WHY PARENTS ENROL THEIR CHILDREN IN RECREATIONAL GYMNASTICS PROGRAMMES AT THE BEGINNING OF THEIR EDUCATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the motives of parents who enrolled their children in recreational gymnastics programmes at six primary schools and their auxiliary branches in the north-east part of Slovenia in the 2007/2008 academic year. The study included 386 parents who (after the programme ended) answered a questionnaire specifically designed for this study. Basic statistical parameters were calculated, and a one-way analysis of variance has been carried out in order to observe the differences in the motives of parents, according to their gender, age, educational level and gender of their child. The results of the study revealed that the most significant motive stated by the parents as a reason for enrolling children in a course was "because sport benefits the health of my child". This indicates the awareness of parents about the usefulness of sport for the development and health of children. According to gender of parents, there were minor differences found, although differences in the structure of motives were revealed according to the age of parents, their level of education and gender of their child. The prevailing motives of parents indicate that the organisers of gymnastics courses should emphasise such organisation in schools, which will emphasise the effects of exercising on the health of children along with enjoyment and useful spending of free time.

Keywords: *extracurricular programmes, recreational gymnastics, first three-year period, motives, parents*

INTRODUCTION

Physical activity has been proved beneficial for health and the positive physical, intellectual, and emotional development of children and adolescents (Bratina et al., 2011; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Malina, 1996; Malina & Bouchard, 1991; Pate et al., 1995). Regular physical activity may contribute to the prevention of the main chronic degenerative diseases (Froberg & Andersen, 2010) and enables children and adolescents to successfully control their aggression (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). A better organisation and structure of their free time prevents negative

behavioural patterns (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). The psychological outcomes of extracurricular physical activities, such as higher self-esteem and self-confidence and lower rates of depression, have been also documented (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Mahoney, Schweder, & Stattin, 2002), as well as better academic outcomes and educational aspirations of children and youth (Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

Parents play the most prominent role when enrolling children in free time activities; by doing so, they introduce them to regular sports activities from an early age (Freedson & Everson, 1991; Howard & Madrigal 1990; Jago, Fox, Page, Brockman, & Thompson, 2010; Moore et al., 1991). Educational institutions and sports clubs also play a significant influence with their extracurricular sport programmes (Eccles, Barber, Stone & Hunt, 2003; Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Golja, Šterlinko, Stubelj Ars, & Besednjak-Kocijančič, 2009).

Gymnastics is a compulsory part of all PE curriculum and each child practice gymnastics during regular PE classes (Živčić Marković, Sporiš, & Čavar, 2011). Gymnastics plays one of the most important parts in development of children as it offers a wide range of locomotive, stability and body control movements, which are extremely beneficial for children's development. Gymnastics requires a considerable diversity of movements: transitions from dynamic to static elements and vice versa, and frequent changes of the body position in space. The successful performance of each element requires accurate muscular activity of a specific intensity, through space and at the right moment (Bučar, 2003; Bučar Pajek, Čuk, Kovač, & Turšič, 2010; Kovač, 2006; Novak, Kovač, & Čuk, 2008; Živčić Marković et al., 2011).

Slovenian adults participate in sports activity for various reasons: to feel better and to be healthy, to acquire motor and working abilities, for fun, socialising and relaxation as well as enjoyment, competition and satisfaction (Petkovšek & Ambrožič, 1999; Sila, 2007). Adults who are physically active and are aware of the importance of exercising for health and well-being can be a good example also for their own children (Moore et al., 1991). Particularly salient is the role of parents in younger children; specifically, the enrolment of pre-school children and children in the early year period of primary school into extracurricular activities is decided mostly by parents (Biddle & Goudas, 1996; Brustad, 1996; Kunješić, 2012).

The influence of parents and social environment is highly complex. Parents can influence their children's physical activity involvement in direct and indirect manners (Taylor, Baranowski, & Sallis, 1994), either with role modelling of physical activity (Bandura, 1996) or with their beliefs about the competence of their children (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998). Brustad (1996) found that encouragement and support from parents and their beliefs in 4-6th grade children are stronger than other social factors. The influence of fathers and mothers may be manifested in different ways; furthermore, father and mother could influence their child's physical activity also by different processes (Bois, Sarrazin, Brustad, Trouilloud, & Cury, 2005). Brustad (1993, 1996) conducted a series of studies on the influence of parental attitudes and behaviours on children's physical competence perceptions and affective responses to physical activity. The findings varied by gender: parents with lower socioeconomic status from a large urban area gave more encouragement to their sons than daughters, and girls reported lower perceived physical competence and positive affect toward physical activity than did boys. The aim of this study was to examine the motives that led parents to make a decision about enrolling children into recreational gymnastics programmes. The study also observed differences in the motives according to gender, age, educational level and the gender of their child.

