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Sport – a protective factor in facing the risky behavior of children and youth

ABSTRACT

The research was carried out in May 2006 in Opatija on a sample of 585 participants – 203 sportspersons (35%), 255 occasional sportspersons (43%) and 127 non-sportspersons (22%) aged 10-19, i.e. pupils of elementary school grade 4 to 8 and high school students.

The goal of the research was to deepen the understanding of the existence or non-existence of a connection between going in for sports and risky behavior of children and youth.

Four hypotheses have been put forward:

H1. Children and youth who engage in organized sports activities are less prone to violence than children and youth who do not engage in organized sports activities or do not do sport at all.

H2. Children and youth who engage in organized sports activities take in less legal and illegal psychoactive substances than children and youth who do not engage in organized sports activities or do not do sport at all.

H3. Children and youth who engage in organized sports activities are more responsible towards their health than children and youth who do not engage in organized sport activities or do not do sport at all.

H4. Children and youth who engage in organized sports activities are less prone to risky forms of behavior than children and youth who do not engage in organized sports activities or do not do sport at all.

In the various participants' groups, different correlations were found between risky behaviors. In the sportspersons sample, the only statistically significant correlation was between sexual behavior and addiction (.373). In the occasional sportsperson group, positive correlations were found between violence and addiction (.135), violence and sexual behavior (.147), and a really significant connection of addiction and sexual behavior (.442). In the non-sportsperson group, sexual behavior and addiction were really significantly positively correlated (.454), sexual behavior and nutrition negatively (-.169), as well as addiction and nutrition (-.213). Sportspersons are less violent and use significantly less addictive substances than occasional sportspersons and non-sportspersons.

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When socio-demographic variables such as gender, age and material status are controlled, (non) going in for sports has statistically significant effects on the majority of risky behaviors examined in the research.

Key words: Sport, violence, cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, risky sexual behavior

The value and the importance of sport was recognized a long time ago; since the origin of the Latin saying *a healthy mind in a healthy body*. Doing sports activities, in accordance with one's abilities, signifies a healthy lifestyle. Apart from that, nowadays sport is often used as a propaganda means for the prevention of addiction: "with sport against drugs", "yes to sport, no to drugs", etc.

Sport, in its various shapes, is a component of human history. We can observe it from different perspectives and interpret it differently. For the purpose of this survey, sport has been looked at as a possible protective factor in prevention of risky behavior of children and youth.

Research

The goal of the research was to examine if sport is the protective factor in the process of socialization of children and if doing sport is related to less risky behavior.

The issue examined in the research was to establishing the influence of sport on the behavior of children and youth, and research issues include:

- examining if sportspersons are less violent than non-sportspersons, i.e. participants who occasionally engage in sports activities,
- examining if there is a difference in tobacco, alcohol and drugs consumption between the groups of the participants,
- examine if sportspersons show more responsibility for their health in comparison to other groups of participants.

Accordingly, four hypotheses have been put forward :

H1. Children and youth who engage in organized sports activities are less prone to violence than children and youth who do not engage in organized sports activities or do not do sport at all.

H2. Children and youth who engage in organized sports activities take in less legal and illegal psychoactive substances than children and youth who do not engage in organized sports activities or do not do sports at all.

H3. Children and youth who engage in organized sports activities are more responsible towards their health than children and youth who do not engage in organized sports activities or do not do sports at all.

H4. Children and youth who engage in organized sports activities are less prone to risky forms of behavior than children and youth who do not engage in organized sports activities or do not do sport at all.

Sample

585 respondents participated in the research, 203 sportspersons (35%), 255 occasional sportspersons (44%) and 127 non-sportspersons (27%), aged between 11 and 18. The research has been carried out throughout April and May 2006 in Opatija and it included almost 50% of the children and youth in Opatija.

