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Insight Grant 2013

Body-related emotional experiences in sport among adolescent girls: Participation outcomes over time

Project Summary

In adolescence, girls are less likely to participate in sport, are more likely to drop out of sport, and report more poor sport experiences compared to boys. Concerns related to appearance, body shape, size, and weight disproportionately affect girls during adolescence and may impact their sport experiences. To date, there is primarily anecdotal evidence on the impact of body image factors on sport outcomes. The purpose of this mixed-methods program of research was to assess body-related emotions (guilt, shame, envy, embarrassment, pride) among adolescent girls involved in sport, identify how the emotions change over time, and to test sport outcomes related to the emotions. Experiences of body image factors in sport were also explored. We have found that the negative body-related emotions increase over three years, whereas the positive emotions decrease. These changes in emotions are related to lower sport enjoyment and commitment, higher sport anxiety, and are linked to sport withdrawal and drop out. Girls also reported on the judgment-based nature of sport, the prevalence of body talk and weight comments from coaches, teammates, and opponents, and the importance of developing competence. Taken together, the findings from this research should help to inform strategies to foster positive body image among adolescent girls involved in sport – necessary strategies to keep more girls more engaged in sport longer.

Research methods

Adolescent girls involved in organized sport were recruited through team sport organizations and coaches to participate in a prospective longitudinal study. The sports were purposefully selected to represent primarily non-judgment and aesthetic sports (e.g., hockey, softball, soccer). Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire used to assess emotions and sport performance outcomes once a year for three years. Data were analyzed using structural equation and multilevel modeling to test changes over time and associations between emotions and sport performance outcomes.

Furthermore, if the participants reported dropping out of sport across the data collections, the reasons for drop out were evaluated and girls who reported any body image or weight and shape reasons were purposefully sampled to participate in individual interviews. The interviews were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis to explore the experience of sport among girls who report body image challenges.

Research results

Over 540 adolescent girls completed the baseline survey, while there were $n=291$ participants at time 2 and $n=215$ participants at time 3 (39% retention rate). Mean age was 14.15 years old ($SD = 1.36$) at baseline. Most girls were enrolled in soccer or hockey, and there were 24 additional sports identified. Over half of the girls reported participation in two (56.5%) or three or more (18.4%) sports at baseline. The number of sports decreased over time. In fact, within the first year, 21% of girls dropped out of at least one sport, and 6% dropped out altogether. After the second year, an additional 18% of girls dropped at least one sport, and 8% dropped all sports. In total, over 58% of girls reported disengagement from at least one sport over the three years.

All negative body image emotions (guilt, shame, envy, embarrassment) significantly increased over time, and pride experiences decreased. These changes in the body image emotions were significantly related to declining reports of enjoyment and commitment and increases in sport anxiety across three years.

Twelve adolescent girls who reported withdrawing from sport due to body image reasons were interviewed about their experiences in sport. Based on the thematic analysis, seven main themes were identified: (1) culture of “body talk” is normative; (2) body-consciousness leads to compensatory behaviors (i.e., dieting, exercise, covering up); (3) sport promotes appearance and fitness-related social comparisons; (4) different presentations of body consciousness in social vs. sport contexts; (5) negative evaluations of appearance influence perceptions of competence in sport; (6) evaluative and competitive nature of sport is detrimental; and (7) enjoyment of sport is impacted by social influences in and out of sport context. Overall, perceptions of competence may protect girls from complete disengagement in spite of high negative body-related emotions, and negative emotional experiences are prevalent in adolescent girls sport. Also, it was evident that providers of support (e.g., parents, peers, coaches) are contributing to experiences of body consciousness. Descriptive statistics from the questionnaire data also highlight many of these findings – including adolescent girls reporting weight and body-related comments from family (61%), peers (19%) and coaches and teammates (24%).

Limitations of this work include the volunteer non-representative sample of adolescent girls. Also, three time points limits the study of change over time. Nonetheless, the prospective longitudinal design is a strength of this work, as is the purposeful sampling strategies and mixed methodologies.

Policy implications

Taken together, these findings address the first priority outlined in the Ontario Government’s Sport Plan (Game On) by identifying factors that may help explain the lower rates of sport participation among girls and women. Based on these findings, to improve participation in sport, there is a need to develop strategies aimed at improving body-related emotional experiences in sport. Furthermore, policies and modifications to codes of conduct are needed to reduce weight commentary and body talk tolerance. Education programs aimed at parents, coaches, and athletes are also needed.

Next steps

It is important to start testing potential modifiable factors that may help to explain the relationships between the emotions and sport outcomes. We have started to test self-compassion as a protective factor. Based on the qualitative findings, the protective effects of perceptions of competence should be tested to determine if high competence blunts the association between the negative emotions and sport outcomes. Finally, more work is needed to disseminate these findings and evaluate existing programs, policies, and frameworks for any focus on body image, weight commentary, and body talk.

Some of the work on self-compassion is featured in a SSHRC storytellers video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SftzbqwHCXk&list=PLww1dvjSoO4PRgIc62dkPCUcRKVQIPXUB&index=12>

There is also a summary video of this project here: <https://vimeo.com/124934021>

Key stakeholders and benefits

- Sport for Life
- Ontario Government (Sport) stakeholders
- Canadian Center for Ethics in Sport
- Coaching Association of Canada
- CAAWS