

Physical activity and self-esteem. A potential mean for a better development during the age of growth childhood

Attività fisica e autostima. Un potenziale mezzo per uno sviluppo migliore durante l'età della crescita dell'infanzia

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Abstract

This work wonders whether there is a relation between physical activity and self-esteem and how that can enhance a correct growth. The research is narrowed to the literature and the statistics about children from three to eleven year old. A detailed analysis of the concepts, in several studies, brought the authors to a selection of nine main references. Each of them is based on a large number of cases, so that the results can be more reliable. The filter applied to the statistics is the evidence of different levels of self-esteem in correspondence of a specific physical activity of the children.

La domanda che ci siamo poste in questo lavoro è stata su quale rapporto possa esistere fra movimento ed autostima per un corretto sviluppo in bambini fra i tre e gli undici anni riflettendo su teorie e studi scientifici per verificarne la congruenza. Si è partiti dall'analisi dei concetti e anche grazie ad una scrupolosa ed attenta ricerca bibliografica si è poi entrati nel vivo attraverso la selezione e l'approfondimento in particolare, di nove ricerche principalmente scelte da ResearchGate e Pubmed con un campione alto di bambini coinvolti così da rendere i risultati più attendibili. Il filo conduttore ha riguardato principalmente l'eventuale mutamento dei livelli di autostima al variare dell'attività motoria condotta con soggetti in età evolutiva. I risultati sono stati analizzati riportando relative considerazioni.

Keywords

Physical activity, self-esteem, growth, playful sport, age of growth (childhood)

Movimento, autostima, attività motoria, sviluppo, gioco-sport, età evolutiva

Introduction¹

At the bottom of the research there are three definitions: self-esteem, self-concept and body image.

The analysis that follows is based on renowned theories and it confirms the importance of the three concepts for a right development during childhood.

First, the self-concept is generally the union between of the external environment and the inner image of ourselves that is the mental concept of our body together with the personality, the behaviour and our opinions (Ammaniti, 1989).

Our behaviours mirror our self-concept (Pope, McHale, Craighead, 1988).

It is clear the relation between a person and its environment, in which the latter is essential for a right development of the former. “The motion is an immediate fact that shows how a body ‘situated’ in the world reacts”. (Le Boulch, 1971)

This relation is even clearer in the definition of self-concept by considering the importance of the person’s interactions with the environment, the rising of relationships with other people and the link between identity and memory (Keller, Ford, Meacham, 1978).

The concept of self-esteem can be defined as a whole self-evaluation (Pope, McHale, Craighead, 1988) and it represents a crucial element of the consideration of our ego, both alone and in relation with the others. It is therefore different from the self-concept because it belongs to the evaluative field rather than just to the descriptive field. Self-esteem is fundamental for the person’s activity, since it is one of the most important motivational engines (Kohut, 1971). An increasing self-esteem – thus a growing trust in ourselves – allows us to face challenges in life from a different point of view. Self-esteem is also very variable, by nature, and it is possible to draw a plan that works with its levels (Flavell, 1985).

Nowadays self-esteem is growing in importance within relationships and personal networks. It can also be lacking, be destabilised by the others’ opinion about us or even cause negative changes to one’s personality and behavioural disorders, which can affect knowledge and the learning process.

The third concept of this sequence is the body image, which is the mental image of our body (Schlinder, 1935). “Therefore the body image is not a structure achieved at the end of our psychomotor development, but the result of an organisation, whose evolution and enrichment can be achieved permanently, thanks to the individual’s global – physical, intellectual and sentimental - connection with the environment” (Le Boulch, 1971).

The body image, together with self-concept and self-esteem, constitutes a triad, which is essential for the personality development. The individual should see his body as a fundamental part of his person, thus his first mean of communication and action towards the world and on it (Asher, 1978).

Freud described the conscious ego as “first and foremost a body-ego”(1923). The first form of knowledge is an aesthetic knowledge, based on the senses and the motion. The child learns how to know himself, to define himself as an autonomous entity, because of his body (Rebuffo, 2005).

Hence, the construction of a body image, functional and coherent, is essential.

“Consciousness is generally defined as awareness of your thoughts, actions, feelings, sensations, perceptions, and other mental processes” (Frued, 1923).

