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Shaping self through sport: the link between competitive sports and
development of self-concept among young athletes

Bachelor's thesis
FACULTY OF EDUCATION
Intercultural Teacher Education
26.4.2022

University of Oulu

Faculty of Education

Shaping self through sport: the link between competitive sports and development of self-concept among young athletes (Peppi Saarinen)

Bachelor's thesis, 34 pages

April 2022

The popularity of competitive sports is evident as approximately half of children in the Western worlds participate in some type of competitive sports. Being physically active is one of the key elements in maintaining overall human well-being due to its effects on both physical and mental health. The benefits of regular sport participation are especially important for children as their physical and mental development are in their early stages.

In this thesis, I will be focusing on the development of self-concept among children who participate in competitive sports. Competitive environments provide children with different experiences that can affect the self-concept of an individual in either positive or negative way. The responsibility of the adults is also discussed as their role in organizing youth sports is substantial.

Being a youth athlete requires constant balancing between sports, school and social life, which can become overwhelming at times. These different stressors have great impact on individual's mental development. By recognizing the effects that competitive sport participation has on children, we are able to understand and support their journey as a youth athlete.

Keywords: competitive sports, children, youth sports, mental development, self-concept

Kilpaurheilun suosio lasten keskuudessa on selkeää, noin puolet länsimaiden lapsista harrastaa jonkinlaista kilpaurheilua. Fyysinen aktiivisuus on yksi avaintekijöistä ihmisen yleisen hyvinvoinnin ylläpitämisessä, sillä se vaikuttaa sekä fyysiseen että psyykkiseen terveyteen. Säännöllisen urheilun vaikutukset ovat erityisen tärkeitä lapsille heidän fyysisen ja henkisen kehityksen ollessa vasta alkuvaiheessa.

Tässä tutkimuksessa keskityn kilpaurheilua harrastavien lasten minäkäsityksen kehittymiseen. Kilpailullinen ympäristö tarjoaa lapsille erilaisia kokemuksia, jotka voivat vaikuttaa yksilön itsekäsitykseen joko positiivisella tai negatiivisella tavalla. Myös aikuisten vastuu otetaan huomioon, sillä heidän roolinsa lapsiurheilun mahdollistajina on merkittävä.

Nuorena urheilijan arki vaatii jatkuvaa tasapainoilua urheilun, koulun ja sosiaalisen elämän välillä, mikä voi joskus nuoresta tuntua ylivoimaiselta. Erilaisilla stressitekijöillä on suuri vaikutus yksilön psyykkiseen kehitykseen. Tunnistamalla kilpaurheilun mahdolliset vaikutukset lapsiin, pystymme ymmärtämään ja tukemaan heidän matkaansa urheilijana.

Avainsanat: kilpaurheilu, lapset, lapsiurheilu, psyykinen kehitys, minäkäsitys

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1. Introduction

Balanced nutrition, sufficient amount of sleep and physical activity are the corner stones of sustaining a healthy lifestyle. According to the Publications of the Ministry of Education and Culture (2021) children between the ages of 7-11 should have some sort of physical activity for 60 minutes each day, taken into account the individual's age and needs. Even though physical activity can be maintained through different means, many children decide to increase their activity levels by joining organized sports, as sports offer a way to connect with peers and enjoyable experiences (Martin, 2014).

The popularity of organized sports among children in Western worlds is high, approximately 50% of the children participate in some type of organized sport (Palomäki et al., 2018). Finland is no exception in this, in fact, the percentage is even higher as 60% of the Finnish children between the ages of 9 and 15 belong into a sport club (Palomäki et al., 2018). It is also worth mentioning that only 13% of the Finnish children have never participated in organized sports (Palomäki et al., 2018).

Today's Western society places great emphasis on competition and increased levels of performance, excellence and competitiveness are seen as desirable traits, not only in sports but life in general (Mönkkönen, 2019). These values in society also reflect to the leisure activities of the children. Organized sports often include the aspect of competition (Watson et al., 2019), so children are exposed to competition from an early age. Specializing in one sport starts around between the ages 11 and 12 (Keegan et al., 2010). At this age, children are presented with three choices: either they start to pursue competitive environments, stay at the recreational level or to stop playing altogether (Keegan et al., 2010). This type of early specializing can be seen in the sports withdrawal numbers, the peak age of withdrawal being only 13 years old (Martin, 2014).

Specializing in one sport and playing competitively from a young age are very familiar to me. I started to play football just for fun when I was seven but after couple of years its nature shifted towards more competitive. Now, 17 years have passed, and I often wonder who I would be as a person had I not started playing competitively. My own personal experiences combined with my studies in the field of education made me question how much this constant exposure to

competitive environments can affect the development of self-concept of a child. As a becoming educator I feel that it is important to know how different backgrounds can affect the individuals self-concept and therefore the behaviour of an individual.

The main research questions in this thesis is how competitive sports may affect the self-concept of a child. At first, I will define the concepts that are relevant to the study. Then, I will discuss the possible positive and negative effects that competitive sport participation can have on child's self-concept development. The role of adults is also taken into consideration as they play a significant role in organizing youth sports. Lastly, I will discuss and draw conclusions regarding the findings of the study.

2. Defining the differences between physical activity and competitive sports

Words physical activity and competitive sports should not be treated as synonyms. Both physical activity and competitive sports have their own distinguished traits that sets them apart from each other. In this chapter, I will be explaining the differences between these two, and at the end of the chapter, I will justify my reasoning for why I chose to have my focus point on competitive sports in my thesis.

