**SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-PERCEPTION PROFILE: A COMPARISON BETWEEN CHILDREN ATTENDING SPORT AND SEDENTARY CHILDREN**

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**Abstract**

The goal of the study described here was to examine the interrelationship between the sport activity and psychological constructs such as self-esteem (body, school and interpersonal self-esteem) and self-perception profile (global worth, body, athletic, school, behavioural and social self-perceptions) in childhood.

There is a considerable body of recent studies in the literature to focus on the reciprocal enhancement of physical activity and motivational constructs such as self-esteem and self-concept.

The participants in this research were 104, of which 57 regularly attending sport courses and 57 sedentary children. At the beginning of the research subjects were given a questionnaire aimed at evaluating personal habits during their free time. Then they were administered Self-Esteem and Self-Perception tests. On the whole, the findings show significant differences between the groups with concern the psychological constructs of self-esteem and the self-perception. These findings highlight the importance to organise educational settings and encourage life styles aimed at improving well-being from childhood.

**Keywords:** Self-Esteem; Self-perception; Sport; Education; Children.

**Introduction**

This study highlights the relationship between self-esteem and self-perception profile in children regularly attending sports and sedentary children. Self-esteem is conceptualized as one’s judgement and feeling of personal worth or value as a person. It refers to the evaluative component of the Self emerging from the process of comparison and negotiation between the perceived self and the ideal Self. This self-evaluation appears from earliest developmental phases when the child is required to verify the evaluation of himself by comparison it with actual performance on a variety of tasks including motor, physical, social and learning tasks (Alesi, Rappo & Pepi, 2012). An adequate level of self-esteem is a good
predictor of one’s well-being both in childhood and in adulthood in various domains of everyday life. Moreover, it represents a significant protection factor against psycho-social risks in adolescence (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Conger & Conger, 2007).

Although self-esteem has been traditionally considered as a global one-dimensional perception and evaluation of the Self (Rosenberg, 1979), a growing number of studies have suggested a multidimensional perspective. Consequently, one might differentiate between the global self-esteem about oneself and the self-evaluation with regards to a specific domain self-esteem such as school, physical, work, social, family, emotional (Bracken, 1992).

According to Harter (1999), individuals draw self-perceptions concerning both domain-specific judgements as well as global judgements of their self-worth. In turns, these evaluations can vary across domains. Specifically, self-evaluations of physical appearance have revealed to contribute in a significant way to global self-esteem.

Over the last decade there has been an increasing body of studies in the literature which deepens the nature of children self-worth in physical and academic in domains. In particular, it identifies the feelings and judgments of self satisfaction in physical domains such as sport and physical education (Kolovelonis, Mousouraki, Goudas & Michalopoulou, 2013). More specifically the construct of physical self-esteem is multidimensional and derives from self-evaluation of general appearance and body weight, perceptions of sport and athletic competence and attributions to others of judgements about one’s body (Shrivera, Harristb, Pagec, Hubbs-Taidt, Moulton & Tophamf, 2013). Children with an adequate level of physical self-esteem are more likely to accept their perceived body image and less dependent upon external contingencies regarding appearance or social acceptance. An increasing body of literature has documented the close and reciprocal relationship between self-esteem and body image from primary school on in the light of the clinical emergency concerning the children obesity and subsequent attention towards the psychological well being of overweight children (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Conger & Conger, 2007). This phenomenon is particularly reinforced in Western societies by the pressure of an ideal standardized body induced through the media. Children are sensitive to media pressure and societal norms for weight and appearance very early, already at about 8-10 years. Coherent with this, children establish from ages 6 to 11 the link between body mass index (BMI) and body image and associate the higher BMI to the more negative body image (Burkhalter & Hillman, 2011; Xanthopoulos, Borradaile, Hayes, Sherman, Veur, Grundyand & Foster, 2011). This sensitivity increases by age and becomes more evident during adolescence when girls tend to prefer the stereotype of thin body and boys adopt the stereotype of muscular for body (Richetin, Xaiz, Maravita & Perugini, 2012).