Understanding the motives that led parents to enrol their children into gymnastics programmes will help the organisers of programmes to be more focused when presenting them to parents, and to adapt the programme goals, thus persuading more parents to enrol their children into regular sports activity.

METHODS

Programme

All schools in Slovenia offer different extra-curricular sport programmes for children, which are organised and implemented by schools or sport associations. The Gymnastic Association of Slovenia (GAS) has developed an extracurricular programme called "Gymnastics in primary schools" (Fišer, 2008) in order to promote gymnastics among children in the regions where previously there were no gymnastics traditions. The programme is non-competitive, intended for recreation of children aged 7 to 9 who do not want to commit to long hours in the gym or take part in competitions. Classes develop co-ordination, strength and flexibility while building confidence in body movement and at the same time teaching children the fundamentals required for all sports.

Schools involved in the study had good sport facilities and equipment and offer children of that age various extra-curricular sport programmes. The participation of children is free of charge as the coaches are paid by the GAS. Children practice twice per week (each class lasting 60 minutes) at the afternoon after the regular compulsory educational programme. After first year of implementation GAS evaluated the efficiency of the programme by measuring motor abilities of children and examining the motives of parents who enrolled their children in recreational gymnastics programmes.

Sample of participants

The sample included 386 parents who had enrolled their children into the programme "Gymnastics in primary schools" at six primary schools and their auxiliary branches in the north-east region of Slovenia in the 2007/2008 academic year. The sample included 185 fathers and 201 mothers whose children (aged 7 to 9) were pupils in the first three-year period of primary school and who voluntarily enrolled with their parents' consent into an extracurricular gymnastics programme. The average age of parents was 36.55 years. When compared to the Slovenian population, parents were less active than the average Slovene (Sila, 2007). A comparison between genders revealed a larger proportion of inactive mothers and a larger number of regularly active fathers. Similar results about the level of sports activities in this part of Slovenia were also found by Karnet (2012).

Sample of variables

A questionnaire was specially designed for the purposes of this study (Fišer, Kajtna & Kovač, 2008, in Fišer, 2008), consisting mostly of closed questions with some additional open questions. The questionnaires were addressed separately to mothers and fathers, thus acquiring data on the gender of the subjects. The first part of the questionnaire collected basic information: age, level of education and the type of residence as well as data about their sports activity (how often they participate in sport, which sports they participate in, the level of awareness about the importance of sport for health they acquired during their education, etc.). The second part of the questionnaire consisted of 30 statements about motives (see Table 1) with a ranking scale from 1 to 5, which were later used for analysis and interpretation as dependable variables. "1" represented an unimportant motive, whereas "5" represented a very important motive.

Table 1. *List of all motives and their abbreviations.*

Abbreviation	Motive
M1	Sport benefits the health of my child.
M2	My child will be in better physical condition.
M3	My child will spend free time in a useful way.
M4	My child will have fun at sport.
M5	My child likes to compete.
M6	Sport will serve as relaxation.
M7	My child will be fitter.
M8	My child enjoys sport.
M9	My child will make good friends when exercising.
M10	My child likes to play.
M11	Sport follows certain rules.
M12	My child needs exercise after school.
M13	Sport increases self-confidence.
M14	Sport will help him/her in future life.
M15	My child will look better.
M16	My child will acquire competitive experience.
M17	My child wished to participate in a course.
M18	His/her friends also participate in a course.
M19	It will give me more free time.
M20	My child will be more confident.
M21	My child will acquire certain working habits.
M22	My child will burn off excess energy.
M23	I would like my child to learn new skills.
M24	My child likes to exercise.
M25	Gymnastics will develop his/her abilities.
M26	His/her friends practice gymnastics.
M27	Gymnastics is interesting and attractive.
M28	I would like my child to later train gymnastics.
M29	By doing gymnastics, he/she will acquire basic motor skills, important for all sports.
M30	Because I used to do gymnastics.

Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire for fathers and mothers was distributed to 282 children in May and June 2008; the children returned 386 questionnaires in gymnastics lessons, by the end of the academic year. The rate of questionnaire return was 68%. Data acquired with questionnaires has been analysed with the use of SPSS programme (Statistical Package for the Social Science). Descriptive statistics and one-way analysis of variance have been calculated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Parental beliefs associated with sport are predominantly positive and mostly related to the positive impact of sport on health and abilities of their children (Kunješić, 2012; Townsend & Murphy, 2001). The results of our study have revealed that "sport benefits the health of my child" was the most important motive for parents enrolling their children into the gymnastic programme. Motor activity is crucial for the motor and physical development of children (Gallahue & Ozmun, 1998) and consequently also has a significant effect for their health (Froberg & Andersen, 2010; Pate et al., 1995). It seems that parents are aware that the health of children is endangered due to the various negative influences of current lifestyles as inactivity leads to excess weight at the youngest age, obesity, diabetes type II and high blood pressure (Froberg & Andersen,

2010). Recognising the benefits of gymnastics for development and health of children results in the desire of parents to enrol their children into additional sports activities (Kunješić, 2012).

Some other leading motives found were "my child wished to participate in a course" and "gymnastics will develop his/her abilities" (see Figure 1). The former motive indicates that parents listen to their children and their wishes when choosing sports activities for them. Furthermore, it shows that physical activity is a primary need of children from an early age (Gallahue & Ozmun, 1998); they feel the lack of it and wish to participate in sports activities. The latter motive is also related to the benefit of physical activity for children. It is apparent that the tradition of gymnastics in Slovenia (Kovač, Starc, & Doupona 2005) and the traces of gymnastics in the common consciousness of Slovenian people describe gymnastics as a sport with an important effect on the health and motor abilities of people.

Among the top ten motives are mainly those supporting the effects of sports participation on health, well-being, fun, enjoyment, useful spending of free time and development of abilities and skills, which is in line with the findings in some other studies (Anderson, Funk, Elliott, & Smith, 2003; Čebokli, 2006; Kunješić, 2012; Weiss, 1993).

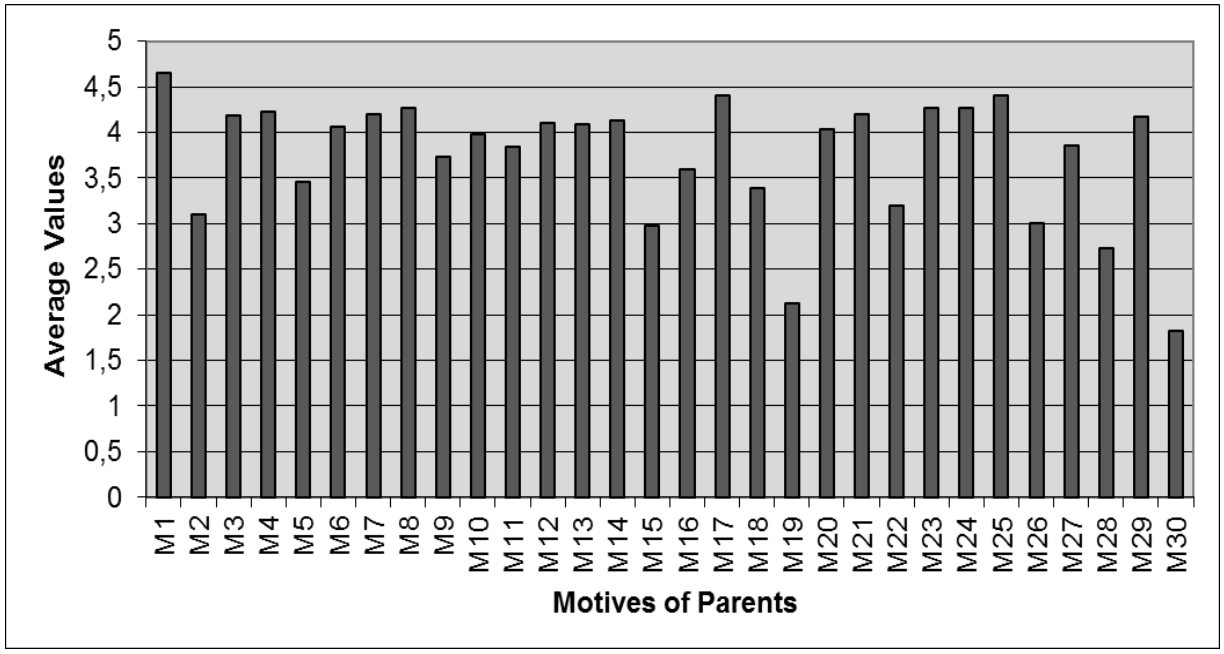

Figure 1. *Motives of parents for enrolling children in a programme "Gymnastics in primary schools".*

Some of the less prominent motives found were "because I used to do gymnastics" and "it will give me more free time". The reasons could be that parents did not previously participate in gymnastics, which does not have a substantial tradition in this part of Slovenia (Kovač et al., 2005); as such, this motive is not a significant decision-making factor due to lack of experience with gymnastics. In addition, as the programme was organised in the afternoon hours, when parents are at work, the enrolment in gymnastics does not represent a "way-out" for parents but could only be understood as provision of various possibilities for physical activities of children.

