

Research Paper

The relationships among sport self-perceptions and social well-being in athletes with physical disabilities

Deborah R. Shapiro, Ph.D.^{a,*}, and Jeffery J. Martin, Ph.D.^b^a*Department of Kinesiology and Health, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, USA*^b*Wayne State University, USA*

Abstract

Background: Peer relationships account for a significant motivational influence on sport participation among youth athletes with and without disabilities.

Objective: The primary purpose of this study was to determine if the quality of friendships, physical self-perceptions and general self-worth predicted close friendship, loneliness and social acceptance among 46 athletes with physical disabilities (males = 35, female = 11) between the ages of 12 and 21 (*M* age = 15.37, *SD* = 2.45). Second, this study examined descriptive information on the quality of friendships inside and outside of an adapted sport setting, feelings of loneliness, social acceptance, close friendships, athletic competence, physical appearance, and self-worth among youth athletes with physical disabilities.

Methods: Participants completed the Sport Friendship Quality Scale (SFQS), a Loneliness Rating Scale and the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (SPPA).

Results: Three regression analyses used positive and negative aspects of non-sport friendship quality, positive aspects of sport friendship quality, physical appearance, athletic competence, and self-worth as predictors and accounted for 57%, 41%, and 31% of the variance in loneliness, close friendships, and social acceptance, respectively. Athletic competence and self-worth were the most important predictors of loneliness and close friendships with significant ($p < .10$) beta weights. No single predictor had a significant beta weight in predicting social acceptance. Negative and positive elements of friendship quality were not important predictors.

Conclusions: These findings highlight the importance of global psychological (i.e., self-worth) and sport specific psychological (i.e., athletic competence) constructs in predicting important social well-being indices (i.e., close friendships & loneliness). Published by Elsevier Inc.

Keywords: Peer relationships; Well-being; Friendship; Disability sport; Physical disability

Peer relationships account for a significant motivational influence on sport participation among youth athletes.¹ For instance, the increased importance of peers to competence perceptions across childhood,^{1–5} the importance of social acceptance and affiliation as primary sport participation motives^{6,7} and the importance of friendships in facilitating well-being, including positive adjustment, pro-social behavior and self-esteem^{5,6} together highlight the value of understanding peer relationships in sport.

There has been an increase in research conducted on young people's peer relationships in sport.¹ Two areas of research examining peer relationships are peer acceptance and friendship. Friendship status and peer acceptance often

are gained by being good at something other children value such as sport.⁸ Friendship refers to the quality of or supportive functions of a dyadic relationship.^{5,9} Friendship quality is defined as the degree to which friendship with a best friend provides psychosocial benefits such as positive perceptions of competence, companionship, help and guidance, and intimate self-disclosure.¹⁰ Researchers have found close friendships contribute to enjoyment and commitment to physical activity (PA)¹¹ through recognition of accomplishments, companionship, and esteem support, enhanced expectancies for success, and decisions to participate in activities outside of physical education.^{9,10,12}

Parents of youth with disabilities worry about the social relationships of their children, including whether or not they are able to establish and maintain satisfying friendships.^{13,14} Children who experience movement difficulties due to a physical disability often develop lower perceptions of athletic competence. Poor self-confidence may be due in part to decreased opportunities for sport and physical

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 404 413 8372; fax: +1 404 413 8053.

E-mail address: Dshapiro@gsu.edu (D.R. Shapiro).

activity (PA) participation,^{15,16} repeated failure in sport settings in conjunction with a lack of support from significant others¹⁷ and social isolation and peer rejection.¹⁸ The impact of these experiences often extends beyond the athletic domain resulting in adverse psychosocial consequences (i.e., reduced self-worth, loneliness and decreased quality of life).^{17,19}

