Coll. Antropol. **48** (2024) 2: 95–101
Original scientific paper
doi:10.5671/ca.48.2.3

# The Influence of Social Support on Physical Activity in Different Domains Among High School Students

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## ABSTRACT

*The aim of this research is to determine the relationship between social support for physical activity and physical activity in different domains among high school students. The sample of respondents consisted of 224 secondary school students (grammar schools, art schools and vocational schools). Of these, there were 144 female students (64.29%) and 80 male students with an average age of 16.07±1.19 and 16.16±1.11 years (M ± SD). The sample of variables consisted of questionnaires on socio-demographic characteristics, physical activity in different domains (IPAQ-A) and social support for physical exercise (SES). The results showed that there is no statistically significant difference between the physical activity variables of females and males in different domains (school – t=–0.91, p=0.37; household – t=0.01, p=0.99; transport – t=–1.83, p=0.07; leisure – t=–0.63, p=0.53), but a significant difference was shown in the social support variables, on the basis of which it can be concluded that males have greater social support from their peers (friends from school – t=–2.66, p=0.008; friends outside school – t=–3.17, p=0.001). For females, a significant positive relationship between support for physical activity (in all variables) and physical activity is only in the domain of leisure time. The results of support from family and friends from school in males showed a positive significant relationship in the domains of school, transport and leisure time, while the results of support from friends outside of school showed only a positive significant relationship in the domain of leisure time. It could be concluded that this study revealed gender differences in the support of parents and peers in physical activities in different domains, and revealed that in all students there is no significant relationship between social support (in all variables) and the domain household. Results of this study is contribution to knowledge about association of social support for physical activity and physical activity in the domains of school, household, transportation, and leisure time. The results of the research can serve as a basis for the design of quality interventions for the promotion of physical activity among high school students, which represents a very important practical contribution of this research.*

***Key words:*** *social support, physical activity, students, leisure time, domains*

## Introduction

In order to influence human health at the population level it is necessary to better understand the social influences that underlie human behavior. Social influence is one of the factors associated with physical activity (PA) in high school students, and it is characterized by the influence of parents, friends, teachers and relatives[1]. Modeling human behavior is one of the constructs of social learning theory and assumes that human behavior is acquired and modified by observing behavior and learning experiences from socially important people[2,3]. Therefore, it is understood that the PA of parents, family and friends in school and outside of school would act as a model for the PA of high school students. Therefore, it is more likely that high school students with physically active parents and/or friends will be more physically active. PA is only one of the many tools that enable an individual's optimal health status, and only through the great promotion of PA we can significantly improve public health[4]. On the other hand, PA is a key protective factor against many non-communicable diseases such as diabetes mellitus and dementia and is strongly associated with cardio-metabolic biomarkers, physical fitness, bone health, quality of life, motor, social, cognitive and emotional development in children[5–7]. And despite much evidence of the importance of PA, PA levels in young

Received for publication March 4, 2024

people have been significantly declining over the past few decades. A large proportion of young people (81%) aged 11–17 do not meet the recommendations for daily PA of at least 60 minutes of moderate to high-intensity PA, and the level of PA in young people decreases with age by an average of –7% per year[8–10]. In the Republic of Croatia (RC), the highest PA was reported by participants aged 55 to 64, and this was mainly due to high PA in the domain of work, household and garden, while young participants (15 – 24 years old) reported the lowest PA, mainly due to a very low level of PA in the household and garden domain and the highest PA in the leisure domain, which was not enough to increase their total PA scores[11]. Although there are a large number of papers that have investigated the relationship between PA and social support of high school students, the knowledge so far is mostly based on total PA or PA in the domain of leisure time, and other domains (school, household, transport) are missing. Studies on PA should cover all domains so that the overall level of PA is not underestimated[11]. Given that social support can significantly influence the increase of total PA, it is important to investigate social support for physical exercise in different domains of high school students, which represents one of the research problems of this paper. Therefore, the aim of this research is to determine the relationship between social support for PA and PA in different domains in high school students.

## Materials and Methods

*Participants*

The sample of respondents consisted of 224 secondary school students (grammar schools, art schools and vocational schools). Of these, there were 144 female students (64.29%) and 80 male students with an average age of 16.07 ± 1.19 and 16.16 ± 1.11 years (M ± SD). In this research, a stratified multistage sample was used. Then: 1) classes in which the survey was conducted were randomly selected within each school; 2) randomly selected the number of students from each class who want to participate in the research (and whose parents give consent for the child's participation in the research). The random selection was carried out according to the principle of "random numbers" using a random number generator in such a way that each school and student was assigned a number.

