



## FAMILY AS AN AGENT FOR SPORT SOCIALIZATION OF YOUTH

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**Abstract** The aim of this research was to examine whether there was a difference in the family characteristics in athletes and non-athletes. Additionally, we wished to determine the degree to which parents were involved in the sports activity of their children. The research was executed on a sample of young athletes (N = 111) and non-athletes (N = 92) of both genders, with an average age of 16.6 years. According to the results of the study, the difference in family configuration (completeness of the family in athletes and non-athletes) was not statistically significant. The differences occurred in the material status (as better material status in athletes' families), the father's education (as better education in athletes' fathers) and in the father's occupation (as more entrepreneurs in athletes' fathers). The difference in parental sport experience in the two sub-samples was not significant; however, more sibling sport participation was observed in athletes than in non-athletes. Compared to mothers, fathers were involved in the children's sports activity to a higher degree. While the engagement of fathers was equal for children of either gender, mothers were more involved in their daughters' sports activity.

**Key words:** Athletes, non-athletes, family, parents

### INTRODUCTION

The family is the basic and most important system within which children and adolescents grow and socialize. Parents have a significant role in all aspects of their children's lives and, along with coaches and peers, they are very important for the sports activity of the youth. Parent - Child interaction regarding sports develops in the family environment and is under the influence of its characteristics. The significance of parents is visible in the early stages of development, for they are the most frequent source of information on sports for children and it is the parents who actually decide that children should become involved in sports [3].

The theoretical expectancy-value model of Eccles et al [6] represents one of the possible frames for the systematization of research into the parental and family role in explaining the difference in behavior, achievement and motivation of the young in different domains of accomplishment, including sports. The applied model includes a large number of variables in different, mutually interactive categories: social and demographic characteristics of the family, personal characteristics of parents and children, general and specific beliefs of parents for each child, emotional characteristics of the family, parental role and behavior with children. The outcome is directly affected by the previous levels and is revealed through beliefs, values, goals and achievements of the youth in sports. However, empiric research into the significance of general and sport-specific characteristics of the family and the parental role in sports activity of the young involved in amateur sports has been largely neglected [4].

Research results from various countries conducted on different samples [9, 17, 19] consistently point to the fact that a large majority of young people involved in competitive sports come from complete families. However, Koprivica et al [10] found that an equal percentage of young athletes and non-athletes lived in single-parent families. With respect to incomplete families, children living with mothers who were active in sports were involved in sports more than children living with fathers [11].

Regarding social and demographic characteristics of the family, the interest of researchers was focused on the material status of the family and the education of parents. In several studies [8, 9, 13, 4] the results implied that athletes mostly came from families with good or high material status. In contrast, Koprivica et al [10] concluded that the material status was not a significant factor for involvement in sports. Some research pointed to the existence of a positive connection between parents' education and the level

of physical activity in adolescents [5, 8]. The research of Koprivica et al [10] showed that even if parents of both athletes and non-athletes had above-average education, it was higher in athletes' parents.

In researching the significance that specific family characteristics had for sports activity of the young, some studies started from the perspective of the theory of social learning. An assumption on learning by model was tested, stating that young people active in sports came from families in which at least one parent also was/had been active in sports. This assumption was confirmed by some research [7, 11, 15] but not confirmed by others [1, 20]. Two studies were conducted on samples belonging to a social and cultural environment similar to the examinees from the present research. The results of research into athletes and non-athletes [10] concluded that compared to athletes, a significantly larger number of non-athletes came from families in which neither parent was involved in sports. Another study [17] on a sample of athletes and their parents showed that most of the parents were involved in sports in their youth, but a relatively small number of parents were currently active in sports. The data were interpreted in light of specific social and economic conditions of the environment (long-term economic crisis). In two available studies [4, 13], the results pointed to the fact that young people participating in competitive sports had an older sibling also competing in sports. Unlike the young people that discontinued competitive swimming, those that carried on reported on the positive influence of an older sibling, primarily with the behavioral model [4]. Similarly, an older sibling was often the source of motivation for the involvement in equestrian sports and further development including competition [13].

