

Benefits and underlying mechanisms of organized sport participation on mental health among socially vulnerable boys. A qualitative study on parents' perspective in the sport-based Icehearts programme.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceived mental health benefits of organized sports participation in socially vulnerable children and the underlying mechanisms contributing to these benefits among boys participating in the sports-based Icehearts programme, as reported by the parents. Focus group interviews (n=5) were conducted among parents (n=28) of boys participating in the programme. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The mental health benefits of organized sports participation were related to increased self-esteem, self-confidence, emotional self-regulation, prosocial behaviour and courage as well as better mood. The perceived mechanisms contributing to these benefits were related to the following themes: skills through sports, the coach, social connectedness and the opportunity for recreational activities. Few challenges and potential pitfalls in implementing sports-based programmes targeted at socially vulnerable children were identified. The findings highlight the importance of role, skills and mindset of the coach leading the sport activities.

Keywords: Sports participation, Children, Mental health, Positive youth development, Sport-based programmes, Vulnerability, Social inclusion

Introduction

Mental health is defined as a state of well-being and affective functioning in which individuals realize their own abilities, are resilient to the stresses of life and are able to make a positive contribution to their community (World Health Organization 2005). Based on Antonovsky's (1996) theory of salutogenesis and orientation of mental health, besides risk-reduction models aiming at preventing mental illness, focus should be put on promotive activities which aim to build strengths, competencies and resources (Barry & Jenkins 2007). Mental health promotion activities targeted at young people aim to equip young people with life and coping skills, emotional support and resources needed to overcome adversity and fulfil their potential (Barry et al. 2013). This kind of enhancement approach will be concretized also within positive youth development (PYD) programmes, which are known to have positive effects on mental health and a broad range of other domains (Damon 2004).

Participation in organized sports – commonly defined as an activity that involves a structured or organised setting for training and/or competition that is provided by a club or association (Eime et al. 2013) – is an important social setting with great potential for promoting mental health and positive youth development (Hagel 2016; Holt 2008), especially among socially vulnerable children and adolescents (Haudenhuyse et al. 2013, 2014a). Social vulnerability is commonly defined as the result of the lack of availability of material or symbolic resources and access to opportunities that are structurally, socially, economically and/or culturally provided by the state, the market and the society (Misztal 2011). Organized sports may be seen as one of these institutional resources that socially vulnerable young people may have a limited access to (Vandermeerschen et al. 2015). Socially vulnerable young people are

characterised as having accumulated large amounts of negative experiences with the societal institutions related to the family, school or community. As a result of these negative experiences, feelings of incompetence, rejection, isolation and a low self-esteem may be raised (Vettenburg 1998.) Sports could, however, provide a place where these young people can be engaged in meaningful activities and have positive experiences of support and appreciation, in contrast to the negative experiences they may have in other societal domains (Haudenhuyse et al. 2014b). For these young people, organized sports can be used as a tool with great potential to engage them in a pedagogical and supportive setting for positive youth development.

Previous studies have shown that organized sports participation in childhood or adolescence is associated with better social and emotional functioning (Eime et al. 2013; Hagel 2016; Moeijes et al. 2017), quality of life, self-esteem (Eime et al. 2013; Wagnsson et al. 2014), social relations (Eime et al. 2013) and coping skills (Tamminen & Holt 2012), also later in life (Appelqvist-Schmidlecher et al. 2018). Further, a systematic review by Panza et al. (2020) suggested that sport participation during adolescence may be a protective environment against anxiety and depressive symptoms. Specifically, team sports – due to the social nature of the participation – have been found to be associated with improved health outcomes compared to individual sports (Eime et al. 2013). Among socially vulnerable children and young people, sports participation has been found to positively associate with pro-social behaviour, subjective health and well-being, sense of coherence (Super et al. 2018a) and development of life skills (Hermens et al. 2017).

Although previous studies in this area have offered valuable insights into the potential of organized sports participation in promoting the mental health of socially vulnerable children and adolescents, there is limited evidence of the underlying mechanism contributing to this relationship (Lubans et al. 2016). Lubans et al. (2016) presented a conceptual model for explaining the effects of physical activity on cognitive and mental health outcomes in young people and reviewed the mechanisms in this relationship. The proposed mechanisms presented in the model were divided into neurobiological, psychosocial and behavioural mechanisms. However, they identified a lack of available evidence for each specific mechanism. Strongest evidence was found in the domain of improvements in physical self-perceptions, which accompanied enhanced self-esteem. Less is known about the underlying mechanisms between organized sports participation and mental well-being among socially vulnerable children and young people. One of the few review articles in this topic concluded that sports-based programmes for socially vulnerable young people may have beneficial outcomes, but the evidence is very limited (Lubans et al. 2012). Thus, there is a remarkable lack of evidence in this topic, especially on mediating factors or mechanisms that are likely to moderate the relationship between mental health and organized sports among socially vulnerable children and young people. Further, only few studies focus on the parents' perspective that may be different compared to the subjective experiences and views of participating children but, nevertheless, provide valuable insight to this topic.