*Methods*

The research was conducted in a regular physical education class. Before starting to fill out the questionnaire, the terms physical activity, moderate physical activity, high-intensity physical activity and all other terms used in the questionnaire were explained to the students. The students were given a QR code that they read with their mobile phones and filled out the survey. During the questionnaire, if something was not clear to the students, they could ask questions to which the physical education teacher would answer. The students needed 15 minutes to fill out the questionnaire.

*Instruments*

The questionnaire contains seven questions relate to age, type of school, grade point average, social status, marital status of parents.An adapted version of the International Physical Activity Questionnaire (IPAQ)[12] was used to measure physical activity. The IPAQ was developed in different languages as a set of internationally comparable, valid and reliable instruments that examine subjectively assessed PA over seven days[12]. The IPAQ measures PA in different domains such as work, transport, household or garden and leisure. It also measures the total amount of walking, moderate-intensity and high-intensity activities as well as total PA and moderate-to-high-intensity PA (MVPA). In the International physical activity questionnaire for adolescents (IPAQ – A)[13–16], which is also a valid instrument, the questions about PA at work were replaced by questions about PA at school, that is, PA in the physical education (PE) class, PA during breaks between classes and walking, moderate and high-intensity PA at school. For the purposes of this research, PA was calculated in the following domains: school, household, transport, leisure, and total PA was also calculated. Questions related to PA in different domains required answers with the exact number of hours and minutes spent in a certain physical activity. For example, questions in the field of transport that read: During the last seven days, on how many days did you travel by feet? How much time did you usually spend walking from place to place on one of those days? Write exactly how many hours and minutes per day. Based on the obtained data, all results of PA in the domains and total PA were expressed in MET minutes per week (MET – minutes/week).

The Social support for Exercise survey (SES)[17] was used to measure social support for PA. This questionnaire assesses the level of support that individuals who are changing their health behavior (exercise) felt from family, friends at school, and friends outside of school. Respondents were asked to rate how often their family members, friends at school, and then friends outside school, support behavior such as walking or exercising with them and how much they encourage them to be physically active. On a Likert scale from 1 to 5, respondents indicated how many times someone from the family or a friend encouraged them to PA. The answers offered were: 1 – Never, 2 – Rarely, 3 – Several times, 4 – Often, 5 – Very often. SES consists of 13 particles, on the basis of which the results of the respondents can be calculated in 4 variables: support of family for physical exercise (family), support of friends at school for physical exercise (friends from school), support of friends outside of school (friends outside of school) , and overall social support for physical exercise.

*Statistics*

The normality of the distribution of variables was tested with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Descriptive parameters were calculated for all quantitative variables: arithmetic mean, standard deviation, and frequencies of

**TABLE 1**

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

| | Male (N=80) | Female (N=144) | All (N=224) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age (years ± sd) | 16.16 ± 1.11 | 16.07 ± 1.19 | 16.10 ± 1.16 |
| Type of school | | | |
| Grammar school | 45 | 127 | 172 |
| Art school | / | 2 | 2 |
| Vocational school | 35 | 15 | 50 |
| Grade average | | | |
| 5 | 20 | 62 | 82 |
| 4 | 35 | 76 | 111 |
| 3 | 25 | 6 | 31 |
| 2 | / | / | / |
| 1 | / | / | / |
| Social status | | | |
| Living with parents | 66 | 127 | 193 |
| Living only with father | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| Living only with mother | 10 | 12 | 22 |
| Other | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Marital status of parents | | | |
| Married | 64 | 123 | 187 |
| Divorced | 12 | 12 | 24 |
| Widowed | 3 | 5 | 8 |
| Unmarried | 1 | 4 | 5 |

individual responses were calculated for all qualitative variables. The t-test for independent samples determined the differences between PA in different domains and variables of social support for physical exercise. A series of regression analyzes determined the relationship between social support and the level of PA among students in the domains of school, household, transport and leisure. Data were processed using the Statistica for Windows software package (Version 14.0.1.25.; Copyright 1984 – 2018 TIBCO Software Inc).

*Ethical consideration*

The parents of the subjects signed the informed consent form and this study was conducted in full accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the relevant ethics board.

## Results

The majority of respondents attend grammar school (76.79%) and vocational school (22.32%), while only 2 students (0.89%) attend art school. The majority of students pass with very good (4; 49.55 %) and excellent results (5; 36.61 %), and only a few with good results (3; 13.84 %). In the RH, grade 5 is the highest grade, while grade 1 is the lowest. 86.16% of students live with both parents, 2.23% with their father and 9.82% with their mother.

