatrick, 2011; Davis & Jowett, 2010), adolescent–parent attachment characteristics, and quality of youth friendships in team sport (Carr, 2009), it is still not clear how adolescents' involvement in sport influences their peer attachment outside sport.

We had two aims in this study. First, we examined the links between adolescents' participation in sport activities and their parent attachment, and predicted that adolescent participants in competitive sport would have strong parent attachment. Second, we assessed the influence of adolescents' involvement in competitive sport on their peer attachment. Because recent research has been more focused on analyzing young athletes' relationships in sport contexts, we did not propose hypotheses in regard to this aspect of adolescents' sport participation.

Method

Participants

Participants were 1,348 adolescents (716 girls and 632 boys) aged between 12 and 16 years ($M = 14.2$, $SD = 1.51$). They were recruited from seven general education schools in Kaunas, Lithuania, using multistage sampling. Participants were divided into two age groups: early adolescence (aged 12 to 14 years; $n = 700$) and middle adolescence (aged 15 to 16 years; $n = 648$), for data analysis. Of the participants, 39.2% ($n = 529$) were involved in competitive sport, and had been participating for an average of 3.97 years ($SD = 2.43$).

Procedure

We obtained permission from school administrators to conduct the study, after which we contacted senior management at the target schools. Prior to collecting data from the students, parental informed consent forms were completed and informed consent was obtained from the students themselves, for whom participation in the study was voluntary. Students completed the survey with the researchers present in the classroom.

Measures

Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment–Revised (IPPA–R; Gullone & Robinson, 2005). Armsden and Greenberg (1987) developed the IPPA, which consists of 25 items across three dimensions: mother, father, and peer. As it was designed for use with older adolescents, we employed the shorter version (IPPA–R), which was revised for use with children and early adolescents, and which does not distinguish between mother and father attachment. The instrument consists of 28 items measuring parent attachment and 25 items measuring peer attachment, with responses made on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never true*) to 3 (*always true*). The items are grouped into three subscales: trust, communication, and alienation. The *trust* subscale measures the degree of mutual understanding and respect in the attachment relationship, and a sample item is “My parents accept me as I am.” The *communication* subscale assesses the extent and quality of verbal communication, and a sample item is “My friends can tell when I’m upset about something.” The *alienation* subscale assesses feelings of anger and interpersonal alienation, and a sample item is “I feel angry with my parents.” Responses to negatively worded items are reverse-scored before calculation. The total score for each parent and peer attachment scale is calculated by adding the trust and communication subscale scores and then subtracting the alienation subscale score (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Gullone & Robinson, 2005). The instrument has high internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from .72 to .86 for the parent attachment items and from .71 to .86 for the peer attachment items.

Students’ sport participation was assessed using the question “Do you participate in competitive sports?” This question has been validated with adolescents in earlier studies (Sukys, 2004). On the basis of their responses, participants were divided into two groups: athletes (those who took part in sport at schools or clubs for no less 2 hours per week and had been participating in competition for no less than 1 year) and nonathletes, for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analyses were performed using SPSS version 19.0, and included calculating Cronbach’s alpha coefficients, descriptive statistics, independent samples *t* tests, Cohen’s *d* effect sizes, Pearson correlation coefficients, and multiple regression coefficients. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ for all tests.

Results

The IPPA–R overall and subscale score means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1, and show that the trust subscale had the highest correlation with parent attachment. Peer attachment had the highest correlation with the

Table 1. Correlations Among Study Variables and Descriptive Statistics

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
IPPA-R parent attachment													
1. Trust	24.02	3.20											
2. Communication	16.64	2.99	.74**										
3. Alienation	16.61	2.57	.59**	.48**									
4. Total	24.05	4.79	.82**	.86**	.16**								
IPPA-R peer attachment													
5. Trust	25.39	3.91	.31**	.29**	.27**	.24**							
6. Communication	18.14	3.54	.21**	.28**	.15**	.24**	.76**						
7. Alienation	9.49	1.46	.15**	.12**	.32**	.01	.50**	.38**					
8. Total	34.04	6.44	.27**	.30**	.17**	.28**	.91**	.93**	.29**				
9. Involvement in sport	—	—	.12**	.11**	.10**	.10**	-.02	.01	-.03	-.01			
10. Sport experience	3.97	2.42	-.04	-.06	-.070	-.03	-.02	-.04	.01	-.03	-.09*		
11. Gender	—	—	.05	-.02	.10**	-.02	-.19**	-.34**	-.10**	-.28**	-.16**	.02	
12. Age	14.20	0.50	-.21**	-.25**	-.12**	-.24**	.04	.02	.04	.02	-.16**	.13**	-.01

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

trust subscale, followed by the communication subscale and then the alienation subscale. Overall peer attachment was higher than parent attachment. Correlation analyses showed significant relationships among the parent and peer attachment subscale sections (see Table 1).