The present study aims 1) to investigate the mental health benefits of participation in organized sports in children participating in a sport-based PYD programme targeted at socially vulnerable children and adolescents, 2) to identify the underlying mechanisms contributing to these benefits and 3) to explore the potential

challenges and pitfalls in using sports-based programmes for vulnerable children from the perspective of parents of participating children.

Materials and method

Icehearts programme

Icehearts is a sports-based PYD programme targeted at socially vulnerable children and adolescents (<https://www.icehearts.fi/brief-in-english/>). The core aim of the programme is to provide one child-adult relationship that lasts through childhood and adolescence using team sport as a tool for the promotion of psychosocial well-being. The programme has been developed in Finland by a non-profit organization and has been running for 25 years. The target group is socially vulnerable children and adolescents who, at the age of six, have been identified by pre-school personnel, social workers and/or parents to be at risk of social marginalisation. Common causes for social vulnerability are a single-parent family background, many changes in family structure, problem behaviour and challenges in interacting with other people (Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al. 2017). Each Icehearts team is led by a mentor (a professional trained in youth work/education/social work with a background in sports), who provides sports activities and support at school, after school and at home for a period of 12 years. During primary school (1-6th grades), the focus is on 1) team sport and after school activities, 2) support with school work, 3) individual support and 4) social work including family support. During the first 3–4 years, the children are provided with a variety of after-school sports activities and they are allowed to choose collectively which team sport they wish to focus on. After primary school (7th grade till the age of 18), the focus is – besides organized sports in a chosen team sport – on tailored psychosocial support.

Team sport is not an inherent aim of the approach, but rather a tool for securing the involvement of deprived children. Team sport serves as an environment where children – besides physical activity – have the possibility to learn social skills, get friends and experience sense of belonging. The mentor provides the children of the team and their families comprehensive and long-term support whenever and where-ever needed. The core of the programme is the trustworthy relationship between mentor and the children in the team and the long-term support provided by the mentor.

There are separate teams for boys and girls; boys' teams are led by a male mentor and girls' teams by a female mentor. Currently, there are 60 teams in 14 different municipalities providing programme for over 800 children in Finland. Previous studies have indicated that the programme has a positive impact on the well-being of participating children from the perspective of Icehearts mentors (Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al. 2017) and parents of participating children (Appelqvist-Schmidlechner & Kekkonen 2020), but is highly valued also from the perspective of school staff (Kekkonen et al. 2018).

Data collection

The present study is a part of a longitudinal Icehearts study – started in 2015 – which aims to investigate the feasibility, effects and perceived benefits of the sports-based Icehearts programme and to explore the life course of participating children and adolescents in five Icehearts teams (Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al. 2017). The informants used in this study were parents of children (n=55, all boys at the age of 10) participating in the Icehearts programme in these five teams. The ethical approval for the study was received from the ethics committee of the Finnish Institute for Health and

Welfare in 2015. Focus groups were used as a method for data collection, as this method is useful for generating discussion and richer data by capitalising on the interaction between participants (Kitzinger 1995). Five focus group interviews were conducted in 2019. All parents of children participating in the programme in these five teams were invited to take part in the focus group interviews. The parents were contacted, recruited and informed about the study by the mentor of each team. Participation in focus groups was voluntary, and they took place in facilities arranged by Icehearts mentors. Altogether 28 parents (21 mothers and 7 fathers) participated in the focus groups. Written informed consent was provided by all them. Prior to starting the interviews, the purpose of the study as well as the confidentiality and anonymity of all stored data were guaranteed. The interviews were conducted according to general ethical guidelines for behavioural and social research.

Each focus group lasted an average of 87 minutes (range 79 – 100 minutes) and was facilitated by two researchers with previous experience in conducting focus group interviews. A semi-structured discussion guide was developed to focus on relevant themes and used in each focus group. The interviews started with an introduction from each participant and the questions were followed by open questions covering topics such as the impact and benefits of the programme, the role and meaning of the team sport for the children and feedback for the programme providers. The discussion guide also included themes that are not the focus of the present study, such as the programme's impact on schoolwork and co-operation between mentors and parents. Each interview tried to promote a natural flow of discussion and did not strictly keep the order of questions in the discussion guide. The guide rather served to ensure that all the relevant topics were discussed during the interview. Further, the interviewer tried to

