

The Role of Sports in the Development of Children's Health and Empathy Skills

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Abstract. This article analyzes how sports and active games contribute to children's physical health and the formation of empathy-related competencies. In contemporary educational contexts, children's development is increasingly understood as a multidimensional process in which motor activity, emotional regulation, social interaction, and moral learning reinforce one another. Drawing on pedagogical and psychological literature, the paper synthesizes how structured physical education, team sports, and age-appropriate active games support functional growth, endurance, and healthy lifestyle habits while simultaneously shaping children's prosocial behaviors such as cooperation, perspective-taking, respect for rules, and compassionate responses to peers. The study also considers how collective sports experiences can support civic responsibility and socially constructive attitudes by cultivating self-discipline, fairness, mutual support, and the ability to handle success and failure with emotional balance. Methodologically, the article uses a qualitative, integrative review and thematic analysis of the provided sources, with attention to the educational functions of play, the psychological mechanisms of social learning, and the practical requirements for organizing inclusive game-based activities. The results indicate that sports and games serve not only as a health-promoting tool but also as a pedagogical environment in which children rehearse social roles, learn emotional self-control, and develop empathy through repeated cooperative action. The discussion highlights implications for teachers, parents, and school psychologists regarding balanced program design, individual differences, and the prevention of sedentary lifestyles.

Keywords: *child development, physical education, sports games, empathy, psychological development*

Introduction

The twenty-first century is often described as an era of intensified opportunity and accelerated change, but it is also a period in which children's lifestyles are increasingly shaped by sedentary routines, screen-based leisure, and reduced everyday movement. In this context, the educational goal of raising children who are physically, psychologically, and socially healthy has become a strategic priority for many school systems. Physical education, sports, and active games are among the most accessible and pedagogically flexible tools for supporting children's holistic development. In many cultures, the idea

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that “health is the greatest blessing” is not simply a proverb but a guiding educational principle: health is understood as a foundation for learning, emotional stability, and future productivity.

From a pedagogical viewpoint, sport is not only a means of strengthening the body. It is also a structured social environment in which children learn to cooperate, follow rules, manage emotions, and develop moral habits through repeated practice. School-based games create a safe “micro-society” where children can test communication strategies, experience responsibility to teammates, and learn how their behavior affects others. These processes are directly connected to empathy development, understood as the capacity to recognize others’ emotional states, take another person’s perspective, and respond with socially appropriate care or support. In educational psychology, empathy is closely linked to emotional intelligence, prosocial behavior, classroom climate, and conflict resolution.

The formative power of play and movement has been emphasized in psychological and pedagogical traditions for decades. Play has been described as a leading activity in childhood and a key mechanism through which mental processes and social behaviors are formed (Handbook of the School Psychologist, 2022). Pedagogical sources also note that regular physical activity supports functional development and helps establish habits that protect children’s long-term health (Kazimov, 2011). At the same time, social interactions inside games—especially team-based activities—create repeated opportunities for children to practice understanding, patience, fairness, and mutual help (Talibov, 2008).

A core aim of this article is to connect these two developmental lines—health and empathy—within one educational framework. Health is treated here not only as the absence of illness, but as physical readiness, resilience, and energy that enable children to learn and participate in social life. Empathy skills are treated not as abstract moral ideas, but as practical competencies formed through interaction: listening, cooperation, emotional self-control, and respectful communication. By bringing these themes together, the article argues that sports and games can be designed as an educational strategy that strengthens children’s bodies while also shaping emotionally balanced and socially responsible individuals.

The paper also addresses the civic dimension of sport and collective activity. In many educational settings, physical training has been linked to the formation of discipline, responsibility, and attachment to social values. In contexts where civic identity and social responsibility are emphasized, sports programs may support children’s sense of belonging, shared purpose, and constructive participation in community life. Discussions of patriotic education have similarly highlighted the importance of healthy, prepared youth for the social development of the nation (Hashimov, 2012).

Finally, the article responds to modern challenges. Excessive time on social media and limited physical movement can negatively affect children’s posture, sleep, attention, and mood regulation, and may also contribute to irritability, communication difficulties, and emotional withdrawal. Therefore, physical activity should be approached not as an optional supplement but as a central component of child development and educational planning.

Methods

Design

This article uses an integrative, qualitative, literature-based approach grounded in the sources provided by the author. Rather than testing a single hypothesis through experimental measurement, the study synthesizes pedagogical and psychological findings into a clear research-article structure to inform educational practice.

Data Sources and Selection

The analysis is based on seven core sources covering pedagogy, psychology of play, school psychological guidance, and civic education. These include monographs on child psychology and pedagogy (Aliyeva, 2004; Kazimov, 2011; Talibov, 2008), a work focused on psychological aspects of children's games (Fucik, 1969), a classic text addressing children and play (Gorky, 1934), a professional handbook for school psychologists (Handbook of the School Psychologist, 2022), and a newspaper article addressing patriotic education (Hashimov, 2012).