The above-mentioned relationship is strictly linked to the mediator role of physical activity.

Physical activity represents a structured or unstructured movement that favours health and well-being by a variety of moderate or vigorous intensity activities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2008). It’s widely recognized that regular physical activity influences the health by inducing many benefits both at physical and psychological levels. The first ones benefits are well documented and concern the decreased risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes mellitus, hypertension, a number of cancers, osteoporosis... Unfortunately the psychological benefits have received less attention. To date, the majority of the existing
research focused on mental health by stressing how regular physical activity decreases level of anxiety, depression, and stress reactivity and increases mood and self-esteem (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Conger & Conger, 2007). Some evidence also show how regular physical activity and sport influence a positive body image perception among adolescents and children. Playing sport in adolescence has beneficial effects on the perception of body image and self-esteem by reducing the risk of depression (Monteiro Gaspar, Amaral, Bruno, Oliveira & Borges, 2011). During childhood the participation in leisure activities such as sport activities may regulate the process of self-worth development and increase the level of self-esteem by inducing positive perceptions of physical competence and physical acceptance. This positive influence is generalized to global self-esteem (Birkeland, Melkevik, Holsen & Wold, 2012).

On this theoretical basis, the current study aims to investigate four specific research questions:

1. Do sport and sedentary life influence everyday habits of children aged between 7 and 12 years?
2. Do gender and sport activities influence self-esteem in physical, school and interpersonal domains?
3. Do gender and sport activities influence global and specific self-perceptions regarding school, athletic, body, behavioural and social domains?
4. To what extent are correlated self-esteem levels and self-perceptions?

**Materials and Methods**

**Subjects**

Participants were 104 children whose average chronological age was 11.26 years (range 7.5 – 12; SD= 2.3). With regard to gender, there were 45 girls and 59 boys. Children were subdivided into two groups: Group 1 (N=57) attending regularly sport courses and Group 2 (N=57) composed by sedentary children. In particular sport activities included soccer, volley, rugby, martial arts, handball and dancing (See Figure 1).

The medium socio-economic level was predominant.

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**Fig. 1 Kind of sports**

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Materials and Procedure

The Socio-demographic Questionnaire was employed during the sampling phase to distribute the subjects into two groups as a function of their physical activities (sport attendance or sedentary life style). The questionnaire was articulated into two parts. The first one analysed family background by the evaluation parameters such as family size, and the subjects’ parents’ academic history and jobs. This assessment took account both of performance in individual subject areas such as language, mathematics, and motor activities, as well as a global score. The second part of the questionnaire analysed the area of leisure-time and physical activities measured by the self-reported kind and times in minutes each participant performed sport activities and hobbies (reading, play at videogames, play with friends....) during their out-of-school time.

Examples:
“Do you participate in out-of-school sport activities? If yes, what kind of sport and how long?”
The answer categories were open.
“During your free time what do you do?:
The answer categories were coded in:
“Reading”; “Playing at video-games”; “Playing with friends”; “Watching TV”; “Other”
When a child chose one the above-mentioned categories, he or she had also to report how long in minutes.

Then children were administered Self-Esteem and Self-Perception tests. The order of presentation of the two tests was balanced. The administration modality was individual and it did not last than 20 minutes.

The children Self-Esteem was measured by the TMA - Multidimensional test of Self-esteem - (Bracken, 1992). Three subscales were employed: 1) Physical Self-Esteem aimed at evaluating how a child feels about himself or herself within concerning the appearance (e.g. size, hair, skin..), health or disability, prowess (agility, athletic ability..) ; 2) School Self-Esteem aimed at evaluating how a child feels about himself or herself within a school context or in relation to achievement; 3) Interpersonal Self-Esteem aimed at evaluating how a child feels about himself or herself in relation to peers. Each subscale consisted of 25 Likert-type items, positive and negative statements. Participants were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with statements on a 4-point scale using anchors of Absolutely true and Absolutely false.