probe for a deeper understanding of the experiences by asking more detailed questions about the experiences. At the end of the interview, the participants were given the opportunity to bring up anything that had not been mentioned. As a reward, the participants were given a 50 Euro gift card for participating in the focus group. All focus groups were – with the permission of participants – digitally recorded and later transcribed.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) using an inductive approach was used to analyze the transcripts. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The data used for the analysis consisted of 156 pages of transcribed text. At first, interviews were read thoroughly several times and initial ideas and observations related to the research questions were noted by the first author. Then, all expressions (sentences and paragraphs) relevant to the aim of the present study were identified and sorted out for the analysis. Preliminary coding was undertaken, by making notes and highlighting anything which might contribute to the understanding of the topic. Initial codes were developed to describe the basic meaning of the data. Three main themes were found: 1) impact of sports participation on mental well-being, 2) underlying mechanisms behind this impact and 3) challenges and pitfalls of using sports-based programmes for socially vulnerable children. Then, conceptually similar codes and corresponding raw data extracts were identified, sorted and grouped together under these three themes. The next stage was to organise these initial codes into meaningful and hierarchical groups, forming the first template of the themes and subthemes. The interviews were then re-read with the first template, refined and

updated. The analysis was conducted with the help of Microsoft Excel, using different colours for different themes and subthemes.

Several strategies were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. All authors participated in the data collection and read the transcribed interviews several times, which made all authors very familiar with the data. In addition, the authors used memos and discussed with each other after each focus group session. The second and third authors provided feedback and guidance in relation to the analysis process. Further, the themes and subthemes identified were cross-checked and reviewed by the second and third authors. The authors then discussed the themes and subthemes until they reached a consensus. Quotes illustrating the themes are presented in the text.

Results

Benefits of organized sports participation on mental well-being

The parents reported several positive mental health benefits among children as a result of participating in organized sports within Icehearts programme. The following themes were identified: self-esteem and self-confidence, emotional self-regulation, social skills, courage and mood. Only few comments by the parents were related to negative experiences within the programme and these are reported under the title “Potential pitfalls of using sports-based programmes for vulnerable children”.

Besides increased self-esteem and self-confidence, which could first be observed in the context of sports, but then also in other fields of life, emotional self-regulation was the most commonly reported benefit of sports participation from the parents’ perspective. The children participating in the Icehearts programme were able to practice

their emotional self-regulation especially in competitive situations. The parents described, for instance, how losing games had always been difficult for their children, and how emotional outburst had been one of the reasons why some of the children had experienced major obstacles in regular sports clubs.

” Icehearts has been a team where you won’t be kicked out even if you shout to other kids. You are able to train and learn to control your emotions and he is doing quite well now. He can already handle disappointments...Hot-headed behaviour in the field has turned into a more reasonable playstyle, and he hasn’t lost his temper recently.” (mother AÄ1)

Further, parents reported that they had noticed enhanced social skills in the children’s behaviour when interacting with other people. According to several parents, the children were more sedate, polite and respectful, and got along better with other people compared to past. Some of the parents also reported enhanced courage, which was seen both in interactions with other people and in making efforts to try harder in different situations. Some of the parents illustrated about significant changes in the mood of their children, as described by one mother:

“A very concrete change was seen in 2017, before Christmas. He had a very moody month and he even told me that there is no reason to live at all because he won’t learn anything anyway, that he will never be able to get a job because he is so stupid. ...But then he became a member of the Icehearts team and these thoughts totally disappeared. ...” (mother AÄ13)

Mechanisms contributing to the mental health benefits of sports participation

Several factors emerged as perceived mechanisms leading to better mental well-being among participating children. These could be categorised into four themes related to 1) skills through sports, 2) the coach, 3) social connectedness and 4) the possibility to participate in recreational activities.

First, according to the parents, sports themselves have mechanisms that can contribute to mental health benefits of sports participation. This theme was named as skills through sports and it included two subthemes: life skills learned in competitive sports and perceived physical competence. Parents reported that through competitive sports and experiences in the team, the children had learned how to handle failures and losing, not just in sport, but in life general. Furthermore, the parents reported that the children had learned to take responsibility and to follow rules, which has resulted, for instance, in increased self-esteem.

“And then he has learned to take responsibility, responsibility in his team. And that has improved his self-esteem...At some point he was some kind of captain of his team, and I think this was done on purpose. The mentor wanted to give him responsibility so that he also learns to pay attention to other people.” (father AII)

Besides skills through competitive sports, perceived physical competence also contributed to mental health benefits observed by the parents. Increased self-esteem and self-confidence were the most reported mental health benefits, commonly resulting from increased competence in sports and from experiences of succeeding. The parents reported the children being respected through sports and getting inspiration for a sports

career due to these experiences. These experiences had led to future plans and provided inspiration for future possibilities.

