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The role of parental affection and psychological control in adolescent athletes' symptoms of school and sport burnout during the transition to upper secondary school

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The transition from compulsory school to upper secondary school is a challenging period for adolescents. Especially challenging it can be for adolescents who aim to integrate two domains of achievement, such as an athletic career and academic education. The pressure from two intertwined achievement domains may make student-athletes vulnerable to symptoms of burnout. The study examined the role of mothers' and fathers' affection and psychological control as possible risk or protective factors in the symptoms of school and sport burnout among 15–16 year olds adolescent athletes in Finland.

Methods: The adolescents' ($n = 391$) burnout symptoms in the two domains were measured using questionnaires at the beginning and at the end of the first grade of upper secondary school. Mothers ($n = 258$) and fathers ($n = 191$) filled in questionnaires concerning their parenting behaviors at the beginning of the school year.

Results & conclusions: The results showed that the athletes' symptoms of both school and sport burnout increased across the school year. Maternal affection buffered against the increase of school burnout, but only when not combined with simultaneous psychologically controlling mothering.

Symptoms of school burnout, such as exhaustion, cynicism, and feelings of inadequacy (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen, & Nurmi, 2009; Shih, 2015), are an increasing problem among adolescents in modern society (Salmela-Aro, 2017; Yusoff & Khan, 2013). Academic stress and school-related burnout are serious risk factors for various internalized problems (Salmela-Aro, Savolainen, & Holopainen, 2009; Silvar, 2001; Walburg, 2014), as well as lowered school engagement and achievement (Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014; Vasalampi, Salmela-Aro, & Nurmi, 2009), increased school dropout rates (Salmela-Aro, 2017; Silvar, 2001), and difficulties in the transition to working life and higher education (Vasalampi et al., 2009). Consequently, understanding of both the possible risk factors and the factors that protect adolescents from burnout is needed. The present study aimed to examine the role of parental affection and psychological control as possible risk or protective factors in the development of burnout in a subsample of adolescents, specifically adolescent athletes who had recently started their academic track (i.e., secondary education that prepares them to apply for higher education in university) in upper secondary school. Recent studies suggest that talented athletes tend to be highly motivated to do well in both the sport and academic domains (Lupo et al., 2015). These students might thus be assumed to be

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vulnerable to symptoms of school burnout during their transition to an academic track after comprehensive school, as well as being prone to sport burnout (Sorkkila, Aunola, & Ryba, 2017) as they struggle to integrate their athletic careers with their education (Ryba et al., 2016).

1. Burnout among adolescents

School burnout has been defined as a psychological syndrome or an emotional state that occurs as a result of chronic school-related stress and overload (Walburg, 2014). It is manifested as emotional exhaustion due to academic demands, a cynical and detached attitude towards schoolwork, and feelings of incompetence as a student (Kiuru, Aunola, Nurmi, Leskinen, & Salmela-Aro, 2008; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-romá, & Bakker, 2002; Walburg, 2014). According to Kiuru et al. (2008), school burnout is caused by a dissonance between the student's internal resources for schoolwork and his or her own expectations for success, or those held by other people such as teachers, peers, and parents. Interestingly, symptoms of school burnout seem often to go hand in hand with high school engagement and thriving: in up to one quarter of Finnish upper secondary school students, high engagement coincided with symptoms of exhaustion and even depression (Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014).

After comprehensive school, students have different possibilities to continue their studies. In Finland, these possibilities include either upper secondary (an academic track that prepares students to apply for higher education in university) or vocational school (a vocational track that prepares students for working life). Previous research has shown that symptoms of school burnout are an increasing problem particularly among students in academic track (Bask & Salmela-Aro, 2013; Salmela-Aro, 2017; Salmela-Aro & Tynkkynen, 2012). This is understandable since study demands are significantly higher in academic track than in vocational tracks (Salmela-Aro, 2017). Although the transition to upper secondary school is a challenge for any adolescent (Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000; Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, & Nurmi, 2008), it can be especially challenging for young students who aim to integrate two domains of achievement, such as an athletic career and academic education. Not only do student-athletes need to adapt to increasing study demands and a new social environment at school, but they are also under competitive pressure and a constantly increasing sport training load (Ryba et al., 2016; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015). This pressure from two intertwined achievement domains may make student-athletes particularly vulnerable to symptoms of burnout, not only at school but also in sport.

