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Extracurricular sport improves long-term chances of academic success in boys and girls

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Background. Academic attainment is associated with healthy behavior. Research has yet to provide compelling evidence that healthy behavior might also influence academic performance. As an important parental/community investment, extracurricular childhood sport intends to promote both physical/mental health. Few longitudinal studies have tested whether extracurricular sport predicts later academic success.

Objective. Using a prospective-longitudinal birth cohort of 746 girls and 721 boys, we examined the unique contribution of extracurricular childhood sport to later indicators of academic success in adolescence. We hypothesized that persistent participation would promote educational success.

Method. As a predictor, mothers reported on whether the child participated in sports or organized physical activities with a coach/instructor from ages 6 to 10 years. Developmental trajectories were then generated using longitudinal latent class analysis. From ages 12 to 17 years, youth reported on academic indicators of success over the last 6 months. These were linearly regressed on trajectories of participation in organized sport, while controlling for pre-existing and concurrent child and family confounds.

Results. Consistent participation in organized sport significantly predicted improvements in prospects for academic success from middle school onward, especially showing increments in aspirations and reductions in academic failure and dropout risk through to the senior year of high school for girls and boys.

Discussion. Consistent extracurricular sport participation in middle childhood begets later youth flourishment by improving human capital potential. As a health strategy, supporting organized/structured physical activity venues forecast improvements in population health prospects for boys and girls, potentially improving overall well-being throughout their development.

Key words: Extracurricular sport; physical activity; sport; academic achievement; child development; education; human capital.