

Study: Kids in positive sports climate better adjusted, show less depression

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(Medical Xpress) -- It's only natural that when kids are part of a positive, caring sports environment, they can have more fun. But a new study by a University of Kansas professor shows that a positive sporting environment can predict their psychological well-being and help them deal with a range of good and bad emotions in life.

Mary Fry, associate professor of health, sport and exercise science, co-authored a study that surveyed nearly 400 kids who took part in a National Youth Sports Program athletic camp. The findings were published in the journal *Sport, Exercise and Performance Psychology*. They measured whether the youths perceived a caring climate and their mental well-being, including how able they are to express positive emotions when good things happen to them in life and how well they are able to cope when negative things happen.

“Research has shown that kids who perceive a positive climate in their sporting activities have more fun, try harder and tend to stick with their sports longer,” Fry said. “Beyond that, it’s very cool to see that they also display more empathy and better emotional regulation.”

The findings are significant given the rising rates of juvenile obesity in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have reported that between 20 and 30 percent of adolescents experience depressive symptoms at clinically significant levels and other research has shown that about 25 percent of young people are not on track to become healthy adults.

Fry and her colleagues conducted the study by surveying youths from age 9 to 16 at a National Youth Sports Program Camp. The camps offer underserved young people across the country a chance to take part in physical activity such as swimming and a wide range of [sports](#) and educational topics on college campuses. At the end of the camp they were given an anonymous survey, measuring how supportive they felt group members and leaders were, and how much they felt valued and accepted by other participants. They were also asked about their capacity to experience positive and negative emotions by agreeing with statements like “I can express joy when good things happen to me” and “I can get over feeling irritated quickly for wrongs I have experienced.” The researchers also asked the kids about their feelings of hope for their lives, subjective happiness, depressive symptoms and how often they feel sadness.

They found that children who strongly perceived a caring climate both regularly felt joy in positive situations and were able to properly handle negative emotions and experienced fewer instances of [depression](#). A positive environment allows adolescents to not worry about being judged, chided, laughed at for making mistakes, not being as physically gifted as peers or being able to express emotions.

“That’s a big deal for kids,” Fry said. “When you’re in an environment where you can’t express your emotions, you tend to be more guarded. It just reinforces the important role teachers and coaches play.”

The findings reinforce another aspect of Fry’s work. Along with students in KU’s Sport and Exercise Physiology Lab she works to foster positive interactions with young girls in a physical activity/positive life skills program called Strong Girls and is developing in-services to help physical education teachers and coaches implement strategies for creating more positive environments.

The study's findings also add credence to youth athletic programs that strive to provide more than exercise through their positive experiences.

“Though the aims of positive youth development programs often refer to promoting enhanced psychological well-being, little research has directly examined this link. Results suggest that equipping adults with strategies to create a positive and caring climate can reap significant rewards for young people with regard to their overall physical and psychological development,” Fry and colleagues wrote.

Provided by University of Kansas

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