2.1 Physical activity

“Physical activity refers to all movement including during leisure time, for transport to get to and from places, or as part of a person’s work” (WHO, 2020, 1). Participating in physical can be viewed as easily accessible for everyone since it “can be done at any level of skill and for enjoyment by everybody” (WHO, 2020, 1). Physical activity plays a significant role in human well-being, it not only boots physical health but also mental health (Lehtosaari, 2012).

Physical activity, sometimes referred to as free play, is often organized by the participants themselves (Watson. et al., 2019; Wiium & Säfvenbom, 2019). Characteristics of free play are the absence of strict rules, performance goals and designated leaders (Wiium & Säfvenbom, 2019). This serves an ideal platform to learn and practice different social skills, such as group working skills and problem-solving skills, as well as independence and self-regulation skills (Wiium & Säfvenbom, 2019).

2.2 Competitive sports

Competitive sports is a subcategory of physical activity (Lehtosaari, 2012; Watson. et al., 2019). Competitive sports are carefully structured and there are set of rules that needs to be followed (Friedman, 2013; Watson. et al., 2019). Rather than letting the participants to coordinate the activity by themselves, in competitive sports, the events are organized by adults (Friedman,

2013; Watson. et al., 2019). In order to participate, specific skills and techniques are required (Lehtosaari, 2012).

Hard work and dedication are needed if a person wants so to succeed in competitive sports (Mönkkönen, 2019). Competitive sports are highly goal-orientated as the participants are trying to reach a certain goal or outcome (Lehtosaari, 2012). People who are participating in competitive sports are also expected to constantly develop their skill set, whether by perfecting their existing skills or learning something new that will help them in their pursuit towards their ultimate goal (Mönkkönen, 2019).

The essence of competitive sports is as the name entails competing (Mönkkönen, 2019). According to Raitis (2014), in order to have a competition, at least two people are required to participate. At the end of each competition, the participants are ranked according to their performance. Someone wins and someone loses: whether there is one winner and one loser or one winner and multiple losers (Duncan & Kern, 2020). Children who participate in competitive sports are not discouraged by the competitiveness, in fact, most children highlight competition as the “key source of their enjoyment” (Walters et al., 2012, 242).

The reason I chose competitive sports over physical activity in this thesis is the aspect of competition. Children who participate in competitive sports are exposed to competition on regular basis. The world of competing is cruel, as the participants are constantly being compared to each other. It is also extremely disheartening to see that even if you have done your absolute best, you might not still reach the desired outcome. These are complicated issues that young athletes have to face almost every single day. Therefore, I am interested to research how these issues might affect the young athletes development of self-concept.

3. Self-concept

Self-concept or sometimes referred to as just self, is a multi-faceted concept (Findlay & Bowker, 2007). Rudd et al. (2017, 93) use the word “blanket term” to describe self-concept, stating that self-concept “refers to how an individual measures their own competence, attributes, and characteristics compared to others”. Individual’s self-concept is shaped through experiences that individual encounters throughout their life (İsmail & Tekke, 2015), and according to Findlay and Bowker (2007, 30) it “becomes increasingly differentiated with age”.

3.1 Development of self-concept

The development of one’s self-concept starts already at preschool age (Marshall, 1989). At this age children are able to describe themselves through various categories, however, these descriptions are susceptible to change (Marshall, 1989). Marshall (1989) gives the example of how a child can identify himself as a boy, but he also states, that he is going to be a mother when he grows up.

The development of self-concept continues during the primary school years. During these years, children “begin to acquire more mature thinking skills and extend these abilities to their thinking about self (Marshall, 1989, 3). Children become more aware of themselves and their abilities, and by the age of 7 to 8 they start to compare themselves to their peers (Marshall, 1989). By the age of 9, children describe their abilities by stating what activities they are able to perform (Marshall, 1989). These descriptions of one’s abilities are often presented along with comparisons to the abilities of peers, for example, by stating that “I can ride bike better than my little brother” (Marshall, 1989, 3). Marshall (1989, 3) adds that at this age, “children are able to think inductively”, meaning that they are able to observe their surroundings and pick up unspoken cues. The example that Marshall (1989, 3) gives about this inductive reasoning is that “I’m not very smart, because I’m in the low group in reading and math”.

At primary school age, children become more worried about how others are perceiving them (Marshall, 1989). Especially the perceptions of significant adults are highly important (Marshall, 1989). As the years go on, the thought of “how others see me” becomes increasingly important in the process of shaping one’s self-concept (Marshall, 1989).

3.2 Aspects of self-concept

In this thesis, I will be using the self-concept theory defined by Carl Rogers. Carl Rogers (1902-1987) was a humanistic psychologist, who pioneered humanistic psychotherapy. Rogers was also one of the first therapists to focus on ‘a person-centered’ approach” (İsmaail & Tekke, 2015, 28). According to Rogers, the self-concept is constructed of three elements: real-self, ideal-self and self-worth (İsmaail & Tekke, 2015).

3.2.1 Real-self

Real-self or self-image is the self that feels the most true to us (İsmaail & Tekke, 2015). İsmaail and Tekke (2015, 30) describe the concept real-self further by stating that “it may not be perfect, but it’s the part of us that feels most real”. Real-self includes all of our distinctive features and characteristics (Mönkkönen, 2019), which are reflected into our thoughts and feelings (İsmaail & Tekke, 2015). All of this has an effect on how an individual views the world (İsmaail & Tekke, 2015).

