



PÉCSI TUDOMÁNYEGYETEM
ÁLTALÁNOS ORVOSTUDOMÁNYI KAR

Sports psychology IV.

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Pécs, 2026. March



Children in sports

“My message to young people today is to enjoy sport, to try to find the activity where they genuinely like going to training, and enjoy what they do—because you cannot do sport out of pressure.” — László Cseh (Hungarian Olympic medalist swimmer)

(cited in: Gyömbér & Kovács, 2024)



Benefits of youth sports

- development of sport-related skills
- personality and skill development (physical, psychological, social)
- **psychological skills such as respect, competitiveness, cooperation, confidence, emotion regulation**
- learning the foundations of a healthy lifestyle
- youth sport as a social activity: new friendships + parents



Youth Sport Motivation

- **Smoll (1998): motivational factors among young athletes**
 1. fun and enjoyment
 2. skill development, learning new abilities
 3. excitement
 4. spending time with friends, making new friends
 5. success or winning

Benefits	Disadvantages
development of appropriate skills	development of inappropriate skills
improved endurance	injury, illness
knowledge of strategies and rules	learning and applying incorrect strategies or rules
fair play, respect and compliance with rules	unrealistic or negative self-esteem
realistic and positive self-esteem	distorted self-perception and body image
self-knowledge	turning away from sports
realistic body image, body awareness	misuse of rules for the sake of winning
long-term motivation for sport	lack of enjoyment, fear of failure
enjoyment	development of harmful social skills or psychological harm
development of personal, social, and psychological skills	loss of time that could be used for other activities

Development in Sport

- **positive youth development**
- early years: any form of movement →
- preschool age (3–4 yrs): cooperation with others, playing together
- from age 5: gross-motor games, emerging competitiveness, sense of competence (parental feedback! → self-confidence) →
- primary school: basic sport-specific skills, ongoing developmental changes (e.g., vision, hearing), practice, acceptance of mistakes →
- adolescence: physical and hormonal changes, major individual differences (early/late maturers), vulnerability to injuries



Positive Youth Development

- acquiring all knowledge, skills, competencies, and experiences required for a successful transition to adult sport.
- developmental impact extends beyond sport and influences long-term participation, performance, and personal growth.
(Gyömbér & Kovács, 2024)

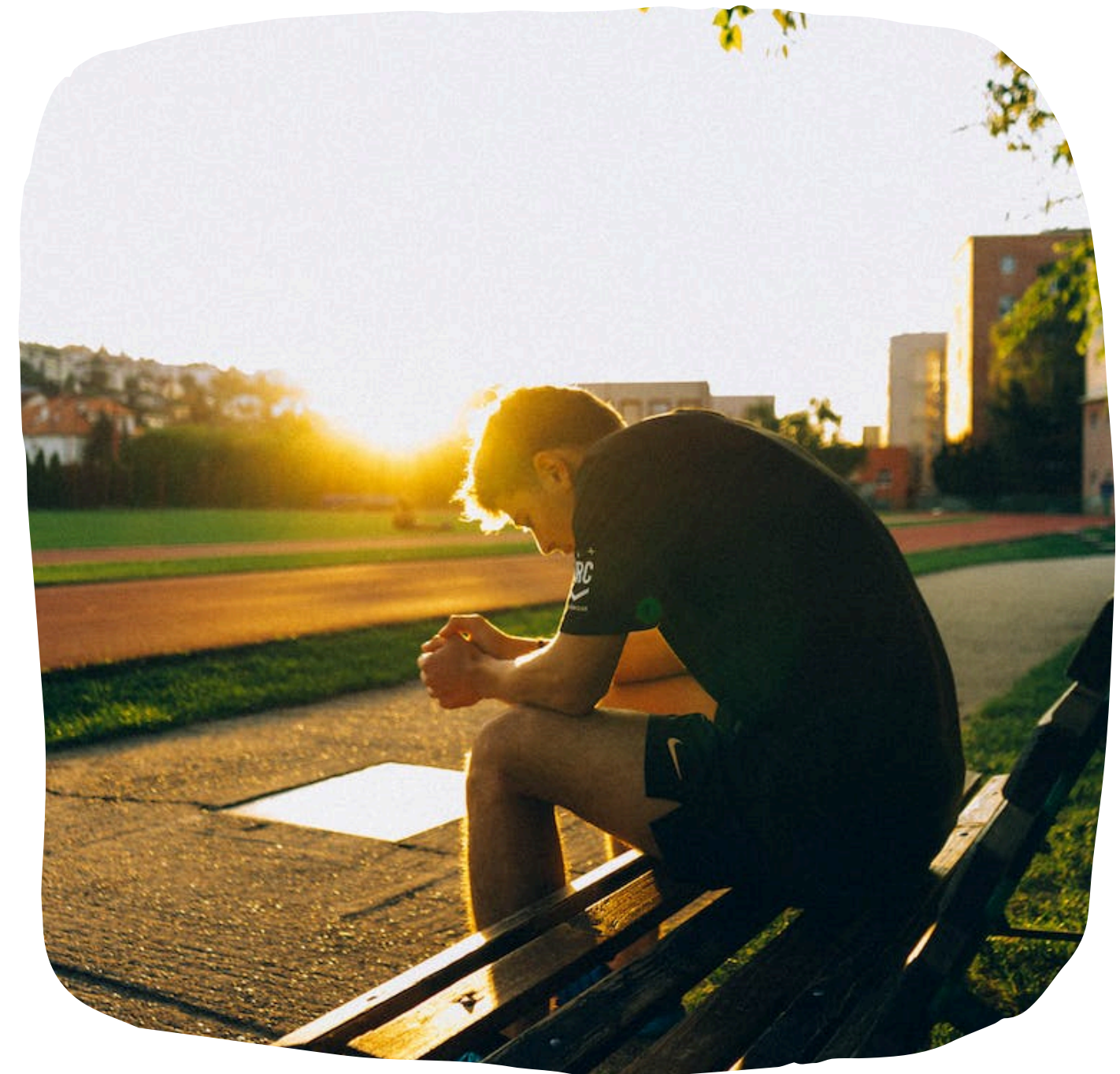
Elements of PYD:

- sense of efficacy (awareness of skill and ability development)
- confidence (recognition of effort and risk-taking)
- connection (positive social climate)
- character (ethical principles, fair play)



Risks in Sport

- physical risks (e.g., overload, injury)
- psychological risks:
- development of identity → identification with the athletic identity → injury- crisis → IDENTITY THREAT
- risk of early, excessive, intense training → immature personality
- environment!- crucial role, parents and coaches must support healthy personality development
- István Balyi: Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model



What is the goal?

- differing goals and strategies among children, parents, coaches, clubs
- finding common ground — **COOPERATION**
- open communication, clear boundaries, clarified expectations, shared goal-setting
- questions: What do I decide? Why this way? What is needed for it?
- transparency and well-defined boundaries
- balance: the child needs space for motivation and development



Faulty Conception of Winning (Martens, 1978)

Examples of **misconceptions**:

- befriending the opponent = weakness → “You must not be friends with the opponent.”
- joy and relaxation = lack of competitiveness
- execution of coaching instruction, that gives „unfair advantages”
- encouragement of substance use, cheating
- victory is the most important – more than friends, family, confidence, other skills, health, proper self-esteem



**BUT! the actual goal:
healthy physical and
personal
development!**

-> everything else (also victory!) is secondary

-> focus: gathering experience

Erikson (1991)- stages of psychosocial development



1. Infancy (0-1 year)	trust-mistrust
2. Early childhood (1-3 y)	autonomy- shame/doubt
3. Play age (3-6 y)	initiative-guilt
4. School age (6 -11 y)	industry (performance) – inferiority
5. Adolescence (12-18 y)	identity – role confusion

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK556096/>

Common issues among children

Examples:

- **competition anxiety** (before important events)
- **psychosomatic symptoms** (e.g. head- and stomachache)
- **attention and concentration problems** (distraction, freezing after instruction)
- “lack of motivation or confidence”
- **adolescents acting out** (impulsive behaviors)
- **nail-biting** (anxiety, frustration, unconscious motivation such as desire to please others)
- **bed-wetting or soiling** (anxiety)
- **tics, stuttering** (usually conflict with environment, emotional tension)
- **eating disorders** (especially in weight-class sports)
- **sleep problems** (e.g. poor sleep quality before competition)

→ suspected **psychological disorder** → sport psychologist must refer to clinician/ psychiatrist

Sport Psychology – Children

- communication with parents and coach
- initial parental consultation
- setting boundaries with parents, coach, child
- feedback + confidentiality
- child's symptom = system's (family's) symptom



Coach's Role

- multiple roles (parent, teacher, role model, etc.)
- reference person in children's lives
- different coaching styles – authenticity matters
- emotional involvement



Positive Reinforcement

everyday sense: acknowledgment and appreciation of effort and results → increases confidence and motivation (e.g., coach smiles when the child finishes the task – this is also positive reinforcement, even without words.)

psychological perspective:

- behavior is shaped through learning → **the frequency of a behavior depends on its consequences (behaviorism)**
- **positive reinforcement increases the likelihood of repeating the behavior**
- goal: increase the frequency of the behavior it follows
- **feedback: regular, honest, specific** → **athlete understands what behavior triggered the reinforcement**



Mindset Theory

(Dweck, 2006) – **fixed vs. growth mindset**

- **our beliefs about ourselves and our abilities influence outcomes**
- Innate talent vs. effort?
- **effort is a variable we can control!**
- growth-mindset athlete: takes on more challenging tasks (challenge = learning opportunity)
- produces a wider range of solutions
- is not frightened by failure – the “self” is not threatened





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**Thank You for Your
Attention!**

Pécs, 2026. March

Literature

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