Sport-related burnout is exhibited as exhaustion, cynicism, and a feeling of inadequacy as an athlete (Sorkkila et al., 2017). Sport burnout has been shown to be valid (Sorkkila, Ryba, Aunola, & Salmela-Aro, *in press*) and distinct construct from school burnout (Sorkkila et al., 2017), suggesting that symptoms of burnout are—at least to some extent—domain-specific. In a 2017 study, Sorkkila et al. found that 30% of student-athletes reported mild and 3% reported severe sport burnout symptoms at the beginning of upper secondary school. High-level achievements are demanded of these athletes so they are often prone to perfectionism (Hill & Curran, 2016), characterized as overly high personal standards and critical self-evaluations (Flett & Hewitt, 2005; Hill & Curran, 2016). The overly high standards perceived to be set by others—that is, socially prescribed perfectionism (Hill, Hall, Appleton, & Kozub, 2008)—may be particular triggers for feelings of lack of control. These feelings can result in achievement-striving being perceived as threatening, and thus make a student prone to the symptoms of burnout (Appleton, Hall, & Hill, 2009; Hill et al., 2008).

2. The role of parental affection and psychological control

The role of parenting in adolescents' well-being has been a widely investigated topic. Based on Baumrind's (1966) traditional parenting style paradigm, the two most often examined characteristics of parenting have been parental affection (e.g., responsiveness, warmth, involvement, acceptance, supportiveness) and control (e.g., maturity demands, monitoring, limit setting) (Aunola & Nurmi, 2005). In Baumrind's (1966) traditional parenting style typology parental control was mainly defined as the level of demandingness typical for the parent. Later, however, indirect and manipulative form of control (discussed already by Baumrind (1966))—referred in the literature as psychological control (Barber, 1996; Baumrind, Larzelere, & Owens, 2010)—has been investigated as unique form of control separate from more directive type of control (i.e., behavioral control).

There seems to be consensus that parental affection—that is, the degree to which parents emotionally support their children and provide them with warmth and love (Wouters, Doumen, Germeijs, Colpin, & Verschueren, 2013)—has positive consequences for healthy child and adolescent development (Hart et al., 2003), as well as their educational and career success (Upadhyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2012). In contrast, psychological control—that is, attempts to control adolescents' thoughts and emotions by psychological means—has more negative outcomes, such as internal distress and problem behaviors (Barber & Harmon, 2002; Soenens, Park, Vansteenkiste, & Mouratidis, 2012). According to self-determination theory (SDT), environmental support, including support from parents, for adolescents' innate psychological needs for relatedness (the need to feel connected and loved), autonomy (the need to feel self-determined and self-directed), and competence (the need to feel capable and personally effective), is crucial in order to achieve optimal psychological growth and health (Deci & Ryan, 2000). From this perspective, parental affection can be assumed to support adolescents' well-being by supporting feelings of relatedness and competence, in particular, whereas psychological control exercised by parents can be assumed to have negative consequences as it thwarts adolescents' need for autonomy (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010).

Recently, Shih (2015) used SDT to explain the evolution of adolescents' symptoms of burnout in the context of school and student-teacher interaction. According to SDT, adolescents' feelings of autonomy can be considered a crucial psychological resource for dealing with stressful demands (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As suggested by Shih (2015), such a resource may help the individual interpret stressors as challenges rather than threats, and thus use effective ways of coping when dealing with stressful situations and a heavy workload. Following this line of reasoning, social contexts (including family) that thwart adolescents' sense of autonomy—for

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