Real-self is also connected to our personality (İsmaail & Tekke, 2015). Allen et al. (2015, 375) define personality as “characteristic thought and behaviour patterns that distinguish a person from other individuals “. Personality is formed partially through genetics, but the surrounding environment and experiences that one comes across throughout life also shape personality (Mönkkönen, 2019). Some aspects of personality remain unchanged throughout person’s life, but some are “subject to change” (Allen et al., 2015, 375).

3.2.2 Ideal-self

Ideal-self embodies the idea of the best possible version of ourselves (İsmail & Tekke, 2015). Surrounding environment has significant influence on one's ideal-self, since it can be seen as a "culmination of all the things that we should be and what others think we should be (İsmail & Tekke, 2015, 31). Ideal-self is the force that drives us to achieve our goals and ambitions (İsmail & Tekke, 2015).

One part of ideal-self is identity. Zacarés and Iborra (2015, 432) explain that "identity is located at the major crossroads of individual and social process". Identity is constructed of individual's own sense of uniqueness and sense of belonging to a community or a certain social group (Mönkkönen, 2019; Zacarés & Iborra, 2015). At short, identity answers the question "who am I?" (Mönkkönen, 2019).

3.2.3 Self-worth

Self-worth, or sometimes referred to as self-esteem, holds individuals ideas concerning their own worth (İsmail & Tekke, 2015). It is developed through feelings of capability, the idea of being able to get through different tasks (Marshall, 1989). Environment has also an impact on individual's self-worth, since according to (Marshall (1989, 1) self-worth "may be affected by possessing culturally valued traits". The perceptions of others also affects individual's self-worth (Marshall, 1989). As humans are social animals, we want others to consider us to be important and worthy (Marshall, 1989).

Individual's self-worth depends on the relationship between expectations and the outcome (Raitis, 2014). Low self-worth is often the result of too high expectation or not achieving the desired outcome (Raitis, 2014). The current trend in modern society is that the expectations are set too high, or people are too scared to set any expectations at all due the fear of failure (Raitis, 2014). Since there are no expectations or goals to be reached, people are lacking the sense of achievement, which result in poor self-worth (Raitis, 2014). This is not ideal situation, since a person with high self-worth is able to cope with failures and disappointments in life (İsmail & Tekke, 2015; Raitis, 2014).

3.2.4 Congruence

Real-self, ideal-self and self-worth should not be thought as separate parts of the self-concept, in fact, these aspects are intertwined (İsmail & Tekke, 2015). This is explained by İsmail and Tekke (2015, 32) as “the closer the person’s self image and self-ideal are each other, the more congruent or consistent and the higher person’s sense of self-worth”. Vice versa, when individual’s real-self and ideal-self are significantly different from each other, sense of self-worth is lower (İsmail & Tekke, 2015). Discrepancy between real-self and ideal-self is called incongruence (İsmail & Tekke, 2015). Incongruence can for example cause feelings of anxiety (İsmail & Tekke, 2015).

4. Effects of competitive sport on self-concept development

In this chapter I will be discussing the effects of competitive sport on an individual's self-concept. I will categorize the effects as either positive or negative and discuss how these effects are visible in the context of self-concept. Whether these effects are truly positive or negative is up to debate, however, I will be doing the judgement based on the values that are visible in the Western society.

4.1 Positive effects

The connection between competitive sport participation and mental well-being has been widely recognized (Pluhar et al., 2019). According to Pluhar et al. (2019, 490) participating in competitive sports is shown to “correlate more positively with adolescent mental health than other forms of physical activity”. Competitive sport participation plays an important role in children's development altogether and it provides an environment for different learning experiences (Ronkainen et al., 2021). The extent of the importance of sports in a child's life is evident, as according to Ronkainen et al. (2021, 214) “sport has an educational dimension and plays a social, cultural and recreational role”

4.1.1 Boost in self-concept

Competitive sport participation is known to have positive effects on all the aspects of self-concept. Perhaps the most notably, participating in competitive sport contributes to development of positive self-esteem (Choi et al., 2014; Dyck, 2013; Findlay & Bowker, 2007; Moejis, 2018; Pluhar et al., 2019; Sulén, 2008; Watson. et al., 2019). By participating in competitive sports, children are able to experience feelings of achievement, which are known to increase the sense of self-worth (Moejis, 2018). Competitive sports also help children in “obtaining sense of self, and realization of potential” (Choi et al., 2014, 200). According to a study conducted by Findlay and Bowker (2007), these effects are known to be especially beneficial on shy children self-esteem.

In addition to these positive effects on self-worth, competitive sports participation is linked to increased self-image (Lehtosaari, 2012). Competitive sports are also said to build character, increase courage and boost confidence (Choi et al., 2014; Sulén, 2008). Raitis (2014) lists enhanced self-control, focus and calmness as positive effects of competitive sport participation. Participating in competitive sports can aid children in the process of building their identities (Salasuo & Kangaspunta, 2011). At the age of 11-15, or some at even younger age, adolescents start to identify themselves as athletes (Salasuo & Kangaspunta, 2011). Social groups, such as sport teams, are valuable elements to the process of building one's identity (Bruner et al., 2018).

