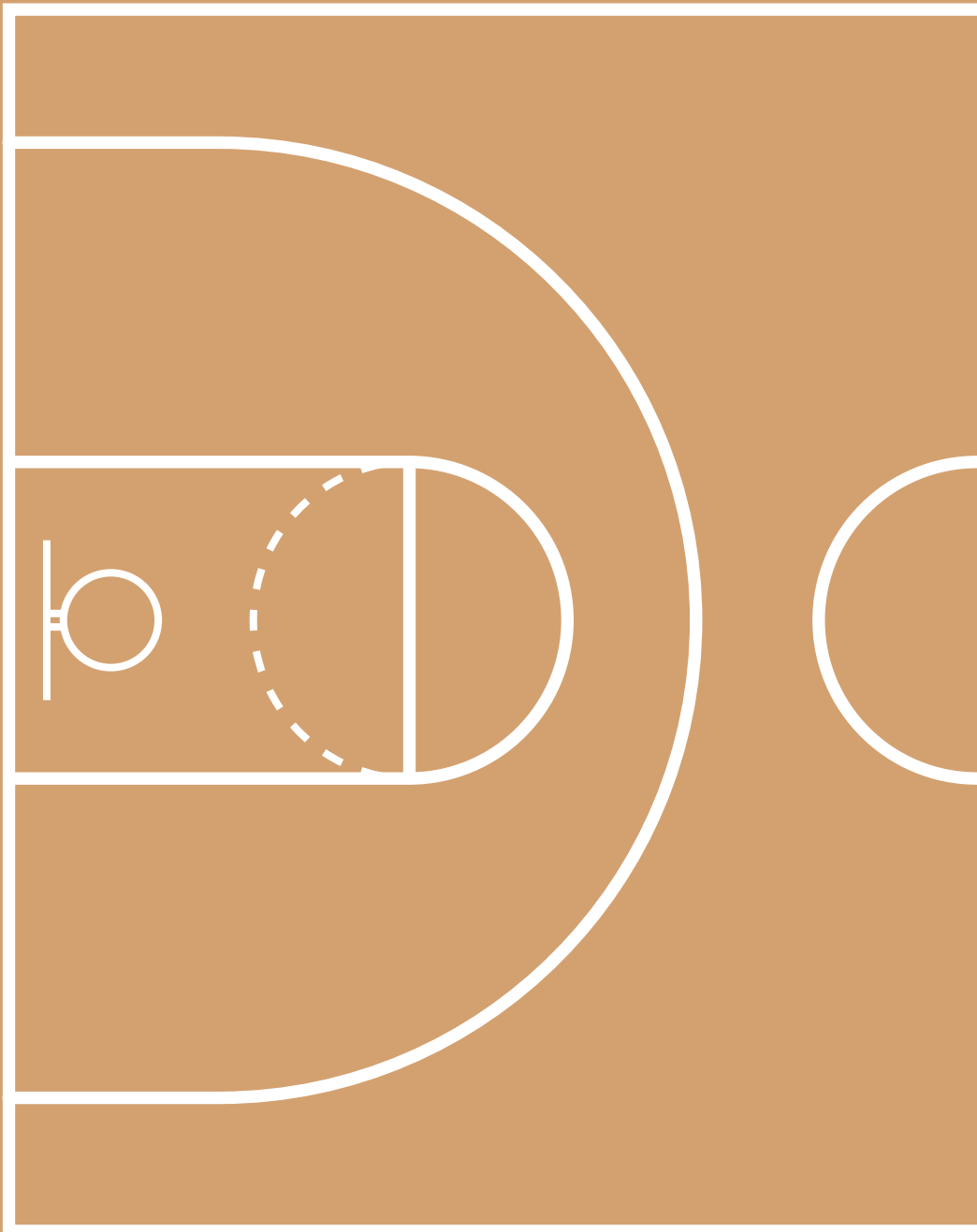


A FLEXIBLE HOBBY, AN APPROACHABLE INSTRUCTOR

**and other researchers'
recommendations for instructors
of children's and adolescents'
leisure activities**





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A flexible hobby, an approachable instructor and other researchers' recommendations for instructors of children's and adolescents' leisure activities

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Table of contents

Foreword	5
Environmental catalysts and knowledge of a child's development stages support leisure activity instructors	9
Leisure activities and training in puberty	19
For better and for worse: the importance of children and young people's peer relationships in physical activity	29
Multisport participation in children and young people's physical activity	39
Children and adolescents' leisure activities and sleep	47
Supporting children and adolescents' health and wellbeing through diet	55
How can children and young people be motivated in leisure activities?	65
How can interaction be used to maintain high-quality motivation and a positive atmosphere?	73
Instructors are highly important for participation in leisure activities	83
How can a young person's mental health be supported in leisure activities?	91
Icehearts programme offers long-term support through team sports	99
Combining competitive sports with school requires support also from the coach	107
Musically gifted children require support and care from music teachers to further enhance their holistic development	115
Cultural and linguistic diversity in leisure activities	125
Living the role of a teacher and boys	135
Next steps	145



Students in the School Cinema Association's film club make their own films.

Foreword

“A child cannot be interested in something of which they have no knowledge,” notes Professor Inkeri Ruokonen in the first article of this publication. Children and young people should be exposed as much content and opportunities as possible in physical activity, arts and culture as well as other areas of interest that they can try out, engage in and learn about. For example, videos and other motion images are a good way to illustrate what it is like to engage in a sport or other leisure activities. Indeed, the reason parkour is so popular among children is because they have watched video clips of it on their mobile phones. The Student Survey of 2024 shows that children and young people are interested in different types of recreational activities. They just need opportunities to try them out.

Children and young people should be given the freedom to discover and choose their own recreational activities. This year, the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities in secondary schools includes a range of leisure activities for students to try out. This

concept can be incorporated into all recreational activities in such a way that children would first be allowed to easily try out two activities before having to decide whether to continue with the chosen activity.

Moreover, we need new ideas for how to prompt teenagers to take part in leisure activities, as many quit their recreational activities in secondary school. The 2024 Student Survey shows that 19 per cent of secondary school students, both girls and boys, do not take part in any leisure activities at all. Altogether 31 per cent of girls and 22 per cent of boys have considered quitting their recreational activities. This was one of the main reasons why we decided to produce this publication.

The publication consists of concise articles by researchers and experts on factors related to leisure activities that foster favourable growth and development in children and young people, motivate them to pursue recreational activities and to enjoy their activities and advance in them. We also asked the authors to give recommendations to instructors and coaches.

Bringing in new perspectives to the discussion on leisure activities are warranted: What do children and young people consider important in recreational activities and what impedes them from pursuing their activities and making progress in them. According to Tanja Lanni, who studied the Finnish model for leisure activities, it is often the case that children and young people would like to reach their objective in leisure activities in ways that differ from those of the instructors and coaches. I believe many instructors and coaches are prepared to change their practices, if this encourages children and young people to become more committed

to their recreational activities and helps the whole group evolve. Laimi advocates making leisure activities more flexible, especially so that children's and young people's wishes can be met, and so that it is possible to train in different. Instructors are also encouraged to talk more, especially with secondary school students. This way they would become more familiar to young people.

The publication includes articles written by researchers specialised in both sports and arts. This makes it possible to deliberate the significance of children's creativity in sports, for example. Researcher Guadalupe López-Íñiguez notes that creativity plays a vital role in the development of gifted children. The researcher highlights the importance of students' freedom and exploration processes, as well as improvisation and social relationships. I believe these ideas would interest team coaches too.

It is my hope that this publication will stimulate discussion and bring impetus to exploring novel ways of providing recreational activities for children and young people.

SANDRA BERGQVIST,

Minister of Youth, Sport and Physical Activity

The publication is part of the implementation of the National Child Strategy. Anna Kanerva, Senior Researcher at the Center for Cultural Policy Research Cupore, is responsible for the editing of the publication together with a working group that consisted of Iina Berden, Ministerial Adviser at the Ministry of Education and Culture, Professor Eeva Anttila and Coordinator Sunna Maijala from the University of the Arts Helsinki.



Jumping is fun, and you can do it anywhere.

– Roope Rikala, 8, Parkour Academy of Vallila.

Environmental catalysts and knowledge of a child's development stages support leisure activity instructors

INKERI RUOKONEN

Environmental catalysts

Each child is valuable and unique. This article focuses on how important it is for the adults in a child's growth environment to be familiar with features of the child's development stages and to support the child's interests by providing high-quality guidance, support and teaching. Support and opportunities provided by the adults around them allow the child to find and develop their personal strengths and interests. In addition to environmental factors, the child's personal characteristics and lucky coincidences influence the way the child discovers their intrinsic motivation, learns, and develops to their full potential in the leisure activity of their choice. Through intrinsic motivation, persistent practice and high-quality instruction, the child can fulfil their potential and even become a top-level talent. The key, however, is the joy the child experiences while engaging in a leisure activity. For those who guide leisure activities, fostering and maintaining the child's joy is an all-important goal.

A child cannot be interested in something of which they have no knowledge. In order to find an interest, the child needs environmental catalysts, including experiences of different forms of leisure activities. According to Gagné's¹ theory, environmental catalysts play an important role in a child's learning and wellbeing as well as in supporting engagement in a leisure activity that the child enjoys. Each child has potential strengths. Recognising a child's individual talent potential is important in terms of being able to support the child and to encourage them to find their interests and fulfil their potential in them. The adults around the child, including parents, teachers and instructors, can encourage the child to try different hobbies and help them discover their interests. Friends and peers often act as strong catalysts of enthusiasm. Acting as part of a group may inspire the child and help them develop their social and team work skills. In a safe environment, the child dares try new things without a fear of failure. Enhancement-led feedback helps the child understand their strengths and development areas and inspires them to continue practising. Adults and siblings can set an example, and their passions and interests can inspire the child. Environmental catalysts (parents, school, leisure activity instructors, siblings, friends, the media, cultural venues and experiences, etc.) can provide significant support for the child in discovering and developing their talent potential and strengths². When the child receives support and opportunities to try activities they might like, they can discover and develop their personal strengths and interests. Studies have found that artistic hobbies and learning through arts in schools support pupils' educational self-efficacy beliefs and social skills³.

¹Gagné, 2023. | ²Piirto, 2022; Ruokonen, 2005; Ruokonen et. al., 2011.

³Ruokonen 2009; Ruokonen 2014; Ruokonen & Ruismäki 2015; Ruokonen 2018.

Stages of development in childhood and adolescence

Teachers and instructors in the child's growth environment have been found to play a key role in encouraging and guiding the child in a leisure activity. The foundation of a well-functioning pedagogical guidance relationship is knowledge of a child's development stages and focusing on the uniqueness of each individual. In the following section, we discuss general characteristics associated with school-age children's stages of development to support leisure activity instructors.

According to Erikson's⁴ psychosocial development theory, an individual goes through eight different stages of developmental crises during their lifetime and has to resolve the developmental conflicts relating to them. Erikson's theory covers an individual's entire lifetime from childhood to old age. Each stage involves a challenge that can affect an individual's identity and development. The conflict can have either a positive resolution (that promotes wellbeing) or a negative one (that undermines wellbeing). A positive resolution supports the individual's development, whereas a negative resolution may pose challenges in later stages. Erikson stressed the development of identity in youth, in particular, even if a person's identity continues to develop throughout their lifetime. The identity is continuously taking shape and evolving through different roles and experiences, and it is a key theme throughout the individual's lifetime. An individual's development constantly interacts with social relationships, as people learn and grow in relationships with others. Erikson notes that the culture and era in which an individual lives influ-

⁴Erikson, 1963.

ence their development. Before school age, a child has already gone through three different stages of development: infancy, early childhood and preschool age. If the child has benefited from positive interaction and attachments, they have developed a basic trust in life, learning to be independent and use their initiative in relation to their learning and actions.

In the development stage of a primary school age child (aged 6 to 12), Erikson's⁵ theory stresses learning the skill of industry and supporting practice. If efforts to support the child's industry fail, the child may develop a feeling of inferiority. A leisure activity provides the child with opportunities for experimenting, action-based learning and learning the skills of practising. Children develop coordinated physical activity skills and are able to participate in a wide range of physical activities that improve their skills, agility and strength. The child's thinking becomes more logical and abstract, and they start to understand more complex issues and are curious to learn new things, such as notation. Children learn to collaborate and work in a group, which is important in many leisure activities. Primary school age children also develop their emotional skills and learn to express their feelings and motivation. It is important for the instructor and guardians to support the child in setting goals and encourage them to work together with other children. The instructor's task is to monitor their development and provide them with appropriate support when they face challenges. Results obtained through practice inspire the child. Through artistic expression and disciplinary skills, the child can overcome feelings of timidity and inhibition. A leisure activity gives the child the performance challenges they need. An enjoyable leisure activity opens out the world and helps the child to conquer new mental horizons. The child is encour-

⁵Erikson, 1963.

Recommendations for leisure activity instructors to support the guidance of children aged 6 to 12:

- Respect the child's interests and guide the child to set goals: encourage the child to take responsibility for their practice. Create routines around leisure activities and practice, making them part of everyday life.
- Encourage friendships and collaboration: rather than on competition, attention is focused on encouraging others, team play and achieving both personal and shared goals.
- Help the child to be their best self: positive feedback on learning helps develop their self-confidence.
- Celebrate achievements: Notice the child's achievements, whether small or large, and create a positive atmosphere for learning.

aged to take responsibility for their practice and given space for their personal choices and free creative expression. Rather than fearing failure, the child learns from it, and their perseverance in practising increases. The joy of success is a shared joy.

In youth (ages 12 to 18), the child goes through the stormy stages of puberty and takes a step towards adulthood. Young people may experience anxiety and uncertainty, and learning emotional skills remains important as powerful feelings come and go. According to Erikson's⁶ theory, the key to this stage is creating a sense of identity as well as exploring and discovering yourself. If the identity conflict associated with this development stage remains unresolved, the young person can develop a sense of confused roles and a poor sense of self and self-efficacy. Young people grow rapidly and their bodies change, which includes growth spurts and hormonal changes. This may affect their self-image and body image. At lower secondary school age, children engage in more abstract thinking and they learn to assess things more critically. They seek the acceptance of their peers. The circle of friends and group identity become increasingly important as the young person strives to separate themselves from parental care and the world of childhood. Finding an enjoyable leisure activity and the friendships associated with it plays an important role in a teenager's wellbeing. A good and enjoyable leisure activity may prevent a young person from ending up in bad company or even in the street. Offering support in tough times prevents the young person from giving up their hobby, as an enjoyable leisure activity can help them find their self and relieve the pressures they encounter on the way. While puberty can be a challenging stage, with the right kind of support and flexibility the young person can discover meaning and joy in leisure activities. It is important to

⁶Erikson, 1963.