Table 1: Participants - total

age	10-14	15-19	total	% participation of the total population of children and youth in Opatija
M	165 (60%)	197 (54%)	362	57
F	114 (35%)	109 (31%)	223	33
Total	279 (46%)	306 (43%)	585	45

Forming the three groups of participants

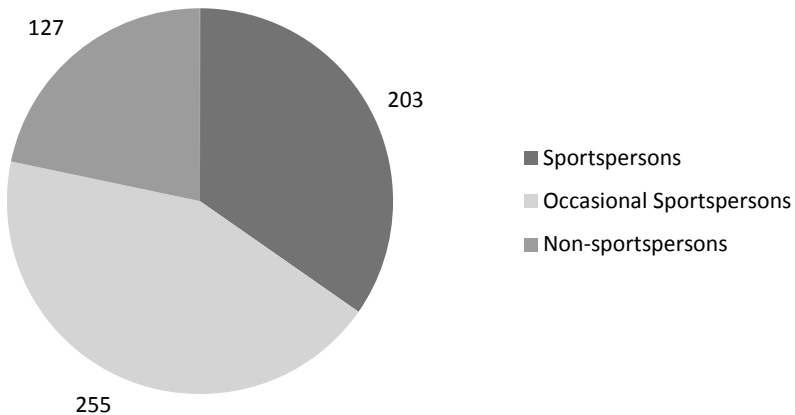
A questionnaire was first filled out by sportspersons (203), members of sports clubs which are active in the area of the Town of Opatija. After forming the group of sportspersons, a control group which was supposed to consist of twice as many participants was to be formed, and a sample was to be coordinated with regards to sex and age as in the sportspersons group.

Non-sportspersons group was further divided into two groups based on their answer to question number 58 of the questionnaire: How many times a week do you spend your spare time doing activities with your peers (jogging, sports)? All those who answered 0 or 1 day were separated as non-sportspersons (not doing sports at all or only occasionally), and those who selected one of the remaining answers were placed in the group of occasional sportspersons (children and youth who regularly engage in physical activities but are not members of sports clubs).

Table 2: Frequency of engaging in physical activities and/or sport for children and youth who are not members of sports clubs

	OCCASIONAL SPORTSPERSONS	%	NON-SPORTSPERSONS	%
0 days			80	62,99
1 day			47	37,01
2 days	62	24,31		
3 days	55	21,57		
4 days	38	14,90		
5 days	24	9,41		
6 days	17	6,67		
7 days	59	23,14		
total	255	100	127	100

Graph 1. Distribution of participants according to engaging in sports activities



Data are collected through a questionnaire on risky behavior of youth (revised 1999 CDC YRBS questionnaire) which was adapted for this survey.

The questionnaire consisted of 60 questions, which were, in accordance with the hypotheses, divided into 4 basic groups:

- questions related to violent behavior
- questions related to addiction
- questions related to sexual behavior
- questions related to nutrition

The introductory part of the questionnaire contained, apart from the basic questions regarding age and sex, questions related to material situation in the family and relationship with parents.

The data were gathered collectively, during practice or class. Sportspersons were given questionnaires during their practices, randomly and voluntarily.

Occasional sportspersons and non-sportspersons were given questionnaires collectively during classes at school.

Identification of variables

Predictor variable = sport

Although most authors agree that **sport** is a physical activity with the aim of competition, health and fun, for the purpose of this survey **sport** is defined as a physical activity of children and youth who are under professional supervision at least twice a week with the aim of participating in competitions.

Criteria variables = violent behavior, drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco, drug use, sexually risky behavior, unhealthy eating habits

Results and discussion

In the various participants' groups, different correlations were found between risky behaviors. In the sportspersons sample, the only statistically significant correlation was between sexual behavior and addiction (,373).

Table 3: Correlations between factors in sportspersons group

	Violence	Addiction	Sexually risky behavior	Nutrition
Violence	1			
Addiction	,061	1		
Sexually risky behavior	,060	,373**	1	
Nutrition	,029	-,134	,085	1

In the occasional sportspersons group, positive correlations were found between violence and addiction (.135), violence and sexual behavior (.147), and a really significant connection of addiction and sexual behavior (.442).