Second, the role of the coach – his commitment, skills and mindset – was a highly significant factor contributing to mental health benefits from the perspective of the parents. This theme included the following subthemes: the emotional bond and trust between the mentor and child, caring, comprehensive support, authority, mentor as a role model and positive coaching. Building a strong emotional bond and a trustworthy relationship between the mentor and a child was the basis for mental health benefits of sports participation. This relationship could be established through long-term presence in the children's daily life and by giving sometimes extra attention and time. A caring approach was seen through the helpfulness and kindness of the mentor, as described by the parents, but also through the comprehensive support provided by the mentor. A trustworthy relationship between the children and the mentor was one of the key elements contributing to mental health benefits of sports participation. Sometimes it took longer to establish this kind of a relationship and the parents appreciated the effort the mentors made to build this trustworthy relationship.

The parents acknowledged the authority of the mentors over the children and described – with admiration – how the mentors succeeded in making the children behave as asked. They also pointed out how important and valuable it was that the mentor always immediately intervened in conflict situations arisen from peer relations. The so-called positive coaching contributed to the mental health benefits of sports participation. Several parents reported negative sports experiences with regular sports clubs. Due to these negative experiences, these children already had “emotional

baggage” which affected their behaviour and self-esteem. Through the positive coaching approach and pedagogical skills, for example through positive feedback, the parents had noticed a remarkable increase in the self-esteem and self-confidence of the children.

“The self-confidence of X has increased hugely. He started to believe in himself and in what he is doing when somebody praised him as he succeeded in something. These experiences were then also transferred to school and to other fields of life.” (mother AÄ13)

Despite the authority of the mentors, as reported by the parents, some of the parents described the mentors to be “equal” with the kids, as “one of the boys”, by taking the liberty to play and fool around with them. Humour was an important tool in coaching. Further, the mentor served as a role model as a sportsman, whose behaviour the children tried to copy. Furthermore, the parents also regarded the mentor as an important male role model, especially for those living in a single-parent-household.

“And the role of serving as a male role model is important, as X has no father. That’s why he respects him so much. He is like God to him.” (mother TÄ3)

Third, social connectedness was one of the four themes contributing to the mental health benefits of sports participation. Team membership and peer relations were important factors for the mental well-being of the participating children. The parents reported a sense of community, belonging and connectedness within the team. Some of the parents described how the children were proud to be a member of the team. On the field, they encouraged each other, but they also learned from each other, as described by a mother:

“They have great team spirit. X is quite hot-headed, and the team has helped him with this issue. When a team member comes and says that you should cool down... It has been important for him that it is precisely his team member who says that, not his parent or the mentor.” (mother MÄ1)

Team membership has also taught the children teamwork skills, in terms of collaboration, tolerance, respect towards others and acceptance of new team members. Several parents reported children to have become more tolerant towards people from other ethnic groups. Peer relations in general played an important role in the mental well-being of the participating children. Children had got new friends through Icehearts and they spend time with these friends also outside Icehearts activities. For several children, participating in team sports meant an end of loneliness.

“I don’t know if it would have been enough support just getting some professional help [for mental health problems] or just talking with the mentor. But the fact that you are a member of this team and you succeed in something... and get friends. Especially the friends.” (mother AA13)

The opportunity for recreational activities was the fourth theme illustrating the mechanisms of sports participation leading to positive impact in mental health of participating children. Many of the parents had limited opportunities to provide leisure-time activities for their children. Participating in the Icehearts programme provided enjoyment and a desirable hobby for these children. Several parents talked about the safe environment provided by the programme, ensuring that the children are not just somewhere “messaging around” without anyone looking after them after school. Furthermore, opportunity to burn off energy through physical activity and to reduce

excessive screen time, which seemed to be a common problem in the families, was appreciated.

“A couple of years ago he had big problems at school. Almost every day he was involved in a fight and the teacher had to contact me almost every day. But after he joined this team, he has calmed down a lot ... and I’m sure it is only because he has the opportunity to burn off energy, because he has enough physical activity. He also sleeps better.” (mother KÄ1)

Potential pitfalls of using sports-based programmes for vulnerable children

The overwhelming majority of the experiences by the parents were positive. However, four themes became apparent that illustrated the potential pitfalls of using sports-based programmes for vulnerable children. First, a couple of the parents mentioned the concern of stigma that may occur by participating in this specific programme targeted at vulnerable children. This concern was related to self-stigma and stigma experienced from other parents or teams. Self-stigma came out as a conception that all children participating in Icehearts have severe conduct problems. This fear experienced by some of the parents had, however, commonly disappeared after gaining first-hand experiences about the programme.

