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Original article

# Parental social support, perceived competence and enjoyment in school physical activity

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## Abstract

**Background:** Beginning in the elementary school years, there are differences among children on how they perceive their competence in physical activity (PA). Children's competence perceptions may influence their affective reactions to PA. A crucial question is how to motivate children who hold low competence perceptions to enhance their enjoyment and PA involvement. Because parents play critical roles in children's development and socialization, social support from parents can be an important factor to complement teachers' effort to enhance children's enjoyment and PA involvement. In this research we identified the associations among children's beliefs about parental social support, perceived competence and enjoyment in school PA.

**Methods:** Three hundred and twenty children (9–11 years old) participated in a two-wave study. At the first wave, children completed questionnaires measuring their beliefs about parental social support, perceived competence and enjoyment in school PA; they reported their enjoyment again 8 months later at the second wave.

**Results:** Both concurrent and longitudinal analyses revealed that beliefs about parental social support were important factors associated with children's enjoyment in school PA, especially among girls with low competence perceptions.

**Conclusion:** Family socialization factors should be taken into consideration. The efficacy of individual and community-level strategies should be included and evaluated when designing effective intervention strategies that enhance children's PA in school.

In this research we identified the associations among children's beliefs about parental social support, perceived competence and enjoyment in school PA.

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**Keywords:** Elementary children; Motivation; Social context; Social support

## 1. Introduction

Beginning in the elementary school years, there are differences among children on how they perceive their competence in physical activity (PA).<sup>1</sup> Though some children view themselves as possessing skills to do well in PA, others view themselves as lacking such skills. How children perceive their competence has important implications for their intentions and participation in PA.<sup>2</sup> Children who hold low competence often do more poorly than their objective abilities warrant. Moreover, children's competence perceptions may influence their affective reactions to PA. Specifically, children who view themselves as

lacking skills rarely experience fun and enjoyment during the participation.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a crucial question is how to motivate children who hold low competence perceptions to enhance their PA involvement.

Individuals' behavior change is associated with their physical and social environment.<sup>4</sup> Researchers have identified many factors that influence children's behavior, including peers, teachers, and parents.<sup>5</sup> Social support from parents has been identified as an especially important factor related to children's participation in PAs.<sup>6</sup> Given the role that parents play in children's development and socialization, we propose that parents can facilitate physical education teachers to reduce the negative effects of children's low competence perceptions. Therefore, this study was designed to examine the possibility that parental social support enhances the enjoyment of children with low competence perceptions in school PA.

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According to Ecological Systems Theory (EST),<sup>7</sup> development or change in individual characteristics cannot be effectively explained without considering the context in which the person is embedded. Although intrapersonal interventions have been effective,<sup>8</sup> behavior change is more likely to occur and be sustained when the socio-cultural and physical environments are supportive of physically active lifestyles. Davison and Birch<sup>7</sup> provided an application of EST to predictors of childhood physical activity. In the case of children, the ecological niche includes the family and the school, which are in turn embedded in larger social contexts including the community and society in general. It is suggested that effective interventions must incorporate the context surrounding the individual/group whose behavior is being targeted.

For elementary children, family constitutes an important initial element of socialization. Several types of parental influence have been suggested in the literature.<sup>9,10</sup> For example, parents can provide instrumental support (e.g., organizing PAs, providing transportation, paying activity fee), emotional support (e.g., encouraging children), informational support (e.g., giving instruction), companionship support (e.g., playing with children), and validation support (e.g., serving as role models). As a consequence of a variety of interactions with parents, children establish their belief about parental social support in a specific domain. Many researchers have confirmed that children's beliefs about socializing agents such as parent support can help shape their attitudes and values toward PA and direct PA involvement. Particularly, with the central role of competence perception in motivation and intention,<sup>11,12</sup> socialization in PA has often been studied together with perceived competence to understand children's and adolescents' PA involvement.<sup>13,14</sup>

For example, Bois et al.<sup>13</sup> examined the influence of parents' PA involvement and attitudes on children's competence perceptions and time spent in PA with a sample of 152 French children. Structural equation modeling revealed that parents' role modeling behavior had a direct effect on children's time spent in PA and that parents' beliefs about their child's competence had an indirect effect on children's PA by influencing children's perceived competence. Using 380 American secondary students as participants, Trost et al.<sup>4</sup> investigated a conceptual model linking parental PA orientations, parental support for PA, and children's perceived competence with PA participation. They found that parental support was an important correlate of youth PA, acting directly or indirectly through its influence on perceived competence. Through observation and social interaction, children can reproduce the behaviors of their parents in PA. More supportive parents tend to have more active children. Other researchers have found similar results.<sup>15,16</sup>

Previous studies have significantly enhanced our understanding of parental social support and children's PA engagement. Nevertheless, these studies have been limited in the following ways. First, many studies in parental social support are cross-sectional in nature. Consequently, the proposed cause-effect relationships between parental social support, children's perceived competence and PA involvement lack temporal correspondence. According to MacCallum and Austin,<sup>17</sup>

longitudinal designs, including autoregressive influence in which future values are estimated based on a weighted sum of past values, provide stronger support for potential cause and effect postulates. Second, researchers have rarely considered individual differences when investigating the influence of parental social support. Because of a variety of influences ranging from school socialization and prior experience to a history of accomplishment, children might approach their interactions with parents with established competence perceptions in school subjects.<sup>18,19</sup> It is reasonable to assume that those who have low perceived competence may benefit more from parental social support because of their heightened need for the psychological resources provided by the support.<sup>18</sup> In other words, parental social support may protect children from the adverse effects of holding negative beliefs and mitigate poor psychological functioning.<sup>20</sup>

Last, although gender differences in PA are well recognized, few researchers have examined gender invariance within the process of parental social influence. Consequently, theoretical considerations and attendant recommendations are often contingent upon the presence of no gender differences. Sallis et al.,<sup>5</sup> for example, investigated adolescent gender differences in motivational characteristics of PA participation from a multi-ethnic sample. Compared to their male peers, females reported less role modeling by their parents and had lower levels of intrinsic motivation and enjoyment in exercise. In a longitudinal study, Garcia et al.<sup>21</sup> found that females reported a significant decline in perceived benefits of PA and the influences of role models (e.g., parents, teachers, and peers) from elementary to junior high school, whereas males reported a decline in perceived competence and social norms regarding PA. Given these documented differences, it is apparent that identifying gender-specific characteristics in the relationship between parental social support and PA behavior will augment the literature with valuable information about gender-specific factors influencing PA. Such information is critical when developing effective programs to promote children's in-school PA.

The purpose of this study was to identify the associations among children's beliefs about parental social support, their perceived competence, and enjoyment in school PA. There were two research questions. First, to what extent was perceived competence associated with enjoyment in school PA? Given the influence of perceived competence on children's motivation and affective reactions,<sup>22</sup> we hypothesized that children who hold low perceived competence would be less likely to experience enjoyment than their counterparts who hold high perceived competence in school PA. Second, to what extent could parental social support aid children who hold low perceived competence to enjoy PA? Because children who hold low perceived competence are in greater need of the psychological resources provided by parental social support than children who hold high perceptions,<sup>18</sup> we hypothesized that children with low perceived competence would be more likely to benefit from high levels of parental social support. Importantly, given the possible gender influence on the process of parental social support, we hypothesized that gender might be a potential

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