The majority of students declared that their parents were married (83.48%), then divorced (10.71%), and that one of the parents was a widower (3.57%) and that they were unmarried (2.23%). The results of the T-test showed that there is no significant difference in physical activity in different domains between females and males, although males achieved better results in all observed variables (Table 2). They are more physically active than females. In the variable family, there is no significant difference ($p=0.89$) between females and males, while in the variables friends from school and friends outside of school, males achieve significantly better results (Table 2).

The results of a series of multiple regression analyzes and variables of social support for physical exercise and PA in different domains showed that multiple relationship coefficients vary between 0.03 for physical activity in the domain of household and 0.39 for physical activity in the domain of leisure. The variables family, friends from school and friends outside of school have significant regression coefficients with the domains transport (0.15, 0.17 and 0.20; $p<0.05$ and $p<0.01$), leisure (0.37, 0.36 and 0.39; $p<0.001$) and total physical activity (0.31, 0.31 and 0.33; $p<0.001$), while they have no significant relationship with the domains school and household.

**TABLE 2**

DESCRIPTIVE PARAMETERS OF STUDENTS' PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN DIFFERENT DOMAINS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR EXERCISE (M ± SD)

| | Male (N=80) | Female (N=144) | All (N=224) | t - value | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| School | 1129.25 | 990 | 1061 | -0.91 | 0.37 |
| Home | 480 | 450 | 480 | 0.01 | 0.99 |
| Transport | 831 | 693 | 693 | -1.83 | 0.07 |
| Leisure | 1629 | 1265.25 | 1330.25 | -0.63 | 0.53 |
| Total PA | 2540 | 2520 | 2532 | -0.37 | 0.71 |
| Family | 19.71 ± 7.56 | 19.56 ± 8.11 | 19.62 ± 7.90 | -0.14 | 0.89 |
| Friends from school | 21.24 ± 9.19 | 18.14 ± 7.83 | 19.25 ± 8.45 | -2.66 | 0.008** |
| Friends outside of school | 21.65 ± 9.96 | 17.76 ± 8.07 | 19.15 ± 8.97 | -3.17 | 0.001*** |

** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

**TABLE 3**

RESULTS OF MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYZES BETWEEN SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR EXERCISE AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY VARIABLES FOR ALL STUDENTS (N=224)

| | School (β) | Household (β) | Transport (β) | Leisure (β) | Total PA (β) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Family | 0.10 | 0.04 | 0.15* | 0.37*** | 0.31*** |
| Friends from school | 0.07 | 0.03 | 0.17** | 0.36*** | 0.31*** |
| Friends outside of school | 0.09 | 0.07 | 0.20** | 0.39*** | 0.33*** |

β - standardized regression coefficients, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

**TABLE 4**

RESULTS OF MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYZES BETWEEN SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR EXERCISE AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY VARIABLES FOR FEMALE STUDENTS (N=144)

| | School (β) | Household (β) | Transport (β) | Leisure (β) | Total PA (β) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Family | 0.04 | -0.04 | 0.07 | 0.32*** | 0.26** |
| Friends from school | -0.03 | 0.01 | 0.03 | 0.27*** | 0.23** |
| Friends outside of school | 0.04 | 0.07 | 0.15 | 0.37*** | 0.35*** |

In Table 4, the multiple correlation coefficients vary between –0.03 for physical activity in the domain of schools and 0.37 for physical activity in the domain of leisure. The variables family, friends from school and friends outside of school have significant regression coefficients with the domains of leisure (0.32, 0.27 and 0.37; $p<0.001$) and total physical activity (0.26, 0.23 and 0.35; $p<0.01$ and $p<0.001$), while they have no significant relationship with the domains of school, household and transport. So, for females, apart from the domain school and household, there is no significant relationship in the domain transport.

In Table 5, the multiple correlation coefficients vary between 0.06 for PA in the household domain and 0.50 for PA in the leisure domain. The variables family, friends from school have significant regression coefficients with the domains school, transport, leisure and total physical activity, while only with the domain household they have no significant relationship. Support for physical exercise of friends outside of school has significant regression coefficients with the domain of leisure (0.46, 0.50 and 0.43; $p<0.001$) and total physical activity (0.41, 0.41 and 0.31; $p<0.001$ and $p<0.01$), while there is no significant relationship with the domains of school, household and transport.