In terms of personality, some personality traits are found to be common among athletes. For example, athletes are prone to perseverance, patience and resilience (Ahto & Kaski, 2021; Mönkkönen, 2019). Other common personality traits include discipline, cooperation, sense of fair play and sportsmanship (Allen et al., 2015).

4.1.2 Improvements in mental health

Self-concept and mental health are closely connected to each other (Zhu et al., 2016). In fact, self-concept has direct impact on mental health (Zhu et al., 2016). According to Zhu et al. (2016), a well-established self-concept contributes to stabler mental health.

Children who participate in competitive sports are also showing fewer depressive symptoms (Petito et al., 2016; Pluhar et al., 2019) and mental health issues than children who have stopped participating in competitive sports or children who do not take part in competitive sports (Pluhar et al., 2019). Competitive sport participation can also diminish the existence of internalizing problems (Moejis, 2018). Several aspects of competitive sports are beneficial in the terms of internalizing problems, since “membership in a sports club, moderate or high frequency of sports participation, performing team sports, performing outdoor sports, performing contact sports and involvement in competition were longitudinally associated with fewer internalizing problems” (Moejis, 2018, 1). The social aspect of competitive sport is also vital in maintaining mental health, as the children who participate in competitive sports are “associated with lower scores on loneliness” (Findlay & Bowker, 2007, 29).

When a child is doing well in their sport, they are experiencing the sense of accomplishment (Mönkkönen, 2019; Pluhar et al., 2019). In the best-case scenario, when the child is enjoying the sport they are participating in, sports can act as a distraction from all the other bad things that are happening in life (Mönkkönen, 2019). In result, the children who participate in competitive sports are likely to have better overall mood (Mönkkönen, 2019).

4.1.3 Development of future life skills

In addition to being beneficial in the development of self-concept and maintaining mental health, competitive sports are an effective way to learn valuable life skills. All and all, participating in competitive sports contribute to healthier lifestyle (Ahto & Kaski, 2021). In addition to learning physical skills and maintaining mental health, competitive sports offer an environment to enhance “emotional and spiritual strength” (Choi et al., 2014, 195). As children are exposed to different emotional scenarios in competitive environments, they are able to perfect their self-regulation skills, such as regulating their emotions (Ahto & Kaski, 2021). Choi et al. (2014, 195) explain, that through sports, children are able to develop “strategies to deal with winning and losing, as well as success and failure”.

Athletes, especially those who participate in team sports, are known to possess improved social abilities (Ahto & Kaski, 2021; Lehtosaari, 2012; Pluhar et al., 2019). These social skills include for example ability to manage, take in account different perspectives and working towards common goals (Choi et al., 2014). Due to these increased social abilities young athletes often have a higher social status (Martin, 2014). Positive relations with peers is related to higher sense of self-worth (Martin, 2014). Athletes are also showing “psychological adjustment and lower rates of antisocial behavior” (Wiiium & Säfvenbom, 2019, 3).

These attributes are viewed desirable outside of sports as well (Ahto & Kaski, 2021; Raitis, 2014). For example, in school settings, children who participate in competitive sports have better school performance and “educational aspirations” than children who are not involved in sports (Findlay & Bowker, 2007, 29). According to Choi et al. (2014, 195), even though competitive sport environments are stressful, they are “no more anxiety-evoking than other experiences such as test taking in classroom”. In fact, children who are exposed to competitive settings

on regular basis are known to develop “ability to function adequately in stressful situations” (Choi et al., 2014, 195).

4.2 Negative effects

Competitive sport participation is not always beneficial for child’s development. This is not a new phenomenon, since “as early as 1975, concerns were expressed about the damage caused by win-at-all-costs behaviours exhibited by teachers, parents and coaches” (Walters, 2012, 242). In fact, competitive sports involves several risks and factors that negatively impact child’s mental well-being (Ahto & Kaski, 2021). Raitis (2014) goes to as far as stating that the uplifting effect of competition on children’s development is virtually zero. Choi et al. (2014, 196) describe competitive environments as counter-productive: “Rather than motivating children to play, improve their skills, and experience intrinsic rewards from the activity itself, competition imposes an external form of control that simply shifts attention to extrinsic factors”. It is also important to note that some of the required and desired attributes that are present or formed in competitive settings might not be viewed as positive in other settings or situations (Ahto & Kaski, 2021).

4.2.1 Worse self-concept

Participating in competitive sports from an early age can result in poorly developed self-concept (Choi et al., 2014). The effects of poorly developed self-concept may even result in “some athletes feeling worse about themselves than non-athletes” (Findlay & Bowker, 2007, 30). These feelings are often the result of lowered self-esteem (Findlay & Bowker, 2007). In competitive sports, the lowered self-esteem can be for example due to not getting the same amount of time on the field as other members of the team (Lehtosaari, 2012). This may cause a vicious cycle, in which athletes lowered self-esteem and self-confidence results in poor performance, which again affects the athletes self-concept (Choi et al., 2014). Choi et al. (2014, 196) explain this further by stating that “competition does not always produce superior performance but instead can actually hurt performances. In today’s sports world, the intense anxiety, pressure, and

frustration produced by competition can often choke children's performances". In other words, participating in competitive sports can be seen as "ego deflating" (Choi et al., 2014, 197).