Recommendations for leisure activity instructors to support the guidance of children aged 12 to 18:

- Create an atmosphere of trust, listen and be open: listen actively and keep a dialogical connection open. Be prepared to discuss the young person's emotions, challenges and identity. The leisure activity is a channel for letting out, experiencing and building many different emotions.
- Support the young person's efforts to become independent: encourage them to be themselves, accept and value them. Give them space to make their own decisions and try things out.
- Link the leisure activity to friends: encourage the young person to participate in leisure activities where they can meet other people of their age. Engaging in an activity with friends can boost motivation.
- Set a good example and be a role model for the young person: they look for role models and idols but cannot imitate them directly. Offer good examples and role models that can inspire the young person to develop their identity.
- Encourage the young person to engage in diverse activities: encourage them to take part in different activities and groups, enabling them to find their own place and interests.
- Support the young person in setting goals and rejoicing of their achievements: help them set realistic goals in their leisure activity and celebrate learning experiences or achievements, whether big or small.

give the young person some space while keeping lines of communication open and listening to their thoughts about their feelings and identity discourse. Young people can express their thoughts not only verbally but also through arts, including visual or musical expression, embodiment or drama. A leisure activity instructor often is an admired role model and example for a young person. This enables the instructor to inspire, motivate and encourage the young person to find their own way and identity as well as to have enthusiasm for developing their skills in their chosen leisure activity. Believing in your own strengths, discovering your motivation, commitment to practice and an encouraging community are key factors in maintaining participation in a leisure activity. A leisure activity pursued in youth does not need to become a profession, even if this naturally does sometimes happen. In the best case, the hobby becomes an activity and source of joy that endures throughout the person's lifetime.

Knowledge of a child's and young person's development stages, offering environmental stimuli, listening to the child's personal voice and immersing yourself in the child's world of experiences lay the foundation for a trusting pedagogical interaction relationship. The child's personal relationship with and commitment to a leisure activity stem from the freedom to choose a hobby that is relevant to their competence and interests. They develop and gather strength through an environment and instruction of a high pedagogical quality, with the support of encouraging friends and guardians.

AUTHOR

Inkeri Ruokonen (Doctor of Education, Licentiate of Music Education) is Professor Emerita at the University of Turku, where she worked as Professor of Early Childhood Education Pedagogy and Vice Dean of

the Faculty of Education. She has the title of Docent in Music Education and is a member of the Teachers' Academy at the University of Helsinki. Inkeri Ruokonen has served as educational director in a development project on the foundations of pedagogical work in leisure activities for children and young people, which is part of the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities funded by the Finnish National Agency for Education.

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The best things about football are mates, the atmosphere, hanging out together and having fun. It's easier to find a hobby if you can try out different sports.

– Emil Myllylä, 16, and Joel Mattinen, 16, Laajasalon Palloseura.

Leisure activities and training in puberty

TUULA AIRA

Meaningful leisure time and activities play an important role in children's and young people's wellbeing¹. A large majority of children and young people in Finland also report that they engage in an activity at least once a week². However, participation in guided leisure activities declines clearly during adolescence, especially when it comes to physical activity³ (Figure 1) – many young people give up their physical leisure activity (so-called *drop out* phenomenon). While 18% of basic education grade 8 and 9 pupils engage in organised cultural or art activities at least weekly, this proportion drops as they move on to upper secondary education (15% of general upper secondary school students, 9% of students at vocational institutions)⁴. This chapter focuses particularly on engaging in guided physical activity in youth.

Instructor-led physical activity is organised especially by sports clubs, which reach nearly nine out of ten Finns during their childhood and adolescence⁵. Young people also engage in

¹ Aira et al., 2014; Convention on the Rights of the Child 60/1991.

² Statistics and indicator databank Sotkanet 2024.

³ Aira et al., 2013. | ⁴ Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2024.

⁵ Blomqvist et al., 2019.

physical activity organised by sports sector enterprises, school sports clubs or other associations or clubs⁶.

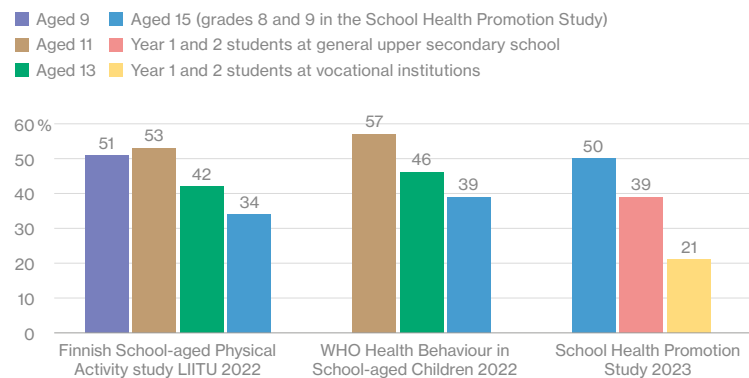


Figure 1. Regular participation of children and young people of different ages in organised physical activity (%)⁷

Why do many young people drop out of organized physical activity in puberty – is there anything we can do?

Based on a survey conducted as part of the Finnish School-aged Physical Activity study (LIITU), the most common reasons for dropping out of sports club activities among children aged 11 to 15 were not finding the activities inspiring enough, getting tired of the sport, and not enjoying being in the team or group⁸. The

⁶Martin et al., 2023. | ⁷Finnish School-aged Physical Activity study (LIITU) and WHO's Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey: shares of those participating regularly and actively in sports club activities (Blomqvist et al., 2023; previously unpublished data from WHO HBSC), School Health Promotion Study: those who engage in organised physical activity at least once a week (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2024). | ⁸ Blomqvist et al., 2023.

most common reasons for dropping out of a team sport among young competitive athletes aged 15 to 16 were similar: they had other things to do, they had no time to spend with friends, the activities were not inspiring enough, and team spirit was lacking⁹. The proportions of those who found the listed reasons important varied from almost 50% (lack of team spirit) to more than 70% (had other things to do)¹⁰.

The findings indicate that it would be important for the instructor to try and foster a positive and safe atmosphere in the activity group. Team building and making friends are worth focusing on. A guidance approach that encourages everyone and takes note of individual strengths may be the key to young people not dropping out. It would also be useful for the instructor to regularly ask the young people about their needs and wishes, for example by talking to them one on one and/or using a survey that they can respond to anonymously. The Finnish Olympic Committee offers a free online questionnaire template for clubs in Finnish, Swedish and English¹¹.

The instructor should recognise the fact that dropping out of a leisure activity may also be a natural part of a young person's life which the instructor cannot in all respects influence¹². Young people's interests change and, for example, school and studies take up more of their time as they grow older. A Finnish cohort study found that a desire to spend more time studying was the

⁹ Rottensteiner & Konttinen, 2013.

¹⁰ Rottensteiner & Konttinen, 2013.

¹¹ Finlands Olympiska Kommitté, 2024.

¹² Rottensteiner & Konttinen, 2013; Törmä 2024.

most common reason for dropping out of sports club activities between the ages of 15 and 19¹³. Typical reasons for dropping out also included being tired of the sport, an illness/injury, and not having enough time for other pastimes¹⁴.

Those who participated in sports club activities throughout their youth (aged 15 and 19) were more likely to have engaged in their main sport early (by school age), competed at the national level at the age of 15, and pursued success as adult athletes than those who dropped out of club activities between the ages of 15 and 19¹⁵. In the light of these findings, it appears that those whose pursuit of an activity is less goal-oriented are more likely to drop out. While competitiveness suits many young people, it would be important to have the possibility to keep participating while setting the bar lower if you so wish. An average of four weekly guided training sessions¹⁶ may be too much for many at general upper secondary school age. While participation in competitive sports is the sole mission of some sports clubs, many also wish to offer leisure activities to all young people. Some regional sports organisations provide instructor training that focuses specifically on guiding leisure physical activities rather than coaching competitive athletes¹⁷.

Few young people start a physical activity at a sports club after the age of 15¹⁸. It is important to also offer opportunities for starting a physical activity as an adolescent. For the time being, general upper secondary school and vocational education and training

¹³ Rinta-Antila et al., 2023. | ¹⁴ Rinta-Antila et al., 2023.

¹⁵ Rinta-Antila et al., 2024. | ¹⁶ Mononen et al., 2021.

¹⁷ T.ex. Keski-Suomen Liikunta ry, 2024.

¹⁸ Rinta-Antila et al., 2024.

students are not within the scope of the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities. The Ombudsman for Children has also proposed extending this model to secondary education¹⁹. Organising leisure activities during the school hours could lower the threshold for participating in an instructor-led activity and, for example, help young people find friends through the hobby.

Focus on the young person's holistic wellbeing

The purpose of leisure activities is to bring joy to a young person's life, make their leisure time meaningful, and provide a counterbalance to school work and studies. At best, an organised physical activity can promote social and psychological wellbeing²⁰ and help the young person to engage in enough physical activity to maintain their health²¹. However, participation in sports club activities and similar does not automatically guarantee meeting the recommendation for physical activity²². As in any other encounters between young people, peer relationships are not always straightforward, not everyone feels included, and some may be bullied²³. The instructor's actions are highly significant in dealing with problems and fostering a team spirit in general. It is advisable to spend time planning not only how participants' skills can be developed but also how friendships can be built and every participant taken into consideration.

¹⁹ LAPS/59/2022.

²⁰ Vella et al., 2023.

²¹ Aira et al., 2021.

²² Aira et al., 2021.

²³ Toivonen and Kananen, 2023.

Recommendations for leisure activity instructors:

- Create an inspiring atmosphere that fosters team spirit.
- Find out regularly about young people's preferences and needs relating to the activity.
- Lower the threshold for starting a leisure activity as an adolescent or young adult.
- Remember that dropping out cannot be completely prevented. Young people's interests change, and dropping out of a leisure activity can also be seen as a normal life stage.
- Vocational and general upper secondary school students should also have an opportunity to participate in a leisure activity during school hours. As proposed by the Ombudsman for Children, the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities should be extended to secondary education.

AUTHOR

Tuula Aira (Doctor of Health Sciences) is a university teacher of health promotion at the University of Jyväskylä's Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences. She has conducted research in the health and wellbeing of children and adolescents and, in recent years, particularly the change in physical activity patterns during adolescence. Aira has led children's and young people's recreational physical activities and is currently involved in the activities of her local sports club as a board member.

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Hanna Wahlman leads the School Cinema Association's film club at Nordsjö Primary School in Helsinki. Film clubs is one of the top three hobbies girls and boys aged 7 to 15 would like to try.

For better and for worse: the importance of children and young people's peer relation- ships in physical activity

PÄIVI BERG

Studies on the leisure activities of children and young adults aged from 7 to 29 show that these age groups are more likely to engage in self-organised physical activity and exercise than to participate in instructor-led physical activity¹. The fact that the share of those participating in organised physical activity decreases with age is also well known. The 'older' young people are, the more likely they are to engage in physical activity outside a sports club setting. For young people, the social aspect of leisure activities is essential: spending time with friends is one of the most important reasons for engaging in hobbies².

Some children and young people additionally 'take their hobby seriously', in other words pursue it with determination and specific goals, while others enjoy hanging out together in a more relaxed atmosphere and with less strict commitment. According

¹ Hakanen, Myllyniemi & Salasuo, 2019;

Tarvainen, Manner, Myllyniemi & Salasuo, 2022.

² Myllyniemi & Berg, 2013; see also Laukkanen, Palomäki & Huotari, 2023; Koski & Hirvensalo, 2023.

to my observations, however, the degree of commitment to a leisure activity does not depend on whether the activity is organised or self-organised. People try out different possibilities together, but the degree of commitment varies from situation to situation and is determined in the social context. If a leisure activity is not to their liking, the entire group of young people may move on to other options to find something meaningful to do.³

When it comes to starting and dropping out of organised physical activity, I have used the term social legs to describe the importance of children and young people's relationships with friends. I use it to describe the way children and young people make choices together in peer groups⁴. Children and young people usually have several and varying groups of friends, which means that each group can also attract individual children and young people to new leisure activities or draw them away. My interviews with children and young people have brought up the way friends can attract a child or young person to an activity and maintain their involvement in it. For most girls and boys, a friend persuading them to participate was a significant impetus for starting a leisure activity: the social legs had carried them to it. When it comes to hobbies involving physical activity, however, peer groups may have several simultaneous meanings. Friends can attract a young person to a leisure activity and keep them involved in it. Friends who do not participate in the activity may equally well draw a young person away from it – or others in the activity group may push the young person out.

It is crucial for coaches and instructors in children's and young people's organised physical activities to recognise that bullying

³ Berg, 2015.

⁴ Berg, 2015.

and discrimination are a factor in peer relationships that pushes children and young people away from the activity. It was examined more extensively for the first time in the Finnish School-aged Physical Activity study (LIITU) in 2016⁵. All in all, around 20% of young people aged 11, 13 and 15 reported bullying or discrimination in a physical activity which, after school and the Internet, was the third most common place where bullying and discrimination took place. The most common reasons for bullying were a person's appearance, limited physical activity skills and clothing. In the Children and youth leisure survey⁶, roughly one out of three respondents aged between 10 and 29 reported that they had experienced bullying, discrimination or other inappropriate behaviour often or sometimes. Experiences of bullying, discrimination and inappropriate behaviour were more common among those aged over 15. Almost one half of respondents aged between 20 and 24 reported having experienced bullying, discrimination or inappropriate behaviour in physical activity often or sometimes. It mostly involved belittling, underestimation and being excluded from the group but also mocking and name-calling.⁷

The group most likely to report experiences of bullying, discrimination and inappropriate treatment in the Children and youth leisure survey⁸ were non-binary young people. Almost 70% of them said they had experienced inappropriate treatment in physical activity often or sometimes. Clearly more than one half of young people belonging to sexual minorities also reported experiencing inappropriate treatment often or sometimes, while this figure for young people belonging to an ethnic minority was 45%. Young people with disabilities and those who feel they look

⁵ Laine, Matilainen & Salasuo, 2016. | ⁶ Hakanen et al., 2019.

⁷ Hakanen et al., 2019. | ⁸ Hakanen et al., 2019.

different also reported bullying and discrimination clearly more often than others. Consequently, belonging to or identifying with different minorities significantly increases the likelihood of inappropriate treatment encountered by children and young people in a physical activity.⁹

Whereas belonging to a sexual or gender minority is more normalised in society and consequently also in leisure activity environments than before, some young people are still afraid of the possible consequences of coming out in physical activities. They are afraid that this would affect the way their friends and coaches in the activity treat them.¹⁰ Homophobic verbal bullying as a means of discrimination has been shown to predict more frequent experiences of depression, anxiety and stress than physical bullying¹¹. Discriminatory treatment by other participants in a leisure activity additionally has a negative impact on transgender and non-binary young people's conflicting relationships with their bodies¹².

We have discussed bullying, discrimination and sexual harassment in children's and young people's physical activity and sports in a work¹³ edited by us. The authors we invited to contribute to the work comprised a number of actors working with issues related to childhood, adolescence, families, physical activity and sport. I will conclude by giving recommendations picked from this work for coaches and instructors concerning practices, openness and collaboration as well as addressing diversity and equality in leisure activities.

⁹ Hakanen et al., 2019.

¹⁰ Berg & Kokkonen, 2020; Lehtonen, 2018; Junkala & Lallukka, 2012.

¹¹ Symons et al., 2014. | ¹² Hargie et al., 2017.

¹³ Berg, Salasuo & Lehtonen, 2020.