Self-esteem and body image are strictly related concepts. The studies, on which this article is based, show how habits within physical activity and sport can increase the self-esteem levels. These activities – if practiced positively – can lead to an improvement of social skills and to a better perception of the individual’s abilities (Bowker, 2006). Furthermore, physical activity

¹ This study, although being the result of common elaboration and sharing of formulation and contents, can be attributed as shown below: Manuela Valentini: first section; Isabella di Paoli: second section

can enhance the management of body image and make the individual achieve a general feeling of satisfaction because of the scored goals.

1. Material and methods

The analysed studies belong to worldwide academic institutions. The relevance of these studies is based on the information they convey about the relation between physical activity and different levels of self-esteem.

The data here exposed refer directly to nine main sources, which were published later than 2000. However, they span through a different extension of time and they are based on data about children between three and thirteen years old. Some of the sources investigate also on teenagers and adults, to enhance a more complete perspective about the subject. All the researches included a large amount of cases, for a more reliable result of the present work.

Neither earlier studies nor the ones only about teenagers are included.

KEY WORDS: self-esteem, physical activity, games, sport, childhood.

| Authors, years, countries | Sample | Age | Activities | Duration | Results |
|--|----------------------------------|----------------|---|---------------------|---|
| P.W.C. Lau, A. Lee, C.W. Yu, L. Ransdell, R.Y.T. Sung, 2003, China | 386 children, 44% girls 56% boys | 7-13 years old | Questionnaires about the levels of self-esteem and self-concept connected to the physical self. | During a single day | They couldn't find significant relations between self-esteem levels and the possible level of discrepancy through ideal body and real body. A significant correspondence was found between the different levels of body image, participation to physical activities, obesity and strength. This research also reveals how Chinese children aren't influenced by this discrepancy through ideal body and real body in construction of their self-esteem. |
| E. Ekeland, F. Heian, K.B. Hagen, 2005, Norway | 24-288 children | 3-20 years old | Aerobic activities, strength trainings, skills trainings | From 4 to 20 weeks. | This research proves how the physical activity has positive results on self-esteem levels on children and teenagers |

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|--|--------------------------------------|------------------------|---|--------------------------------|--|
| R. McGee, S. Williams, P. Howden-Chapman, J. Martin, I. Kawachi, 2006, New Zealand | 1139 children | From 3 to 32 years old | Children had to participate to sport activities out of the school. | From 1972 to 2005 | Sport activities are proved to allow children to improve their social skills and expand their social convoy. At the same time their levels of attachment and their perception of skills seem to be improved as well. |
| A. Bowker, 2006, Canada | 382 children, 167 boys and 215 girls | 10-13 years old | Questionnaire about sport participation and knowledge about self-esteem and physical skills. | 4 months (from March to June). | This research confirms the connection between an improvement of the level of self-esteem and children sport participation (boys seems to be less conditioned by sport participation to build their body image than girls). |
| C.B. Slutzky, S.D. Simpkins, 2006, United States | 987 children (502 girls, 485 boys) | 5-11 years old | 4 measurements about the sport self-concept of children. Some questionnaire were presented to their parents and teachers too, in order to identify their personal perception of their sons/students physical and social skills. | 3 years | This research confirms the differences between team sports and individual ones in the building up of the self-concept: team sports are the best in order to improve the levels of social skills and self-esteem. |
| G. Restrepo, L. Dary, R. Bedoia, S. Arleth, 2011, Argentina | 434 children | 4-7 years old | Swimming activities | - | A correlation between levels of self-esteem and swimming activities is proved. |

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|--|---|-----------------|---|-------------------|--|
| M. Batista, D.S. Cubo, S. Honorio, J. Martins, 2013, Portugal | 531 children, 295 boys e 286 girls. | 8-10 years old. | The “Self-Concept Scale Susan Harter” was used to analyze the different levels of self-concept, school skills, social reception, physical skills, body image, behaviour and global self-esteem. The results were compared to the observations about children routine. | 1 year | The results underlines how the regular physical activity is not totally decisive for the definition of self-concept; however, a higher number of session of sport activities during a week, and especially team sports over the individual ones, could be significant in the build of self-esteem. |
| C. Felfe, M. Lechner, A. Steinmayr, 2016, Germany | First dataset: 5632 children (KiGGS) Second dataset: 1449 children (GCP) | 3-10 years old | The research uses the “German health interview and examination survey for children and adolescents” and the “German child panel”, to underline the differences between who practices sports and who doesn't. | From 2002 to 2005 | The participation in sport club has strong effects on children well-being, education and behaviour; moreover, the interactions with the team allow the development of empathy, social skills and loyalty. |
| T. La Vigne, B. Hoza, A. L. Smith, E.K. Shoultberg, W. Bukowski, 2016, United States | 222 children, 54% girls, 46% boys | 10-14 years old | Different physical activities were introduced in the scholastic routine. Moreover, periodically children were asked to self-evaluate their psychological and social well-being. | 20 years | This research proves a significant connection between genders and the construction of self-esteem and physical activities. It seems girls are less sensitive to the influences of the body image in the building up of the self-concept. |