Even though competitive sports can serve as a good foundation to one's identity development, in some cases, the effects might be completely opposite. If a child bases their whole identity on the sport they are playing, this can result in the "risk of prematurely narrowing their identity" (Choi et al., 2014, 197). According to a study conducted Mönkkönen (2019), many athletes do not know who they would be without sports. Basing your whole identity on sports is not necessarily a good thing, since every athlete's career is bound to end up some point (Mönkkönen, 2019). When the career ends, this can bring up the questions of who am I or what am I supposed to do now (Mönkkönen, 2019).

As with positive personality traits, some negative personality traits are also common among athletes. Since athletes are striving for perfection, in some cases, this perfectionism can be turned out to be more harmful than good (Ahto & Kaski, 2021). Since athletes are always trying to perform better and do everything as well as possible, it may result in excessive training and overload (Ahto & Kaski, 2021). Also, as athletes are doing everything in their power in order to win, this desire to win may come out as aggression and hostility (Choi et al., 2014; Raitis, 2014). Furthermore, this can cause the athletes to actively cheat, dismiss good sportsmanship and even in some cases deliberately injure the opponent players (Choi et al., 2014). Even though participating in competitive sports more often than not include working with other people, athletes are prone to selfishness and self-centeredness (Lehtosaari, 2012).

4.2.2 Too many losers for each winner

In order to have competition, at least two people are required to participate, as competing against oneself or time is not considered to be competition (Raitis, 2014). In its most basic form, competitive settings include individuals or groups competing against each other, and in the end, only one prize is given out to the person or group whose performance is the best (Duncan & Kern, 2020). These prizes can range from physical ones, such as medals and trophies, to abstract ones, such as titles and bragging rights (Duncan & Kern, 2020). Therefore, it can be said that "the success of one participant or team causes the failure of another" (Choi et al., 2014, 197).

There has been discussion whether or not children should be exposed to competitive environments from a young age, since children do not view winning as an important factor until the age of 10-11 (Choi et al., 2014). Exposing children too early to competitive environments may increase the risk of “neglecting other developmental tasks (Choi et al., 2014, 197). Children’s individualism should be taken into consideration, as according to Duncan and Kern (2020, 38) “physical development (in growth and maturation), cognitive development (knowledge acquisition and skill development strategies), and social emotional development (self-concept and self-determination) are occurring simultaneously, albeit at different rates”. Children mature at different rates and some are cognitively, physically and emotionally ready for competition at earlier age than others (Duncan & Kern, 2020). If competing and winning are stressed too much during the early years, children might lose their interest in doing sports altogether since it is no longer fun or enjoyable (Choi et al., 2014).

If the focus shifts too early from children’s well-being to winning and losing, the children are faced with immense amount of pressure and expectations (Sulén, 2008). The feelings of failure or losing can be extremely damaging to child’s self-esteem (Choi et al., 2014). If a child is constantly having these negative feelings, it can result in fear and stress of failure (Choi et al., 2014; Raitis, 2014). The child fears that if they lose, they do not only let themselves down but someone else also, whether it being the coach or other members of the team (Choi et al., 2014).

4.2.3 Declining mental health

If a child does not experience the feelings of achievement in their chosen sport, it can have a toll on their mental health (Lehtosaari, 2012). Or at some point, the pressure to compete and win might get too overwhelming for the child, which results in poor mental health (Ahto & Kaski, 2021). Prolonged pressure towards competing and winning can result in fear of competing (Ahto & Kaski, 2021) or high “competition-related stress” (Petito et al., 2016, 2). Anxiety towards competing not only affects the mental health of the child but it can also have effects on the physical health, since competing anxiety is also linked to “injury frequency and injury severity” (Ledochowski et al., 2012, 1).

According to *Petito et al. (2016, 2)*, “a significant body of research has found evidence of mental health problems associated with sport participation as a result of sport-related significant stressors”. These mental health problems include for example psychological stress disorders and feelings of mental exhaustion (*Choi et al., 2014*). Feelings of anxiety and depression are also common (*Ahto & Kaski, 2021; Petito et al., 2016*). In the worst-case scenario, these constant stressors can trigger an eating disorder or bipolar disorder (*Ahto & Kaski, 2021; Petito et al., 2016*). At an older age, when the expectations are getting higher and higher, young athletes can resort to substance abuse (*Choi et al., 2014; Petito et al., 2016*).

4.2.4 Athlete burnout

If the pressure to compete and training workload gets too much for the child to manage, they can start to suffer from a condition called athlete burnout, also referred to as sport burnout (*Sorkkila et al., 2016*). Athlete burnout is “a multidimensional construct that encompasses emotional and physical exhaustion” (*Sorkkila et al., 2016, 59*). When negative feelings start to pile up and the athlete is unable to affective coping mechanisms, it can result in athlete burnout (*Gustafsson et al., 2015*). Athlete burnout is often related to high levels of perfectionism, which typically is “a combination of exceedingly high standards and a preoccupation with extreme self-critical evaluation” (*Gustafsson et al., 2015, 1256*). Fear of making mistakes is also often related to high levels of perfectionism (*Gustafsson, 2015*).

Athlete burnout is often the result of chronic stress, which is usually caused by the child feeling like they are not able to meet the demands that are expected from them (*Sorkkila, 2016*). Children can set these unattainable expectations themselves, but in some cases, the pressure is coming from the parents (*Sorkkila, 2016*). Athlete burnout can also be caused by the child having a hard time balancing both adolescent life and athlete life at the same time (*Gustafsson et al., 2015*). Combining schoolwork and regular competitions is not easy, and the pressure to excel in both can cause the child to experience symptoms of burnout (*Gustafsson et al., 2015*).