Analytical Procedure

A thematic analysis approach was used. First, the sources were read with attention to recurring concepts: (a) physical development and health outcomes of sport and active games; (b) psychological mechanisms of play (attention, memory, emotion regulation); (c) social learning processes in group games (cooperation, rule-following, conflict resolution); and (d) value-oriented outcomes (responsibility, civic attitudes, moral norms). Second, these themes were organized into a developmental model connecting physical activity with empathy-related social competencies. Third, implications were formulated for educators, parents, and school psychologists, with emphasis on organizing inclusive and developmentally appropriate sports and game activities.

Results

The thematic analysis produced four central results: (1) sports and active games support children's health through functional development, endurance, and healthy habits; (2) games strengthen psychological processes such as attention, memory, creativity, and stress tolerance; (3) cooperative sports contexts provide repeated practice for empathy skills, including perspective-taking and emotional self-control; and (4) collective activity can support value formation, including responsibility, fairness, and civic attitudes.

1) Contributions of Sports to Children's Physical Health

Across pedagogical sources, regular physical activity is consistently presented as a fundamental condition for children's physical growth. School pedagogy emphasizes that systematic movement improves functional development, increases resistance to negative environmental factors, and supports healthy lifestyle habits (Kazimov, 2011, p. 187). In practical terms, children who participate in age-appropriate sports and active games often show improved coordination, balance, agility,

strength, and endurance. These qualities are not only “sport achievements”; they support daily functioning, reduce fatigue in learning tasks, and contribute to better posture and overall well-being.

Sports and active games also establish routine. Routine is a hidden but powerful mechanism: when movement becomes a normal part of the day, children develop a stable relationship with physical activity that can protect them later against sedentary habits. In this sense, sports function as preventive pedagogy—supporting health before problems develop.

Another recurring point is that sports help children develop discipline and self-control through bodily practice. Children learn to repeat movements, follow training structures, and tolerate gradual improvement. This builds persistence and can indirectly influence health by supporting consistent participation and avoiding risky behaviors. The health outcome is therefore both physiological (improved fitness, resilience) and behavioral (formation of healthy habits).

2) Psychological Effects of Games: Attention, Memory, Creativity, and Resilience

The reviewed sources present play as a psychologically formative activity rather than only entertainment. The school psychologist handbook describes play as central to the formation of mental processes in childhood (Handbook of the School Psychologist, 2022, p. 54). Active games require children to monitor rules, track signals, anticipate others’ actions, and make quick decisions. This naturally trains attention and working memory.

Classic perspectives on play also stress its educational function. Gorky considered play a meaningful element in shaping children’s worldview and memory, emphasizing that play can act as an early “school of life” in which children rehearse real experiences in a safe, symbolic form (Gorky, 1934). In modern terms, play provides an environment where children practice coping strategies: they experience success and failure, manage frustration, and learn emotional regulation while remaining engaged.

Fucik’s discussion of children’s games highlights the social and psychological richness of play across cultural contexts, emphasizing its role in developing thinking, influencing others, and forming emotional attitudes (Fucik, 1969). Even when games are simple, they offer children a structured situation in which emotions arise naturally and must be managed constructively. This repeated practice can strengthen psychological resilience, especially when educators guide children toward fair play, respectful communication, and balanced reactions to losing.

Creativity is another consistent theme. Play and sports games often involve improvisation, role distribution, and flexible problem-solving. Children learn not only to follow a plan but also to adapt when conditions change, which is a key cognitive skill for later academic learning and real-life challenges.

3) Development of Empathy Through Team and Group Activity

The strongest result of the analysis concerns the connection between sports games and empathy development. Empathy is not acquired only through moral instruction; it grows through interaction,

feedback, and the repeated experience of social consequences. Team sports and collective games provide exactly such conditions.

In collective play, children must consider teammates' positions, coordinate actions, and make decisions that influence others. This naturally activates perspective-taking: "If I pass now, my teammate can score"; "If I push, someone may fall and get hurt." Pedagogical literature emphasizes that group games teach children norms of behavior, collectivism, and moral-spiritual values through shared activity (Talibov, 2008, p. 63).

The sources also emphasize emotional learning. In games, children face emotionally charged situations—competition, fairness disputes, mistakes, and unexpected outcomes. These are the moments when empathy is trained: children learn to comfort a disappointed teammate, accept feedback, and regulate anger after conflict. When educators guide these moments well, children internalize prosocial behaviors as normal and valued.

Aliyeva (2004) discusses spiritual and moral education in adolescence and notes the importance of shaping children's social feelings and attitudes through structured educational influence. Within sports contexts, this influence becomes practical: moral values are not only spoken but enacted in real time through helping, sharing, and respecting rules. In this way, sports become a living environment for empathy education.

4) Value Formation: Responsibility, Fairness, and Civic Attitudes

A fourth result is that sports and games may support value formation beyond immediate social skills. Schools often aim to raise children who are responsible, goal-oriented, and socially constructive. Sports reinforce these qualities because they require commitment, adherence to rules, and respect for others.

The civic dimension is also present in the provided sources. Discussions of patriotic education highlight the importance of raising healthy, disciplined youth who can contribute responsibly to society (Hashimov, 2012). While empathy is primarily interpersonal, civic attitudes extend empathy to broader social circles: classmates, school community, and society. In well-designed sports programs, children learn to represent their class or school respectfully, accept collective responsibility, and cooperate toward shared goals.