Second, some of the parents talked about differences in the levels of interest and motivation for sports among the children participating in the programme. Some of the children were very enthusiastic and motivated to enhance their physical competence, some even dreamed about a sports career. Some, in contrast, had only limited or no motivation for team sports or sports in general, which was seen as a difficult challenge for the programme.

“Sometimes it’s irritating that not everyone wants to play. Some kids just come to mess around or play video games. So, they disrupt the training. There are always those who would like to play and those who want to do something else.”
(KÄ2)

Third, a couple of the parents expressed their concern of exposing their children to ongoing failures. Icehearts teams also compete against regular sports clubs with greater focus on sports performance. Some of the parents were afraid that they put their children at risk of mainly experiencing failures and lost games when competing against these clubs. They were afraid that these experiences would damage the already fragile self-esteem of their children.

“And I thought ‘shit, will this always be like this?’ That we will just lose every game, and one part of the team is just not interested in floorball at all. Will they ever experience winning and succeeding? Should I have chosen another team? I had these kinds of thoughts because it was so rough to watch them losing game after game.” (mother AÄ12)

Fourth, the parents mentioned the concern of coach turnover as a potential pitfall for the programme. One of the key characteristics of the programme is to provide the children with continuance and long-term support from one mentor for the whole period from age 7 to 18. Every team strongly wished to keep the mentor they have already had for all these years. One team had experienced an unexpected coach turnover.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the mental health benefits of organized sports in children participating in a sport-based PYD programme targeted at socially vulnerable children and adolescents and to identify the underlying mechanisms contributing to these benefits, from the perspective of parents. The parents reported several mental health benefits in their children as a result of participating in the Icehearts programme. They were related to increased self-esteem and self-confidence, emotional self-regulation, prosocial behaviour, courage and better mood (Figure 1). Perceived mechanisms contributing to these outcomes were identified in four domains which constituted the themes for the second research question: perceived skills through sports, the coach, social connectedness and opportunity for recreational activities. The themes for research questions 1 and 2 are illustrated in Figure 1 and described in more detail in this chapter.

Figure 1. Perceived mental health benefits of organized sports participation in children participating in the Icehearts programme and mechanisms contributing to these benefits from the parents' perspective.

The perceived mental health benefits reported by the parents were similar to the conclusions of the review by Eime et al. (2013) and other previous studies in this topic (Bailey et al. 2013; Hagel 2016; Moeijes et al. 2017). The findings were also in line with a previous quantitative study on Icehearts programme with the focus of changes in behaviour and socioemotional well-being assessed by the parents (Appelqvist-Schmidlechner & Kekkonen 2020).

Several parents reported negative experiences with regular sports clubs as a result of their children's challenging behaviour. It is known that children with conduct problems or a diagnosis of ADHD – commonly present among Icehearts participants – often face challenges in regular sports clubs due to poor self-regulation and difficulties in interacting with coaches and/or peers (Lee et al. 2014). These experiences have likely increased their feelings of rejection and social isolation, and consequently, pushed the children down the spiral of vulnerability (Super et al. 2017). Due to these negative experiences, some children already had an emotional baggage affecting their behaviour and self-esteem. Within Icehearts, the children had found understanding and sense of acceptance.

The present study identified four themes contributing to the mental health benefits of organized sports in children participating in the Icehearts programme. These themes were related to the coach, perceived skills through sports, social connectedness and opportunity for recreational activities. According to the parents of the participating children, and in line with previous studies (Cronin & Allen 2015; Haudenhuyse et al. 2012; Riley and Anderson-Butcher 2012; Super et al. 2017; Swan et al. 2018), the role, skills and mindset of the mentors (or coaches) running the programme are crucial for the promotion of mental well-being of the participating children. Social conditions, such as the positive coaching climate and strong team spirit, have been considered crucial for reaching positive outcomes through organized sports participation, and coaches have been considered to play the key role in creating these social conditions (Cronin & Allen 2015; Haudenhuyse et al. 2012; Swan et al. 2018). Coaches have the important role in the establishment and maintenance of a supportive environment in which the young

people could have meaningful, consistent and balanced sports experiences (Super et al. 2017; Riley & Anderson-Butcher 2012).