Common symptoms of athlete burnout include sport devaluation and reduced sense of accomplishment (*Gustafsson et al., 2015; Sorkkila et al., 2016*). Feelings of inadequacy are also common (*Sorkkila, 2016*). If athlete burnout is not recognized and the measures to ease the pressure are not utilized, motivation towards the sport decreases, and eventually, the athlete drops out

from the sport altogether (Sorkkila, 2016). Especially with children, dropping out early from the sport is connected to mental unwellness (Ahto & Kaski, 2021).

5. The effects of adults on self-concept development

Since this research is focused on children, it is relevant to discuss the role of the adults as well. In this thesis, the term adults refers to parents and coaches. Since children interact with these adults on a daily basis, it is fair to say that both parents and coaches play a significant role in young athlete's life (Ledochowski et al., 2012; Mossman et al., 2021; Walters et al., 2012; Weiss & Fretwell, 2013). Adults have notable influence, for example, in child's attitudes and enjoyment towards sports as well as child's behaviour in the sport (Walters et al., 2012). Parents and coaches are also aiding the child in building the foundation for a healthier lifestyle, as "the childhood years are highlighted as a crucial time when ongoing participation in physical activity can be nurtured and maintained" (Walters et al., 2012, 241)

The intensity of the involvement of the adults in youth sports is hard to balance, since according to Choi et al. (2014) adults are either too much or too little involved. There are also sometimes conflicts between coaches and parents regarding the expectations that both of these group have towards each other (Dyck, 2013; Weiss & Fretwell, 2013). Weiss and Fretwell (2013, 286) explain this by stating that "parents' expectations and behaviors are among notable concerns expressed by youth coaches, and coaches' behaviors are often seen as problematic by parents".

Children are aware of the fact that they are constantly being observed by their parents and coaches: "On the pitch during a game, there is nowhere to hide" (Walters et al., 2012, 252). Therefore, children figure out the best ways to please the adults (Walters et al., 2012). Mistakes and losing leads to shouting, so the best way to stop the adults from shouting is to perform well (Walters et al., 2012). Children are forced to conform to the ideals of the adults, which can cause a lot of stress to the children (Walters et al., 2012).

The feedback that child receives from the adults have great impact on child's self-concept development (Palmer, 2009). According to Palmer (2009, 5), children who are surrounded with emotionally supportive adults "are more likely to construct a working model of the self as someone competent, likeable, and worthy of support", which leads to child having "positive self-understanding". And vice versa, when adults are not being emotionally supportive towards the child, it affects their self-concept development in a negative way (Palmer, 2009).

5.1 Coaches

There are a lot of expectations concerning the role of the coach in youth sport (Dyck, 2013). In addition to being responsible for teaching the necessary skills and techniques of the sport to the players, coaches are supposed to “mould teamwork, contribute to the character formation of young players, and judiciously blend a joy of participation in sport with an appreciation of what it takes to win” (Dyck, 2013, 85). Even though coaches are interacting with multiple children at the time, coaches should be able to take in consideration the unique needs and motives that each individual has (Martin, 2014). When these needs are met, positive experience are formed, and the children are more likely to continue their participation in the sport (Martin, 2014).

5.1.1 Provider of positive experiences

According to Weiss and Fretwell (2013, 287) “the knowledge base on effective coaching behaviors in youth sport has also multiplied rapidly in the last decade”. One of the most important tasks for the coach is to upkeep an environment, in which the children are able to have positive experiences (Mossman et al., 2021). When the coach utilizes so called “positive approach”, which refers to using praises and encouragement to motivate the children, it increases children’s enjoyment, motivation and self-esteem (Weiss & Fretwell, 2013, 287).

Mossman et al (2012) describe different types of climates that are possible in youth sports. One of the is called “coach-related mastery-climate”, which is associated with positive outcomes in youth sports (Mossman et al., 2021, 2476). In this type of environment, the coach is “placing values on hard work, encouraging their athletes to work together and do their best, and winning not being as important as developing” (Mossman et al., 2021, 2476). The benefits of coach-related mastery-climate include for example prosocial behaviour, enjoyment, increased motivation and commitment (Mossman et al., 2021).

In addition to being the creators of positive sports environment, coaches also are a major contributor of social support to the children (Weiss & Fretwell, 2013). Social support provided by the coach is linked to lower levels of anxiety and burnout symptoms (Weiss & Fretwell, 2013).

The quality of the relationship between the coach and the young athlete plays a significant role, as positive relationship is related to “reduced evaluation apprehension and sport anxiety” (Ledochowski et al., 2012, 1). The benefits of a positive coach-athlete relationship can even expand to the life beyond the sport (Ahto & Kaski, 2021). In some cases, coach can fill the need for a reliable adult in child’s life if they do not have one in their immediate circle (Ahto & Kaski, 2021).

5.1.2 Treating children unfairly

Coaches’ actions can also have harmful effects on children. For example, it is not that uncommon that ability groups are formed based on the children’s abilities (Salasuo & Kangaspunta, 2011). Coaches may also knowingly or unknowingly treat children in different ways, for example by singling out more talented children (Dyck, 2013). One of the children interviewed by Dyck (2013, 101) told that “while she was regularly singled out and praised for being a “hard worker” by her coach, other kids could go weeks without getting any recognition”. Children are able to recognize unfairness in these situations (Dyck, 2013). Coaches might also use the players in a way that guarantees the best results, disregarding the wishes of the players (Walters et al., 2012). This could mean for example that the coach would make the children play the positions that they did not necessarily want to play in (Walters et al., 2012).