Recommendations for leisure activity instructors:

PRACTICES, OPENNESS AND COLLABORATION

- Coaches and instructors are responsible for the wellbeing of the children they guide. It is advisable to tell the participating children and young people as well as their guardians that they are also responsible for treating others well and building a positive atmosphere, making sure that joy, learning and safety are for everyone in all situations.
- A child or young person must not be exposed to hazards or inappropriate treatment in leisure activities, and if this occurs, immediate intervention in the situation is needed. In addition, a child must be able to participate in planning the activities and influence matters that concern them.
- Common rules and clear operating models for intervening in problem situations should be drawn up together with the coaches, instructors, other club actors, parents and the children and young people themselves to guide everyone involved in the activities. It is also essential to communicate about any operating models already in place for preventing and intervening in discrimination and inappropriate treatment.
- Sports and physical activity organisers must foster a listening and dialogical atmosphere in which mental and physical violence is prevented, people also dare bring up sensitive issues, and intervention in such issues is the norm. Open dialogue between parents and club actors is an

important form of preventive work. Additionally, children's and young people's experiences should always be heard. It is important that discussions and interventions do not lead to a fear of consequences. In a good operating culture, each child and young person feels that they are treated fairly and respectfully.

ADDRESSING EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

- Promoting equality creates an opportunity to reach new target groups and improve the quality of the activities. Increased equality improves comfort and commitment. Taking visible action to promote equality may increase the attraction of the club and improve its image.
- Young people in minority groups need to receive a clear message of being welcome to join in.
- Everyone working with children and young people should receive training on how they can promote equality between children and young people, be it LGTB sensitivity, multiculturalism or accounting for limitations of functional capacity. It is advisable for instructors, coaches and sports clubs to draw on the competence of different NGOs and youth work in many different issues – to ask for advice, ask for training.
- Each sports venue, training session, participant, athlete, coach and person working with physical activity and sports must be committed to promoting non-discrimination and equal treatment. There must be zero tolerance for discrimination and inappropriate treatment.

AUTHOR

Päivi Berg, Doctor of Social Sciences, has a title of Docent in social psychology, and she works as a university researcher at the University of Helsinki. She engages in youth research and has studied physical activity at school, children and young people's physical leisure activities and leisure time, and many other aspects of young people's lives. Key themes of her research have concerned inequalities and non-discrimination.

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Visual arts is the number one hobby that girls aged 10 to 15 would like to try (Student survey 2024). Image from Espoo School of Art.



Kwame Kubi's hobbies are Thai boxing and gym training.

Multisport participation in children and young people's physical activity

NANNE-MARI LUUKKAINEN

The national physical activity recommendations (2021) stress the importance of versatile physical activity for all children and adolescents aged 7 to 17, taking the individual's age into account. While variety is mentioned in the recommendations and it is emphasised in physical activities, its practical realisation may vary.

The purpose of this article is to examine children and adolescents' multisport participation. This refers to a child's or adolescent's participation in more than one sport, which provides an opportunity to try out different sports and get to know a variety of operating environments. In addition to organised activities, children and adolescents also need versatile exercise as part of their other daily activities.

Benefits of multisport

The number of children who participate in multidisciplinary sports appears to increase from early childhood education age until primary school grades 1 to 3. In grades 4 to 6, however, multisport participation begins to decline as children no longer take

part in as many sports activities as before.¹ This loss of diversity happens surprisingly early, even if research evidence shows that there should be no rush.

Many former performance athletes engaged in several sports in their childhood and adolescence and only selected their main sport at an older age². Even from the perspective of elite sports, there is consequently no need to rush into choosing a particular sport too early. Research findings indicate that early concentration on a specific sport may help a person reach the top at a young age, but success in junior classes rarely continues into adulthood³. Unvaried activities may additionally bring various challenges, including burnout, increased injury risk and disadvantages to long-term development. So why the hurry in children's and young people's sports these days?

The benefits of multisport participation can already be seen in early years. While this guide is intended for instructors and coaches of children and adolescents aged 7 to 18, they should be aware of the fact that physical activity in early years predicts physically active lifestyles later on. The development of a physically active or sedentary lifestyle is known to have its roots in early childhood and affect the person in their adolescence and even adulthood⁴.

Studies have found that children at early childhood education age who participate in two or more sports are more physically active in the first primary school grades compared to children who do not engage in physical activity or only participate in one sport⁵.

¹ Luukkainen et al., unpublished.

² Aira et al., 2014. | ³ Güllich et al., 2022.

⁴ Lounassalo et al., 2019; Telama et al., 2014.

⁵ Luukkainen et al., 2024.

While children should pursue multidisciplinary sports at an early age, their individual needs should be addressed in this.

Multisport participation allows children to learn about different sports and operating environments. This enables them to participate in many different forms of physical activity and consequently also provides them with more opportunities for physical activity in their leisure time. Research evidence also shows that the length of time children spend outdoors generally predicts their level of physical activity later on⁶. This is why versatile activities outside training sessions are also important. Rather than being limited to physical activity, the benefits of multisport participation and time spent outdoors also predict better motor skills later in childhood.⁷ The diversity of motor skills has also been found to decline if the child only focuses on a single sport.⁸ Versatile prior experiences additionally help the child develop skills in other sports. Examples of this include different exercises, styles of play, coaching styles, coaching cultures and various social relationships with different actors in the sport.

Multisport participation predicts a higher level of physical activity in adulthood and reduces sedentary behaviours over the long term⁹. Research findings indicate that participation in multidisciplinary sports produces more enjoyable experiences of physical activity and sports in children compared to those who only focus on a single sport. In addition, sports injuries and repetitive strain injuries are less common in children who engage in multiple sports,¹⁰ whereas early specialisation in a single sport

⁶ Luukkainen et al., 2024.

⁷ Luukkainen et al., 2025.

⁸ Lloyd et al., 2015.

⁹ Côté et al., 2009; Gallant et al., 2022. | ¹⁰ Côté et al., 2009.

increases the risk of burnout and overtraining¹¹. Multisport participation enables children and adolescents to try out different sports and find one that suits them. Increased variation also helps maintain their interest in participation.

Various studies have been conducted on multidisciplinary sports and versatility. While it is often thought that versatile training in a single sport would offer the same positive effects as multisport participation, this is not true. Multidisciplinary sports have been found to produce more extensive and diverse benefits than focusing on a single sport, even if the training is versatile. For example, one sport alone cannot offer familiarisation with the cultures of other sports, different coaches and their operating methods, or physical activity in different environments.¹²

It is important to remember that children and adolescents are individuals, and each child has their own ways of pursuing leisure activities. This is why coaches and instructors should encourage children to participate and also find other ways of engaging in physical activity for themselves. It is important to accept that children do other sports and spend time on them. Coaches should additionally encourage children to engage in non-organised physical activity, such as being on the move and outdoor activities. Coaches should also understand how much physical activity children and young people need to get in total, as training sessions of a sport alone often do not even meet the requirements of physical activity recommendations.

However, it is crucial to remember that the key to children and young people's physical activity is the joy and fun the exercise and activities bring them.

¹¹ Waldron et al., 2020.

¹² Côté et al., 2009.

Recommendations for leisure activity instructors:

- Multisport participation improves children's physical activity and motor skills.
- Enable and encourage children and adolescents to engage in multidisciplinary sports.
- Versatile activities help maintain enthusiasm and interest.

AUTHOR

Nanne-Mari Luukkainen, Master of Sport Sciences, is a postgraduate researcher and university teacher at the University of Jyväskylä. In her research, Luukkainen has examined the impacts of non-organised and instructor-led physical activity, including multisport participation, on children and adolescents' physical activity and motor skills. In addition to her research, Luukkainen has practical experience of coaching children and young people and club activities, in which she has considered the significance of diversity in physical activity from a practical perspective.

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11-year-old Nea Tallgren's hobbies are film-making and horse riding.

Children and adolescents' leisure activities and sleep

JUULIA PAAVONEN

Getting enough sleep is essential for a child's growth and well-being. Sleep enables neural net development and learning. While we sleep, things we learned during the day are transferred to the long-term memory. Adequate sleep also plays a key role in emotion regulation and coping during the day. Growth hormone is released during sleep. Sleep is also vital for a well-functioning immune system.

In childhood, the need for sleep is clearly greater than later in life. The average need for sleep is approx. 12 to 14 hours a day in infancy, 10 to 13 hours at pre-primary age, 9 to 12 hours at primary school age, and 8 to 10 hours at secondary school age. Until the age of 3 to 5, napping meets some of the need for sleep. Regular daily routines, a healthy diet and daytime activities, including exercise and outdoor activities, are important for sleep.

Individual differences in the need for sleep are considerable in all age groups. A child may need 2 to 3 hours more sleep at night than another child of the same age. Heavy physical strain, being active or an illness may temporarily increase a child's need for sleep. The need for sleep also increases temporarily in puberty, albeit paradoxically, the young person's ability to tolerate pressure for sleep simultaneously increases, exposing them to sleep deficit.

Adequate sleep ensures optimal coping the next day. A child probably gets enough sleep if they are alert during the day, appear

to thrive, and have the energy to participate in various age-appropriate daily activities. To assess sleep adequacy, a sleep diary or monitoring of circadian rhythms can be used, for example over a two-week period.

Sleep deficit is often caused by choosing to stay up and going to bed too late considering the individual's need for sleep. It can also be caused by various sleep disorders that reduce the quality of sleep, slowing down recovery from the stresses of the day.

If the circadian rhythm has been upset, the child is sleepy at the wrong time considering school hours. In most cases this involves a delayed sleep phase, which means that the child is unable to fall asleep early enough and does not get adequate sleep during the night. An irregular daily rhythm is common especially after puberty. This leads to significant variations in the amount of sleep, and sleep deficit occurs at least occasionally. In most cases, the individual gets too little sleep on weekdays and makes up for the accumulated sleep deficit during the weekend. An irregular rhythm frequently also results in an experience of the sleep not being refreshing.

Insomnia is often associated with varying degrees of difficulty falling asleep and waking up at night as well as anxiety and overstimulation in the evening, which make it hard to fall asleep. Parasomnias, which include the individual sleepwalking and talking in their sleep as well as sleep terrors or confusional arousals, are often the result of sleep deficit or other sleep disorders. Restless legs can make it difficult to fall asleep in the evenings. Respiratory sleep disorders and narcolepsy may also cause hypersomnia and an experience of poor sleep quality.

In addition to tiredness, symptoms indicating inadequate sleep in children include especially restlessness and problems with concentration and emotion regulation. Sleep deficit exacer-

bates cognitive control difficulties and lengthens reaction times. It increases accident susceptibility, undermines regulation of fine motor skills and exposes the musculoskeletal system to pain. Long-term sleep deficit also increases the risk of metabolic disorders and weight gain. In adults, sleep deficit impairs both aerobic and anaerobic performance.

Adequate sleep is, above all, important for the mental wellbeing of children and adolescents. In young athletes, getting more sleep at night was linked to better mood and fewer experiences of fatigue and stress.

Children are more susceptible to not getting enough sleep than adults as their means of compensating for inadequate sleep are undeveloped. Paradoxically, sleep deficit in children may also manifest itself as restlessness, which may make it difficult to understand its link to not getting enough sleep. Various sleep disorders are additionally common in different age groups; their prevalence is as high as 20% to 30%, and even higher in children and young people who engage in sports.

The underlying reasons for sleep deficit usually are factors that disrupt sleep. Irregular lifestyles and excessive variation in the times of going to bed and waking up are the most common ones. Excessive screen time, especially in the evening, makes it more difficult to fall asleep, whereas strenuous physical training in the evening may also prevent a person from relaxing and going to sleep at the right time. Insomnia may additionally be a symptom of the overtraining syndrome. Sometimes sleep difficulties are associated with a stressful life situation in a broader sense, or mental health disorders.

It is always important to take the child's subjective experience of the quality and adequacy of their sleep into consideration. When assessing the adequacy of sleep in young children, the par-

ents' help is needed, as a child is not always able to reliably assess their circadian rhythm or quality of sleep. Motivating young people to get enough sleep is vital.

It is essential for professionals who work with children to remember the key importance of adequate sleep for supporting coping during the day, growth and development. Parents and children should be reminded of how significant getting enough sleep is for the child's daily wellbeing and coping. The schedules of leisure activities should allow the child or young person enough time to calm down before going to sleep after pursuing them. Individual features in the need for sleep and circadian rhythm should be accounted for as necessary. When planning the content of training sessions, it is also vital to ensure that the strain caused by an evening session is not so severe that it hampers falling asleep. If necessary, individual flexibility in the training programme or timing of training sessions should be offered, enabling the child or young person to get enough sleep.

All means should be used to ensure that a growing child gets enough sleep. Sleep disorders can be treated by various sleep hygiene and behavioural therapy methods (see tips for sleep hygiene below). A regular circadian rhythm ensures that the young person gets enough sleep both on weekdays and in the weekends. If the issue cannot be solved by such means, help is also available through the health care system.

AUTHOR

Julia Paavonen completed her Licentiate of Medicine degree at the University of Helsinki in 2000 and her Bachelor of Political Science degree in 2003. In 2004, Paavonen defended her dissertation on the significance of children's sleep disorders for their daytime wellbeing. Paavonen has had the title of Docent in Developmental Neuropsychi-

Recommendations for leisure activity instructors:

- Getting enough sleep is essential for the coping and development of a child who engages in physical activity.
- The need for sleep varies individually.
- It is vital to remind physically active children and their parents of the importance of getting enough sleep.
- Training programmes should enable the young person to get enough sleep.
- The level of strain should be assessed and, if necessary, reduced in the evenings.

SLEEP HYGIENE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

- An individual circadian rhythm that allows the child to get enough sleep every night.
- A regular daily rhythm with no more than one hour of variation between weekdays and weekends.
- Avoiding energy drinks and drinks containing caffeine.
- Avoiding screen time for one hour before bedtime.
- Having sufficient time to calm down before going to bed.
- Regular routines when getting ready for bed.
- Adequate lighting in the morning.
- Sufficiently dim lighting in the evenings.

atric Epidemiology since 2010 and Docent in Child Psychiatry since 2024. Paavonen has worked as a specialist in child psychiatry since 2017, and she holds the full-time post of Chief Physician at the Child Psychiatry department of Helsinki University Hospital.

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I like being able to have a proper training session in the evenings.

– Xander Arnold, 16.



Ville Hanni, coach in Laajasalon Palloseura, explains the game plan.

Supporting children and adolescents' health and wellbeing through diet

SARI NIINISTÖ & SUSANNA RAULIO

Health-promoting nutrition is the foundation of children and adolescents' wellbeing, and its impacts extend far into the future. Childhood and adolescence are important periods for shaping food preferences and eating habits, and adult support is crucial in developing a balanced food and body relationship.¹

A diet that supports health and normal growth can be put together in many ways, from a vegetarian to mixed diet as indicated by the individual's personal values. The key is eating a varied diet, as different foods provide different nutrients. Wholegrain products, vegetables, berries and fruit are good sources of fibre and carbohydrates. A variety of good protein sources should be selected, such as legumes, fish and eggs as well as meat in moderate quantities. Eating dairy products or corresponding supplemented plant-based products, soft fats, including vegetable oils and nuts, and vitamin D supplements every day is also recommended. The use of sugar and salt should be limited, and eating meat products and processed foods that contain large amounts of hard fats, salt or sugar should be kept to the minimum.²

There is no need to label individual foods as healthy or unhealthy, and a good diet can include all foods, also hamburgers,

¹ Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare & National Nutrition Council, 2019.