Table 4: Correlations between factors in occasional sportspersons group

	Violence	Addiction	Sexually risky behavior	Nutrition
Violence	1			
Addiction	,135*	1		
Sexually risky behavior	,147*	,442**	1	
Nutrition	-,044	-,099	-,070	1

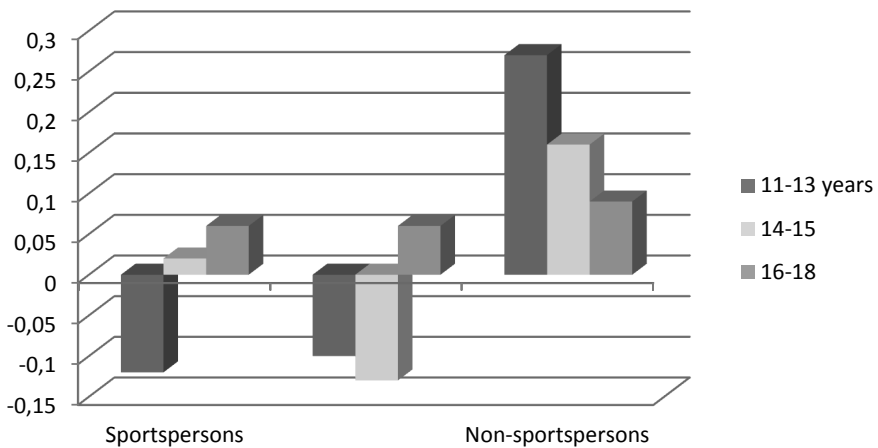
In the non-sportspersons group, sexual behavior and addiction were really significantly positively correlated (.454), sexual behavior and nutrition negatively (-.169), as well as addiction and nutrition (-.213).

Table 5. Correlations between factors in non-sportspersons group

	Violence	Addiction	Sexually risky behavior	Nutrition
Violence	1			
Addiction	,155	1		
Sexually risky behavior	,033	,454**	1	
Nutrition	-,020	-,169**	-,213**	1

Results have shown that tendency towards one type of risky behavior often leads to other types of risky behaviors (Gramezy, 1991 according to Bašić, Ferić, 2004), that taking one addictive substance often leads to taking other addictive substances and that youth who use addictive substances are also more prone to more sexually risky behavior (Kuzman 2004).

Sportspersons are less violent and almost never carry weapons and participate in fights less than occasional sportspersons and non-sportspersons. However, in the sportspersons group, violence increases with age, and similar results have been seen in the occasional sportspersons group. In non-sportspersons group violence decreases with age.

Graph 2: Average values for different age groups of participants regarding violence

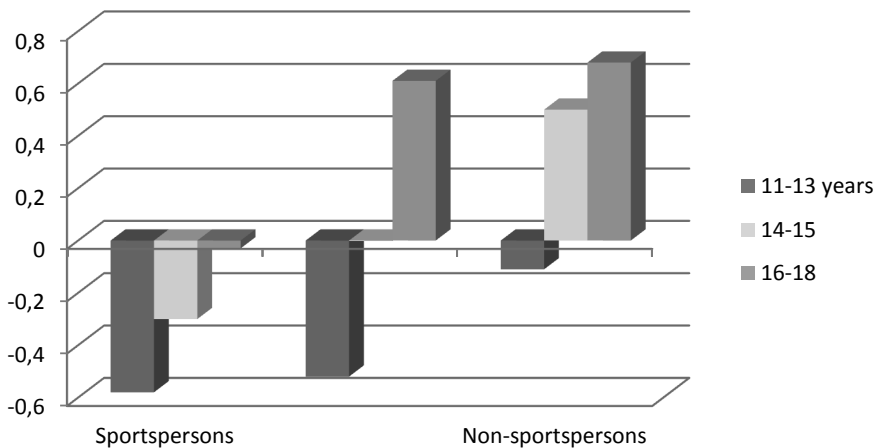
Even though we are talking about children and youth's sport, it is obvious that the motto "faster, higher, stronger" has been emphasized here as well and that the final aim is achieving the best possible sports result. This may imply the inadequate coach's behavior who promote unhealthy competitions and intolerance while they impose winning at all costs. However, competitiveness and fighting spirit are also apparent in the sports games of children and youth who spend their spare time in this way. Regular sports or physical activities increase physical strength so it is possible that sportspersons use this advantage over the others when resolving conflicts. Non-sportspersons show the normal development of maturity so with age they are better in controlling their aggressive behavior. However, sportspersons have obviously been stimulated to behave aggressively, particularly during competitions. Although we are talking about children and youth's sport which should have primarily educational function and in which the result should not be the most important goal, results of this research prove otherwise. Maturity of sportspersons and occasional sportspersons is influenced by external factors which impose the imperative to win (even in friendly games) as the only and most important aim.

