

## Positive self-concept through physical-sport activity of preschool children

George F. Zarotis

*University of the Aegean, Faculty of Human Sciences, Rhodes, Greece*

**ABSTRACT:** Research activities on self development in Evolutionary Psychology research have a long tradition. Man, from birth, possibly earlier, has a subjective sense of self. Out of this sense of self, man learns about himself and classifies himself and his environment. The aim of the present study was to build a positive self-concept in preschool children by offering motor activities and finally to study this issue. The method adopted for the study was a review of the relevant literature. By analyzing various research findings, we discovered that self-esteem and self-confidence develop as a result of children's experiences with their own body during the early years of life. Successes are recorded as positive experiences. Equally imprinted are the unsuccessful endeavours, which as failures influence essentially the self-esteem of children. Limits of their own performance are recognized and make it clear to the children early on whether they are strong or weak. In addition, children are always in comparison with others. In a game the objective of which is the comparison with others or in everyday situations, the child is compared many times with peers. Thus, the self-concept of children develops not only based on their own observations, but also on the ascriptions that others attribute to them. The child-centred approach imputes the cause of a variety of disorders to a child's negative self-concept characterized by low confidence in one's own abilities and a lack of self-esteem. From this consideration, arises conversely the approach of child-centered development promotion, which examines the possibility of a positive change in body concept and, as a consequence, of self-concept through positive physical and motor experiences. As a consequence of this, thoughts arose about the possibilities of promoting self-concept by offering opportunities for motor games and movement activities.

**KEY WORDS:** *positive self-concept, movement, preschool age, personality development*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The examination of the terms "self-concept" and "ego" is the subject of different research directions. The terms "ego" and "self-concept" have different meanings and are by no means synonyms. A person's self-concept is defined by one's own concepts and beliefs, as well as the expectations and demands of others, or it is a person's mental model of his/her own abilities and qualities. The Ego of a person includes the private Ego and the social Ego. The private Ego arises through experiences and evaluation of one's own actions in different everyday situations, whereas the social Ego is created by the presumed external image, i.e. the opinion of others about one's own person (Knopp 2008). Netz (2007) divided self-concept into a cognitive and an evaluative, emotional component. The cognitive component, the so-called self-image, refers here to neutrally describable characteristics of the personality such as height, weight and appearance. The evaluative, emotional component of the self-concept, the so-called self-esteem, concerns satisfaction with one's own perceived traits and abilities. All definitions include both assessments of one's own abilities through accumulated experience, as well as personal appraisals by persons of reference. The self-concept is therefore a self-image that builds up in the course of life through comparisons with persons of reference and experienced effects of the individual's own behaviour on the personal and material environment. In recent years, a change of perspective in the health sciences has been observed, in which the focus increasingly shifted from deficit orientation to resource orientation. The focus here is on the targeted strengthening of the protective factors that protect people from daily stress and strengthen them in dealing with it. The protective factors for mental health can be divided into personal, social and family resources. The positive self-concept has been identified as one of the key protective factors that strengthen children's resilience to stress. The self-concept of a child plays an important role in the context of personal resources and greatly determines his/her actions. Taking into consideration this property, self-concept is an important source of health, which significantly influences the development and prospect of a person's life. Self-concept is responsible for how children assess themselves, whether they have confidence in

their own abilities, whether they behave rather reserved or active in dealing with others and whether they quickly give up on difficulties or consider them as challenges (Fischer 2008).

A positive self-concept manifests itself, for example, in the conviction that one can cope with new and difficult requirements, solve problems and have a situation under control. Amongst other things, pre-school day care facilities for childcare, such as kindergartens or day-care centres, have the task of preparing children for later life in school and subsequently their professional life. This includes offering children the opportunity to build a positive self-concept and ideally to enhance it. This self-concept evolves from the comparison of subjective skills and the challenges that a person confronts in the course of his/her life. The first, targeted challenges can be posed in day-care centres for pre-school childcare, when, for the first time, children have to act and react independently, without their parents, for an extended period of time. Respectively great is the responsibility of such institutions to provide these children with an ideal framework in which they can face a variety of challenges and thus test their abilities. This is how children learn to assess themselves as well as people from their immediate environment. In everyday life, general behavioural requirements based on social standards are constantly set to the child. These are required and defined by the teacher, since unwanted behaviour is directly reported and results in consequences. Through the constant interaction with other children and educators, the mutual behaviour is constantly interpreted, from which children develop self-understanding and as a result they can build up a positive self-concept. Explicit challenges are artificially created, in which children can use their own abilities and skills to solve their tasks. Experiences of success, as well as dealing with failure help children to increase their self-confidence, which in turn has an influence on self-concept (Zimmer 2006).