Further, the mentor's ethos of caring was one significant factor contributing to the mental well-being of the participating children in the present study. The importance of caring as a coaching characteristic – meaning the coaches also show interest in the children's lives outside of sports – is highlighted by several previous studies (Dochsten et al. 2020; Haudenhyuse et al. 2014b; Luguetti et al. 2017; Nols et al. 2017). Caring as a coaching characteristic is also relevant in elite sports (Dochsten et al. 2020), but especially in the so-called sports-for-development initiatives (Schulenkorf et al. 2016; Nols et al. 2017). Coaches have a key role in providing a place where socially vulnerable young people can find support, appreciation, security and caring (Haudenhyuse et al. 2014b, 2012). This “sports-plus factor” of coaching arose as an important mechanism contributing to the mental health benefits also in the present study. However, this task can be very challenging, as – at the same time – the coach is confronted with the common culture of sports to focus on competition, achievements and performance goals (Super et al. 2018b). Despite the pressure on coaches to focus on competition and performance, coaches can create little moments of success and, in this way, give young people an opportunity to experience mastery (Super et al. 2018b), similar to what the parents described in the present study.

Perceived skills through sports arose as another key mechanism contributing to mental health benefits in children participating in the Icehearts programme. In the present study, increased self-esteem and self-confidence were the most reported mental health benefits, commonly resulting from increased competence in sports and

experiences of succeeding. These experiences had also led to future plans and provided inspiration for future possibilities. Previous studies have shown that perceived sports competence plays a mediating role in the relationship between sports participation and increased self-esteem in young people (Mason & Holt 2012; Wagnsson et al. 2014), also among socially vulnerable young people by offering them a place where they can feel protected and dream about future possibilities (Lugueti et al. 2017), similar to the findings of the present study.

Further, the present study highlighted the important role of the team and social connectedness as mechanisms contributing to the mental health benefits. Social connectedness is known to be one of the strongest predictors of mental well-being (Frieling et al. 2018; Gander mann et al. 2016) and team sports provide an opportunity for social interaction and relatedness, as well as development of self-regulation and coping skills that may influence mental health. The importance of relationships and the feeling of belonging have also been emphasised in previous studies as one of the key elements in supporting positive youth development and promoting mental health through sports-based programmes (Draper & Coalter 2016; Hargreaves & Pringle 2019; Haudenhuyse et al. 2014b; Mason & Holt 2012). The social value conferred on sport has been identified also in development of interventions targeted at adult populations using, for example, supportive social relations, team cooperation or sport talk as a tool in aiming at advantageous results (McKeown et al. 2015, Spandler et al. 2014).

The opportunity for recreational activities was the last mechanism, identified in the present study, contributing to the mental health benefits in children participating in the Icehearts programme. Most of the parents reported that their children had experienced great pleasure and enjoyment while participating in activities provided by the programme. In previous studies, enjoyment has been found to be one of the central

elements in sports-based programmes aiming to promote mental health (Hargreaves & Pringle 2019; Riley & Anderson-Butcher 2012; Super et al. 2017). Many of the parents wouldn't have the possibility to provide their children with convenient leisure time activities due to lack of financial resources or of time. Besides daily activities and training, the programme also provides opportunities to try new things, which has likely opened the children up for new experiences and increased their courage to try new things in general.

Sports participation may also impact negatively the mental health, as described in the present study by the parents who had negative experiences with regular clubs. Negative experiences with sports are commonly related to the coaches' overemphasis on winning, negative communication or sports politics in terms of not being selected to play (Holt & Sehn 2008). In the present study, parents did not directly express any negative mental health outcomes as a result of the Icehearts programme, but four potential concerns or pitfalls were identified which may be a risk for negative outcomes in terms of mental health and should therefore be taken into account. These were stigma, differences in the levels of interest and motivation for sports among the participating children, ongoing failures and unexpected coach turnover.

Stigma is known to be one reason for non-participation in out-of-school programmes targeted at vulnerable children (Terzian et al. 2009). In the present study, a couple of mothers described their concern about the stigma their child may face due to their participation in the programme. However, the benefits of the programme were seen to outweigh this concern. Another concern, which was reported by some parents, was related to the wide range of motivation levels among the participating children.

This caused frustration, especially, for the children with high levels of motivation for sports. On the other hand, the children who are not enthusiastic about sports are at risk of dropping out of the programme. Therefore, alternative initiatives are needed to provide these children with other pleasant leisure time activities and with support they might need. Further, the fear of ongoing failures caused by losing games, and how this may affect the mental well-being of their children, was mentioned as one of the concerns by some parents. In terms of this issue, the coaches need “the eye for the game” and the ability to estimate the optimal level of participation in competitive sports for each team, in a way that every child can experience at least some success. One of the five teams participating in this study had experienced an unexpected coach turnover, which has strongly affected both the children and the parents. Coach turnover is sometimes unpredictable or unavoidable, but highly unfavourable, especially for programmes that are based on a promise of long-term support from one trustworthy mentor. A colleague working alongside the mentor could be one solution to prevent these kinds of situations. In case of unexpected coach turnover, this colleague, already well-known among the programme participants, could take the leadership of the team without causing too much harm.