² National Nutrition Council, 2024.

pizzas, chips and sweets. When your everyday diet is balanced, there is no need to worry about having an occasional treat. It is important to teach children and young people to listen to their bodies – and tell hunger and thirst apart from cravings. This helps them develop a balanced relationship with food.³

Good drink choices

We should get 1 to 1.5 litres of fluids every day, and water is the best drink for quenching thirst. During physical activity that makes you sweat, you will also need 0.5 to 1 litres of water per hour, and sports drinks or juice may be necessary during drawn-out performances. The recommended amount of full fruit juices is at most one glass a day, and other sugary drinks, such as soft drinks and juices with added sugar, should be consumed less frequently. Fizzy drinks and those with added sugar harm your teeth, which is why you should not drink them between meals⁴. When a young person feels tired, an energy drink may be a tempting option. Their stimulating effects are short lived, however, and drinking them in excess can disrupt sleep and cause addiction⁵.

Nutritional challenges of Finnish children and adolescents

Challenges associated with children and adolescents' diets include irregular meals, not eating enough fruit and vegetables, excessive salt and sugar intake, and high meat consumption among boys⁶. The quality of snacks is highly important as they provide a

³ Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare & National Nutrition Council, 2019.

⁴ Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare & National Nutrition Council, 2019.

⁵ Kuusipalo and Raulio, 2018. | ⁶ Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2023a; Väisänen et al., 2023; Eloranta et al., 2014; Hoppu et al., 2008.

significant share of the daily energy and sugar intake⁷. Sufficient iron and vitamin D intake is a problem for many, and more than a third do not use a vitamin D supplement as recommended⁸. Prevalence of overweight and obesity has increased⁹, as have eating disorders and their symptoms¹⁰.

Regular meal times and eating enough are the foundation of wellbeing

Having varied and regular meals every 3 to 4 hours is the foundation for alertness and coping during the day. Regular meals keep blood sugar levels constant throughout the day, support healthy growth and weight development, and protect teeth from cavities. Regular mealtimes help you eat moderately at individual meals and reduce cravings for unnecessary snacks, grazing and over-eating. Scheduling mealtimes throughout the day is part of life management. The habits we learn as children and adolescents build a foundation for balanced and moderate eating throughout our lives.¹¹

A versatile school lunch that meets the recommendations keeps up children's energy levels and alertness for studying. While eating the school lunch every day is important in terms of regular mealtimes¹², not all pupils and students have it daily¹³. Eating breakfast and the school lunch is worthwhile, however, as young people who skip both meals have been found to struggle more with their school work¹⁴. It is important for adults who work with young people, including teachers and leisure activi-

⁷ Eloranta, 2014. | ⁸ Väisänen et al., 2023; Soinen et al., 2023.

⁹ Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2023b. | ¹⁰ Häkkinen and Raejuuri, 2022.

¹¹ & ¹² National Nutrition Council, 2017. | ¹³ Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2023; Koreasalo, et al. 2023. | ¹⁴ Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2020.

ty instructors, to tell young people about the benefits of regular meals and encourage them to follow this advice.

Nutritious snacks as needed

The same principles apply to choosing snacks and selecting main meals; a good snack contains wholegrain cereals and vegetables, fruit or berries. Foods rich in sugar, salt and saturated fat should only be selected occasionally. Eating a snack during school hours ensures that the young person has enough energy even if there is a longer interval between meals. If the school does not provide one, bringing a snack from home is important. Regular eating stops young people from buying snacks guided by their cravings when hunger catches them unawares. The importance of snacks is stressed for young people who engage in sports, as lack of energy at training sessions increases the risk of injury or illness and can hinder development. It is a good idea to prepare for a training session after school by having a snack towards the end of the school day, and a small snack, such as a piece of fruit, could even be eaten just before the session. To promote recovery after strenuous training, it is important to have a snack that contains both carbohydrates and protein.¹⁵

Nutrition as part of lifestyle

Sleep has a significant impact on eating behaviour. If you do not get enough sleep, your appetite grows and you have more cravings for foods rich in carbohydrates¹⁶. Coaches and instructors can contribute to children and young people's wellbeing by considering the timing and frequency of leisure activities: young peo-

¹⁵ National Nutrition Council, 2017; Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare & National Nutrition Council, 2019. | ¹⁶ Paunio och Porkka-Heiskanen, 2008.

ple must have enough time to eat, recover and sleep after engaging in an activity.

Coaches and instructors are important food educators

Coaches and instructors often have significant authority, which comes with responsibility. They can support children's and adolescents' balanced and positive attitudes towards food and their bodies. It is important for the coach and instructor to be aware of themselves as role models, and the way they talk about food carries weight. Recognising your personal attitudes and keeping them separate from your professional role help to approach the topic neutrally. When talking about health-enhancing eating, the impacts of a good diet on coping, concentration, learning and performance should be stressed. The joy and enjoyment of meals are also important for developing a positive relationship with food¹⁷. A coach should avoid commenting on young people's eating, bodies and weight, as this may have a long-term impact on their self-esteem and relationship with their body.

The food environment should support healthy choices

Our food choices are influenced by a number of different factors, including the availability and presentation of foods and food-related advertising, especially on digital channels. Our decisions related to eating are often unconscious, and the food environment plays an important role in making them: for instance, we can only choose between the foods that are avail-

¹⁷ Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare & National Nutrition Council, 2019.

¹⁸ Rantala et al., 2023.

Recommendations for leisure activity instructors:

- Encourage participants to have regular and sufficient meals that support coping at school and in leisure activities.
- Tell young people about the importance of food and drink choices for their wellbeing and encourage them to make good choices.
- Be aware of your personal attitudes, how you communicate about eating, and your responsibility as a role model. Set a good example by displaying an appreciative and positive attitude towards healthy eating.
- Support children and young people in developing accepting and appreciative body relationships and avoid commenting on what they eat, their bodies and their weight.
- Influence the food environment in the leisure activity venue to make healthy choices attractive and easy.
- Food offers many types of joy and enjoyment! Eating together with family, friends or a leisure activity group reinforces social relationships.

able in the environment. The selection of foods offered at leisure activity venues can guide our choices. This is why it is important for everyone who can influence children's and adolescents' food environments to actively strive to develop them with the goal of promoting young people's health.¹⁸

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Research Manager Sari Niinistö (PhD, Master of Science (Nutrition)), Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, is a specialist in children's and adolescents' nutrition who studies nutrition and its connection to illness risks. Niinistö participates in projects that develop research methodology and interventions aiming to improve both nutrition and environmental sustainability. She has been involved in drawing up nutrition recommendations and communicating about them.

Research Manager Susanna Raulio (PhD, Master of Science (Nutrition)), Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, is a nutrition expert who has studied phenomena related to food service use, including day-care centre and school meals. Raulio has participated in drawing up meal and nutrition recommendations for educational institutions and promoting nutrition that supports health and environmental sustainability.

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Parkour is the number one hobby girls and boys aged 7 to 9 would like to try (Student survey 2024).



Maybe we could do more of these joint works where the whole group is doing something together at the School of Art.

– Aino Alestalo 13, Espoo School of Art

How can children and young people be motivated in leisure activities?

SANNA SALMINEN

One of the key challenges of leading leisure activities is motivating children and young people to both engage in a hobby and keep participating in it. Leisure activities often also compete for time with mobile technology and other hobbies, for instance. The goals of improving children and young people's wellbeing, inclusion and motivation are parallel, and they can be promoted with similar pedagogical choices.

Motivation is divided into extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation refers to motivating a participant with rewards or negative consequences, whereas intrinsic motivation refers to the participant's personal internal enthusiasm and commitment to the activity. A reward that creates extrinsic motivation can be a positive experience as such – for example a sticker, a treat or a long-awaited excursion as a reward for persisting with an activity, but if motivation is only supported by external means, it gradually erodes the possibilities for intrinsic motivation to develop.¹ Sometimes the source of external motivation may be the

¹ Ryan & Deci, 2017.

parents' strong enthusiasm for the child's hobby, which is a great resource at best but becomes an obstacle to the child's intrinsic motivation at worst. This is why it is particularly important for the instructor of leisure activities to focus on creating a framework that fosters intrinsic motivation.

A basic prerequisite for the development of intrinsic motivation is that the activity should satisfy the participant's three fundamental psychological needs². These needs are establishing caring relationships (relatedness), improving skills (competence), and experiences of self-expression and ownership. At the same time, experiences of inclusion and wellbeing can be promoted. Raivio and Karjalainen³ propose *belonging*, *acting* and *having* (resources, including health, safety, abilities) as the three components of inclusion. The three factors of wellbeing in Allardt's⁴ classic definition are related to the ones listed above: *having*, *loving* (cf. *belonging*) & *being* (cf. *acting*). In other words, a good environment for developing intrinsic motivation is provided if the activities support the establishment of friendships, the instructor comes across as caring, the community values the activities in question, the participants have an opportunity to express themselves and influence the activities, and the participants see their skills improving and the level of challenge in the activities is optimal. Additionally, increase in wellbeing and inclusion is promoted.

In practice, the establishment of caring peer relationships in leisure activities can be supported by incorporating team-building exercises and practices in the session routines – which at their simplest could include changing group divisions and pairs as well as short discussion assignments related to news, but also

²Ryan & Deci, 2017.

³2013. | ⁴1976.

play, drama exercises and games. Giving participants age-appropriate responsibilities and using peer guidance and learning in the organisation of the activities help participants get to know each other and give them an experience of their personal significance as group members. It is important for the instructor to learn the group members' names and attempt to encounter everyone from time to time, showing personal interest in and appreciation of them. More experienced participants can also become mentors for newcomers and, for example, guide them in all the routines of the activities for the first year.⁵

In addition to the actual leisure activity, it is a good idea to sometimes arrange informal opportunities for spending time together, including social evenings, trips or camps. Age-appropriate independent practice can also be scheduled as part of the structures of the activity, where the instructor is not present, but the group members can use everything they have learned amongst themselves, for example in the home of one of the participants. A group of mixed ages where young people of many ages engage in the activity together opens up plenty of opportunities for building a family-like operating culture. If families, friends and the surrounding community can be persuaded to show their appreciation in some way, this greatly supports the activities – even attending performances, exhibitions, concerts or matches is an important expression of appreciation. Parents should be thanked for their contribution and explained how important it is.⁶

To give a participant an experience of ownership and an opportunity for self-expression, situations should be created in which they can be engaged in planning, giving feedback, reflect-

⁵Salminen, 2021b.

⁶Salminen, 2021b.

ing on objectives and assessing successes. It is advisable to create space for each participant to be heard and seen. Such spaces can be built as part of the routines of the activity: for example, small group discussions can be conducted at the beginning of each season to draw up the group's rules and goals and to consider its strengths and areas needing improvement. The experience of self-expression is reinforced when participants can use their strengths and be creative. The activity must have safe boundaries, however. It is up to the instructor to ensure that the jointly agreed rules are observed. Self-expression is also supported by working through emotions: feelings of success, joy, enthusiasm, disappointment and sadness alike are shared together, identified, labelled and accepted.⁷

The best way to support improvement of skills is offering an optimal level of challenge: the challenge should be tough enough to force participants to exert themselves a little and to ensure that success feels rewarding, but not so overwhelming that they get discouraged. In this respect, realistic and apt encouragement works better as a guidance approach than vague praise, apportioning of blame or giving orders. Specific and shared goals and clear communication are the key. Self-assessments and progress monitoring tools are ways of supporting participants in observing their learning.

Intrinsic motivation supports optimally development in a leisure activity, encourages self-expression and fosters an inspiring team spirit. At best, the operating culture creates a self-perpetuating virtuous cycle that also makes the instructor's work highly rewarding and inspiring.

⁷ Salminen, 2021a.

Recommendations for leisure activity instructors:

- Support the formation of friendships and team building in the group.
- Assign age-appropriate responsibilities.
- Set clear and meaningful objectives for the activities.
- Ask participants to give feedback.
- Plan together: give participants an opportunity to influence the activities.
- Aim for an optimal level of challenge considering the participants' competence.
- Show caring.

AUTHOR

Sanna Salminen, PhD, works as a university teacher at the University of Jyväskylä's Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies. She also leads Vox Aurea, a children's choir consisting of nearly sixty singers aged between 11 and 18. Salminen's research focuses on developing pedagogy for guiding musical activities and intercultural music education. She is also known as the author of music textbooks for primary schools (Soi 3–4 and 5–6 / Sanoma pro).

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Gym training is the most popular hobby that boys aged 13 to 15 would like to try (Student survey 2024).



Junior team B2 of Laajasalon Palloseura from Helsinki.

How can interaction be used to maintain high-quality motivation and a positive atmosphere?

NELLI HANKONEN

Through experience, many leisure activity leaders and coaches have developed good and appropriate ways of working with children and young people. They are likely to be familiar with many of the issues discussed here, which is why the purpose of this article is to help them reflect on their current interaction habits in relation to research evidence concerning the dynamics of motivation.

What is motivation?

Motivation can be conceptualised through *quantity*: one person is greatly motivated in a certain activity, while another has no motivation whatsoever. Motivation can also be examined in terms of its *quality*. There may be differences between people who are equally highly motivated. In fact, an equally high motivation may stem from coercion and the experience of pressure, or from the person themselves. Intrinsic motivation – joy, enjoyment and interest – often characterises leisure activity participants' motivational world.

What lies between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation?

According to a widely supported motivation theory, self-determination theory¹, there is a continuum between the ‘pure’ extremes of intrinsic and *extrinsic motivation*. Pure extrinsic motivation means that you only do things to avoid punishment (or to receive a reward). This can be distinguished from *introjected motivation*, in which a person has internalised external expectations: they do things to avoid feelings of shame or guilt. Doing things purely driven by *intrinsic motivation* (because of enjoyment, pleasure, and interest) can also be distinguished from *value-based motivation*, which means that the individual perceives the consequences, which they personally appreciate, as the reason for their actions.

Type of motivation	EXTERNAL MOTIVATION	INTROJECTED MOTIVATION	PERSONAL VALUES	INTRINSIC MOTIVATION
I do it because...	“somebody tells me to do it”	“I feel ashamed if I don’t”	“this is important”	“I enjoy it, it is interesting”

Interaction affects the child’s motivation

Developing high-quality motivation requires conditions in which a person can feel they are doing something meaningful (autonomy), have sufficient skills and comprehension (competence) and are genuinely cared for and valued by others (relatedness). The individual’s basic psychological needs can be crystallised as “I can influence things, I am competent, I am good enough”.

¹ Ryan & Deci, 2017; Määttä m.fl., 2023.

The need for autonomy is often misunderstood: it is not the same as full powers to make decisions, independence or autonomy from others. Understanding the justifications for activities and experiencing ownership of them plays an important part in the experience of autonomy.