Challenges can be very diverse and originate from different areas. In addition to aesthetic education, creative design, music and rhythmic, other movement-oriented challenges can also be offered to the child. To enable children to achieve optimal personality development, a multifaceted range of challenges should be available in preschool day-care facilities. As a decisive basis for healthy personality development is the formation of a differentiated, realistic but nevertheless positively coloured self-concept (Hurrelmann 2006).

The previous statements have shown that there are different models and approaches to self-concept. Due to the natural changes of self-concept contingent upon Evolutionary Psychology, unavoidably there are difficulties in observing and recording self-concept and its changes. There are research methodological issues that their solution should be the central task of future researches. The difficulty is that examinations findings are hardly comparable with each other, since there is no connection between individual works and thus the term "self-concept" is differently defined and used. The self-concept research predominantly moves within a theoretical framework; thus, establishing and testing hypotheses and resulting to a deduction of conclusions in practice proves difficult.

## II. Methodology

The present research is a bibliographic review study, presenting the critical points of the existing knowledge about the theoretical approach to the concepts of "positive self-concept through physical activity in preschool children". There is no specialized and comprehensive work on this subject in this area. This work endeavours to cover this gap, and will perhaps also be a useful aid for those who in the future will attempt similar efforts. The main aim of the bibliographic review is to frame the study within the "body" of the relevant literature. The review of the current study concerns clearly formulated questions and uses systematic and explicit criteria for critically analysing a body of published papers by summarizing, sorting, grouping and comparing.

## III. BIBLIOGRAPHIC REVIEW STUDY

### 3. Self-concept development in preschool children

The image that children have of their own personality is called the self-concept. Self-esteem and self-confidence develop as a result of children's experiences with their own body during the early years of life. Successes are recorded as positive experiences. Equally imprinted are the unsuccessful endeavours, which as failures influence essentially the self-esteem of children. Limits of their own performance are recognized and make it clear to the children early on whether they are strong or weak. In addition, children are always in comparison with others. In a game the objective of which is the comparison with others or in everyday situations, the child is compared many times with peers. Thus, the self-concept of children develops not only based on their own observations, but also on the ascriptions that others attribute to them. If children again and again receive from others negative feedback during their sports activities, this statement is internalized from the children. It begins to build a negative self-concept that in future situations prevents them from positively approaching a new task. Children with a negative self-concept perceive unknown situations and challenges to be a threat, because they had not had a good experience in the past. This situation becomes problematic when children with a negative self-concept make generalizations and they transfer the negative motor experiences to other areas. So, a child, after failing in a motor game, could fear that it will fail as well in handicraft or baking, and therefore avoids the situation.

Children with a positive self-concept, on the other hand, are able to tackle new challenges with zeal and motivation. Through their success experiences in sporting situations, they can acquire a strong self-confidence,

which allows them to show a positive attitude in other areas of kindergarten everyday life. Regardless of whether the self-concept is positive or negative, self-esteem assessment takes place at a very early age and is usually stable and resistant to change during one's lifetime. Thus, it becomes very clear how greatly important motor education is in elementary education. Self-esteem in children is almost always linked to their physical-motor abilities. For kindergarten educators this means avoiding from the start the development of a negative self-concept in children. This can be best achieved if the child has a correspondingly large room for manoeuvre in the case of a game situation and exercise offers. In this, the child should be able to deal with the situation independently, without being supported too much by the educator. In this way the child can independently make decisions, and as a result the positive self-concept is supported (Zimmer & Hunger 2017).

Self-concept consists of an academic part and a non-academic part, which in turn includes the emotional, the social and the physical self-concept (also called body concept or body image). Furthermore, self-concept can be divided into an emotional part (self-esteem), which is the satisfaction about the perceived traits and a cognitive part (self-image), which consists of neutrally describable characteristics (Nolting & Paulus, 2008).

In childhood, the physical self-concept covers the largest part of self-concept. It is mainly formed between the ages of four and eleven by exercise, physical experience and self-assessment. It also includes the physiological, cognitive and emotional-psychosocial level and thus influences the entire personality development. A good motor performance is usually associated in childhood with a positive body concept and thus with a more positive self-concept. Since self-concept is particularly stable, situations are usually perceived as congruent with the self-concept. Repetitive situational events can lead to a generalization that can affect the overall self-concept. This can occur on the cognitive level (conviction that there is lack of efficiency), on the motivational level (avoidance) and on the emotional level (resignation) (Dordel 2007).