Strengths and limitations of the study

There are some strengths and limitations that should be discussed. First, the focus of the present study was on parents’ views on participation in organized sports in the context of a sports-based programme targeted at socially vulnerable children. Therefore, the findings have practical implications especially for the development and implementation of these kinds of “sports-plus” initiatives and programmes. However, the findings also

highlighted topics, such as the important role of positive coaching, that could be transferable to organized sports in general.

Second, the interviews were conducted among parents whose children had many kind of psychosocial challenges in life – emotional problems, conduct problems, problems with peers or poor financial situation in the family hindering child's recreational activity - making them socially vulnerable. Therefore, social vulnerability in the present study is understood in quite a broad meaning. Comparisons with other studies on socially vulnerable children and adolescents should be made with caution. Further, the children participating in the Icehearts programme were all male participants. Generalizing findings of the present study to female participants should be made with caution.

Third, the interviews were conducted in the form of casual conversations. The order of the questions and the depth in which each topic was discussed differed among the interviews. In some of the interviews, several topics were discussed more thoroughly than in others, depending on the capacity and need of the participants to reflect on the specific topic. However, the interviewers saw this informal nature of the interviews as a strength of the study, as it yielded deeper insights into the parents' experiences than a more formal interview and simultaneously supported the creation of a safe and trustworthy interviewing atmosphere. The parents discussed and talked very openly about all topics, sometimes even about very sensitive issues.

Fourth, the parents' perspective – though unique and important – does not provide insight into the day-to-day structure of the programme. Presumably, the parents

drew information through observations and conversations with their children. Gaining the perspective of both the parents and their children would provide a more comprehensive picture of the underlying mechanisms contributing to the mental health benefits of sports participation.

Fifth, this study focused mainly on the relationship between mental health and participation in organized sports provided by the Icehearts programme, not the impacts of the programme as a whole. When analysing the data, it was sometimes difficult to distinguish when the parents were talking about the programme as a whole and when they were talking precisely about the sports participation within the programme. The children also received support from the mentors in other settings, for example at school. Quotations and paragraphs clearly related to these other contexts and types of support were excluded from the analysis.

The use of a qualitative method may be considered both a strength and a limitation of this study. While the results cannot be generalized because of it, we gained deeper understanding on this topic than what could have been achieved through quantitative methods.

Conclusion

The perceived mental health benefits of organized sports participation, as reported by the parents of the children participating in the Icehearts programme, were increased self-esteem, self-confidence, emotional self-regulation, prosocial behaviour, courage and better mood. The perceived key mechanisms contributing to these benefits were related to the perceived skills through sports, the role, skills and mindset of the coach,

social connectedness and opportunity for recreational activities. A few challenges and potential pitfalls of sports-based programmes – such as Icehearts programme - targeted at socially vulnerable children were identified. These were the concern of stigma, differences in the levels of motivation for sports among the participating children, the impact of ongoing failures experienced in competitive sports and unexpected coach turnover.

Our findings provide qualitative evidence for the potential of organized sports in promoting the mental health of children. They widen our understanding of the underlying mechanisms contributing to these positive outcomes and give us knowledge on the potential pitfalls that should be taken into account when developing and implementing sports-based programmes targeted at socially vulnerable children. Our findings not only have implications for youth development programme designers and professionals working with young people, particularly with those who are socially vulnerable, but also for coaches running sports activities for children in general sports clubs. The study highlights the need of collaboration across disciplines and “whole individual / whole life” perspective like described in the relational practice model by Haigh and Benefield (2019) in supporting positive youth development and mental well-being of socially vulnerable children. Positive coaching can be used as an effective tool both in activities targeted at socially vulnerable young people and in young people in general sport clubs.

Sports participation does not automatically lead to positive mental health outcomes. Our findings highlight the importance of the role, skills and mindset of the coach running the sports activities. Long-term evaluation is crucial for understanding

how participation in organized sports affects well-being later in life and how it translates to other fields of life.