Interaction styles have an impact on whether these basic psychological needs are satisfied – and consequently on how an individual is motivated and how they feel. Extrinsic motivation can naturally be created by issuing orders and threats, but the action ceases as soon as supervision stops. A better quality of motivation can be achieved through motivating styles that support the fulfilment of basic psychological needs. An instructor’s styles of motivating participants can be roughly divided into four main categories².

UNMOTIVATING STYLES:

A **chaotic style**, ‘laissez-faire’. The participants must themselves determine what they should do and how they should develop their competence. The instructor waits for situations to develop, with little or no planning.

→ **the need for competence is not satisfied**

A **controlling style**, or pressure and coercion: the instructor demands that the others think, feel and act according to his or her orders. Others have to do what the instructor wants, no matter what they think.

² Aelterman & Vansteenkiste, 2023.

- **Does not tolerate protests or inclusion.**
- **Threatens with sanctions.**
- **Stifles others by instilling feelings of shame or guilt.**
- **Attempts to change the way others think, feel and behave to conform with what he or she wants.**
- **Uses personal attacks.**

→ **the need for autonomy is not satisfied**

Instructors who use these styles undermine the fulfilment of participants' basic needs and wellbeing, and they are considered less effective. What kinds of styles, then, motivate and support wellbeing?

MOTIVATING STYLES:

An **autonomy supportive style**, is characterized by curious interest, responsiveness, flexibility: the instructor strives to recognise and nurture the participants' interests, preferences and emotions, so that they are willing to commit to the activities and tasks. For example:

- **Understands the participants' interests through discussions, for example the level at which each individual sets their goals in the activity**
- **Asks for feedback and suggestions**
- **Provides meaningful choice where appropriate**
- **Accepts displays of negative emotions and disagreements**

- **Tries to understand how others see things**
- **Allows everyone to work at their own pace**
- **Justifies his or her requests so that the participants see them as personally meaningful**

You can say: "Thank you for telling me this!" Set an example: tell the participants about your mistakes – you are a human being, too, not an authority who is always right (as when using a controlling style).

A **structuring style**, is characterized by process and progress orientation: based on participants' competence and skills, the instructor provides strategies and assistance, allowing participants to feel that they are able to manage the activities and tasks.

- **Facilitates progress by providing appropriate support if necessary**
- **Gives clear instructions**
- **Helps when help is needed**
- **Discusses mistakes with participants constructively, helping them understand how they can improve their performance**
- **Communicates clearly and transparently about expectations**

Recommendations for leisure activity instructors:

Check the underlying assumptions that may affect your choice of actions:

- **Objectives of the activity, rushing:** is the ultimate purpose of the situation to make things happen quickly, or could a more patient and relaxed approach create conditions in which things can get done quickly enough while maintaining a positive atmosphere?
- **Compassion:** Do you try and put yourself in the other person's position? Understand their actions from their perspective – not only yours? Compassion is important, not only towards children and young people but also yourself. Teachers with self-compassion have been found to use motivating styles also with their pupils. Of course, evidence shows that participants influence their instructor's motivation, too – no one is immune, and it is human to not always have the energy to be your best self.
- **Do you see strengths, or primarily errors that should be corrected?** Do you divide people into two castes? Do you find a participant basically stupid or bad? Studies have proven the power of self-fulfilling prophecies: through micro processes, teachers' or even army trainers' perceptions of their students' or trainees' giftedness lead to the realisation of those – originally false – expectations. **There is something good in everyone – and when you notice it, it is useful to say it out loud.**
- **Do you think you know better? Different people need different things, and in order to understand, you have to listen.** Effective,

active listening is one of the most important interpersonal skills: first of all, listen openly rather than assume that you know. Also show it through your gestures and words. You can repeat things in your own words and ensure you understood.

- **Are you keen to give advice to or push information on participants, also when it is not needed?** Advice is received better when you first check what the other person knows, or if they want advice in the first place.
- **A positive motivating style is not about patting someone on the head and complimenting them.** Providing a structure is an essential part of good motivation: You may give feedback, also corrective feedback – people want to grow and develop. You can talk about mistakes, however without embarrassing or shaming anyone, and preferably in private.
- **Do you allow enough choice and freedom – but not too much?** You can set rules and boundaries that support autonomy. Excessive choice leads to chaos and thwarts the need for competence.
- **Non-verbal motivation:** Your very intonation or tone of voice can be either motivating or unmotivating: pay attention to non-verbal messages.

Can you give the children a choice and involve them in planning?

- **Avoid excessive control:** Always dictating everything. Failing to give reasons for your requests. Embarrassing or making fun of others, even under the guise of sarcasm. Giving negative feedback in front of others.

- **Avoid excessive chaos:** Having votes on every issue and giving too many options.

Do you have clear expectations and rules?

- **Avoid excessive control:** Dictating rules and issuing threats, without listening to the children's and young people's viewpoints.
- **Avoid excessive chaos:** Not discussing rules and limits at all.

FOR EXAMPLE, YOU CAN DEVELOP YOUR INTERACTION BY THE FOLLOWING MEANS:

- **We all have our strengths and development areas in interaction.** Highlight 3 to 5 things in this article that you are already doing well in your interaction – and also highlight in a different colour 3 to 5 things in which you would like to improve.
- **Think about the young people you instruct or coach:** do they feel that they can do meaningful and significant things in the activity, that they are given tasks suitable for their level of development and individual goals, and that they are cared for? Talk to them and/or follow up on this, and observe your own actions. How do different words and actions affect the atmosphere? You can play an active role in creating a different climate with your personal choices.
- At each session, try to make a positive/encouraging comment or give feedback to each person at least once.

AUTHOR

Nelli Hankonen is Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Tampere. With her research group and practical actors, she has studied such themes as measures for promoting wellbeing, motivation and motivating, and the way you can change your interaction habits.

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The best thing about the School of Art is that you can be really creative and, of course, figure out things with your friends. What would be a great creative solution for this work?

– Saara Marte, 13, Espoo School of Art.

Instructors are highly important for participation in leisure activities

TANJA LAIMI

The objective of the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities is to organise every child and young person leisure activities according to their wishes and free of charge in connection with the school day¹. The idea is to support children and young people in enjoying safe and meaningful leisure time. The aims of the model are particularly important and topical as the results of such surveys as the School Health Promotion Study indicate that loneliness has become more widespread among children².

This article looks at leisure activities and their guidance from the perspective of children and young people. In particular, the article focuses on what actors involved in organising leisure activities can take into account in addition to high-quality content. The article is based on an evaluation of the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities conducted by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC). In the evaluation and the data collection carried out for it, there was a particular emphasis on hearing and engaging children and young people. The evaluation was commissioned from FINEEC by the Ministry of Education and Culture, and it took place between 1 September 2022 and 31 March

¹ Finnish Model for Leisure Activities, 2024.

² Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2023.

2023. The evaluation was based on data collected in six municipalities in which evaluation visits were organised. The principles of enhancement-led assessment were stressed in the evaluation – inclusiveness, interactivity, trust between the party conducting the evaluation and the participant, and the actor’s responsibility for developing their activities.

In particular, the article answers the following questions:

1) What makes leisure activities enjoyable? To which factors should special attention be paid in order to make leisure activities as meaningful as possible for children and young people?

2) What wishes do children and young people have regarding leisure activities? How are participants’ opinions and preferences taken into account in them?

There is a wide range of reasons for starting a leisure activity, and many different factors influence the participant’s enjoyment of it. While the content, or what you do in the activity, was important in itself according to children’s and young people’s experiences, it was often not enough on its own. The instructor may overlook this viewpoint, which affects the participants’ experience of whether or not the activity is meaningful. Children and young people highlighted as important factors in the evaluation not only the content but also the flexibility and variability of the activities, having friends, and instructors who have professional competence and are “nice”. This article discusses these factors and how organisers and instructors of leisure activities can take them into account.

Relaxed activities with a high quality

The discussions with children and young people focused on enjoyable leisure activities. Especially lower secondary school

pupils appreciated an opportunity to engage in hobbies where participation was not taken quite so seriously. In such activities, the threshold for listening to participants’ opinions was also low. Simple, everyday ways of exerting influence had stayed with the participants. For example, they appreciated having a vote between two different activities, or the possibility of doing the same thing in several different ways. Consequently, a relaxed and generally pleasant atmosphere had a great impact on their enjoyment of the activity.

The evaluators asked the persons organising and leading leisure activities about their views of the content and quality of the activities. They often found that a good leisure activity was firmly guided and methodical and aimed for continuous development. Their attitudes to hearing participants’ opinions were similar, and they felt it requires a great deal of time and resources. Leisure activity organisers also often found that binding registrations and monitoring attendance and absences were advisable. This was thought to promote participation.

Consequently, a major difference between participants’ and organisers’ opinions was discovered. First off, you could also make the mistake of thinking that when participants call for a relaxed atmosphere, this could mean compromising on quality. When focusing on the issue further in discussions with children and young people, this turned out not to be true. A relaxed leisure activity usually had versatile content of an extremely high quality. Factors that made the activity relaxed included an instructor who listened carefully to participants’ wishes in daily life, gave different options for doing a task, and did not force participants to do a certain activity or monitor attendance strictly.

Leisure activity organisers could be nervous about such more relaxed implementations in advance: will anyone take part if

there is no ready-made plan to cover the entire semester, or if attendance is not controlled every time? However, positive feedback had been received from both instructors and participants: on the contrary, more informal organisation had encouraged participation. Where participation was not mandatory, young people had decided to turn up to spend time with their friends, for example, rather than because they had to. And as attendance was not monitored, participants could sometimes fail to come for various reasons but attend the following sessions with renewed enthusiasm. Methods of low-threshold inclusion had often also increased enthusiasm for participation. The experiences of children and young people give pause for thought: would it be better to focus on positive aspects that attract young people to the activities, rather than ensuring that they turn up, for example by keeping a beady eye on attendance?

A safe and familiar instructor has an important role in a leisure activity

When they talked about their hobbies, for many children and young people the instructor strongly personified the activity. A familiar and safe instructor was considered highly important. For example, children and young people said that with the instructor's support, they were able to both exceed themselves and try out new things. With their instructor, participants also dared to fail, or come out of their comfort zones. Discussions with leisure activity instructors indicated, however, that they are not always aware of their important role and often take it for granted. Young participants are not always able, or know how, to verbalise the instructor's important role.

Children and young people often described the instructor as "nice". Nice instructors were additionally good-humoured, fun,

friendly and kind and took everyone into consideration. A nice instructor was often also competent, which is something the participants noticed. While some participants knew everything about the instructor's educational background and other experience, his or her greatest impact was visible in daily life. For example, children and young people observed the instructor's competence based on whether he or she was able to be flexible, when necessary, come up with alternative activities, or improvise.

Competence is strongly associated with modifying the activities to suit the participants. To do this, the instructor needs to know their group. Many children and young people found it positive that they got to know the instructor in the leisure activity both from the perspective of the activity and outside it. They appreciated an instructor who listens to the children's and young people's issues, asks about what is happening in their lives, and tells them about himself or herself. Some participants even found the role of such instructors so important that they skipped a session if they knew it would be taken by a substitute instructor with a narrow focus on the content. Lower secondary school pupils, in particular, appreciated not only keeping to the point but also other chats, such as talking about new TV series, games or the school lunch of the day.

Conclusion

Those participating in and organising leisure activities have a shared goal: an activity that is as meaningful as possible. However, children and young people do not always share the adults' ideas of how this is achieved. This may also involve a kind of language barrier as wishes are understood differently. What makes a leisure activity meaningful according to participants is not only enjoyable content but also a relaxed atmosphere, having their

wishes taken into account in daily life, the instructor's competence and getting to know the instructor. These aspects do not take a great deal of time from the activity itself or require much preparation from the instructor. Many things that make a leisure activity enjoyable may overlap: a fun activity can be even better if you can engage in it with a pleasant group and under the guidance of a nice instructor.

AUTHOR

Tanja Laimi is an evaluation expert at the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC). Laimi served as the Project Manager in the evaluation of the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities carried out by FINEEC. In addition to evaluating the model, Laimi's work at FINEEC has included evaluations related to such issues as equality and non-discrimination, and the school attendance of children with an immigrant background. Children and young people's engagement, listening to their opinions and realising their rights are important issues for both Laimi and FINEEC at large, which are taken into account in evaluation activities.

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Recommendations for leisure activity instructors:

- Children's and young people's inclusion in leisure activities and their development should be increased further. All adults involved in leisure activities should be instructed to engage the participants, and the working time and resources needed for this should be granted to them, enabling them to make different practical arrangements in addition to ensuring engagement.
- Instructors, leisure activity organisers and, for example, activity coordinators should be emboldened to try out different ways of listening to children's and young people's preferences and opinions.
- There should be more flexibility in leisure activities, making it possible to take participants' wishes and different implementation methods into consideration.



The reason for a young person not having a hobby could be that they are shy.

– Kwame Kubi, 15.

How can a young person's mental health be supported in leisure activities?

MIGUEL REYES

Young minds and a leisure activity

Mental health can be strengthened by developing mental health skills. Mental health skills include emotional, awareness and interaction skills, all of which children and young people learn in relation to adults and their peer groups.

Mieli Mental Health Finland's online course titled *Young minds and a leisure activity* offers instructors practical ways of supporting the mental health of children and young people in a leisure activity environment and drawing on their mental health skills as part of their guidance work. The content of the online course is based on the PERMA theory¹ of wellbeing and flourishing, which was developed by Professor Martin Seligman in 2011 and which is based on positive psychology. In his research, Seligman was interested in what makes people flourish. Based on his studies, Seligman² identified five dimensions that strengthen

¹ Seligman, 2011.

² Ibid.

mental wellbeing and can make an individual flourish. These dimensions are:

- **Positivity**
- **Presence and engagement**
- **Relationships and interaction**
- **Meaning**
- **Accomplishment**

These dimensions can also be called the characteristics of a good leisure activity, and by fulfilling them, instructors can strengthen children and adolescents' wellbeing and mental health.

How can you create a safe operating environment?

Small actions can be enough to strengthen children's and young people's mental health. Offering a leisure activity to them is an important act in itself. A safe leisure activity instructor is an important person in a child's and young person's everyday life. It is important that a child and young person is encountered with appreciation as themselves in the leisure activity. This is achieved through a safe operating environment, which involves the following factors:

The session is characterised by repetition and predictability

The participants are told how the activities of the session progress. They know what to expect and what is expected of them. The recurrence of conditions, schedules and practices, for example, creates a sense of safety. It is also strengthened by the instructor's predictable behaviour.

- **I base the session on a familiar structure.**
- **I explain clearly what should be done and in what order.**
- **I am myself as an instructor.**

It is safe to be yourself in the leisure activity environment

The participants feel valued, seen and heard in their leisure activity. They dare to talk openly about their feelings and views, trust the group's support in difficult times, and try out different things without fear of failure.

- **I talk and listen with respect.**
- **I respect the participants' personalities.**
- **I set an example by talking about my feelings.**
- **I reinforce experiences of inclusion by discussing the activity and acting as a group.**
- **I use the word 'we' and stress what our group does together.**

Everyone follows common rules in the activity

Common rules, which have been drawn up together with the participants, are respected. The participants understand what type of behaviour is expected of them and how they should take others into consideration.