This is not an automatic outcome of sport; it depends on how sport is taught. If competitive pressure becomes excessive, it can produce aggression or humiliation. But when fair play and respect are emphasized, sports can become a strong educational mechanism for moral behavior and civic responsibility.

Discussion

Sports and Empathy as a Single Developmental System

The results suggest that sports and empathy should not be treated as separate educational topics—one “physical,” one “moral.” Instead, they form a single developmental system in which bodily activity shapes emotional and social learning. Children experience the world through movement, and games transform movement into meaning: rules define the situation, interaction creates social learning, and outcomes create emotional feedback.

The concept of play as a “psychological laboratory” is useful here. In everyday life, children rarely get such concentrated practice in cooperation and emotional regulation as they do in games. A simple team activity can contain many micro-lessons: waiting for one’s turn, noticing another child’s distress, negotiating roles, and responding to conflict. Over time, these moments accumulate into stable social habits and empathy-related competencies.

Mechanisms Linking Sports to Empathy

Several mechanisms can be identified from the thematic analysis:

1. **Shared Goals and Interdependence.** Team sports require children to rely on one another. This interdependence encourages attention to others’ needs and abilities, which supports perspective-taking (Talibov, 2008).
2. **Rule-Governed Interaction.** Rules provide a moral structure: fairness, boundaries, and consequences. Following rules trains children to respect others’ rights and limits, which is central to empathy in social life (Handbook of the School Psychologist, 2022).
3. **Emotionally Charged Situations.** Winning, losing, mistakes, and conflicts generate strong emotions. With proper guidance, children learn to manage these emotions without harming others, which supports emotional empathy and self-control (Fucik, 1969).
4. **Feedback and Reflection.** Coaches and teachers can encourage children to reflect: “How did your teammate feel when you shouted?” Reflection connects behavior to emotional outcomes and accelerates empathy learning (Aliyeva, 2004).

The Role of Individual Differences

An important practical issue is that children differ in temperament, motivation, and social comfort. Some children thrive in competitive games; others feel stress or withdraw. The school psychologist approach stresses attention to children’s individual characteristics and developmental pace (Handbook of the School Psychologist, 2022). Therefore, sports and game programs should be flexible: mixing competitive and cooperative formats, providing non-judgmental feedback, and ensuring that every child experiences success and belonging.

Educators should avoid interpreting reluctance as “weakness.” Sometimes a child avoids games because of anxiety, negative past experience, or fear of failure. In such cases, gradual inclusion, supportive pairing with empathic peers, and non-competitive physical activities can build confidence without pressure.

Sports and the Modern Sedentary Challenge

Modern sedentary habits create a double risk: physical health risks (posture problems, reduced fitness) and social-emotional risks (reduced face-to-face interaction, weaker communication practice). Sports and active games are among the strongest school-based tools to counteract these tendencies. They provide a structured reason for children to move and to interact in real time with peers.

However, the effectiveness depends on consistent implementation. If physical education is treated as a minor subject, children lose a key developmental environment. Pedagogical planning should therefore include regular movement opportunities, not only in formal lessons but also in breaks, extracurricular clubs, and community events.

Sports, Moral Education, and Civic Responsibility

The link between sports and civic responsibility is most constructive when it is framed through ethical values rather than aggressive nationalism. The provided civic education source emphasizes patriotic education as part of youth development (Hashimov, 2012). In educational practice, this can be translated into socially healthy values: responsibility, respect for others, and constructive contribution to community life. Sports naturally supports these values because children experience what it means to act for a team rather than only for oneself.

At the same time, it is crucial to keep sports environments psychologically safe. Humiliation, exclusion, or overly harsh coaching can harm empathy development and produce hostility. Therefore, the teacher's role is central: educators must model respectful communication, fairness, and emotional stability, making these qualities part of sports culture itself.

Conclusion

Sports and active games are powerful educational instruments that influence children's physical health and empathy-related social competencies simultaneously. The reviewed literature indicates that regular physical activity supports functional development, endurance, and healthy habits (Kazimov, 2011), while play serves as a core mechanism for the formation of mental processes and social behavior (Handbook of the School Psychologist, 2022). Through team games and collective activities, children practice cooperation, perspective-taking, rule-following, and emotional regulation—skills that are foundational for empathy and positive social relationships (Talibov, 2008). Classic and cross-cultural perspectives further support the view that games develop thinking, emotional attitudes, and social influence in childhood (Fucik, 1969), and that play contributes to memory and worldview formation (Gorky, 1934).

In modern contexts where sedentary routines and digital distractions are widespread, schools and families should treat sports and active games as essential rather than optional. Effective programs should balance competitive and cooperative activities, consider individual differences, and preserve psychological safety so that every child can participate with dignity. When organized thoughtfully, sports education contributes not only to children's physical readiness but also to their emotional

maturity, social responsibility, and capacity for empathic relationships—qualities that shape them into healthier, more constructive members of society.

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