Example: "I am proud of my hair " or "I am proud of my school work",

The test retest reliability of the battery was .90.

Children were also given the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985). It’s a self-report scale that measures a child's sense of global self-worth and self-competence in five domains of self-concept such as school, social, athletic, physical and behavioural. Were obtained 6 subscores, 1 global self-worth score and 5 scores for the other areas. Scale items are typically phrased as follows: "Some kids like the kind of person they are BUT other kids often wish they were someone else." Children select which option is most like them and then indicate whether the statement is sort of true or really true for them.

Interviewers administered this instrument directly to the children. The interviewer read each statement to the child, then asked "which kind of kid is more like you," and followed up by asking whether or not the particular response was "really true for you" or "sort of true for you."

Each of the two subscales includes six items, each of which has a value between one and four
Harter (1985, 1990) reports internal reliability ranging from .67 to .80.
Results
This study had four research questions. First to investigate whether children regularly attending out-of-school sport activities would present different everyday habits than their sedentary peers. This research questions was analyzed by One-Way ANOVA using sport activities/sedentary life style as independent variable, whilst the dependent ones were minutes spent in sport activities or reading or TV or video-games or playing with friends. Results revealed significant differences between the two groups for time spent in sport activities [F(1, 100) = 12.582; p<.001], reading [F(1, 77) = 9.489; p<.01], watching TV [F(1, 90) = 14.505; p<.001] and playing with video-games [F(1, 75) = 6.791; p<.05). To be more precise, sport participants spent more time in sport activities, watching TV and playing with video-games than sedentary children. On the contrary non-sport participants engaged more in reading than sport participants (See Graphic 2).

The second and the third research questions investigated whether gender or sport participation would influence the levels of self-esteem and self-perception. These research questions were analyzed by One-Way ANOVAs using gender and sport activities/sedentary life style as independent variables. School, body, interpersonal levels of self-esteem and global, school, social, body, athletic, behavioural self-perceptions were assumed as dependent variables.

Data analysis revealed significant differences in body self-esteem [F(1, 103) = 10.753; p<.001], in school self-esteem [F(1, 103) = 6.979; p<.05] and in school self-perception [F(1, 103) = 9.271; p<.05] between males and females. In particular, males showed a higher level of body self-esteem than females.

![Fig. 2 Habits of sport participants and sedentary children in minutes](image-url)
On the contrary, females manifested higher levels of school self-esteem and school self-perception than males (See Graphic 3).

Moreover sport participation influenced behavioral self-perception \( [F(1, 103) = 8.468; p<.05] \).

**Fig. 3 Means of Body Self-Esteem, School Self-Esteem and School Self-Perception**
Children attending sport activities presented higher level of behavioral self-perceptions ($M =$ ) than sedentary children (See Graphic 4).

The fourth research question investigated to what extent would be correlated self-esteem levels and self-perceptions.

![Fig. 4 Means of Behavioral Self-Perception](image-url)
On the whole, Pearson’s correlations proved significant and positive correlations between body self-esteem and global self-worth \((r = .373**\)), school self-esteem and behavioural self-perception \((r = .301*)\) and between school self-esteem and global self-worth \((r = .281*)\). With concern the sport participants, positive correlations were found between body self-esteem and athletic self-perception \((r = .350**\)), between body self-esteem and body self-perception \((r = .479**\)).

**Discussion**

The goal of the research reported here was to compare children regularly attending out-of-school sports and sedentary children concerning their habits and their level of self-esteem and self-perception. 

Worth of note is that sport participants significantly differed from sedentary children with concern their time spent in leisure and sport activities. The first ones engaged more in sport and less in reading. These results support an important role for sport activities in determining the habits of everyday life in childhood. At long term, sport participation is a significant and crucial protection factor against psycho-social risks in adolescence (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Conger & Conger 2007).

