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Gender differences in sports involvement: a case of children's self-stereotyped ideas

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Introduction

The health benefits of physical activity (PA) behaviors are well established. Although female sport participation has been increasing in the last decades, boys still participate more in sports than girls.¹ Stereotyping sports as 'masculine' or 'feminine' affects both male and female participation and can be difficult to overcome since childhood is a critical period for shaping and influencing future behaviors.²

Aim

Our purpose is to understand if children are aware of gender stereotypes and which social-demographic factors can be responsible for that.

Material and Methods

Subjects were recruited from the population of children attending two public schools of Coimbra city, Portugal. We used a questionnaire in 433 parents with 6 to 10 years-old children assessing socio-demographic information. A short interview was made to each children where they were asked about their thoughts and opinions about sport participation and PA behaviour:

Question 1: To do sport is more important for boys than girls

Question 2: Boys are better sportsman than girls

Question 3: There are sports exclusively for boys

Question 4: There are sports exclusively for girls

Conclusion

These stereotypes, whether made consciously or unconsciously, are present in children since a young age. Our findings are disturbing since habits and routines maintained in adulthood are usually adopted around this age. Both sexes, and not only boys, need to be encouraged to move beyond the traditional classification of 'girly' or 'manly' sports and instead pursue a diverse range of PA.

Results and Discussion

	Sex		Age		School	
	F	p	χ^2	p	F	p
To do sport is more important for boys than girls?	41.061	p<0,001	3.905	p=0,004	15.488	p=0,017
Boys are better sportsman than girls?	43.377	p<0,001	3.062	p=0,017	-	-
Are there sports exclusively for boys?	11.985	p=0,002	6.858	p<0,001	14.820	p=0,005
Are there sports exclusively for girls?	-	-	4.419	p=0,002	-	-

(statistical tests in SPSS 21) (p value <0.05 was considered significant)

➡ There was no statistical difference according to neither the participation of children in extracurricular sport nor the parents' scholar degree.

- Boys believe they perform better in sports than girls - maybe because boys see sports as being male gender-role stereotyped - and that engagement in PA is more important for males;
- The majority of kids assumed that there is not any sport exclusively for one of the sexes;
- Older kids tend to be more open to the idea of girls having the same rights to participate in sports;
- The gender differences can be due to socialization process since we also found differences according to each child's school.

References

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- 2 Schmalz, D., & Kerstetter, D. (2006). Girlie girls and manly men: Children's stigma consciousness of gender in sports and physical activities. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 38, 536-557.

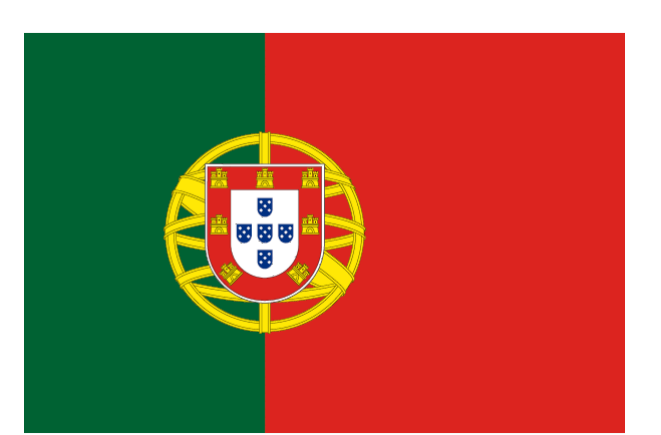
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