Some coaches are also prone to punishing or shouting at children if their performance did not meet the expectations set by the coach (Walters et al., 2012). Even though some children report benefitting from the shouting, as being shouted at makes them perform better, majority of the children agree that being yelled at makes them feel bad about themselves (Walters et al., 2012). Using punishment, treating children unequally and encouraging rivalry between teammates are characteristics of “coach-related ego-climate” (Mossman et al., 2021, 2476). When this type of environment is enforced, it can lead to lowered team spirit, antisocial behaviour and anxiety (Mossman et al., 2021). All of this can cause the child to have lower enjoyment and motivation towards sport (Mossman et al., 2021).

5.2 Parents

Parents are involved in children's sport more than ever (Salasuo, 2011) and alongside the coaches, parents have a significant role "in shaping the experiences of junior athletes" (Gustafsson et al., 2015, 1257). Parents are usually responsible for child's initial sport participation as they are the ones who introduces and signs up the child to a specific sport (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2013). This exposure to a sport can happen for example through parents own interests, different events or media (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2013).

Parental involvement in sports can take several different forms (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2013). Some of the tasks that fall on the shoulders of the parents include transporting the child between home and practices and purchasing equipment and financing other possible costs (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2013; Salasuo & Kangaspunta, 2011). Above all, the parents should serve as an emotional support and source of encouragement (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2013). Some parents might at first struggle with these expectations, especially if they are just learning how much effort is put into building an athletic career (Knight et al., 2017). Parental involvement in youth sports might seem daunting at first, but "sport parenting is not simply a matter of 'good' versus 'bad' or 'do's' versus 'don't's' but an intricate social experience, influenced by a whole host of factors and variables (Knight et al., 2017, 96).

5.2.1 Personal cheerleaders

Alongside with coaches, parents also have an important role in the process of making the sport environment as pleasant as possible for all the participants (Mossman et al., 2021). Mossman et al. (2021, 2476) describe an environment called "parent-created mastery-climate", which refers to "young people identifying their parents as being satisfied with their work ethic, learning of new skills, and placing value upon learning such skills". This type of supportive climate exerted by parents is linked to increased motivation, self-worth and competence (Mossman et al., 2021). Supportive and encouraging climate endorsed by the parents is also linked to children's positive psychosocial development (Knight et al., 2017).

Active parental involvement and emotional support are linked to overall enjoyment in the sport with children (Ledochowski et al., 2012; Weiss & Fretwell, 2013). These factors can also lessen the symptoms of athlete burnout (Gustafsson et al., 2015). Parental involvement in youth sports

can also send out a message to the child that their participation in sports is seen as important and something that should be invested in (Salasuo & Kangaspunta, 2011).

5.2.2 Source of stress

Even though parents involvement in youth sports is important, sometimes it can cause unnecessary stress (Salasuo & Kangaspunta, 2011). Negative parental involvement is associated with children portraying symptoms of stress, worse mood and high levels of anxiety towards competing (Ledochowski et al., 2012). Negative involvement by the parent can be for example overstepping boundaries and having to high expectations (Knight et al., 2017).

Usually at first the parents only concerns related to the sports are child's enjoyment towards the sport and whether they are having fun or not (Knight et al., 2017). However, if the sport is getting more competitive, parents' concerns shift to external factors, such as how they and their child is viewed by others (Knight et al., 2017). This can cause stress to the child if the expectations set by the child and the parent do not meet (Salasuo & Kangaspunta, 2011). If the goals and standards of the parent and the child are constantly clashing, it can contribute to the child having symptoms of athlete burnout (Salasuo & Kangaspunta, 2011; Sorkkila et al., 2016).

According to Mossman et al (2021, 2476), the term "parent-created ego-climate" is used to describe climate which includes "young people being punished for poor performance or making mistakes, over- involvement, and exerting pressure". When children are exposed to this kind of environment, it can result in anxiety, selfishness, lowered self-worth and "perfectionistic cognitions" (Mossman et al., 2021, 2476). Constant pressure exerted by the parent can influence the psychosocial development of the child (Knight et al., 2017). These factors can cause the child to burnout and dropout of the sport altogether (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2013).

5.3 Parent-coach-dual role

In some cases, one adult has to balance the responsibilities of the coach and being a parent at the same time (Weiss & Fretwell, 2013). This is quite common phenomenon in youth sports, since most of the coaches are a parent to either one or multiple children in the team (Weiss &

Fretwell, 2013). The occurrence of parent-coach-dual role is high, as according to Weiss and Fretwell (2013, 287) “84% of current and 81% of the former coaches in their sample coached their children”. In addition to these numbers, roughly 90% of the “volunteer coaches” also fulfill the parent-children-dual role (Weiss & Fretwell, 2013, 287).

Parent-coach dual role can have both positive and negative impact on child’s development. When the parent-coach is showing positive responses, such as praising, encouragement and social support, it has positive effects on child’s perceived competence (Weiss & Fretwell, 2013). This increases child’s motivation towards the sport and therefore continued participation (Weiss & Fretwell, 2013). Children also see the additional time spend with their parent as a good way of bonding and strengthening the relationship with the parent (Weiss & Fretwell, 2013).