- **We create together rules that respect everyone.**
- **The participants understand that common rules improve the spirit, comfort and wellbeing in the group.**
- **I am fair, clear and consistent.**

What can a leisure activity instructor pay attention to in their actions?

The instructor's most important tool for supporting the mental health of children and young people is your personal wellbeing and taking care of your mental health. Analyse the feelings that guidance and children and young people evoke in you. All adults also have negative emotions and difficult moments, and this is okay. It would be good to get support for carrying and releasing these emotions in the leisure activity community.

Children and young people do not yet have the same resilience regarding their lives or carrying and mirroring their emotions. It is important that we as adults support them and help them believe in their capabilities to also cope with difficult issues. This is supported by an age-appropriate approach to guidance.

Using shame as a method of educating children and young people does not work or support their self-esteem. Young people, in particular, experience shame almost all the time as uncertainty and tolerating it are part of the growth process in adolescence. In this stage of development, young people need us adults more than ever. Joy and enjoyment of what you do are an important feature of leisure activities. It supports the child and young person and bolsters their motivation to turn up time after time and find new things to learn through the activity.

In leisure activities, small actions become great acts for children and young people's mental health. You do not need to know everything. For example, you can always go back to the materials of the Young minds and a leisure activity online course.

Recommendations for leisure activity instructors:

- When you greet everyone and treat them appropriately as well as intervene immediately in any inappropriate behaviour or bullying, you foster a feeling of safety. This way an adult can allow children and young people feel that adults help and support them in various situations.
- Just doing things regularly and explaining them to the participants (what we should do and why) help children and young people feel safe.
- You can engage children and young people in making the rules, which also gives them the experience of being heard and allows them to be active. Subsequently, holding on to these rules will be important.

YOUNG MINDS AND A LEISURE ACTIVITY ONLINE COURSE

- The online course for leisure activity instructors is free of charge for everyone. You can find the course (in Finnish) at: <https://mieli.fi/materiaalit-ja-koulutukset/koulutukset/mielenterveystaitoja-nuorisotyohon-ja-harrastustoimintaan/nuori-mieli-harrastuksessa-verkkokurssi/>.
- For a collection of other information relevant to leisure activities (in Finnish), visit: <https://mieli.fi/materiaalit-ja-koulutukset/tietoa-mielenterveyden-vahvistamisesta/lapset-ja-nuoret/mielenterveys-harrastustoiminnassa/>

AUTHOR

Miguel Reyes works in the Young minds in sports and Young minds in leisure activities functions of Mieli Mental Health Finland's Youth unit. Reyes has a Bachelor of Social Services degree and also sexuality counsellor and therapist qualifications. Reyes has worked with children and young people for more than 20 years in everything from foster care to helplines and chat services (the Family Federation of Finland's Poikien Puhelin helpline for boys and Mieli Mental Health Finland's Sekasin chat).

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Players of Laajasalon Palloseura are warming up.

Icehearts programme offers long-term support through team sports

KAIJA APPELQVIST-SCHMIDLECHNER

Icehearts is a programme that provides long-term early support for children who have already given cause for particular concern at early childhood education age¹. Previous research has shown that various behavioural and emotional disorders in childhood often predict difficulties later in life². We also know that reinforcing the factors that protect a child's growth and development, and early support can help the child cope despite having a challenging start in life³. The Icehearts programme aims to catch such children.

Icehearts mentors are supportive figures on the journey from childhood to adulthood

Even if a child has had a difficult start in life, having a trusting, safe and sufficiently long-lasting relationship with at least one adult protects their development⁴. This view is the foundation of the Icehearts programme. In Icehearts activities, a sports team is

¹ Smolej, 2017. | ² Scott, 2015.

³ Eddy et al., 2017. | ⁴ Eddy et al., 2017.

put together of preschool-aged children in need of support. This takes place in cooperation with day care, preschool and comprehensive school as well as municipal social services. At the heart of the Icehearts activities is the mentor who leads the team and is a trusted adult for the children. This person commits to supporting the children in their team for 12 years. In addition to leading a leisure activity, they are guiding and supportive figures on a shared journey of 12 years for the children in their team from grade 1 until the child turns 18. The Icehearts mentor undertakes to guide and support the child in not only team activities but also in school work and everyday challenges until the child turns 18.

Icehearts was launched in 1996 with a single boys' team. Today, about 1,000 children and 70 teams around Finland are already involved with the programme. The programme was awarded as one of the best practices in health promotion by the European Commission, and it is currently being piloted in five European Union Member States as part of the EU-funded Icehearts Europe project (2023–2025).

Icehearts is more than a sports activity

Taking part in leisure activities is important for growing children and young people. At best, it can support the child's and adolescent's growth and offer them experiences of success, feeling appreciated and belonging to a community⁵. This is vital, especially for children and adolescents who have challenging living conditions. In the Icehearts programme the instructor's or coach's role and importance go further than usual, as the support offered to the child extends from hobbies to school work and the child's

⁵ Bruner et al., 2021.

daily life. The mentor also supports the parents if necessary⁶ and works together with other services that assist the child and the family, especially schools⁷. The activities are free of charge for the families.

In Icehearts, children and adolescents can engage in physical activity and be part of the team, regardless of their physical skills or any behavioural challenges. During their first years in the programme, the children selected for the Icehearts team can choose the sport they want to play. Popular sports include indoor football and futsal. The team activities provide an environment and a framework for practising social and life skills. The team members experience different emotions together, both positive and negative ones. Sometimes they rejoice of success, at other times they have to tolerate defeat and bitter disappointment. A child's self-esteem improves when, unexpectedly, they are the celebrated scorer of goals in their team rather than the much-maligned troublemaker of the class. The children also learn friendship skills and taking others into consideration in the team. According to research findings, the positive impacts of the Icehearts programme can be seen especially as improved self-esteem, mood, relationships with friends and social skills⁸.

Lessons learned from the Icehearts model for coaches and leisure activity instructors

The Icehearts programme has many elements that can also be applied in grassroots sports club or other children's hobbies⁹. At best, leisure activities can significantly support the growth of children and adolescents and offer them experiences of success

⁶ Kekkonen et al., 2022. | ⁷ Kekkonen et al., 2018. | ⁸ Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al., 2020; 2021; 2024. | ⁹ Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al., 2021.

and feeling valued. In leisure activities, children learn social skills as well as making and keeping friends. A leisure activity is also an important opportunity for a child to feel that they belong to a group and are part of a community.

Coaches or leisure activity instructors who work with children and adolescents need skills and capabilities for creating a favourable environment for the child's growth and development. An essential prerequisite is that the coach or instructor is a trusted and safe adult for the child. Sometimes they may be the only safe adult in a child's life. As children are often only learning social skills in leisure activities, coaches and instructors have a duty to intervene in and resolve conflicts between them.

At the centre of the Icehearts programme is striving to see something good in every child and to offer everyone experiences of success. This is crucial especially for those children whose circumstances at home are marred by different problems or who are more accustomed to getting negative attention. At best, leisure activities support the child's growth into an adult with a good self-confidence who takes others into consideration. Being part of a group strengthens the child's sense of inclusion and supports the development of their identity. A good team spirit helps a young person to stay on in a leisure activity even during the most turbulent years of puberty and prevents the drop-out phenomenon that is common at the age of around 14 to 15.

Recommendations for leisure activity instructors:

- Understand that you are a key person and an important adult in the child's and adolescent's daily life. Whether you wish it or not.
- Make sure that children and adolescents have a safe leisure activity environment and also ensure psychological safety. Have zero tolerance for bullying.
- Focus on fostering a team spirit and feeling of togetherness.
- Understand that a leisure activity is an environment where a child is often only practising their social skills. Support them in this as best you can.
- Intervene in conflicts between the children and make sure that everyone is accepted as themselves. Teach children to accept diversity.
- See if encouragement and highlighting good points could work better than negative feedback.
- Set up small and larger situations in which each child and young person can experience feelings of success.
- Be worthy of trust. Do not make promises you cannot keep.
- Set aside moments when you have time to listen to what is happening in the child's life right now. If something of concern comes up, make sure that the child receives the support they need.
- Remember that a coach or instructor often is an important role model for a child and young person.
- Be genuine. Children and young people can smell falseness a mile away.

AUTHOR

Kaija Appelqvist-Schmidlechner is Adjunct Professor in Social Psychiatry. She works as a Research Manager in the Mental health team of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. In particular, she has studied links between physical activity and mental health and the role of physical activity in supporting children's and adolescents' favourable growth and development. She has extensive experience of coaching juniors in athletics in her free time.

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Laajasalon Palloseura's junior team B2 has training sessions three times a week.

Combining competitive sports with school requires support also from the coach

MATILDA SORKKILA

Participation in sports is known to have a positive impact on adolescents' physical and mental health¹ and it also reduces their problem behaviours². However, high-level or competitive sports require a great deal of commitment and time and combining them with school may cause stress and pressure among some individuals³. In this article, I discuss the combination of adolescents' sports and school as well as the challenges to wellbeing associated with it, especially burnout. I also propose methods that coaches could use to support the coping and wellbeing of young people.

Performing well in a sport requires dedication and time, especially if one is aiming for the top. Only a handful of adolescents become professional athletes. This is why, in addition to facing tough competition, young athletes must also secure their future by attending school. In many cases, success in one area (e.g. sports) comes at the expense of success in another (e.g. at school)⁴.

¹Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005. | ²Janssen & LeBlack, 2010.

³Sorkkila et al., 2018, 2019, 2020a.

⁴Ryba et al., 2016.

Adolescents who engage in top-level sports may set demanding expectations for themselves⁵, and they may wish to do well both at school and in sport⁶. If their resources are not sufficient in relation to the demands, they burn out.

Burning out may be visible either at school or in sport, or in both⁷. It manifests itself as fatigue at the level of exhaustion, cynicism towards school or sport, and a feeling of inadequacy as a student or an athlete⁸. A young athlete may experience constant mental and physical fatigue and feel that they no longer do as well at school or in sport as they used to. They may also no longer find school or sport interesting and may consider dropping out.

To support an adolescent's coping, it is important to find out what the reasons behind their stress are. One study found that burnout among students at upper secondary sport schools began as stress at school but, when prolonged, spread to sports⁹. The demands and stress experienced at school consequently affected coping in sport, not the other way round. This is an important consideration for decision-makers and coaches: if the root cause of burnout is not identified, actions of support can easily be misdirected. This may cause the burnout to become worse or even turn into depression¹⁰.

If a young athlete appears to be tired, it would be vital to look at their life situation holistically and, if necessary, also take action regarding school. From this perspective, it would be important for coaches to have effective contacts with the young person's parents and preferably also school teachers. This is also important for another reason: even if school is the primary source of the

⁵ Fleming, & Dorsch, 2024. | ⁶ Sorkkila et al., 2020b.

⁷ Sorkkila et al., 2017. | ⁸ Sorkkila et al., 2020a; Salmela-Aro & Näätänen, 2005.

⁹ Sorkkila et al., 2018. | ¹⁰ Bianchi et al., 2015; Salmela-Aro et al., 2009.

stress, the young person is more likely to drop out of sport than school when burning out¹¹.

Athletes often find that their coaches are not very interested in the athlete's school and that their expectations mainly focus on sport¹². Although the coach's principal task is in the field of sports, they should nevertheless also show interest in the young person's school and support it. One study found that the coach's encouragement for a balanced life supported young athletes' resilience, or ability to recover from setbacks¹³. It has also been shown that young people who identified themselves both as students and as athletes did significantly better at school than people who only identified as athletes¹⁴.

In addition to the coach, parental support and expectations also play a role. In one study, the parents' high expectations regarding the young person's success in sport exacerbated their school burnout, while parents' high expectations regarding academic success increased burnout associated with sport¹⁵. Consequently, if the young person is supported in only one area of life and expectations of success in that area are high, the meaningfulness of the other area of life may be lost and the risk of burnout in that area may increase. This is how one-sided encouragement in sport may translate as difficulties in coping at school. It is consequently important that the coach should ask the athlete about how they are doing at school every now and then or, for example, relax the demands in sport during the examination week at school.

¹¹ Sorkkila et al., 2019. | ¹² Sorkkila et al., 2020b.

¹³ Kegelaers, & Wylleman, 2019. | ¹⁴ Moazami-Goodarzi et al., 2019.

¹⁵ Sorkkila et al., 2017.

One of the coach's most important tasks is to ensure that the young person gets enough rest and is able to recover. Even if it appears to the coach that the young person has enough free time, many young athletes spend their time away from sport doing schoolwork¹⁶. This may mean that the young person does not actually have any real free time at all. In one study, students of upper secondary sport schools said that they did not have any time for recovery or friendships and romantic relationships¹⁷ because they spent the time left over from sport doing their schoolwork. It would consequently be up to the coach, schools, and parents to jointly ensure that a young athlete has enough free time for both rest and social relationships, which are part of a normal adolescence.

AUTHOR

Matilda Sorkkila, PhD, is a Docent (Adjunct Professor) in Psychology of Wellbeing who works as a University Lecturer of Applied Psychology at the University of Helsinki. Sorkkila has conducted research on wellbeing and coping in the contexts of school, sport and parenthood and participated in the development of measures for identifying and preventing burnout. She defended her dissertation on school and sport burnout of student-athletes in upper secondary education at the University of Jyväskylä in 2018.

¹⁶ Sorkkila et al., 2020b.

¹⁷ Sorkkila et al., 2020b.

Recommendations for coaches:

- Ask how the young person is doing at school and also show interest in their schoolwork.
- Notice the signs of burnout in a young person, such as constant fatigue and experiences of inadequacy. Ask how the young person is doing and if necessary, refer them for help.
- Contact the school and the parents with a low threshold. A young person's life is a holistic entity, and problems with coping at school may spread to sport.
- Ensure that the young person has enough rest and is able to recover. Note that rest from sport does not necessarily mean rest from school.

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Maybe some children and young people don't have hobbies because they might not find any fun activities they'd like to do nearby. Or maybe hobbies can be too expensive.

– Aino-Maria Syrjänen, 12, Espoo School of Art.

Musically gifted children require support and care from music teachers to further enhance their holistic development

GUADALUPE LÓPEZ-ÍÑIGUEZ

Gifted children and adolescents frequently exhibit a strong intrinsic motivation for learning¹. Specifically, those engaged in music studies tend to possess elevated levels of emotional intelligence, which helps them manage stressful circumstances more effectively². Nevertheless, musically gifted students may encounter challenges and disruptions throughout their educational journey and personal development, potentially affecting their health, well-being, and holistic growth³. This text explores the challenges in specialised music education for exceptionally gifted learners, particularly when their training focuses solely on enhancing their musical abilities. Additionally, we examine the influence of external pressures from various stakeholders. The aim is to ensure that highly gifted students receive a comprehensive musical education that not only develops their musical talents but also

¹ E.g. Gottfried et al., 2005.

² Nogaj, 2020.

³ López-Íñiguez & Westerlund, 2023.

protects their rights as children and fosters their socio-emotional development.