Table of studies analyzed in publication order.
Source: self development

2. Comparison of the sources

The case studies, seen through the three concepts mentioned in the introduction, confirm the hypothesis that physical activity, games and sport do enhance self-esteem in children and teenagers. Sports, especially the ones practiced in teams, allow the children to gather, make friends and improve their physical and social skills. In addition, children who practice sport become more aware of what they can or cannot do, of their limitations and potential. In most cases the 'rules' are respected and children learn to ask for help to their fellows, so that they can correct their mistakes while avoiding frustration. Thanks to a playful dimension, sport shows how share mistakes and correct them as a group, by repeating carefully the most difficult evolutions and movements. This method also gives the child the chance to bring the physical action to a more psychological level, developing 'aware movements'. Eventually, this awareness contributes to the child's self-esteem.

A relevant difference is the one between sport as a hobby and physical activity practiced at school. The former is in fact more effective on the self-esteem than the latter, which is practiced more seldom and for less hours.

A further conclusion can be reached thanks to the case studies. These show different levels of self-esteem according to gender and the direct effects that sport has on children's body image. In general, males seem to let the sport change more the relation between their 'ideal' and 'real' self. However the presence of studies in the literature, which state the opposite, allows us to state that gender does not have a very relevant influence on the sport-self-esteem relationship.

3. Discussion

An interesting point of this research on literature is, therefore, the link between physical activity and self-esteem.

The Chinese study *'The association between global self-esteem, physical self-concept and actual vs ideal body size rating in Chinese primary school children'* allows important reflections upon the present article, because of the culture that has produced it. Even though the Asian study has been run at the same time as many other Western ones, its results are the opposite. Body image does not influence very much the levels of self-esteem in Chinese children.

On the other hand, the Norwegian study *Exercise and self esteem in the young*, states the presence of 'short term' effects of sport on the young's self-esteem, which is compared with the one of young who do not practice any physical activity. Similar conclusions are reached by the Canadian study *The Relationship Between Sports Participation and Self-Esteem During Early Adolescence*. Here we can see that the body image seems more positive and less affected by self-esteem in males than in female children. It is anyway important, for the sake of research, to point out that the results by gender are different in other works. For example, in *'Associations between physical fitness and children well-being'* boys seem to be more affected than girls by physical activity at a conscious level.

Some other works focus more on the relation sport-social benefits in the individual. The research *'The link between children's sport participation and self-esteem: Exploring the mediating role of sport self-concept'* shows larger benefits in team sports than in individual ones. The study *'Participation in clubs and groups from childhood to adolescence and its effects on attachment and self-esteem'* has as an outcome to link physical activity to improvements of human relationships among children.

Further elaborations come from the reference *'The practice of physical activity related to self-esteem and academic performance in students of basic education'*, according to which it is important to focus on the quality of the sport that children practice. Sport in schools should not be taken in the same account as agonistic sport, nor we should neglect the higher benefits of team sports than the ones of individual workout. The former enhances better achievements both on an academic and social level, thus self-esteem, in children.

Conclusions

The references and the reflections upon them do reveal the relevance of this study about physical activity during childhood, where the factors 'sport' and 'self-esteem' are related, as from the initial hypothesis. The results of the nine case studies include a detected well-being in the children who practice sports, thanks to a substantial change of the individual's environment – socially and psychologically.

Social network, level of skills and personal satisfaction are some of the categories that improve through sport, especially the one practiced in teams and in environment that are more informal than schools, after the teaching time.

Nevertheless, the relation between physical activity and self-esteem is not to be considered direct but we should rather state the importance of exercise, not only during growth but also later in the person's life. If practiced as a game or at the agonistic level, sport can be very healthy for the body and the mind and bring benefits to self-conscience (or self-concept) and to the relationships with the others and the environment.

These last ones allow us, in general, to find out our position in the surrounding environment, with a consequent increasing satisfaction. Once the individual walks a similar path, he can better connect with the others and they can all together contribute to a better community, very diverse, where conscious identities can upgrade the conditions of all.

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