

SPORT AS AN AGENT OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN SCHOOLS

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Abstract.

The role of sports as an agent of socialization cannot be overemphasized. Childhood stage of life represents a period when most attributes of life are formed, and this includes ability to develop appropriate social roles and lay a good foundation for positive social behaviours. This paper focused on different ways by which sports can be used as an agent of social integration among school children and adolescents. Related websites like Sports discuss and other search engines were consulted for materials used to develop the paper. Most of the documented researches believed that sports has a direct link with social integration and that some of the benefits derivable from sports as an agent of social integration include: sportsmanship, leadership, diversity, teamwork, and building relationship, which are vital socialisation ingredients in the lives of school children. The paper also identified parents teachers and coaches as strong stakeholders in the attempt to use sports as a major weapon of socialization among children. It was also concluded that regardless of their orientation, play through sports and physical activity occupies a central role in children's lives and is therefore vital to their social orientation.

Introduction

Sport is any activity, experience, or business enterprise focused on fitness, recreation, athletics or leisure. Sport does not have to be competitive nor does it always require specialized equipment or rules; in fact, sport includes activities such as working-out, running and dancing. Socialization is an active process of learning, and social integration and development occurs as we interact with others. It involves the formation of ideas about who we are and what is important in our lives (Parks and Quartermain, 1999).

For most people, the development of social roles and appropriate social behaviours should occur during the childhood years.

Physical play between parents and children, as well as between siblings and/or peers, serves as a strong regulator in the developmental process. Physical play may take the form of chasing games, or wrestling, or practising sport skills such as jumping, throwing, catching and striking. These activities may be competitive or non-competitive and are important for promoting social, moral and physiological development of both boys and girls in and out of school.

Physical play during infancy and early childhood is central to the development of social and emotional competence. Researchers have reported that children who engage in more physical play with their parents, particularly with parents who are sensitive and responsive to the child exhibited greater enjoyment during the play sessions and were more popular with their peers (MacDonald, 1988).

Why is physical activity important?

Many researchers have confirmed the importance of physical activity in the lives of children and adults in the society. The benefits of physical are commonly viewed from three perspectives. These are:

1. physical/physiological
2. emotional/psychological
3. sociological

Of these three, much emphasis has been placed on the physical/physiological and psychological benefits. It is important to note however that to underscore the maximum benefits of physical activity, equal attention should be placed on how it affects the triad of health.

Improving the physical and physiological function of man, physical activities has been known to improve physical fitness, contribute to disease and illness prevention, and help live a more functional life. The American Heart Association (2004) in their position statement has said that an average individual is capable of reducing the possibility of cardiovascular disease and living a more functional life if he engages in moderate physical activity of about 30 minutes in duration every day.

The emotional benefits of physical activities can also be found in increased self-esteem and self-confidence, decreased stress and

depression, academic success identity, balance and resilience. All these are vital benefits which cannot be swept under the carpet.

However, over the years, too much emphasis is being placed on the physiological and emotional benefits to the detriment of equally important sociological benefits of physical activity. According to Hart and Birrel (1981) a sociologists explore sport as both a social process and product. It is said to be a specialized form of social processes of competition and cooperation and an activity which generally require high degree of coordinated interaction.

The Link between Sports and Socialization

Researches have shown that participation and involvement in physical activity involves:

- the process of introduction and involvement
- the process of developing commitment
- acquiring knowledge about the sport
- associating with people in the sport
- learning the norms of the sport
- receiving recognition and acceptance from other participants

Sociological benefits of sport participation

Creating and developing a conducive environment for participation in physical activity ultimately leads to improving social interaction and integration of students within the context of their environment and their relationship with peers and the larger society. Specifically, this benefit is achieved through the following:

- sportsmanship
- leadership
- diversity and teamwork
- building relationship.

Sportsmanship

Participation in sports and physical activity develops spirit of sportsmanship in children. According to Thompson (2004) sportsmanship is a very important factor which can be developed by teaching athletes what he called the **ROOTS** of positive play. According to him, each letter of the acronym **ROOTS** stands for an important part of the game, which athletes should be taught to respect:

R is for Rules

O is for Opponents

O is for Officials

T is for teammates

S is for Self

The underlying premise is simple: using the lessons of sportsmanship to transform youth sports, so that sports can transform the youth.

Leadership

Sports help children build leadership skills. Children are given permission to be tough, strong, brave, decisive, hardworking and competitive. Being on a team provides opportunities to lead both formally and informally. Leadership opportunity in sport comes with the need to select captains and assistant captains for the team.