The researchers agree that the parents' involvement into their children's sports activities was significant, and that the different level of involvement led to a different outcome. In one of the first studies [16], it was found that both parents were involved in their children's sports activity at moderate to high intensity. The data were confirmed by a recent study [18] on a large sample of young athletes involved in different sports. It is interesting that athletes and their parents evaluated parental involvement differently in the different phases of the child's career in sports [21]. The parents felt that their greatest involvement was in the initial phase and that it then dropped gradually. The athletes, on the other hand, felt that the parents' activity remained at a high level in the later phases, especially referring to the level of support and encouragement. Significantly, the research presented different findings on the involvement of mothers and fathers. One of the reasons for receiving different results could depend on whether the data collected were based on the evaluation by the athletes or by their parents. In one of the first studies in this issue [12], it was shown that the fathers were dominant agents of sports socialization, and that they more than mothers participated in the activity of sons that were involved in sports to a high extent. For sons that were moderately involved in sports and for daughters (regardless of the level of involvement), both parents were perceived as equally important agents of sports socialization and involved to an equal degree.

The results of research on a large sample [18] including athletes and their mothers and fathers showed that they evaluated the level of parental involvement differently. According to parents, they were equally involved in their children's sports activities, while according to athletes, the involvement of fathers was higher compared to that of mothers. The results of a recent study in the level of parental involvement in sports activities of their children of different gender showed that the fathers were more directly involved in their sons' activities than in their daughters' [2].

The subject of the present research was the effect of family factors on sports activity of youth. The research had two primary goals. Firstly, it was to investigate if there were differences between the families of athletes and non-athletes in the family structure (nuclear/ two- and single-parent family), social and economic characteristics (parents' occupation and education, family's material status), and involvement in sports of other family members. The second goal was to investigate if there were differences in the level of involvement in the children's sports activities relative to the parents' gender, and the parents' level of involvement relative to their children's gender.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **SUBJECTS AND PROCEDURES**

#### **SAMPLE**

It included  $N = 203$  examinees of both genders (99 boys and 104 girls), grouped in two sub-samples: athletes ( $n = 111$ ) involved in competitive sports for at least two years, and non-athletes ( $n = 92$ ), all students of final years of elementary school and first year of high school. The examinees were 13 - 16 years old ( $14.64 \pm 1.06$ ).

#### **VARIABLES**

The research used the following variables: involvement of the young in sports, family configuration (two-parent or single-parent family), social and economic characteristics (parents' occupation and education, material status of the family), and the variables describing how the family functioned relative to the sports

activity (sporting experience of family members, mothers' and fathers' level of involvement in daughters' and sons' sports activities).

## PROCEDURE

The participation was voluntary. In the survey instructions, the examinees were explained that there were no right or wrong answers, and that it was very important that their answers were honest. In order to reduce the tendency of providing socially acceptable answers, the survey was filled out anonymously. The survey was conducted in the sports club facilities or in classrooms.

## INSTRUMENTS

The data were gathered with the application of two instruments. The first consisted of a list with thirteen items, two of which were open-ended questions that addressed the age of the participant and their sporting experience, followed by eleven questions of closed type referring to social and demographic characteristics of the family. The participants were asked to indicate one of the options provided for gender, parents' occupation (there were six response choices: no occupation, engineering and technology, natural science and medicine, social work and education, economy and law, entrepreneurship), parents' education (there were six response choices: elementary school graduate, high school graduate, university non-graduate, university graduate, master degree, doctor degree), material status of the family (there were four response choices: very favorable, favorable, moderate, unfavorable), and frequency of sports activities in family members (there were five response choices: almost never, rarely, sometimes, often, almost always). Family configuration was assessed with the item "Indicate all people with whom you live in the household", with six options (mother/stepmother, father/stepfather, brother/stepbrother, sister/stepsister, grandmother, grandfather, relative/other).

The second instrument was the Survey on Involvement of Mothers and Fathers in Sports of the Youth URSM-PS [19], or the survey on the mothers' and fathers' activities that could provide insight into the level of their involvement. The questions started with "My mother" or "My father". An example of an item ran, "My mother is familiar with the competition calendar." The examinees replied by circling one of the offered responses on a Likert scale, ranging from 0 "Almost never" to 4 "Almost always". Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of reliability was  $\alpha = 0.89$  for the evaluation of the degree of the mother's involvement, and  $\alpha = 0.91$  for the evaluation of the degree of the father's involvement [19].

## STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The data were computed with the computer package SPSS Version 18. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of reliability was calculated to test the reliability of URSM instruments. Descriptive statistical analysis was applied (f, %), as well as tests to determine the significance of the difference ( $\chi^2$  test, ANOVA and ANOVA for repeated measurement).

## RESULTS

The reliability of the Survey on Involvement of Mothers and Fathers in Sports of the Youth URSM-PS was high-it was equal for both forms (for the evaluation of mothers' and fathers' involvement) and it was  $\alpha = 0.87$ . An almost identical percentage of athletes (87.0%) and non-athletes (87.4%) lived in two-parent families; this difference was not statistically significant  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 0.00$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . As can be seen in Table 1, most mothers in both subsamples had completed university studies; they were followed in frequency by the category of mothers who had finished high school. Chi square test showed that there were no significant differences in mothers' education  $\chi^2_{(5)} = 9.60$ ,  $p > 0.05$  between these two subsamples. Approximately half of the athletes' fathers were also university graduates, followed by the category of fathers who had high school education-approximately one third. As it is shown in Table 1, for non-athletes, the number of university and high school graduates among the fathers was almost identical. The difference in fathers' education between the two subsamples was significant  $\chi^2_{(5)} = 11.30$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , with the athletes' fathers having acquired a higher level of education.

Similar results were received regarding the difference in parents' occupation between athletes and non-athletes (Table 2). In both subsamples, a large proportion of mothers (approximately 1/3) worked in legal and economic professions. The difference in the mother's occupation  $\chi^2_{(5)} = 8.04$ ,  $p > 0.05$  was not statistically significant. However, there were more fathers employed in professions related to natural sciences and medicine in non-athletes than in athletes. The difference in the father's occupation between the two sub samples was significant  $\chi^2_{(5)} = 17.62$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 1.** Frequency and percentage of athlete and non-athlete parents education

Parent Education	Mothers		Fathers	
	Athletes	Non-athletes	Athletes	Non-athletes
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
<b>Elementary School Graduate</b>	/	4 (3.6)	/	7 (6.3)
<b>High School Graduate</b>	23 (25.3)	43 (39.1)	27 (30.0)	42 (37.8)
<b>University Non-graduate</b>	10 (11.0)	8 (7.3)	8 (8.9)	5 (4.5)
<b>University Graduate</b>	53 (58.2)	49 (44.5)	46 (51.1)	42 (37.8)
<b>Master Degree</b>	3 (3.3)	2 (1.8)	7 (7.8)	9 (8.1)
<b>Doctor Degree</b>	2 (2.2)	4 (3.6)	2 (2.2)	6 (5.4)
<b>Total</b>	91 (100.0)	111 (100.0)	90 (100.0)	111 (100.0)

**Table2.** Frequency and percentage of athlete and non-athlete parents occupation

Parent Occupation	Mothers		Fathers	
	Athletes	Non-athletes	Athletes	Non-athletes
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
<b>No Occupation</b>	6 (6.6)	10 (9.2)	/	7 (6.3)
<b>Engineering and Technology</b>	11 (12.1)	18 (16.5)	37 (41.1)	45 (40.5)
<b>Natural Sciences and Medicine</b>	19 (20.9)	15 (13.8)	2 (2.2)	16 (14.4)
<b>Social Work and Education</b>	15 (16.5)	16 (14.7)	9 (10.0)	7 (6.3)
<b>Economy and Law</b>	33 (36.3)	30 (27.5)	21 (23.3)	20 (18.0)
<b>Entrepreneurship</b>	7 (7.7)	20 (18.3)	21 (23.3)	16 (14.4)
<b>Total</b>	91 (100.0)	111 (100.0)	92 (100.0)	111 (100.0)

Almost two thirds of athletes (65.2%) and less than a half of non-athletes (46.8%) evaluated the material status of their family as very favorable. The percentage of athletes (22.8%) and non-athletes (22.5%) that regarded the material status of their family as favorable was similar. A smaller percentage of athletes (12%) than non-athletes (18.9%) evaluated their family's material status as moderate. As much as ten percent of non-athletes evaluated the material status of their family as unfavorable, while there were no athletes in this category. Chi square test showed that athletes evaluated the material status of their family as more favorable compared to non-athletes,  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 15.40$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

