

Leaving anger on the field: Sports help ease aggression in boys

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We know that physical education teaches children about fitness and encourages them to live a healthy lifestyle. Now a Tel Aviv University researcher has statistical evidence that sports participation is also beneficial to a child's cognitive, emotional and behavioral well-being.

Keren Shahar, a Ph.D. student at Tel Aviv University's Bob Shapell School of Social Work working under the supervision of Prof. Tammie Ronen and Prof. Michael Rosenbaum, says that over the course of her study, which included 649 [children](#) from low [socioeconomic backgrounds](#), a continuous program of various sports helped improve self-control and discipline and lowered feelings of aggression in the children overall.

Her research was recently presented at TAU's Renata Adler Memorial Research Center for Child Welfare and Protection Conference.

A prescription for a healthier body and mind

"We set out to determine whether sports training would have a positive impact on these children by lowering aggression, and how this result can be achieved," explains Shahar. It would be more effective than verbal therapy, she says, because while verbal therapy encourages children to control their behavior, research indicates that it does not reduce negative emotions. The introduction of sport, however, is able to reduce aggressive behavior as a result of quelling [negative emotions](#).

In 25 schools across Israel, Shahar and her fellow researchers analyzed a 24-week-long after-school program based on sports. Half the participants comprised a control group who did not receive sports instruction, and the other half were systematically introduced to a variety of sports for five hours a week. Three times a week, students ranging from grades 3-6 played group sports such as basketball or soccer. Twice a week, they participated in martial arts, including judo and karate.

After 24 weeks of programming, Shahar compared questionnaires and evaluations executed at the beginning of the program with the same tests administered at the end. Her results demonstrated an improvement in traits relating to participants' self-control, such as self-observation, problem-solving skills, and delayed gratification — which ultimately led to a decrease in the incidence of aggression. Only those children who exhibited higher levels of self-control also demonstrated the decline in aggression.

Boys benefit most

Girls had a much weaker response to [sports](#) programming than their male classmates, Shahar's research showed. Statistically, there was little change in the female population. Shahar reasons that girls do not often suffer from the same aggression problems as boys, and are less likely to exhibit a passion for sport.

But the research still applies, Shahar adds. The key is to introduce children to something that they love to do and in which they have a compelling interest. "Find something that motivates them," she counsels. A strong connection with any activity gives children a sense of purpose and decreases the likelihood that they will "act out" their behavioral problems.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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