

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

The Connection between
Competitive Sports and Well-Being,
Achievement, and Healthy Behavior
Patterns among Israeli Youth

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Abstract

Adolescence is regarded as a period of transitions between childhood and adulthood (Holt, 2008). It is a time of major changes and personal transitions (Markowitz, 2010). In the past researchers saw adolescence as problem to be solved and sought ways to prevent and reduce the challenges and problems young people faced in order to ease the transition into adulthood. In other words promoting health was done by fighting negative behavior such as by punishing delinquent behavior, substance use, truancy, etc. This was sometimes known as the Deficit-Reduction Approach. Today adolescence is viewed more as resource to be developed than a problem to be solved, and in order to ensure a healthy transition into adulthood it is more effective to concentrate on promoting positive behaviors than punishing the negative, this is sometimes known as Positive Youth Development.

One component of Positive Youth Development are supervised extra-curricular activities, and one of the most popular extra-curricular activities among youth are sports. Many researchers have provided evidence that participation in sports, especially interscholastic competitive sports, promotes positive youth development, improves academic achievement, and prevents at-risk behavior.

Besides empirical evidence gathered by prior research, this research bases itself on theories such as *Positive Psychology* (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), to explain how reinforcing positive behavior such as participating in sports is more effective than punishing negative behavior; the *Self-Determination Theory* (Ryan & Deci, 2000) on how sports can help motivate youth; the *Assets Model* (Morgan & Ziglio, 2007) on how sports can protect individuals and communities against negative behavior; *Salutogenesis* (Antonovsky, 1979), on how sports helps manage life's stresses; and the *Youth Resiliency Theory* (Harel-Fisch, 2014), on how sports can provide four crucial protective factors that promote well-being.

The objective of this work was to examine the connection between participation in competitive team sports and school adjustment, social connections, well-being, and at-risk behavior among Israeli students.

The population sample used for this study were Israeli students from 8th to 12th grades in secular, religious, and Arab Israeli schools. This sample represents the national demographics of Israel.

However, the most popular and available type of organized competitive sports inside and outside of Israeli schools is football (soccer). If one looks at popular Israeli culture and has experience and knowledge of Israeli society it would be reasonable to suggest that the students that traditionally participate in competitive football in Israel may have a certain profile and characteristics that include less interest in academic pursuits and more at-risk behavior patterns than other students. If this is indeed true there may be a situation of *Selection Bias* in the independent variable and experiment group of this study which is participation in organized competitive sports.

Therefore, the participants in the survey may have pre-determined characteristics and behaviors such as higher rates of involvement in violence, substance use, truancy, and other at-risk behaviors before their participation in competitive sports. If this is the case then there will be a negative connection between participation in competitive sports and well-being and a positive connection between participation in competitive sports and at-risk behavior. That is, students who report participating in competitive sports in Israel will have lower rates of well-being and higher rates of at-risk behavior since competitive sports in Israel often is based around soccer which attracts youth with a certain profile. In this case the study would not be an accurate report on the effects of sports on youth but on the profile of youth attracted to sports since the behavior patterns are not created by their participation in sports competitions but are pre-existent.

Due to this possibility, this study is defined as an explorative study which aims to test if participation in competitive sports is a protective factor towards youth well-being or will show a higher rate of at-risk behavior possibly due to the profile of the students who participate. Furthermore, if one goes over the vast amount of scientific literature on the subject of sports and positive youth development there is a controversy over its effectiveness. However, most researchers would agree that sports can be a protective factor towards youth well-being if accompanied by three other factors: competition (as opposed to sports only for fitness and leisure), *Sports Plus or Plus Sports* (meaning that there exists an educational agenda and activities besides the competition itself), and a trained staff with tools to teach students life skills through sports. These 3 factors are often not available in Israel and may also contribute to negative results.

The research is quantitative and based on data collected by the World Health Organization- Health Behavior in School-aged Children survey (WHO-HBSC). This survey takes place once every four years in various different WHO member countries using the exact same scientific methodological protocol. This work uses the National Survey on At-Risk Behavior Among Israeli Youth, which is a section of the WHO-HBSC.

The results achieved were negative, Israeli youth who participate in sports showed a higher propensity for involvement in at-risk behavior, and participating in sports did not show signs of improving school adjustment, social connections, or well-being. This however is actually in agreement with many researchers who have concluded that sports can indeed lead to negative behavior such as violence and cheating, and that in order for sports to promote positive youth development it must be accompanied by a life skills training program and a staff qualified to do so, a practice which is absent in most Israeli competitive sport frameworks, such as in Israel's interscholastic sports program.

Furthermore, the data collected shows that sports attracts youth that are in the most need of guidance and supervision and can definitely be used as an arena to capture their participation and attention unlike other arenas in which youth interact with adults such as school. This research also provides data that school adjustment, positive social connections, and feelings of well-being are indeed protective factors against at-risk

behavior. Therefore developing programs that aim to improve these factors may help decrease at-risk behavior, and sports can be an ideal platform in which to develop these types of programs since it attracts youth participation, especially participation of at-risk youth in need of adult intervention to change their negative behavior and help their positive development.

This study stresses the need for future research on sports programs, especially longitudinal studies that test students before, during, and after their participation in competitive sports to accurately be able to test its influence on youth development, as well as studies on sports teams and competitions that are accompanied by staff trained to teach students life skills through sports in order to verify the effectiveness of sports programs in decreasing at-risk behavior and promoting well-being.