Gifted students are afforded significant advantages through specialised educational programs and resources catering to their giftedness and interests⁴. A significant challenge in gifted music education is the limited focus on musical skills development within music lessons. An educational framework that prioritises talent development alone may not sufficiently consider the holistic and special needs of these young individuals⁵. Gifted learners are more likely to thrive when their musical education also considers their socio-emotional well-being and physical and moral growth⁶. Music teachers should foster continuous communication with the various stakeholders involved in the lives of these learners regarding their well-being and childhood rights, and to ensure the provision of adequate resources and support.

One way to expand narrow notions of musical development is creativity. Creativity plays a vital role in the development of gifted students⁷. Improvisation, diversity of musical genres, and other musical and non-musical activities should be encouraged to foster creativity and help gifted children enjoy the learning and playing process. This approach to music education requires engaging not only with one's disciplinary aspects and performative excellence but also relationality with others and the various complexities of social life. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to promote their gifted students' inquiry, freedom, and exploration processes over the duty of being recognised as talented or succeeding at competitions.

⁴ Pfeiffer, 2013.

⁵ E.g. López-Íñiguez & Westerlund, 2023.

⁶ López-Íñiguez, 2025. | ⁷ E.g. Pfeiffer, 2013.

Gifted young learners often excel in musical activities such as playing, composing, or conducting. However, it is crucial to consider whether their engagement in music stems from intrinsic motivation—such as a genuine passion for music—or from extrinsic factors that may involve negative reinforcement, compelling them to sustain a high level of involvement⁸. Distinguishing between beneficial parental support that fosters talent development and excessive involvement is crucial, as the latter can hinder progress⁹. Research demonstrates overly involved parents may interfere with music lessons and the pedagogical approaches of teachers, dictating what should be learned, the amount of practice required, and even the number of competitions in which the child should participate¹⁰. Such overinvolvement can transform a student's experience from enjoyment and healthy development to unhealthy perfectionism and stress¹¹. Educators should recognise these parental behaviours and engage in constructive dialogues about the child's well-being, encouraging parents to adopt a more supportive role or step back.

Another challenge in the education of gifted young musicians is how attending competitions and being publicly exposed at an early age can direct the entire educational process of the child¹². Such experiences can adversely affect the motivation and well-being of gifted learners, as they often come with considerable pressure and elevated expectations from stakeholders¹³. For example, in settings that prioritise extrinsic rewards and early development, there is a tendency for intrinsic motivation and a genuine passion for learning to decline¹⁴. This effect is partly due

⁸ López-Íñiguez & McPherson, 2023. | ⁹ Olszewski-Kubilius, 2018.

¹⁰ López-Íñiguez, 2025. | ¹¹ Kennedy-Moore & Lowenthal, 2011. | ¹² López-Íñiguez & McPherson, coming soon. | ¹³ López-Íñiguez, 2025. | ¹⁴ Eg. McPherson, 1997.

to the child's excessive preoccupation with external judgements of their performance, which can limit creativity and generate anxiety. Teachers should engage in conversations with parents, music institutes, and the music industry to consider whether frequent participation in public appearances, competitions, and the representation of minors in various media is developmentally suitable—considering children's rights to privacy and rest¹⁵.

Furthermore, while gifted learners may exhibit exceptional talents in their respective fields, their socio-emotional development may align with their chronological age rather than being advanced¹⁶. For instance, the isolation and vulnerabilities of gifted students are important issues to consider. These challenges include difficulties with identity development, career decisions, friendship formation, and dealing with detrimental perfectionism¹⁷. Furthermore, the phenomenon of star culture often diminishes when gifted children and adolescents reach the legal adult age, frequently resulting in distress¹⁸. To address these concerns, educators should actively promote social interactions through diverse group activities, ensemble playing, and collaborative teaching while providing age-appropriate, non-competitive experiences, as well as safe environments that allow for occasional failure, that encourage ethical conduct among peers. It is also advisable to broaden the narrow perspectives on music professionalism and career paths to encompass a diverse range of musical journeys the child might enjoy.

The ability to manage socio-emotional challenges is essential, particularly in situations such as losing a competition, facing negative media scrutiny, or reflecting on a public performance

¹⁵ UN, 1989. | ¹⁶ Pfeiffer, 2013.

¹⁷ E.g. Neihart & Yeo, 2018. | ¹⁸ Smith, 2016.

that did not meet expectations. Educators can empower gifted students to determine the appropriate contexts and methods for sharing their skills and knowledge with others while also recommending breaks when they observe signs of distress or when the demands become overwhelming. When ability is not a concern, students should further assess their identities and contemplate who they aspire to be and what values they wish to uphold¹⁹. This approach gives gifted students a sense of liberation from the external quest for validation and the associated vulnerabilities. Teachers are encouraged to engage in discussions about the diverse interests of gifted students, both within and beyond the realm of music, and to promote a variety of hobbies and activities.

It is crucial for gifted students to engage in enriching educational experiences; however, highly specialised music education environments tend to perpetuate a culture of high performance and competition, characterised by continuous expectations and minimal learner downtime. Such an intense dynamic may discourage gifted learners from pursuing other non-musical areas they might also like, leading to irregular school attendance and a lack of recognition of the importance of general school subjects throughout their lives by parents, music teachers, and even the children themselves²⁰. Thus, music teachers are encouraged to support their students in balancing their academic and musical obligations while also discussing with parents about the importance of maintaining regular attendance at general schools and engaging with the community outside of music, which can help mitigate stress for these gifted individuals²¹.

¹⁹ Rysiew et al., 1999.

²⁰ López-Íñiguez, 2025. | ²¹ Rolling & Cross, 2014.

Recommendations for music teachers:

- Recognise the distinctiveness of gifted music students while remaining vigilant for signs of distress. Consider how music lessons can foster not only musical growth but also personal, social, physical, emotional, and moral development in these individuals.
- Inquire about the young person's well-being outside of music and promote exploring diverse hobbies and interests.
- Evaluate the child's or adolescent's motivation to engage with music and advocate for a range of musical activities and performance opportunities beyond solo performances.
- Be attentive to signs of external pressure and coercion affecting the child. Regularly check in on the young person and refer them for additional support if needed.
- Ensure the young person receives adequate rest and recovery time from practice and performances.
- Engage with music education institutions and parents to ensure sufficient resources for supporting children and young people.
- Participate in professional development courses to expand your knowledge of gifted education in music and the implications of special needs education concerning giftedness.
- Focus on gifted students' general school performance and encourage attendance and certification/graduation. Give

the gifted student support to cope with homework related to missed lessons, for example. If the gifted student is unchallenged at school or lacks developmentally similar friends, talk with their parents to remedy the situation.

RELEVANT LINKS

- Website of the Caring for Musically Gifted research project (Dr Guadalupe López-Íñiguez) <https://www.uniarts.fi/en/projects/caring-for-musically-gifted-children/>
- Global Principles for Professional Learning in Gifted Education (World Council for Gifted and Talented Children): <https://world-gifted.org/global-principles-for-professional-learning-in-gifted-education/>
- Guides to Mental Health for Gifted Children (Davidson Institute): <https://www.davidsongifted.org/resource-library/gifted-resources-guides/mental-health/>

AUTHOR

Guadalupe López-Íñiguez, PhD, is a Docent in Music Education who works as a University Researcher on Instrumental Pedagogy and Performance Science at the Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki. López-Íñiguez is a Research Council of Finland Fellow and Honorary Senior Fellow at the University of Melbourne. López-Íñiguez has researched gifted education in music, constructivist pedagogy and conceptual change, musicians' employability and careers, identity and lifelong learning, well-being, music performance optimisation, and theories of emotion and motivation. López-Íñiguez is also an accomplished musician and recording artist who holds a Master's degree in Cello Performance.

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Film club members shooting a film.

Cultural and linguistic diversity in leisure activities

MARIANA SILJAMÄKI

What is culturally and linguistically aware guidance and coaching in leisure activities? Finland has always been a culturally and linguistically diverse country and home to many groups with different cultures and languages, including Swedish speakers, the Sámi, the Roma and sign language users. Growing immigration has resulted in further cultural and linguistic diversity. More than 600,000 people living in Finland speak a language other than Finnish, Swedish or Sámi.¹ How could young people's wellbeing be supported in culturally and linguistically diverse leisure activity groups?

Key concepts

Cultural diversity refers to aspects related to language, religion, worldviews, socio-economic background, ethnicity and similar². While language can be seen as part of cultural diversity, I would like to highlight linguistic diversity and language awareness separately here. An instructor or coach with language awareness recognises the central role of language in all learning and interaction.

Another important concept is intercultural competence, which includes awareness of the instructor's and coach's personal

¹ Statistics Finland, 2025. | ² See Nieto, 2010.

thought patterns related to cultures and religions as well as issues associated with encountering people, including an ability to work with people from different cultural and religious backgrounds in varying situations.³ This is why social and emotional skills as well as flexibility are also the key to intercultural competence.

In concrete terms, intercultural competence in leisure activities is related to how an instructor or coach supports young people's equal opportunities to participate, regardless of their cultures, languages and religions. In day-to-day activities, such issues as touching a person or changing clothes may come up in a group with cultural and religious diversity. The best way to find out about the young people's and their guardians' values is talking to them about these issues or, in a larger group, addressing an initial questionnaire to all participants regardless of their backgrounds. In the questionnaire young people can, for example, indicate the languages they use and mention any issues that concern them and that they want to bring to the instructor's or coach's attention.

Instructor's and coach's expanding roles and tasks

Instructors can promote intercultural understanding and build bridges between different cultures, for example through dance⁴. In addition to participants in leisure activities, I have also studied themes relating to student PE teachers' intercultural competence⁵. Many student teachers who participated in my research also coach or guide leisure activities. Among other things, they have taught Finnish to multilingual groups using action and movement-based exercises known as embodied language learning⁶. It has been in-

³ E.g. Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2005; Nastasi, 2017. | ⁴ Siljamäki, 2013.

⁵ E.g. Siljamäki & Anttila, 2021; 2022; 2024. | ⁶ Anttila et al., 2024.

teresting to note, both through research and in the role of an intercultural competence teacher, that instructors have become more interested in cultural and language awareness over the years and wish to develop their competence⁷. Instructors' awareness is also associated with their expanding tasks, such as their roles in a diversifying society.⁸ At best, culturally and linguistically aware pedagogy promotes equal participation and may reduce discrimination and racism, which is why it is one of the key tasks of leisure activity instructors⁹.

Instructors' uncertainty about 'getting it right' with children and young people who come from different religious, ethnic or linguistic backgrounds repeatedly comes up¹⁰. The fear of inadvertently insulting a young person or using inappropriate language while guiding them is also a concern. Many instructors feel they are not sufficiently familiar with the values and customs associated with different cultures and religions. While it is impossible to have thorough knowledge of all religions or cultures, solid general knowledge can facilitate encounters between people. Even families and young people from the same religious background may have very different ideas of what acceptable ways of acting in each situation are. Instructors' and coaches' feelings of uncertainty are understandable, but they can gradually improve their intercultural competence and apply good practices, both those they have tried out themselves in guidance situations and ones they have picked up from colleagues.

In my research, I have found that future teachers and instructors have often seen cultural diversity mostly as an immigration-related issue rather than deemed to include the minorities

⁷ Siljamäki & Anttila, 2022; 2024. | ⁸ Cf. Sutela, Kivijärvi & Anttila, 2021.

⁹ Cf. Siljamäki & Anttila, 2022. | ¹⁰ E.g. Siljamäki & Anttila, 2022.

living in Finland¹¹. More attention should be paid to this in leisure activities in order to get all young people to participate. What kind of barriers to the participation of young people belonging to Finnish minority groups could your leisure activity have? How could you lower these barriers?

Language-aware guidance and coaching

Language awareness and multilingualism have long been a key value in Finnish basic education¹². A language-aware approach is also increasingly needed in leisure activity groups, enabling all young people to feel they belong to the group. An element of language awareness is that all languages are valued in multilingual groups and have an important role in interaction and socialisation. Good pedagogical tools for guiding multilingual groups include using pictures, drawings or easy language (selkokieli in Finnish) to illustrate things. Easy language is a form of language in which the content, vocabulary and structure have been adapted to make it easier to read and understand.¹³

While a person can officially only have one mother tongue in Finland, the reality is much more diverse. Departing from normative monolingualism is worthwhile when the group includes young people who know several languages that they use in different situations¹⁴. If a young person's mother tongue is Arabic, for instance, they can search for information in their native language and talk about the content to be discussed with other speakers of the same language in the group. At best, using a young person's mother tongue deepens their learning, improves their motivation and has a positive impact on their self-image¹⁵. An instructor may

¹¹ Siljamäki & Anttila, 2022. | ¹² POPS, 2014. | ¹³ See Finnish Centre for Easy Language/Easy Finnish. | ¹⁴ Cf. Lehtonen, 2021. | ¹⁵ Garcia & Sylcan, 2011.

be concerned if they do not always understand what the young person is reading or talking about with other people speaking the same language in the group. The aim of language-aware guidance is learning to trust young people's expertise regarding their native language.¹⁶

Art, physical activity and other hobbies can also be used to support the learning of Finnish or Swedish by children and young people who have migrated to Finland. In this case, language can be understood as an activity known as translanguaging. The idea of translanguaging is that guidance is holistic and that, in addition to spoken language, language learning is supported with gestures, body language and use of different senses¹⁷. Language learning through action-based assignments has brought learners experiences of meaningful moments, joy, togetherness and empowerment. They have also reported that embodied language learning through movement has been a channel for improving their self-confidence¹⁸.

AUTHOR

Mariana Siljamäki (PhD (Sport Sciences)) is a senior lecturer in dance pedagogy, embodiment and cultural diversity at the University of Jyväskylä's Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences. Siljamäki has researched the development of intercultural competence and applications of embodied language learning in different environments. She has also been a visiting researcher at the University of the Arts Research Institute and has been involved in research projects led by the University of the Arts Helsinki, such as Embodied Language Learning Through the Arts (ELLA/2021–2024). Siljamäki works as a dance teacher in basic education in the arts, in addition to which she is a Pilates instructor.

¹⁶ Cf. Lehtonen, 2021. ¹⁷ Anttila et al., 2024. | ¹⁸ Siljamäki & Anttila, 2024

Recommendations for leisure activity instructors:

- Awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity → discussions with young people and guardians or an initial questionnaire for all participants, for instance regarding their practices and the languages they know.
- Language awareness: recognising the central role of language in all learning and interaction, valuing different languages in activities.
- Clear teaching communication and use of easy language. (See Finnish Centre for Easy Language, <https://selkokeskus.fi/in-english/easy-finnish/>).
- Translanguaging: a holistic idea of using language, such as learning a language through arts and physical activity. An instructor or coach can use action-based methods and embodiment in teaching, such as body language, gestures and movements. (See ELLA Research Project, <https://sites.uniarts.fi/en/web/ellaresearchproject/home>)
- Illustration, including with image and audio materials. (E.g. Papunet, <https://papunet.net/materiaalit/>).
- Repetition and differentiation → promote everyone's participation.
- An overview of the assignment at the beginning.
- Multi-channel materials, breaking materials down.
- Using technology (such as translation programs).