In terms of differences between adolescents' participation in sport activities and their parent and peer attachment, our results showed that athletes scored significantly higher than nonathletes did on the subscales of trust, $M (SD) = 24.39 (3.04)$ vs. $23.78 (3.27)$, $t(1,346) = 3.51$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.20$; communication, $M (SD) = 16.97 (2.93)$ vs. $16.44 (3.01)$, $t(1,346) = 3.19$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.18$; and alienation, $M (SD) = 16.82 (2.52)$ versus $16.47 (2.59)$, $t(1,346) = 2.42$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.14$; as well as overall parent attachment, $M (SD) = 24.54 (4.76)$ vs. $23.75 (4.79)$, $t(1,346) = 2.99$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.17$. There were no significant differences when comparing athletes' and nonathletes' peer attachment subscale scores with their overall peer attachment.

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the effect of participation in sport on parent attachment. Age and gender were entered as control variables in the first step of the models measuring parent attachment, depending on the correlation with dependent variables. Involvement in sport was then entered at the second step. Sport experience was not entered in all models as it was not statistically correlated with the dependent variables. A summary of the hierarchical regression analysis results for parent attachment is presented in Table 2. The first regression was conducted with trust in parents as the dependent variable. The result showed that age and involvement in sport significantly predicted adolescents' trust in parents ($F = 20.48$, $p < .001$), indicating that younger adolescent athletes have more trust in parents. In addition, age and involvement in sport significantly predicted adolescents' communication with parents ($F = 28.73$, $p < .001$), indicating that the younger adolescents and athletes in this study had more communication with parents. The inclusion of adolescents' involvement in sport in the alienation with parent subscale did not improve the overall model ($F = 8.78$, $p < .01$). Results indicated that boys and younger adolescents were more alienated from parents than were girls and older adolescents. In the final model with the overall adolescents' parent attachment score, both age and involvement in sport ($F = 25.70$, $p < .001$) were statistically significant. Younger adolescents were more attached to their parents compared to older adolescents, and adolescents involved in sport were also more attached to their parents, compared to nonathletes.

Table 2. Multiple Regression Results of Adolescents' Involvement in Sport and Parent Attachment

Variable	R	ΔR ²	B	β	t
Parent trust					
Step 1	.20	.05			
Control variables					
Step 2	.21	.07			
Gender			.31	.05	1.76
Age			-.42	-.20	-7.38***
Involvement in sport			.36	.07	2.05*
Parent communication					
Step 1	.23	.06			
Control variable (age)					
Step 2	.26	.07			
Age			-.48	-.24	-9.11***
Involvement in sport			.30	.06	2.11*
Parent alienation					
Step 1	.02	.13			
Control variables					
Step 2	.02	.14			
Gender			.44	.09	3.14**
Age			-.17	-.10	-3.32***
Involvement in sport			.20	.04	1.40
Total parent attachment					
Step 1					
Control variable (age)	.23	.06			
Step 2	.24	.07			
Age			-.22	-8.13***	
Involvement in sport			.06	2.09*	

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

We designed this study to obtain greater insight into the possible relationship between adolescents' participation in sport activities and their parent and peer attachment. The results confirmed our prediction that adolescents participating in sport, compared to nonparticipants, would display stronger parent attachment. In this sense, attachment theory is a useful lens through which to develop understanding in relation to the importance of the psychological basis of early relationships, and is a theory that still holds significance in the context of new relationships experienced within sporting environments (Carr, 2013). Our results also confirmed the role of parents as a key element in the adolescent's sport environment (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Kimiecik & Horn, 2012; Sapieja, Dunn, & Holt, 2011).

Parent attachment and the expression of the relationship with parents were more intense among athletes than nonathletes across the three assessed subscales. Compared to nonathletes, athletes may seek to achieve good results, because, for example, an expression of trust may be important for their success in the sport environment. Through trust, they develop mutual friendships and relationships with their fellow sport participants, and experience understanding and interaction. Knight and Holt (2014) suggested that an accepting, responsive, and supportive relationship can facilitate a perception of being understood, appreciated, cared for, and respected. Such positive beliefs and expectations may enhance perceptions of relationship quality and well-being, enabling a person to become more involved in the relationship. Communication in relation to parent–child attachment in adolescence is associated with healthy expression of emotions, good communication between the child and attachment figures, and access to accurate memories of emotional experiences, appropriate self-disclosure, confidence, and use of effective problem-solving strategies (Shaver et al., 2009).