A one-way ANOVA analysis indicated that the difference in the mother's sports participation between athletes ( $M = 2.74$   $SD = 1.34$ ) and non-athletes ( $M = 2.84$   $SD = 1.25$ ) was not significant  $F_{(1,201)} = 0.29$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . Similarly, there was no difference between the father's sports participation in athletes ( $M = 3.96$   $SD = 1.20$ ) and non-athletes ( $M = 3.77$   $SD = 1.13$ ),  $F_{(2,199)} = 1.20$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . However, if siblings participated in sports activities, there was a difference between athletes and non-athletes  $F_{(1,180)} = 18.28$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.09$ , in a sense that the siblings were more involved in sports in athletes ( $M = 3.94$   $SD = 1.19$ ) than in non-athletes ( $M = 3.12$   $SD = 1.36$ ).

Considering the parents' involvement in the children's sports activities, the average values (on a scale from 0 to 4) for mothers ( $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ) and fathers ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ) suggested that both parents showed moderate to high intensity of involvement. By applying a 2 x 2 ANOVA repeated measurement with the factors of parent (mother vs. father) and child (daughter vs. son), and the dependent variable of parental involvement in the child's sport activity, we can conclude that young athletes evaluated their mothers as less involved in their sports activity compared to fathers,  $F_{(1,88)} = 1358.67$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.27$ . Besides, mothers were less involved in sports activities of their sons ( $M = 1.81$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) than daughters ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ); this difference was statistically significant and explained approximately 25% of the variance,  $F_{(1,89)} = 28.82$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.25$ . Unlike mothers, fathers were equally involved in sports activities of their sons ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ) and daughters ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ),  $F_{(1,88)} = 2.652$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ .

## DISCUSSION

Since the family, and especially parents, are the primary agents of youth socialization, they have a role in all their children's activities, including sports. The starting point for the present research was the model by Eccles et al [6], which posited the connection between a number of factors describing family characteristics and parental role as agents of youth socialization, for different domains of achievement. The present research had two goals. The first was to examine whether there were differences between athletes and non-athletes with respect to the family configuration, particular social and demographic characteristics, and the sporting experience of family members. In addition, we wished to determine the degree to which mothers and fathers were involved in their offspring's sports activities, and whether this involvement was equal for children of both genders.

Considering completeness of the family, the results of our research showed that the majority of young athletes lived in nuclear families, which concurred with recent research findings [Rotella & Bunker 1987, as cited in 9, 17, 18]. The results showing that the same number of athletes and non-athletes came from two-parent families complied with the results of research by Koprivica et al [10]. The data showed that most young people (half of both categories) came from families in which at least one parent had acquired high education. The comparison of parents' education between athletes and non-athletes revealed that there was no difference in the mother's education between the two subsamples. In contrast, the father's education in athletes was higher than in non-athletes, which confirmed the result of earlier research on a similar sample [10]. In addition, there was no statistically significant difference between athletes and non-athletes considering the mother's occupation, while the father's occupation in the two subsamples differed. A large proportion of mothers worked in legal and economic professions. Athletes' fathers were mostly entrepreneurs and non-athletes' fathers worked in professions related to natural sciences and medicine. If the data were viewed in light of the father's material income for the two categories, it could be assumed that entrepreneurs were better paid compared to medical or natural science professionals. This conclusion concurred with several previous studies [8, 9, 13, 14]. Besides, the results of our research suggested that athletes came from families of more favorable material status compared to non-athletes, which was not in accordance with the results of research executed on a similar sample [10]. After detailed consideration of results, it could be noted that a large number of examinees from both subsamples evaluated the material status of their family as very favorable or favorable. However, there were obvious differences considering moderate and unfavorable material status. Firstly, more non-athletes than athletes evaluated the material status of their family as moderate. Secondly, approximately ten percent of non-athletes evaluated their material status as unfavorable, while none of the athletes made such an evaluation. The results gain full sense considering that participation in sports involves continuous material support (purchase of equipment, membership fees, and travel to preparations), which is very difficult for families with unfavorable material status.