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

- Do not make assumptions about their language or culture based on a child's or young person's background. Ask and listen.
- Give yourself time to learn!

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Saimi Liikkanen and Saara Marte attend the Espoo School of Art.



Living the role of a teacher and boys

ISTO TURPEINEN

Life requires agency, presence and encounters with others. In our common and changing world, we encounter the meanings that are important to us. For all of us, being is based on meaning and a meaningful life. In his novel *The First Man*¹ Albert Camus describes the way a teacher encounters the boys he teaches. The boys had been dealt a bad hand for encountering the world. A teacher who loved his job made the pupils feel valued. The teacher helped them become aware of their being and possibilities. A feeling of having the power to grow was sparked in them. The teacher inspired them to learn, and with his gentle firmness, shared their *journey of growth*². In my mind, Camus describes a pedagogue living his role as a teacher. Rather than only teaching the subjects for which he was paid, he also lived his life and learning with his pupils.

From these introductory words on, I wish to emphasise understanding the Other and encounters as well as our ideas of being human. While doing so, I rely on my literary companions and

¹ Camus 1960/1995.

² See also Hollo, 1952; Taneli, 2012.

my lengthy experience of working with boys as a dance teacher and developer of my own work. The Other I encounter, in Buber's terms *Thou*³, is a human being who exists in the world as an embodied and unique individual. They are part of the diversity of us humans. This diversity is a precondition for our being and action. Nobody is ever the same as someone else. Another similar individual does not, has not and will not exist⁴. At the same time understanding another person, a child and an adolescent, is a challenge. The Other is more or less of a mystery⁵. This fact, positive (!) as such, continuously crystallises our need for understanding, in daily life and repeatedly as we encounter the Other.

At the moment of the encounter both of us, the teacher and the learner, display differences and similarities dictated by birth. Among others, they include the assumed gender and the different developmental rhythms and stages of growth determined by gender. Biology and anatomy are part of our destiny, as Jari Sinkkonen notes in his work *Elämäni poikana*⁶ ('My life as a boy'), which he wrote twice. We have our individual and permanent *temperaments*⁷, racial features as well as a background assumption shaped by our expressions and way of being. The moment of our encounter with the Other is unique, and I repeat with emphasis that each individual is a unique human being.

The assumed gender, and the perceptions associated with being assumed a boy, do matter. The being of boys as creatures of a masculine nature who challenge group dynamics can easily be interpreted as something other than what they actually are⁸.

³ Buber, 1995. | ⁴ Arendt, 2002.

⁵ Buber, 1995. | ⁶ Sinkkonen, 2005.

⁷ Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2006; 2011.

⁸ Turpeinen, 2015; Turpeinen & Buck, 2019.

These beliefs and features are "exaggerated and underestimated according to what is found necessary at the time"⁹. We should ask what it would mean for a child and an adolescent to build their identity or self-image in ways other than through gender¹⁰. Defining children and young people based on encountered or recurring encoded tendencies, appearance or verbal talent overlooks the potential power of growth in the individual. The gender-related ethos, skill requirement, a type of *ideal discourse*¹¹ and differentiation in their exclusiveness may define more than the actual objective of the leisure activity. As the objective should be seen enjoyable leisure activities over a long time span, social connection with peers who represent diversity and, perhaps most significantly, developing self-knowledge. Timo Klemola¹² reflects on the importance of physical activity and stresses the projectivity of leisure activities. For him, the deepest meaning of leisure activities is to serve as "a road towards the real self". Through my personal experience as a teacher, I see engaging in long-term leisure activities as a project of self that should be taken seriously. It differs from other projects related to the activities as described by Klemola. The most mundane ones of them are projects related to health and winning, meaning that the objective is achieving well-being or needing to be better than others. Through a project of expression, I will be seen and can share my competence and skills. I stress that leisure activities are significant and meaningful for the agent themselves. A leisure activity builds a young person's understanding of themselves as an agent.

⁹ Varto, 2007.

¹⁰ Ovannämnd

¹¹ Löytönen, 2004.

¹² Klemola, 1991; 2004.

To conclude my article I will consider, concisely and through examples arising from my research, the kinds of long-lasting impacts a leisure activity can leave. This is about diverse experiences that remain in everyone's personal knowledge like "the taste of a dish that you cannot get rid of"¹³. I limit my views to dancers assumed to be boys who have grown up to be men, men with whom I am still in contact through everyday activities and hobbies. This is a kind of "extended family" with shared experience of how the passion to encounter the world is wisdom of the youth. This passion differed from my way of seeing the future, which at the time was middle aged.

In the artistic section of my dissertation¹⁴, an assumed male gave as the reason for decades-long engagement in dance a peer group where you can be what you are. They stressed an atmosphere where "you need not be afraid of anything." I include the atmosphere in the goals of leisure activities and building of the dynamic in group activities towards understanding otherness. In this comment, the "road" towards yourself mentioned above also came up. In other words, a state of becoming exists in which you can be and explore, without some ideal of the activity putting a growing person on their guard¹⁵. Despite obstacles, dancing had continued for a long time. When men talk about their experiences, you get the impression that at some point, a space in which "you needed not be afraid" was created in the boys' peer group. This contains the assumption of an activity which offers a space for freedom. A space in which not all ossified cultural norms gain a foothold. This means that stigmas, presumptions, generalisations and ideals are overcome by dancing which as such, according to the men, is "cool" as a hobby. Two recurring themes could

¹³ Varto, 2008. | ¹⁴ Turpeinen, 2015. | ¹⁵ Turpeinen, 2015.

be found at the root of their stories: being a boy (man) and a peer group of dancing boys. The peer group was a place where they shared experiences related to dancing and growing.

I also wrote about this in our research with Kai Lehikoinen¹⁶. In our work, we interviewed men who had long-term experience of engaging in dance as a hobby when they were children and adolescents. In the interview, a 34-year-old assumed male described being active in the group and their personal relationship with a hobby that, according to gendered perceptions, was not considered suitable for boys. For them, it was a community that made everyday life and the realities of social relationships at school easier. The leisure activity community had an impact on their self-esteem, while the actual form of the leisure activity, dancing and working with your body, suited them.

The skill of encountering gender comes with an understanding of dismantling attitudes. Through rigid attitudinal codes, we trigger a kind of emergency mode, ready to take for granted the physical activity, intensity and even aggressiveness associated with boys. According to the oft-repeated saying, "boys will be boys". From here, it may be difficult to move on to dialogue and understanding of sensitivity. Another way of looking at this is that under the guise of this saying, we downplay and excuse boys' antics as well as justify not intervening in unjustified lack of boundaries.

Child psychiatrist Jari Sinkkonen has said that boys' dangerous scuffles are overlooked because, at the level of attitudes, "violence is associated with being a boy". As a teacher, I concur with Sinkkonen's¹⁷ view, according to which such a thing as "violent play" cannot and do not exist. Genuine play, or as my experienced

¹⁶ Lehikoinen & Turpeinen, 2022. | ¹⁷ Sinkkonen, 2005.

colleague Ilkka Lampi describes it, frolicking, is associated with human creativity and a symbolic action. In simple terms, this question is linked to skills in encountering, the quality of dialogical approach and an understanding of the cultural challenges of growing into manhood, the features of which include being ashamed of crying and emotions and avoiding unconventional hobbies. As a result of having overcome these challenges, I cite the description given by a person engaged in dancing whom I interviewed, assumed male, of a *resource*. While they no longer dance, the impact of this activity has stayed with them. It remains in their dreams and as part of their living, as an impact seen in the way they move and think and who they are (*self*). They say they have learned to think in a more multi-dimensional way and to also see the other's *viewpoint* of this being together.

AUTHOR

Isto Turpeinen, Doctor of Arts (Dance) is an expert, researcher and pedagogue. He works as an Art Advisor in Expert services for cultural well-being at the Arts Promotion Centre Finland. He has worked as a university lecturer and visiting researcher at the University of the Arts Helsinki. He is a founding member of Apinatarha Art Cooperative (2008) and the Vapaa Tanssikoulu Dance School (TPO) (2010). Turpeinen develops a pedagogical "raw timber method" in his work with boys and men. A doctoral dissertation on this method was published in 2015. In 2002, Turpeinen was presented with the State Prize for Children's and Youth Culture.

Recommendations for leisure activity instructors:

- The teacher's work is about sharing the students' journey. Know yourself.
- Listen, listen and listen with a sensitive ear.
- Hold on, be patient. A human being grows slowly but surely

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Gym training at Kulosaari Secondary School in Helsinki.



Next steps

This publication was compiled so that leisure activity instructors and coaches would have access to the latest research data and best practices on factors affecting children's wellbeing. When developing activities for children and young people, it is crucial to use research-based knowledge and involve the contribution of researchers. I hope that new channels will be established to facilitate collaboration and exchange of information between researchers and those working with children and young people.

This publication includes a section on how to effectively combine leisure activities with school responsibilities. We aimed to explore how the actions and attitudes of leisure activity instructors can impact the education of children from diverse backgrounds. It is important to find ways in which goal-oriented leisure activities and the time spent on them can better support and motivate students in their educational journey. This requires joint reflection and understanding by parents, teachers and coaches. Pursuing education demands a great deal, but it will secure the future for everyone.

The challenge in balancing school and leisure activities is that the latter can bring immediate rewards like medals and trophies, whereas the benefits of consistent school attendance and studying take longer to manifest. Leisure activities bring many positive experiences to children's lives and strengthen a wide range of skills. At the same time, however, we must recognise that frequent absences from school due to training and competitions can weaken school performance and make it more difficult to establish friendships at school.

The latest Student Survey asked questions about school attendance and leisure activities, and the responses were quite surprising. The results showed that more than 20 per cent of lower secondary school students consider that they do not have enough time for school work. Of primary and lower secondary school students, 38 per cent overall and as many as 41 per cent of boys in grades 4 to 6 said that a test at school is not a good enough reason to be absent from a leisure activity. The survey included the question of whether the leisure activity instructor considers school attendance important. Of all schoolchildren, 16 per cent felt that the instructor did not consider school important; as many as one in four boys in grades 7 to 9.

It is important to emphasise to children and young people that education is always worthwhile. Children and young people in Finland believe in the importance of education but are sceptical about their possibilities of advancing their educational paths. Sharing accurate information can help dispel this scepticism. Research highlights the importance of education for the success of both nations and individuals, and shows that Finland can provide meaningful educational pathways for all young people. We

should provide children and young people with examples of how education enhances human capital and brings cultural and economic benefits. Education inspires people to succeed, and it is a good idea to raise awareness of role models among children and young people. Researchers point out that children and young people with a strong identity as both athletes and students are the most motivated and resilient.

Safeguarding the wellbeing of children and young people is the best social policy. The principle is clear: we should support all children and young people by offering them equal opportunities for both learning and leisure activities. However, putting this principle into practice depends on us adults.

ANITA LEHIKONEN

Permanent Secretary

Ministry of Education and Culture

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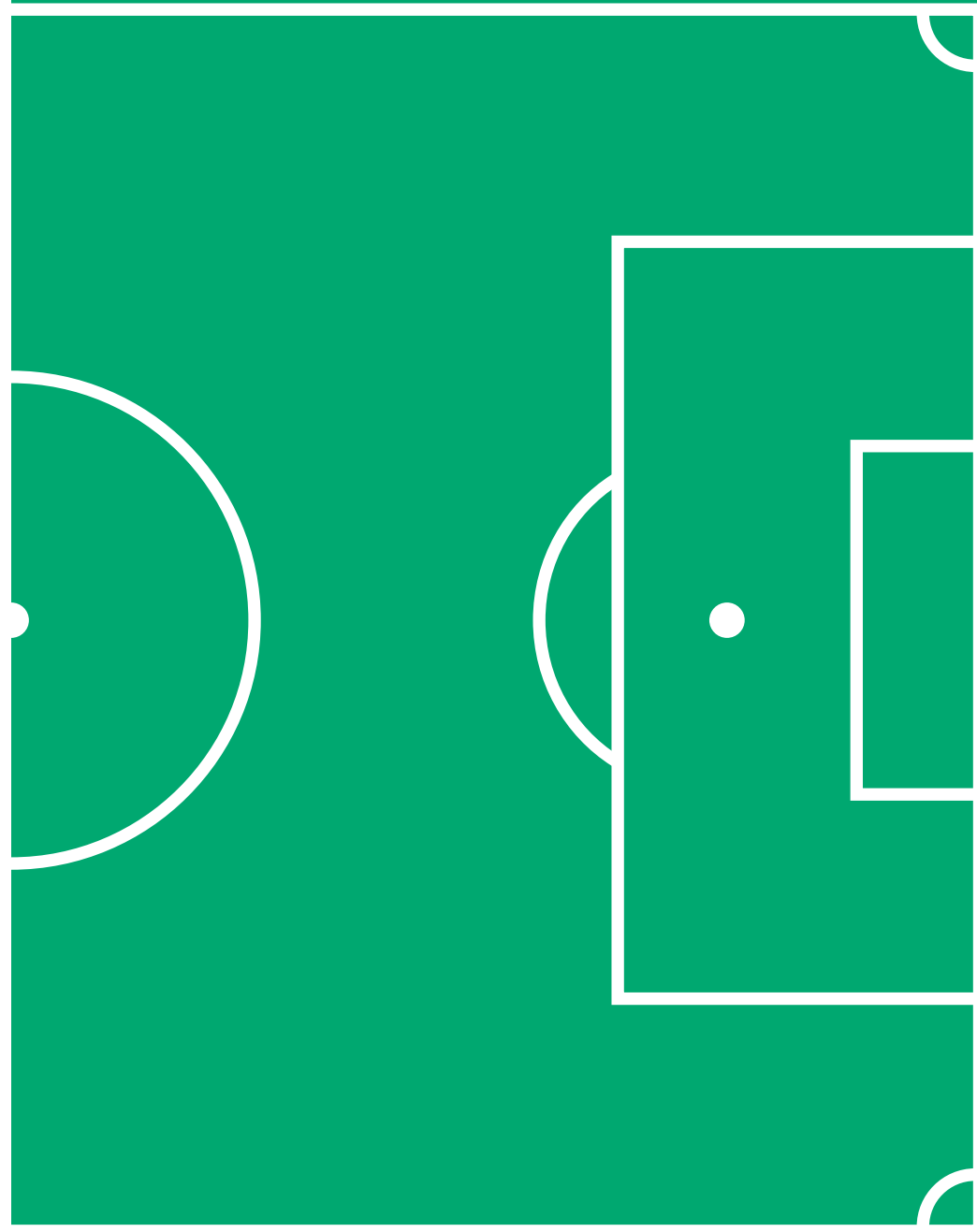
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This publication consists of articles based on new information written by 16 researchers and experts. It examines how instructors and coaches in recreational activities can help contribute to favourable growth and development in children and young people, motivate them to reach their goals in recreational activities and at school, motivate them to pursue recreational activities at different ages and, above all, make recreational activities meaningful for children and young people. Each writer also formulated recommendations for instructors and coaches. The publication is part of the implementation of the National Child Strategy.