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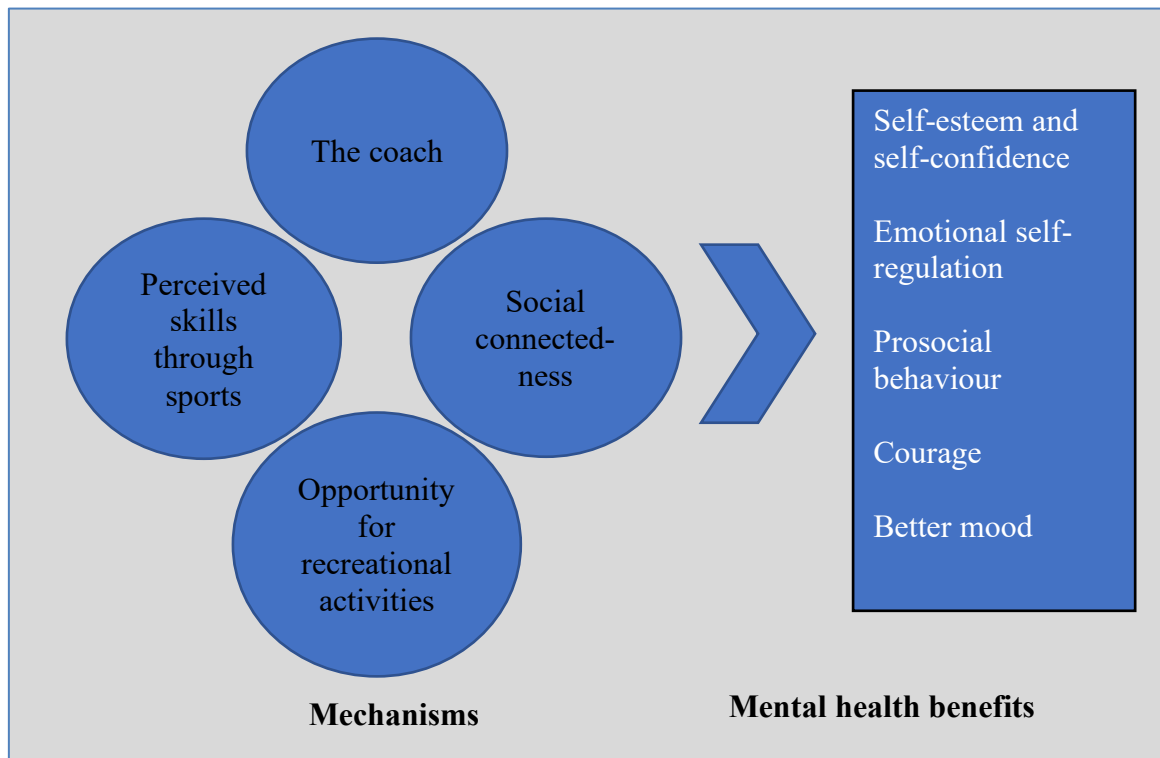


Figure 1. Perceived mental health benefits of organized sports participation in children participating in the Icehearts programme and mechanisms contributing to these benefits from the parents' perspective.

Table 1. Themes, and subthemes related to the research questions.

Themes, and subthemes
<p>Mental health benefits of sports participation</p> <p>Self-esteem and self-confidence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-esteem • Self-confidence • Self-assurance <p>Emotional self-regulation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-control over emotions • Anger management <p>Prosocial behaviour</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calmness • Ability to get along with others • Social skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Deference ○ Politeness ○ Social skills in general <p>Courage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Courage to express oneself • Courage to try <p>Mood</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better mood • Prevention of suicidal thoughts
<p>Mechanisms contributing to the mental health benefits of sports participation</p> <p>Perceived skills through sports</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills through competitive sports <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ability to handle winning and losing ○ Ability to take responsibility ○ Ability to follow rules ○ Sporty and healthy lifestyle • Perceived physical competence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Increased physical competence ○ Being respected through sports ○ Success in sports ○ Inspiration for a sports career <p>Coach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional bond <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Strong bond ○ Presence ○ Sustained relationship ○ Attentiveness • Caring <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Comprehensive support ○ Helpfulness ○ Heartiness

- Partnership in parenting
- Authority
 - Ability to make children obey
 - Intervening and resolving conflicts
- Trust
 - Trustworthy adult
 - Easy for children to open up
- Role model
 - Role model as a sportsman
 - Male role model
- Positive coaching
 - Self-esteem increasing
 - Pedagogical skills
 - Equality
 - Use of humour

Social connectedness

- Team membership
 - Team spirit
 - Sense of community
 - Sense of belonging
 - Connectedness with the group
 - Proud of being a team member
 - Encouraging each other
 - Team work
 - Collaboration
 - Tolerance
 - Respect to each other
 - Accepting new team members
- Peer relations
 - Making new friends
 - Hanging around with friends
 - The end of loneliness

Opportunity for recreational activities

- Leisure-time activities
 - Families with limited opportunities to provide leisure-time activities for children
 - Enjoyment and desirable hobby for the children
 - Low intensity hobby, leaves time for other hobbies or activities
- Burning off energy
 - Opportunity for physical activity
 - Reducing screen time
- Safe environment after school
 - Keep away from “messaging around”
 - Support the parents in daily life knowing the kids are taken care of