One of the aims of the study was to determine whether there are differences in the structure of motives according to gender. Bois and colleagues (2005) found that the influence of fathers and mothers on child's physical activity may be manifested in different ways and by different processes. The results of present study indicated that on the average gender of parents did not

represent any important significant differences. Some minor differences were observed only with the motives "my child enjoys sport" (p=.02), "my child needs exercise after school work" (p=.02) and "my child likes to exercise" (p=.04). All the above motives were listed as more important by mothers (Table 2). These findings seem to indicate that mothers are salient socialisation agents for children of these ages. Results of other studies also show that mothers in Slovenia generally have a larger role than fathers in making decisions about the free time activities of their children (Karnet, 2012; Kovač, Doupona Topič & Strel, 2004).

Table 2. *Motives of parents according to their gender.*

	mothers		**fathers**			
Motive	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**F**	**Sig (F)**
My child enjoys sport.	4.37	0.78	4.17	0.87	5.40	**.02**
My child needs exercise after school.	4.20	0.90	3.98	1.01	5.37	**.02**
My child likes to exercise.	4.34	0.82	4.17	0.87	4.18	**.04**

For the purpose of the study, parents were divided according to their age into two groups. The first group consisted of parents aged 35 years or less (N=168) and the second group of parents aged 36 years or more (N=210). According to the age of parents, statistically significant differences were revealed in nine motives (Table 3). It can be concluded that younger parents attribute greater importance to competitions and rules as they assume that their children like to compete. Parents want their children to acquire competitive experiences and later also to take part in gymnastics; at the same time, they feel that the sport follows certain rules. Parents think that children could benefit from this in future life. All of the above reflects a prevailing stereotype of young people who equate the sport with competitions.

Table 3. *Motives of parents according to their age.*

	<35yrs.		**36+ yrs.**			
Dimension	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**F**	**Sig (F)**
My child will spend free time in a useful way.	4.29	0.81	4.10	0.91	4.51	**.03**
My child likes to compete.	3.66	1.14	3.29	1.06	10.91	**.00**
Sport follows certain rules.	4.00	0.99	3.73	1.07	6.44	**.01**
Sport will help him/her in future life.	4.24	0.77	4.06	0.94	4.34	**.04**
My child will acquire competitive experience.	3.75	1.07	3.46	1.11	6.41	**.01**
My child wished to participate in a course.	4.52	0.77	4.33	0.82	5.34	**.02**
His/her friends also participate in a course.	3.53	1.22	3.26	1.19	4.61	**.03**
Gymnastics is interesting and attractive.	3.98	0.79	3.75	0.97	5.84	**.02**
I would like my child to later train gymnastics.	2.87	1.14	2.62	1.05	4.73	**.03**

Level of education is one of the factors influencing the opinions of parents about sports activity, their own participation (Kovač et al., 2004; Sila, 2007) and the participation of their children in sport (Raudsepp, 2006). Higher education most often also results in better financial status; therefore, parents can offer their children various types of sports activities and motivate them for sport. Better educated parents are also more aware of the positive influence of physical activity for health (Kovač et al., 2007); thus it can be concluded that their motives for enrolling children into sport are also different from other less educated parents.

Parents were divided into two groups according to the level of education: first group consisted of parents with lower levels of education (unfinished primary school, finished primary school and finished vocational school (N=179)) and the second group of parents with higher levels of education (finished four-year high-school, college, university degree or more (N=204)). Statistically significant differences were shown in thirteen motives (Table 4). Parents with lower levels of education considered motives related to competitions and rules in sport to be more beneficial. Less educated parents were also driven by the motives "his/her friend practice gymnastics" (p=.00) and "his/her friends also participate in a course" (p=.01), considering the social relations to be more beneficial than the more educated parents. The motives related with health, spending free time in a useful way and increasing self-confidence by sport seem to be more beneficial for higher educated parents.