The self-concept function is the processing of information concerning the Ego and the control of behaviour. It affects the confidence in one's own abilities, the behaviour towards other people, the achievement motivation, the satisfaction with one's own abilities, the well-being and the emotional stability as well as the way a person deals with unknown situations. In the case of a negative self-concept, the unknown is classified as threatening, one reacts more sensitively to criticism, tolerance to frustration and self-efficacy expectation are low, and so the desire to make an effort can be reduced. A positive self-concept often goes hand in hand with emotional stability, a high degree of self-efficacy and a high motivation to perform (Beins 2007).

The self-efficacy expectation, also called competence expectation, is probably the most important basis of the self-concept. It contains the subjective conviction that one is in control, that is, one is able to influence the material and social environment and to be competent. Furthermore, it is the prerequisite for being confident in new tasks, to be resistant to obstacles and failures, and to attribute success to one's own performance. It is influenced by one's own and indirect (vicarious) experiences, the (emotional) arousal as well as by one's own expectations and those of one's social environment. Self-efficacy arises when success can be attributed to one's own abilities. With a low self-efficacy expectation, there is the belief that the person is not in control, thus success cannot be attributed to one's own abilities, and the self-efficacy expectation remains low. When one expects to be unsuccessful, stress is created, which in turn can affect performance. A high self-efficacy expectation, however, increases motivation, which in turn can increase competencies and thus the self-esteem. A self-reinforcing circuit is created. In this case, self-efficacy expectation can have a greater influence on the action than the performance requirement. Several studies show that increased self-efficacy expectations correlate negatively with anxiety, increase well-being and thereby optimize the learning process (Sygusch 2007).

### **3.1 Building a positive self-concept through physical-sport activity**

The development of the child is a holistic process in which movement takes on a very important meaning. Through movement children learn about themselves and their physical abilities, experience the peculiarities and rules of their surroundings, and communicate with their fellow humans. Children perceive their world through movement. The word movement, in its original and primary meaning, means the change of location of the entire body or the change of position of individual body parts. Movement secures life and makes experiences possible. It also influences human education. Education can be understood as a learning aid in the acquisition of life and culture techniques, as support in the training of vital habits and as guidance on how to deal with other people and the environment. It starts with knowledge and perception, leads to comprehension and ascertainment, strengthens the will, enables the personal classification of feelings, and links attitude with action. Movement and education are to be understood as an interactive dialogue. The richer and more impressive these dialogical experiences are, the more striking and enriching the dialogue shapes the lifestyle of the individual. More exercise options and versatile opportunities for movement in the family, circle of friends, kindergarten and school offer to the child more motor experience, create a higher expression of the individual movement culture and lay the foundations for a richly developed humanity. More exercise equals more quality of life, from the beginning to the end of life (Groessing 2007).

The movement-oriented learning is a part of human education, which takes place in a planned, organized and purposeful way. Learning to move is a lifelong process, which is never completed and is characterized by influences of the personal and the objective world. A person that moves collects experiences, gains insights and absorbs knowledge that is indispensable for the development of personality, and thus for the self-concept. A movement-oriented educational course enables thus a never-ending, holistic personality development, in relation to the moving person's contact with himself/herself, his/her feelings, views and abilities. In addition, it also teaches children how to communicate with other people, and their own material environment. By means of movement-oriented educational methods, the self-concept can be positively influenced. The children are challenged on a sensorimotor level and thereby cognitively promoted, as they have to imagine in advance of a movement, what consequences that movement could have for their own body, but also for the body of a potential partner. Movement is an expression of the zest for life of the children - but at the same time an important means of promoting their development. Movement and play belong to the elementary needs and forms of activity of the children (Roehr-Sendlmeier et al., 2007).

In addition, in the first years of life, these represent essential means for acquiring experience that influences the development of the child's personality in an incomparable manner. Children through movement are integrated into their environment. They find opportunities to recognize and understand their material and social reality. Learning in early childhood is primarily learning about perception and movement. Children need opportunities to explore, to deal with something, to correct it, and to learn from these opportunities. Independent action is an essential prerequisite for child development. A child is an active being. It cannot do without the independent activity, because it is the prerequisite for any healthy development. Movement and play allow the experience of being able to take action yourself. Above all, the educator has the task to create a development-promoting environment and to shape the basic conditions of education in such a way that the child can train his/her powers and abilities. Such a prepared environment becomes particularly important when the natural environment of the child does not provide sufficient opportunities for spontaneous, self-determined action (Schaffner 2005).

Motor development is promoted by giving the children tasks and challenges in which they must use their own body and motor skills to a high degree. In this way, all motor skills and abilities are trained and developed. In order to succeed in a movement-oriented challenge, children often need to learn to control feelings and emotions so they do not fail. Failure could be due to the fact that children cannot follow an action and motion plan free from emotion, because they are regulated by their instincts for emotion-driven action. The movement-oriented education methods take place for the most part in a group. Often the children are dependent on one or more exercise partners. This situation requires from the children a certain amount of social behaviour so that every child is accepted as a partner to facilitate group exercises. With the help of direct feedback on the personal behaviour from the children, as well as from the educator, social development is promoted (Gaschler et al., 2010).

