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**VIOLENCE PREVENTION AMONG TEENS THROUGH SPORT**  
**ACTIVITIES**

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*Abstract*

Violence among teens becomes a more and more important topic every day. A study conducted within a project hosted by the Ministry of National Education in collaboration with Save the Children Romania (Tinerii împotriva violenței, 2010) underlined not only the extent of the phenomenon, but also children's recommendations on this matter. Among other recommendations, they have suggested extracurricular activities that raise group cohesion, enhance communication and develop their skills for conflict solving. We believe that one of the extracurricular activities that can provide to some extent all the above benefits is sport practicing. We were interested if sport could be related to a less violent behaviour among teens and also in the others' perception of those practicing sport. One concern was the teens' interest in sport and the assessment of their preferences for different types of sport activities. Another question to answer was if boys were more prone to sport activities than girls. The empirical research was performed on a sample of 458 randomly selected teenagers (438 valid questionnaires) with ages between 12 and 14 years from 5 schools of Cluj-Napoca. The research methodology consisted of a self-reported questionnaire regarding their age, gender, class, locus of control, self-esteem, aggressiveness, anxiety, pro-social behaviour and relation with peers. Data have confirmed that sport practicing can provide a positive contextual environment for socialising adolescents.

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## **1. Introduction**

Teenage is a difficult period of time. There is a diversity of physical and emotional changes to deal with at a rapid pace. Physical changes, along with the increase in hormone levels, and all body changes, which are sometimes difficult to accept, give them a sense of uncertainty about what is happening to them. As they become young adults, they have to struggle with peer pressure, not feeling wanted in a group causing emotional distress, feelings of anger and aggression. In these particular situations, girls tend to verbally abuse others, while boys have the tendency to express themselves physically.

The World Health Organization defines violence as the use of physical force or real threat power against oneself, against another person or against a group or community, which either results in or has any chance of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, development disability or deprivation (WHO, 2017).

The problem of teen violence cannot be viewed isolated from other problem behaviours. Violent teens also often display other problems, such as truancy, poor grades and dropping out of school, substance abuse, compulsive lying. However, not all violent teens have significant problems other than their violence and not all young people with problems are necessarily violent (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

## **2. Problem Statement**

Deviant behaviour and violence among teens become a more and more frequent and important topic every day. Children and young people are more likely to be exposed to violence and crime than adults are. Experiences of aggressive behaviour can lead to lasting physical, mental and emotional consequences, whether the child is a direct victim or a witness. Teenagers who have been exposed to violence are more likely to develop problems like regressive behaviour, anxiety, depression, and to have aggression, conduct and attachment problems.

Therefore, violence among teens, along with other forms of violence against youngsters, should be an important research topic in social sciences.

## **3. Research Questions**

Identifying and addressing the predictors of youth violence at appropriate points in youth development is important for prevention. The most important predictors can be arranged in five domains: individual, family, school, peer-related, and community and neighbourhood factors (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992).

At the individual level, the factors that affect the potential for violent behaviour include biological, psychological and behavioural traits. These factors may be present from childhood or adolescence and can be influenced by the person's family and peers, as well as by other social and cultural factors.

Rebellion for teenagers is common, and vulnerable teens may start to break rules going against their parents' and teachers' wishes, engaging in behaviours they know are wrong. These acts may include sneaking out of the house, drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes etc. Poor monitoring and supervision of

children by parents and the use of physical punishment to discipline children are strong predictors of violence during adolescence and adulthood.

Friends become behavioural benchmarks and can have a great influence on their choices. Peer influences during adolescence are generally considered positive and important in shaping interpersonal relationships, but they can also have negative effects. Having delinquent friends, for instance, is associated with violence in young people (Thornberry, Huizinga, & Loeber, 1995). Elliott & Menard (1996) concluded that delinquency caused peer bonding and, at the same time, that bonding with delinquent peers caused delinquency.

The communities in which young people live also have an important influence on their families, the nature of their peer groups and the way they may be exposed to situations that lead to violence. Adolescents in urban areas are more likely to be involved in violent behaviour than those living in rural areas. Within urban areas, those living in neighbourhoods with high levels of crime are more likely to be involved in violent behaviour than those living in other neighbourhoods (Farrington, 1998).

The degree of social integration within a community also affects rates of youth violence. Social capital is a concept that attempts to measure such community integration. It refers, roughly speaking, to the rules, norms, obligations, reciprocity and trust that exist in social relations and institutions (Lederman, Loayza, & Menendez, 1999). Social capital can be considered a resource and has been used to explain the improved performance of diverse groups and the evolution of communities. Young people living in places that lack social capital tend to perform poorly in school and have a greater probability of dropping out altogether (Ayres, 1998).

Many predictors of violent behaviour are predictors of other problems, such as substance abuse, delinquency, school dropout, and teen pregnancy (Dryfoos, 1991; Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). The risk of violence is also compounded by the number of risk factors involved. The larger the number of risk factors to which an individual is exposed, the greater the probability that the individual will engage in violent behaviour (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992).