The expression of alienation suggests that adolescents, especially athletes who are not satisfied with the degree of closeness, distrust their parents, and remain both behaviorally and emotionally disconnected from them. Athletes with a high alienation score on the parent scale may be less likely to experience satisfaction with aspects of sport relationships. Further, perceived alienation leads athletes to become less committed, satisfied, and willing to share their sport experiences with their parents. Our results highlights how having a good understanding of attachment between adolescents and parents can contribute to understanding variation in the quality of close personal relationships. Parents may also demotivate children from participating in sport by insisting that they should not only take part in sport but also achieve excellent results, which could lead to weak parental attachment. Thus, the degree of parental involvement in children's sport activities may influence the children's motivation (Harris & Watson, 2014).

Within the context of the parent–child attachment relationship, children develop a set of motivations, emotions, and behaviors in regard to the close relationships that they may draw on in their relationships with peers (Abraham & Kerns, 2013). During adolescence, it is important to be socially accepted by peers and maintain close relationships (Teymoori & Shahrazad, 2012); however, we did not find a significant correlation between adolescent involvement in sport and peer attachment. Our findings have implications for the ways by which children who are not forming successful peer relationships are supported. It is important to keep in mind that the impact of communication skills on peer relationships suggests that traditional social skills education may be insufficient (Abraham & Kerns, 2013). In addition, adolescents with problematic peer relationships may benefit from emotional skills training (e.g., regulating emotions, learning coping

skills). As recent researchers have proposed that young people's attachment relationships with parents may be a potential predictor of the quality of their friendships (Carr, 2009; Carr & Fitzpatrick, 2011), it will be necessary to look at the sport context because we did not find a significant relationship between involvement in sport and peer attachment. The quality of relationships in sport is important to develop young people's motivation, enjoyment, conflict resolution, and for the continuation of their sport career (Carr, 2009; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2009). However, as we found that adolescents' involvement in competitive sport had no effect on peer attachment, attachment to sport teammates did not predict the quality of peer relationships outside the sport setting in this study.

Our findings suggest that parents must understand that encouraging children to participate in sport may not automatically increase mutual trust. Researchers have shown that parents play an important role in reinforcing the benefits of sport (Dorsch et al., 2009); however, too active parental involvement can result in negative outcomes (Brummelman et al., 2013; Knight, Neely, & Holt, 2011). It is important to note that most researchers have emphasized that there is still a need for educational sport programs and to educate parents regarding appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in the context of youth sport (Knight, Boden, & Holt, 2010). From a practical perspective, parents' involvement in youth sport must be supportive and flexible, providing children with opportunities to be involved in, and make decisions about, their sport. Parents must let their children freely enjoy sport without demonstrating excessively high expectations by criticizing or punishing them. However, there is a lack of information for parents about the educational and psychological skills that could help them to manage their own behavior or emotions in the context of youth sport (Holt & Knight, 2014). In addition, it seems to be important for parents to collaborate with youth sport organizations and with coaches to enhance and to inspire their involvement in youth sport. Further, the positive strategy of training and education chosen by the coach, and the coach's ability to engage parents and provide them with knowledge about positive education skills and how to use those skills at home and in the family should be examined in future research (Lisinskiene & Sukys, 2014). This will promote the development and maintenance of good relationships between sport participants, and may help to solve ethical and social problems that occur in the sport environment.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our study has some limitations. First, we did not use a longitudinal design. As the athletes' group consisted of adolescents who had participated in competitive sport for not less than 2 years, their parent and peer attachment at the beginning of their sport career was unclear. Second, we measured adolescent-parent attachment as one entity, without separating the mothers and fathers. Our

findings suggest that other aspects of the relationships stemming from parent–child attachment, which could be contributing to the link between parent–child attachment and peer relationship quality, need to be studied. Future researchers could provide insight into the way in which adolescent involvement in sport affects boys' and girls' attachment relationships with both mothers and fathers, whose roles may be different. In addition, an examination of attachment in a family context from the parents' perspective would give increased insight in explaining how adolescents' involvement in competitive sport benefits their personal development and the family relationships.

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