However, for some children, parent-coach dual role can cause stress (Weiss & Fretwell, 2013). Some of the negative phenomena associated with parent-coach-dual role are “incidences of pressure, high expectations, conflict, criticism, lack of empathy, negative feelings, rebellious behavior and preferential treatment” (Weiss & Fretwell, 2013, 300). These can lead to the child having feelings of anxiety, lowered perceived competence and negative feelings towards sports (Weiss & Fretwell, 2013).

Since the parent has a closer relationship with their own child, the parent-coach might shout more and be more harsh on their child than on other team members (Weiss & Fretwell, 2013). This can be due to high expectations that the parents have towards their child (Dyck, 2013; Weiss & Fretwell, 2013). On the other hand, in some cases the parent-coach might favor their child over other players, causing unnecessary tension between the members of the team (Dyck, 2013; Weiss & Fretwell, 2013). Sometimes negative comments are not left in the field, as the parent-coach continues criticizing the child for example during the car ride home making the child feel bad about themselves (Weiss & Fretwell, 2013). Due to these possible negative outcomes that the parent-coach-dual role, children often prefer having the roles of parent and coach separated (Weiss & Fretwell, 2013). According to Weiss and Fretwell (2013, 287), young athletes “desired that parents be sources of social support and leave skill and strategy instruction to the coach’s domain”.

6. Discussion

This study reveals that competitive sport participation has both positive and negative impacts on child's self-concept development. Sometimes the effects can be somewhat contradicting, as at the same time, competitive sports is known to strengthen and weaken the development of self-concept. Therefore, it can be hard to determine whether participating in competitive is beneficial or unbeneficial for child's self-concept development. The feelings towards competitive youth sports are mixed, since 36% of adults acknowledge the positive impact that competitive sports have on child's development, however, at the same time, 35% see issues in overly competitive environment (Raitis, 2014). Whether it is deemed good or bad, competitive sports serves an environment, where children are able to try and experience different things. These experiences can affect child's self-concept either positively or negatively (Lehtosaari, 2012). According to Choi et al. (2014, 191) "sports competition can be either positive or negative in terms of development, depending on how experiences are perceived by children and how competitions is designed". Since children are individuals, they perceive same experiences in different ways. The characteristics of an individual, such as gender, have an impact on the development of self-concept (Findlay & Bowker, 2007).

Based on this research, the effects of competitive sport concerning the development of self-concept are inconsistent. Sometimes the effects can be somewhat contradicting, as at the same time, competitive sports is known to strengthen and weaken the development of self-concept. For example, competitive sport participation is known to both increase and alleviate depressive symptoms. Competitive sport can also cause either prosocial or antisocial behaviour among participants and bring out both desired and undesired personality traits in young athletes. This again shows how much of an impact individual characteristics have on the outcome of the competitive sport participation. However, it is unreasonable to assume that every characteristic that the child possesses is determined by their participation in competitive sports. For example, it is hard to distinguish whether specific personality traits are formed because the child plays sports, or if the child got interested in sports because they already possess these personality traits (Lehtosaari, 2012).

When a child participates in competitive sports, they quickly adapt the identity of an athlete. However, it is important, that child's identity is not solely based on being an athlete (Ahto & Kaski, 2021). For some, it can be easy to lose yourself in the world of sports and define your whole existence through being an athlete. Child should identify as an athlete, but at the same time, they are for example a pupil, a friend or a sibling (Ahto & Kaski, 2021). Children should feel that they are viewed as valuable regardless of the outcome of their sports performance (Salasuo & Kangaspunta, 2011). When the child has aspirations in different areas of life and their perception of themselves is diverse, it strengthens their mental well-being (Ahto & Kaski, 2021). Having different interests in life, other than just sports, is vital, since at some point, the sport career is bound to end. Therefore, being an athlete is just a temporary phase in individual's life (Mönkkönen, 2019). Even though participating in sports can be beneficial for child's overall well-being, it should not consume their whole life. Children should feel that they are important and valued regardless of their physical attributes.

The role of the adults (parents and coaches) is also significant, as they are in close contact with the child on a daily basis. With their own actions, the adults can affect the self-concept of the child in both positive and negative ways. When the child decides to participate in competitive sports, the adults close to the child are also involved. The adults are expected to do concrete things, such as purchasing equipment and transporting. However, it is equally important for the adult to be emotionally available for the child and encourage them in their sports journey. A good advice for the adults is that "children should be evaluated on effort rather than on the outcome of the competition" (Choi et al., 2014, 199). When the child is trying their best, it is always enough, regardless of the outcome. By focusing on the effort instead of the outcome, children learn that trying is more important than achieving. This also applies to the life outside of sports. Salasuo and Kangaspunta (2011, p. 53) states that "few children become top international athletes, but we hope that everyone will become honest citizens".

There have been discussion going on whether children should be sheltered from competitive settings, especially in schools (Duncan & Kern, 2020). As a becoming educator, I think it is important that children are exposed to competition already at young age. By competing, children are being familiarized with winning and losing, and how to deal with the emotions related to these situations. Children should not be competing against each other in everything, but including competitive elements here and there helps the children to learn to regulate their emotions and actions. Dealing with hardships and disappointments is a part of everyday life, so it is

important, that children are actively learning how to cope in these type of situations. The sooner the children learn this valuable life skills the better.

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