The second and the third research questions investigated whether gender and sport participation would influence self-esteem and self-perception. A question commonly posed by psychologists and educators is the theoretical and methodological overlapping between similar motivational constructs such as self-esteem, self-perception, self-image, self-concept. We argue that these terms are not assumed as synonymous, but they differ in meaningful ways. In other words, self-esteem refers to the evaluative dimension of personality, how individuals assess themselves. Whilst self-perception refers to individuals' beliefs about themselves (Alesi & Pepí, 2008). In this study we adopted the multidimensional perspective for all both these psychological constructs. Consequently, we analysed self-esteem in its sub-areas of body self-esteem, school self-esteem and interpersonal self-esteem. Self-perception was studied concerning sub-areas of global, body, athletic, behavioural, social and school self-perceptions. With regard to self-esteem, boys showed a higher level of body self-esteem than girls. On the contrary, girls manifested higher levels of school self-esteem and school self-perception than boys. This is coherent with the findings obtained in previous research on gender differences which have generally associated the most high self-worth to males. Girls present higher level of school self-esteem related to the capacity to cope with school tasks by employing effective study methods and actively participating in the learning process, both of which are required by achieving set objectives. Research in this field has looked at gender stereotypes from the educational, family and scholastic point of view (Pepi, Faria & Alesi, 2006). According to developmental perspective, adolescent and adult males tend to report higher physical self-perceptions than their female counterparts (Kolovelonis, Mousouraki, Goudas & Michalopoulou, 2013). Moreover the literature on gender differences in sports participation typically favours boys. Sport participation is still considered as a masculine activity, emphasizing aspects such as competitiveness, governance and supremacy. Conversely females are generally considered to show lower levels of body self-esteem than boys and more interested in their look. Moreover girls tend to be more dissatisfied with their bodies and sensitive to developing body misperception (Milligan & Pritchard, 2006).

Finally, we found that children attending sport activities presented higher levels of behavioral self-perceptions than their sedentary peers. These items describe the beliefs about himself as a good/compliant/respectful child and how a
child feels proud of his/her behavior. With respect to this domain, a possible explanation is that physical activity, sport in particular, leads to the cooperation with peers, sharing and learning to follow social and behavioural rules that transfer to other settings. Research investigating the personality characteristics of high achievers in sport underlie high levels of conscientiousness and extraversion linked to self-regulation strategies. These individuals are described to be more reliable, self-disciplined and persevering (Alesi & Pepi, 2012a; Bradley, Keane & Crawford, 2013).

Finally, the positive correlation between body self-esteem and global self-worth is consistent with a growing body of studies documenting the crucial role of body image and body self-concept in the developmental building of self-esteem. The perception of physical appearance or body image is one of the strongest sources of self-esteem in the lifespan. The self-worth bases on the evaluation of himself by comparison it with others and personal performance on a variety of tasks including physical and motor tasks (Alesi, Rappo & Pepi, 2012). Moreover, high self-esteem and positive body image are important for the prevention of disordered eating (Flament, Hill, Buchholz, Henderson, Tasca & Goldfield, 2012). On the contrary, the relationship between low Self-Esteem and low Body-Image is considered to be a crucial factor that increases the risk for developing eating disorders and body dissatisfaction or disturbances among children and adolescents (Milligan & Pritchard, 2006; Xanthopoulos, Borrodaile, Hayes, Sherman, Veur, Grundy & Foster, 2011).

To sum up, the findings of this study about the relationships between self-esteem and self-perception in sport and sedentary children highlight the need for this issue to be addressed in future research. In particular they suggest some interesting implications on the educational field. It might be worth looking further into the possibility to plan programs aimed at promoting and encouraging the sport participation. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, there has been an implicit belief that physical activity causes benefits by improving well-being in various domains. However, the relation between exercise and children’s health has not, until relatively recently, been systematically evaluated. It’s important for researchers and practitioners to understand what interventions are needed to influence the development not only in the motivational area but even in the cognitive domain. Recently is observed a new interest in evaluating the positive effects of exercise on cognitive abilities such as executive functioning, concentration, reaction time. It is important to acknowledge that we need new research building on this relationship.
References

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