In designing programmes to prevent youth violence, it is important to address not only individual cognitive, social and behavioural factors, but also the social systems that shape these factors. The most common interventions against youth violence seek to increase the level of protective factors associated with individual skills, attitudes and beliefs (Krug et al., 2002).

Social development programmes to reduce antisocial and aggressive behaviour in children and violence among adolescents adopt a variety of strategies. These commonly include improving competency and social skills with peers and generally promoting behaviour that is positive, friendly and cooperative (Tolan & Guerra, 1994). One of the activities that can bring all of these together is sport involvement. All across the US, midnight basketball leagues and after-school teams claim to reduce juvenile violent crimes by keeping kids off the streets and playing games.

Our concern here is to explore if sports can mediate teen violence, if children practicing sport are more likely to experience less aggressiveness and anxiety, and a higher self-esteem and pro-social behaviour.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

There are many benefits of playing sports that have become almost indisputable from a scientific point of view. A big body of studies have shown that the physical exercise associated with sports generally makes athletes healthier than less active people. There are also studies claiming that sport benefits are more extended than a healthier life and body. “That belief is much more mythical than factual” said Coakley (2017), who is a Professor Emeritus at the University of Colorado, in Colorado Springs. *Sports in society: Issues and controversies* of this author is a global, issue-oriented approach to the study of the role of sport in society. The book encourages the discussion of current sports-related controversies and helps students develop critical thinking skills. Starting from here, we set the goal of approaching students’ involvement in sport activities and evaluate, with proper instruments, their locus of control, self-esteem, aggressiveness, anxiety, pro-social behaviour, relation with peers and the label from others of being a bully.

Here we are proposing to have a first look at the data that indicates the level of aggressiveness and the bullying behaviour of students, according to their involvement in sport activities.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The research methodology consisted of a self-reported questionnaire regarding their age, gender, class, locus of control, self-esteem, aggressiveness, anxiety, pro-social behaviour and relation with peers. There were 458 randomly selected teenagers (438 valid questionnaires) with ages between 12 and 14 years from 5 schools of Cluj-Napoca. The gender distribution of our sample was of 237 (54.1%) male and 201 (45.9%) female students.

Research instruments: Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaires (Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 1998); The Hare Self-Esteem Scale (Hare, 1985); Locus of Control Scale for Children (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973) and Child Behaviour Checklist ages 6-18 (Achenbach, 2001).

#### **6. Findings**

Of the 438 students in our sample, 274 (62.6%) practice sport and 163 (37.2%) do not practice any extracurricular sport activity.

ANOVA did not reveal any difference between boys and girls in practicing extracurricular sport activities. There were no significant differences in their school performances according to their sport participation. This finding is neither good nor bad. There are studies that suggest that athletic participation is related to positive educational outcomes (Broh, 2002), but there are also studies that consider that sports takes up a large amount of the participants’ time, which affects their school preparation. We did not find any statistically significant relation between those two variables. No significant relation was found between sport practicing and bullying behaviour, aggressiveness.

Anger is one of the human emotions. It is neither good nor bad. Nobody, teen or adult, has ever gotten in trouble for becoming angry at one moment. Anyone can be furious sometimes, but no one would know it unless they conducted some behaviour associated with that anger. That is why we measured not

only aggressiveness, but also the bullying behaviour. Although the relation between sport practicing and aggressiveness is not statistically significant, the relation is a negative one.

Even though there have been revealed several negative social outcomes, such as acts of violence and aggression in youth sport settings (Colburn, 1986), acts of violence considered acceptable and legitimate within the sport environment (Gardner & Janelle, 2002), our findings about behavioural outcomes are not in the same direction. We found a significant negative correlation between the “bullying behaviour” and “the length of sport practicing” variables ( $r=-.107$ ;  $p=0.05$ ). Although there is no a significant relation between bullying behaviour and sport practicing, it seems that sport, if practiced for a longer time, can be a protective factor, according to these results.

**Table 01.** Bullying behaviour according to the length of sport practicing

		<b>For how long</b>	<b>Bully</b>
<b>For how long</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	-.107(*)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.025
	N	438	438
<b>Bully</b>	Pearson Correlation	-.107(*)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.025	.
	N	438	438

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Other significant data revealed a positive relation between the length of sport practicing and self-esteem ( $r=.149$ ;  $p=0.01$ ). This finding is consistent with the idea that sport and physical activity offer teens opportunities to experience challenge, fun and enjoyment, increase their self-esteem and decrease their stress (Health Canada, 2003).

**Table 02.** Level of self-esteem according to the length of sport practicing

		<b>For how long</b>	<b>Bully</b>
<b>For how long</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	.149(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.002
	N	438	438
<b>Self-esteem</b>	Pearson Correlation	.149(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.
	N	438	438

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As Donaldson & Ronan (2006) have underlined, one of the benefits involving sport participation is a positive relationship with emotional well-being, specifically here with self-esteem.

## 7. Conclusion

A large number of studies are focused on the issue of sport usefulness for youth development. Our study findings have not validated all the benefits that we took into consideration according to sport literature, but it is obvious that positive effects exist. Among those positive effects, we found evidence for a positive relation between sport and self-esteem and a negative one between sport and bullying behaviour. Further and more detailed research would be necessary and useful on this topic.

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