Sportspersons use addictive substances significantly less than occasional sportspersons and non-sportspersons. More than 75% of sportspersons have never lit a cigarette and 89% have not smoked in the month prior to the research. 95% of the participants declare never to have drunk alcohol apart from few sips, and 91% of them have never used any illegal drugs. Only one participant uses tablets and illegal substances/doping to enhance his results. The results were considerably worse in the group of occasional sportspersons and non-sportspersons.

Results have shown a significant correlation between the age and the addiction. The older the participants, the more frequent the use of addictive substances, which has been expected, although the correlation is the most significant in non-sportspersons group. In accordance with widely accepted norms, the most spread is alcohol drinking (the largest number of participants had the first drink between the ages of 13 and 14), followed by smoking tobacco (the first cigarette is usually smoked between the ages of 11 and 12), illegal drugs use comes last, between the ages of 15 and 16. It is possible to explain this sequence by the lifestyle built into our culture. The problem of alcohol abuse and its consequences is not frequently mentioned and visible. Drinking alcohol in all occasions has become a pattern of accepted behavior, and has already been established that parents are the ones who frequently offer the first alcoholic beverage to their child, completely unaware of possible dangers. Although smoking cigarettes also used to be the acceptable behavior pattern in all occasions, nowadays the situation is different. Smoking is slowly becoming unacceptable behavior and using illegal drugs has never been built into our culture as acceptable. Additional education, media, results of scientific research on the hazards of smoking and finally the ban of smoking has been a long term process which have only just started showing visible results, reduction of the number of smokers.

Even though expert have been warning about the omnipresent problem of alcohol and alcoholism in the families, the results here show tolerance towards the use of addictive substances. However, there are only few participants with families in which one or more family members daily have more drinks than what is considered normal.

Graph 3: Average values for particular age groups of the participants regarding addiction



Non-sportspersons group is sexually the most active one, but the results show that non-sportspersons group and the oldest group of the participants have a significant multivariate effect on dependent variables ($F = 31.66$; $p < 0.001$) and on the individual variables of addiction ($F = 45.24$; $p < 0.001$) and sexual activity ($F = 115.94$; $p < 0.001$).

Conclusion

When socio-demographic variables such as gender, age and material status are controlled, (non) going in for sports has statistically significant effects on the majority of risky behaviors examined in the research. Based on the research results, the hypotheses that have been put forward, have been confirmed

The research examined the correlation between sport and risky behavior. We have started with the premise that sport is children and youth's organized spending of spare time under the professional supervision. The results relate to the protective effect of sport. However, it is possible that similar results would have been obtained had the participants been involved in any other activity of their desire and interest. In accordance with that, some future researches should be carried out in a way to investigate the protective effect of the organized spare time of children and youth.

Besides, this research has been aimed the correlation of sport and visible, external problems. It would be interesting to conduct a research on correlation of sport and internal issues which children and youth face. That would probably provide a more realistic image of problems and behavioral disorders. Prevention is frequently mentioned declaratively, but in practice we deal more frequently with consequences. Promoting health and providing conditions for optimal physical, psychological and social development of children and youth is a core obligation of the community and a better insight into the difficulties and issues that children and youth face in the process of maturing is necessary for planning and implementation of the prevention programs.

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