The information that most athletes came from families with at least one parent currently or previously active in sports found support in previous research [7, 11, 15]. However, according to the respondents' evaluation, the frequency of parents' previous sports activation was relatively similar in athletes and non-athletes, which was different from the data presented in previous research [10]. Interestingly, there were differences between the two studied categories with respect to siblings' participation in sports. Namely, siblings were more involved in sports in athletes than in non-athletes, which corresponded to the research on samples from other communities [5, 13]. Although this result does not allow for the conclusive causal link between siblings' sports activity, there could be different considerations. One of the possible explanations is that in certain families there is a climate of encouragement regarding sports, or a certain type of sports culture, so that children from such families get involved in sports. The other possible explanation is based on the theory of social learning. It is possible to assume that watching their siblings gain favor and approval for the inclusion or advancement in sports, young people themselves should want to get involved. The basis of described activity is the vicar corroboration. Another possibility is that by observing the sibling model, young people may acquire a certain attitude towards involvement in sports, and develop devotion to sports and a certain type of work ethics.

Parents' involvement in their children's sports activities did not imply necessary presence at practices and competitions, but rather their interest and familiarization with different aspects of the activity such as the competition calendar, practice and competition advancement, possible difficulties the child was facing, equipment requirements, and so on. The results of our research showed that both parents were involved in sports activities of their children, which was in accordance with the results of available research by foreign and domestic authors [11, 17, 18]. It is significant to add that the level of involvement did not show to which degree it was functional (how much it contributed to positive results) but it proved to be a necessary condition for parental support to their children.

The results of the present research regarding greater involvement in children's sports activities on the part of fathers compared to mothers was in accordance with one previous research [18] but not with another

[12]. Besides, the results showed that regarding children's gender, the level to which fathers were involved in sports activities of their children was equal, which concurred with recent research [2]. Unlike fathers, mothers were involved in their sons' sports activity to a lesser degree than in their daughters'. One of the reasons for this could be the stereotypical view of sport as an activity dominated by males [12, 14]. The assumption is in accordance with the conclusion of the research [19] which stated that the young felt it was necessary for the parents to be familiar with a sports activity in order to support it, and that the fathers were better acquainted with sports than mothers. On the other hand, the relatively high level of mothers' inclusion in their daughters' sports activities showed that mothers were generally more involved in the daughters' pursuits compared to fathers (formal education, music school, etc.), including sports.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the present research taken on a sample of young non-athletes and athletes that had been involved in competitive sports for at least two years, of both genders, aged 13 to 16, allow the following conclusions:

- Structural characteristics of the families of athletes and non-athletes were the same. These results led to a conclusion that structural characteristics of the family were not a significant factor for sports activity of the youth;
- Regarding social and demographic characteristics, the difference between families in athletes and non-athletes was that the athletes evaluated the material status of their family as more favorable compared to non-athletes. Next, athletes' fathers had acquired higher education and were more involved in entrepreneurial occupations, while a larger number of non-athletes' fathers were employed in professions related to natural sciences and medicine. It is most likely that the stated characteristics represented factors contributing to the active involvement in sports activities of the young;
- Parents' personal sporting experience was identical in athletes and non-athletes, which led to a conclusion that this factor did not contribute to active participation of young people in sports. Athletes' siblings were involved in sports to a higher degree than in non-athletes; however, the statistical analysis did not allow a conclusion on the existence of a causal link.

In complete families, both parents were involved in sports activities of the children, with the level of the father's inclusion higher than that of the mother. Fathers' involvement was equal in both sons' and daughters' sports activities, while mothers were less involved in their sons' sports activities compared to their daughters'.

## PRACTICAL APPLICATION

The results of the present research draw attention to the fact that few adolescents active in sports come from families of moderate or unfavorable social and economic status. Even though further research should provide a detailed image on reasons for the young people from such backgrounds not to participate in sports, it is clear that there is a need to encourage them to get involved. It is necessary to develop awareness on the importance of active participation, and it could be done through different forms of education. Possible programs should include all children from a family due to the fact there is a tight connection between sports activity in siblings, which provides a potential for mutual encouragement.

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