Loneliness is the cognitive awareness of a deficiency in satisfying social relationships. Loneliness is accompanied by feelings of sadness, deprivation of and longing for association or closeness with other people.^{20–22} Loneliness is an affective variable reflecting the quality of social relationships rather than the quantity of social contacts.²⁰ Children's ability to form close friendships is an important indicator of social well-being.²³ More than 10% of children without disabilities between the third and sixth grades report feelings of considerable loneliness and social dissatisfaction with statements including "I'm lonely" and "I feel left out of things."²⁴ Over time, loneliness is predictive of later adjustment problems. Children who feel isolated or rejected by peers or who are unable to establish close friendships become socially inhibited. Negative self-perceptions of social competence and further peer rejection have been linked to greater risk for academic failure, juvenile delinquency, school dropout, mental health problems and substance abuse.^{20,22}

There is evidence that loneliness is associated with physical inactivity among children and youth.¹⁸ Children who scored low on a measures of loneliness were significantly more physically active, had significantly better scores on tests of physical fitness and were less likely to experience tension and anxiety than those who scored average or high on ratings of loneliness.²⁰ Differences in loneliness scores (average, high, and low) among third through sixth grade children suggest that social and peer factors play a crucial role in physical activity participation.²⁰ Lonely children

may lack the social skills necessary to interact and function effectively in groups. As a result, they may not be included in groups or they withdraw, further contributing to increased feelings of loneliness and isolation.²⁰ Prolonged loneliness may negatively influence ones psychological, emotional and physical well-being.²¹

Few attempts have been made to learn whether children with physical disabilities feel lonely, have close friendships, or are dissatisfied with their social relationships in PA settings¹⁵ or examine potential predictors of related but distinct elements of loneliness, close friendships, and social acceptance. The phenomenon of loneliness in children with physical disabilities merits investigation in its own right since relatively little is known about the concerns and emotional lives of children with physical disabilities.

The social context is an important variable in the study of friendship and loneliness.¹⁸ Children's selection of close friends outside of sport may differ from those with whom they interact on their sports teams. For instance, inclusive physical education settings may be places where children with disabilities can develop close friendships.^{16,25} Youth with disabilities also may identify a close friend via associations between families or interactions with other children outside of the school grounds (neighborhood, church, cousins, and siblings).²⁶ Assessing friendships across sport and non-sport settings may reveal unique and important differences in the quality of friendships of youth with disabilities. An important feature of the current study is the examination of friendship in both adapted sport and non-sport settings.

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, to determine if the quality of friendships inside and outside of sport, physical self-perceptions and general self-worth predicted close friendship, loneliness and social acceptance among athletes with physical disabilities (see Fig. 1). The second goal was to provide descriptive information on the

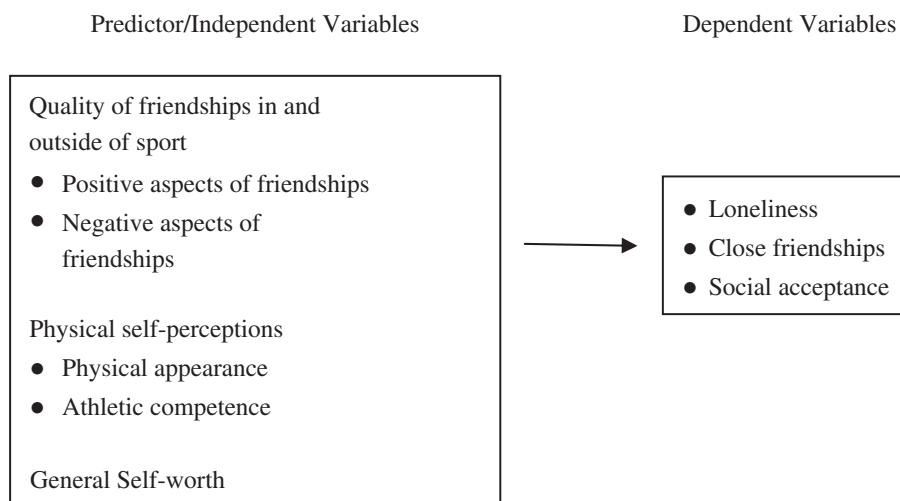


Fig. 1. Organization of independent and dependent variables.

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