

Editorial

Preventing Violence and Social Exclusion through Sport and Physical Activity: The SAVE Project

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Abstract: Sport Against Violence and Exclusion (SAVE), a project cofounded by the Erasmus + Program of the European Union, seeks to prevent violent and socially exclusive behaviors through physical activity. The current editorial shows a range of possible interpretations of these two phenomena from both a psychological and sociological point of view, offering helpful methods to coaches who train children (ages 6 to 12) in grass-root sport clubs. Following a thorough analysis, partners from seven EU countries (Lithuania, Italy, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Austria, and Spain) will be able to identify skills and techniques for coaches to ensure inclusive training methods as well as to provide them with effective conflict resolution tools. Furthermore, both trainers and parents will have access to an online platform with useful information regarding these issues.

Sport against Violence and Exclusion is a project cofounded by the Erasmus + Program of the European Union (Key action: Sport- 590711-EPP-1-2017-1-LT-SPO-SCP). The overall aim of the project is the prevention of violent and socially exclusive behaviors among youth in sport clubs. This goal can be achieved by enabling coaches from grass-root sport clubs to recognize these behaviors as well as the conflict resolution skills with which to address them. As stated by the Durban Declaration and Program of Action, sport and physical activity are promising instruments in the prevention of inequality, racism, and intolerance. Sport clubs are designed to be a valuable environment in which youth can learn respectful behaviors which are valid in every social context [1], and it is possible to define effective prevention strategies according to the psychological literature.

Concerning social exclusion, there is a positive relation between an individual's identification with a group and psychological wellness [2]: People who have been victims of social exclusion tend to suffer from negative emotions (sadness, disappointment, jealousy, anger, and shame) [3], depression [4], and tend to behave aggressively [5]. It is possible to contextualize social exclusion referring to social identity theory [6], in which a part of an individual's self-esteem is linked to their membership in

a group. Identifying with a group allows individuals to make a distinction between the ingroup (group membership) and the outgroup (everyone who is not in their group). The exclusion of undesirable individuals helps to maintain a positive social identity [7]. Thus, a coach's task should be the promotion of a more inclusive and open environment.

According to social development theory [8], children learn how to give sense to the world by play. They adapt their behaviors in relation to the social norms that are valid in a specific social setting and develop a moral conscience through their interactions with significant adults. This can similarly be applicable on the sport field, in which they can internalize group expectations about respectful and disrespectful behaviors through interactions with their coach and teammates, shaping a sense of moral conscience. Accordingly, coaches should be able to guide children to achieve this result by learning specific practices which contribute to the development of a common system of values.

Furthermore, the prevention of violent behaviors may be achieved through the application of Hirschi's social bond theory [9]. The theory suggests that the promotion of an individual's social bonds leads to increased adherence to social norms, preventing violent or otherwise deviant behavior. Thus, coaches should focus on those practices which strengthen social bonds among team members.

Finally, according to social learning theory, children learn how to give sense to the world by observing and imitating adult behaviors [10]. From this perspective, coaches could provide positive behavioral patterns which children could observe and implement.

On the basis of these premises, the SAVE project will promote respect among youth from 6 to 12 years old in grass-root sport clubs, with the aim to prevent violent behavior and to enhance social inclusion and equal opportunities. The age range of 6–12, i.e., school age, was chosen as, during this period, children begin to spend considerable amounts of time with their peers as well as participate in sport clubs. The project will be developed over 30 months and will be implemented in seven European countries: Lithuania, Italy, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Austria, and Spain.

Since the project will involve individuals across numerous nations, each with its own cultural context of knowledge, social norms, and life habits, it will be necessary to conduct a desk analysis and at least seven focus groups per country. This will enable an ability to define which behaviors should be labeled as violent or socially exclusive. Each focus group will be conducted with 5 coaches of grass-root sports as well as 5 parents whose children participate in grass-root sports.

Next, in consultation with current psychological literature, the skills and competencies necessary for coaches will be defined. The results of this phase will be used to design a training phase with a specific curriculum and skill cards which coaches will implement.

Concurrent to the implementation phase, an online platform accessible to both coaches and parents will be designed to provide materials useful in addressing violent and socially exclusive behaviors. At the end of the implementation phase, the Training Kit will be finalized with the Sport against Violence and Exclusion Handbook as well as all the materials, findings, and statistics produced during the project.

The SAVE project confronts a relevant social issue. It can help to build a more aware society through the application of social norms which help to prevent violent and socially exclusive behaviors. In previous decades, few scientific studies provided a thorough understanding of these phenomena. Even now, additional practical strategies to prevent violent and socially exclusive behavior are needed from the scientific community. Thus, the SAVE project fits perfectly within this research scenario and, in our view, can significantly contribute in addressing this social need.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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