Captains serve as the liaison between the coaches and their teammates. Captains lead stretches, organize team activities, model intensity during workouts, have the tough talks with teammates when necessary, and motivate their teammates to be the best they can be.

But leadership opportunities are not limited to team captains. Some team leaders are the best players on the team and lead by example. Other players are vocal and emotional leaders. Still others are social leaders who help with team cohesion and team bonding activities. Through these opportunities leadership qualities are developed in the children and they are prepared for broader future societal challenges.

Building Relationships

Children tend to define themselves through their relationships rather than their achievements. Sports offer yet another way to make friends and create an alternative peer group. So much of team experience is off the field, after the practices or games. Sports are also beneficial in terms of athletes learning to relate to adults, as attention from coaches helps in overcoming shyness and developing poise in social situations.

Sports give students an opportunity to spend ongoing periods of time with an adult in a shared endeavour. At boarding and day schools, students may spend more time with their coach than with any other adult in their lives. The coach or physical education teacher play a

vital role in the all-round development of the child, because the child spends more time with him and look up to him for guidance.

Developing Cooperation, Competition and Fair Play

In addition to developing a positive sense of self, involvement in sport activities can assist children in learning what is right from wrong (i.e. moral development). Indeed, moral concepts of fairness support the very existence of the notion of the sport (Shields and Bredemeier, 1995). For youth to learn about fair play, sport activities must be designed to facilitate cooperation rather than just competition. One of the best ways that participation in sport can teach our children about fair play is through teaching the rules of the game and more importantly abiding by the rules during competition.

In addition, many of children's early experiences in informal and formal sports require that children serve as their own officials. Tennis players must call their own lines during competitions while pick-up games require that children call their own fouls. These games only continue peacefully to the extent that everyone cooperates to have a game and is fair in their officiating calls. If fair play is to be taught and learned, it is the responsibility of all those associated with the sport experience to help athletes learn and appreciate the concept of fair play.

Helping the Child to Achieve These Objectives

The role of parents: The development of appropriate social behaviour begins before children enter sports. Parents and siblings provide important information to infants, toddlers and young children about acceptable ways to respond to being frustrated. For example, children learn that biting, hitting, pinching and kicking are not acceptable ways to retaliate because: (i) these actions hurt others, and (ii) the play often stops when children act inappropriately. Learning the limits to which one can go and still maintain the game is one way children learn how to interact successfully with other children (Macdonald, 1988).

Participation in sport extends the learning of social competence by teaching children to cooperate with their teammates and opponents, as well as abide by the rules. Without this cooperation, the game will not continue. Parents and coaches must be persistent and

consistent in teaching the value of cooperation. Parents must provide opportunities to learn social competence to their children. Fathers, in particular, are often more involved in teaching social competence through physical activity and sport to their sons. The outcomes of a high level of perceived competence (i.e. enhanced self-esteem, higher perceptions of competence and greater acceptance by friends) are equally important to both girls and boys.

The Role of Teachers and Coaches: Physical education teachers and coaches can facilitate the development of social competence through the use of positive feedback. When teaching sport skills, coaches should provide plenty of instructional and encouraging statements. Children are going to make mistakes while learning and performing sport skills. The use of a positive approach to error correction will ensure that children will want to continue to practise and will enhance self-esteem, particularly among youths who have lower self-esteem.

Sport provides numerous opportunities to teach moral principles. The key to children learning what is right and wrong starts with coaches and parents being consistent in their own behaviour. Coaches and parents should:

- Use situations that arise in sport as opportunities to teach why certain behaviours are right and others are wrong.
- Talk about the importance of being honest.
- Promote acceptance of responsibility for one's actions.
- Teach children to respect one's teammates, opponents and officials.

Conclusion

Theorists, regardless of their orientation, concur that play/physical activity occupies a central role in children's lives. They also suggest that the absence of play is an obstacle to the development of healthy and creative individuals. Psychoanalysts believe that play is necessary for mastering emotional traumas or disturbances; psycho-socialists believe it is necessary for ego mastery and learning to live with everyday experiences constructivists believe it is necessary for cognitive growth; maturationists believes it is necessary for competence building and for socializing functions in all cultures of the world; and neuroscientists

believe it is necessary of emotional physical health, motivation and love of learning. All these underscore the importance of physical activity in the lives of children, and efforts should be made to create an enabling environment to ensure an all-round development of children.

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