## Discussion

The main findings for all high school students indicate a significant positive relationship between support for PA (from family, friends from school and friends outside school) and PA in the domains of transport and leisure time. For females, a significant positive relationship between support for PA (in all variables) and PA is only in the domain of leisure time. The results of support from family and friends from school in males showed a positive significant relationship in the domains of school, transport and leisure time, while the results of support from friends outside of school showed only a positive significant relationship in the domain of leisure time. In both females and males, social support for PA has a significantly positive effect on total PA. This study revealed gender differences in the support of parents and peers in PA in different domains, and it was discovered that in all students there is no significant relationship between social support (in all variables) and the domain of household. This may mean that nowadays there is a lack of support from family and peers for doing household chores, or simply that high school students do not like doing such chores, so they do not seek more support for doing household activities. On the other hand, when descriptive indicators of socio-demographic variables are analyzed, it can be determined

**TABLE 5**

RESULTS OF MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYZES BETWEEN SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR EXERCISE AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY VARIABLES FOR MALE STUDENTS (N=80)

| | School (β) | Household (β) | Transport (β) | Leisure (β) | Total PA (β) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Family | 0.23* | 0.21 | 0.31** | 0.46*** | 0.41*** |
| Friends from school | 0.24* | 0.06 | 0.34** | 0.50*** | 0.41*** |
| Friends outside of school | 0.15 | 0.06 | 0.17 | 0.43*** | 0.31** |

that most students pass with very good (4) and excellent (5) school success. There are much more females with very good (52.78 %) and excellent (43.06 %) results compared to males with very good (43.75 %) and excellent (25 %) results, which means that females have a much better average grade than males and probably spend more time sitting and studying. As a result, females spend less time in different PA, which can greatly affect PA in the household domain and the overall PA of an individual. This is perhaps one of the many reasons why females are less physically active than males. Of the total sample of high school students, 86.16% live with both parents, of which 83.48% live married. If the majority of children live with parents who are also married and physically active, the more likely they will be physically active because they will be more able to encourage them to PA. It is known that the PA of fathers is related to that of their sons, and the PA of mothers is related to that of their daughters[18]. The results of this study are in accordance with a large study from Germany (N=3505) and show that females are less physically active than males in all investigated domains and that they receive significantly less support from their peers[19]. These findings are expected, given the fact that gender differences in overall PA are greater at the transition from childhood to adolescence, and that the decline in PA in females occurs during adolescence, and in males in the later stages of life. And that's probably due to sexual maturation, which usually happens earlier in females compared to males. However, it is not entirely clear why females receive significantly less social support for PA in all domains than males. However, social influences can also be the reason for gender differences, i.e. the reduction of PA. If parents and friends do not encourage PA, there is a greater chance that the individual will be less physically active. For this reason, it is very important that females, more than males, have support from family, friends at school and friends outside of school for PA, especially during the period of adolescence. The results of this research showed that family, friends at school and friends outside of school can have a positive and significant influence on PA in the domains of transport and leisure time and on the total PA of all high school students, but not on PA in the domains of schools and households. Thus, family and peers can greatly influence individuals to walk or cycle to and from school, to the mall, to training, to friends, etc., instead of using motorized transport. The social support of family and peers is insufficient for all high school students in the domains of schools and households. The reasons for this can perhaps be manifested in the fact that perhaps children at school are more focused on learning, tests and oral answers than on PA. Well, in the PE class, they may understand it more as a mental break than studying material and tests. As a kind of "exhaust valve" after a hard day. Despite this, the results showed that males have significant positive social support in the domain of schools. Males are more physically active than females in PE classes and this is probably one of the reasons why they have a higher PA in the domain of schools. Accordingly, physical education teachers should motivate females more to work during class and encourage them to participate in extracurricular activities.

*Advantages and limitations*

The advantages of this research are manifested through a scientific contribution to the understanding of PA in different domains among high school students. In addition to the understanding of PA in different domains, the specifics of social support for the PA of high school students are also known. This study is contribution to knowledge about association of social support for PA and PA in the domains of school, household, transportation, and leisure time. The results of the regression analyzes point to the conclusion that PA in different domains is differently related to the components of social support. The results of the research can serve as a basis for the design of quality interventions for the promotion of PA among high school students, which represents a very important practical contribution of this research. This research also has several limitations. The first limitation refers to the transversal character of the research, which makes it impossible to draw conclusions about the causal relationship between the analyzed variables. Another limitation relates to the method used to measure PA. Namely, although in this study PA was measured with an adapted version of the IPAQ questionnaire (IPAQ-A), one of the most frequently used questionnaires in scientific research on PA in the world, it is possible that the results are overestimated or underestimated due to the subjective assessment of the respondents.