Table 4. *Motives of parents according to the level of education*

	Lower education		**Higher education**			
Motive	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**F**	**Sig (F)**
Sport benefits the health of my child.	4.57	0.64	4.73	0.53	6.85	0.01
My child will be in better physical condition.	3.24	1.22	2.96	1.10	5.51	0.02
My child will spend free time in a useful way.	4.06	0.93	4.29	0.80	7.27	0.01
My child likes to compete.	3.72	1.08	3.22	1.11	20.29	0.00
My child needs exercise after school.	3.97	1.02	4.19	0.90	5.01	0.03
Sport increases self-confidence.	3.93	0.98	4.23	0.86	10.04	0.00
My child will look better.	3.13	1.22	2.83	1.13	6.03	0.01
My child will acquire competitive experience.	3.74	1.10	3.44	1.07	7.24	0.01
His/her friends also participate in a course.	3.55	1.23	3.22	1.16	7.14	0.01
It will give me more free time.	2.34	1.30	1.88	1.09	14.05	0.00
His/her friends practice gymnastics.	3.24	1.17	2.76	1.12	16.51	0.00
I would like my child to later train gymnastics.	2.89	1.17	2.55	0.99	9.51	0.00
Because I used to do gymnastics.	198	1.22	1.70	1.09	5.92	0.02

Despite the fact that the gender of parents stereotyped perceptions about physical competence of their children were already documented in some studies (Bois et al., 2005; Jacobs & Eccles, 1992), present study examined whether there were differences in the structure of parents' motives according to the child's gender. Parents were divided according to the gender of their child into two groups. The first group consisted of boys' parents (N=195) and the second group of girls' parents (N=191).

Table 5. *Motives of parents according to the child's gender.*

	Girls' parents		**Boys' parents**			
Motive	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**F**	**Sig (F)**
My child likes to compete.	3.33	1.20	3.58	1.02	5.04	0.03
Sport follows certain rules.	3.62	1.10	4.05	0.95	17.12	0.00
My child will acquire competitive experience.	3.47	1.14	3.72	1.05	4.85	0.03
My child will burn off excess energy.	3.03	1.18	3.35	1.19	6.93	0.01
I would like my child to learn new skills.	4.19	0.81	4.35	0.71	4.57	0.03

The results demonstrated that parents' motives for enrolling their child in recreational gymnastics programme vary more with the gender of their child than the gender of parents. All five motives were listed as more important by boys' parents (Table 5) and represented gender stereotyped perceptions of parents. Three of the motives were related to competition ("my child likes to compete"; "my child will acquire competitive experience"; "sport follows certain rules"). The fundamental perception that sport is a 'male' activity in which success is measured in what has been seen as 'male' characteristics such as competition, dominance and aggression is still predominant (Anderson et al., 2003). It seems that boys' parents still labelled these abilities and behaviours as masculine as a result of social and cultural expectations. On the other hand reasons could also be top sports results in men's artistic gymnastics in Slovenia, such as Mitja Petkovšek and Aljaž Pegan, who are European and World Champions. Both top athletes are idols for young boys.

CONCLUSIONS

The role of parents is particularly beneficial for the participation of the youngest children in extracurricular sport activities (Bois et al., 2005; Freedson & Everson, 1991; Gustafson & Rhodes, 2006; Howard & Madrigal 1990; Jago et al., 2010; Kunješić, 2012; Moore et al., 1991). As such, it is necessary for providers of sports activities to understand the motives that drive parents as only then they will be able to upgrade and improve the programmes they offer and thus encourage parents to enrol children into additional sports activities. The results of the study indicate that the providers of sports programmes should pay particular attention to the selection of contents and the organisational approach, which should emphasise the importance of gymnastics for the healthy development of children as this is a crucial motive for parents enrolling their children into the programme. For this purpose, it is suggested that the organisers of the programme prepare a leaflet to be distributed to the parents at the beginning of the academic year, which should emphasise the role of gymnastics for the healthy development of children along with enjoyment and useful spending of free time. Regular measurements of some key health indicators (body weight and the amount of skin fat) and motor competency (particularly the coordination of movement, strength, balance and flexibility) could demonstrate the importance of regular and expertly organised exercise to parents in the best possible way.

It has frequently been suggested that parental modelling of activity behaviour is likely to be central in promoting physical activity among children (Freedson & Everson, 1991; Gustafson & Rhodes, 2006; Moore et al., 1991). As the parents of the participating children were less active in sports than the average Slovenian person (Sila, 2007), it would also be wise to consider organising parallel sports activities for parents, particularly mothers. Specifically, more active parents more frequently enrol their children in sports activities (Bois et al., 2005; Gustafson & Rhodes, 2006). In addition, engagement in recreational activities could provide social integration opportunities for family members (Wells, Widmer, & McCoy, 2004).

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