## Conclusions

The results of this research showed that males are more physically active than females in all domains of PA and that they have significantly more support from family and peers for PA. Also, it was shown that all high school students have significant positive social support for PA in the domains of transport and leisure time. Females have significant positive social support for PA (in all variables) in the domain of leisure time, and males have significant positive support from family and friends from school in the domains of school, transport and leisure time, and support from friends outside of school in the domain of leisure time. In both females and males, social support for PA has a significantly positive effect on total PA. This study revealed gender differences in the support of parents and peers in PA in different domains, and it was discovered that in all students there is no significant relationship between social support (in all variables) and the domain of households. It is important to conclude that it is necessary to encourage and support high school students for PA, especially in the domains of schools and households, in order to increase PA in these domains, and therefore overall PA. Increasing PA at school can be achieved through extracurricular activities, the organization of various walking and cycling tours, encouraging students to use active transport when coming to and from school,

and increasing the workload within the subject of PE. And the recommendation for the Ministry of Tourism and Sports is to increase the weekly number of hours of PE classes. It is very important to pay special attention to the encouragement and support of PA in females because they give up sports, are less involved in extracurricular activities and are less physically active in the physical education class (school domain). It is necessary to conduct more education for parents and children through which they would receive information about the benefits of PA. Education that would be conducted by expert kinesiologists through various lectures on the benefits of PA and the importance of encouraging children by example and words. Then through various workshops where it would be shown how to exercise and what forms of exercise exist.

## Acknowledgement

Author of this work sincerely thanks all study participants for taking part in this study.

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## UTJECAJ SOCIJALNE PODRŠKE NA TJELESNU AKTIVNOST U RAZLIČITIM DOMENAMA KOD UČENIKA SREDNJIH ŠKOLA


### S A Ž E T A K

Društveni utjecaj jedan je od čimbenika koji su povezani s tjelesnom aktivnosti kod srednjoškolaca, a karakterizira ga utjecaj roditelja, prijatelja, učitelja i rodbine. Iako postoji veliki broj radova u kojima je istražena povezanost tjelesne aktivnosti i društvene podrške srednjoškolaca, dosadašnje spoznaje se temelje većinom na ukupnoj tjelesnoj aktivnosti ili tjelesnoj aktivnosti u domeni slobodnog vremena, a izostaju ostale domene (škola, kućanstvo, transport). Stoga je cilj ovog istraživanja utvrditi povezanost između društvene podrške za tjelesnu aktivnost i tjelesne aktivnosti u različitim domenama kod srednjoškolaca. Uzorak ispitanika činilo je 224 učenika srednjih škola (gimnazije, umjetničke škole i strukovne škole). Od toga je bilo 144 učenice (64,29%) i 80 učenika prosječne dobi 16,07 ± 1,19 i 16,16 ± 1,11 godina (M ± SD). Uzorak varijabli činili su upitnici o socio – demografskim karakteristikama, tjelesnoj aktivnosti u različitim domenama (IPAQ – A) i društvenoj podršci za tjelesno vježbanje (SES). Rezultati su pokazali da nema statistički značajne razlike između varijabli tjelesne aktivnosti djevojaka i mladića u različitim domenama (škola – $t = -0,91$, $p = 0,37$; kuća – $t = 0,01$, $p = 0,99$; transport – $t = -1,83$, $p = 0,07$; slobodno vrijeme – $t = -0,63$, $p = 0,53$), no kod varijabli društvene podrške pokazala se značajna razlika na temelju koje se može zaključiti da mladići imaju veću društvenu podršku od svojih vršnjaka (prijatelji iz škole – $t = -2,66$, $p = 0,008$; prijatelji izvan škole – $t = -3,17$, $p = 0,001$). Kod djevojaka značajna pozitivna povezanost podrške za tjelesnu aktivnost (u svim varijablama) i tjelesne aktivnosti je samo u domeni slobodnog vremena. Rezultati podrške obitelji i prijatelja iz škole kod mladića su pokazali pozitivnu značajnu povezanost u domenama škola, transport i slobodno vrijeme, dok su rezultati podrške prijatelja izvan škole pokazali samo pozitivnu značajnu povezanost u domeni slobodnog vremena. Može se zaključiti da su ovom studijom otkrivene rodne razlike o podršci roditelja i vršnjaka u tjelesnim aktivnostima u različitim domenama te je otkrivena spoznaja da kod svih učenika nema značajne povezanosti između društvene podrške (u svim varijablama) s domenom kuća. Ovo istraživanje je doprinos spoznajama o povezanosti socijalne podrške za tjelesnu aktivnost i tjelesne aktivnosti u domenama škole, kućanstva, prijevoza i slobodnog vremena. Rezultati istraživanja mogu poslužiti kao temelj za osmišljavanje kvalitetnih intervencija za poticanje tjelesne aktivnosti među srednjoškolcima, što predstavlja vrlo važan praktični doprinos ovog istraživanja.