Zimmer summarizes (2010) four characteristics that influence the self-concept through movement-oriented learning approaches:

- a) Information about the sense organs and information processing by the nervous system
- b) Experience of the effectiveness and consequences of one's own behaviour
- c) Requirements of comparison with persons in the environment
- d) Classification of characteristics, abilities and skills by persons of the environment

These features can be found in wrestling, fighting and contest, among other things. Thus, such a concept, adapted to the setting of preschool day-care, could be a possible, movement-oriented educational methodology to build a positive self-concept. In this study, the method of wrestling, fighting and contest is designed to fit the target group, so that it can be offered as a possibility of personality development. Wrestling, group fighting or sport-game contest are terms that require direct physical confrontation within a clearly defined framework and clearly defined rules, aiming at education and building the personality. Fighting can be described as an existential experience, as the primary experience of man that provides many possibilities to collect more experiences, such as the control and regulation of one's body, the physical experience of success and failure, directing and getting to know one's body as well as the body of the partner. In addition, violence and aggression can be experienced and overcome. Feeling and experiencing the feelings of one's partner, such as the desire for victory, fear or frustration, enhance empathy and care for this person (Beitzen 2014). These physical disputes are deliberately planned and organized by an educator so that any risks are minimized in order to achieve an overarching pedagogical goal. Through detailed planning, optimal organization and defined goals, the prerequisites for human education described previously are thus available.

In order for a physical confrontation to achieve its educational goals, certain conditions must be fulfilled in order to be distinguished from contest in the original sense.

The following conditions should be met:

- a) Exact time reports and distances

- b) Same starting conditions
- c) Clear rules
- d) High intensity
- e) Direct comparison with peers
- f) Reviewing one's own performance
- g) Clear feedback (Lange & Sinning 2012)

With wrestling, fighting and contest as a movement-oriented educational method, both motor and cognitive skills can be developed and promoted. Furthermore, social goals and emotional progress can be achieved. Requirements of the wrestling, fighting and contest activities are shaped by the educator so that the participant can gather specific experiences. Positive feedback between the participants takes place immediately during the physical confrontation or in subsequent reflection rounds with the entire group. The educator's task is to recognize undesired behaviours and then to reinforce positive and individual behaviours. This process of feedback is constantly required and promoted by using different feedback variants. If necessary, in-depth exercises, games or tasks can intensify experiences further. Undesired behaviours are experienced by the participants, observed by the educator or discussed in the subsequent reflection round by the entire group. Emerging differences between the expected, required behaviour and the actual behaviour of individual participants can be reduced in the course of an educational process by immediate consequences and direct feedback. A direct consequence, for example, could be the temporary exclusion of some participants if their behaviour impedes the operation of the program. A stable self-concept is the basis for a constructive and optimal personality development. Self-esteem, as an evaluative, emotional component of self-concept, can be strengthened and developed through various movement elements and contents in order to generate a positive self-concept. Those movement elements include the experience of one's own body, as well as the experiences concerning the material that is used. The alternation of physical strain and relaxation as well as the daring are further demands placed on the child. The children are dependent on exercise partners in many motor games and exercises, which demands and promotes independent contact and cooperation. For the most part, emerging conflicts have to be solved independently, which increases mutual understanding and empathy (Roehr-Sendlmeier et al., 2007).

The mentioned movement elements and content for generating a positive self-concept can be found in the aspects of fair fighting. The participant experiences his body directly because it is a matter of physical confrontation. Participants take the risk of physically comparing themselves with a combat partner and accept a possible failure. Wrestling, fighting and contest require independent action within clearly defined rules, which leaves the participants a lot of room for movement implementation. Their own dependence on the mental and physical integrity of the respective exercise partner requires cooperation and empathy. In order to be able to fight with each other for a longer period of time in a group structure, emerging interpersonal conflicts must also be resolved. The content of wrestling, fighting and contest can be arbitrarily and optimally adapted to prevailing circumstances of the group, as well as to set goals. Thus, the positive change in self-concept can be achieved through required, person-oriented and environment-specific tasks as well as age-appropriate measures within a movement request or physical challenge. These movement elements can be conveyed in a special way via a movement-oriented educational model (Beitzen 2014).

A successful personality development and the related positive change of the self-concept based on movement were explained by:

- a) Person-oriented tasks related to individual perception, skills and abilities
- b) environment-specific tasks in situational diversity
- c) age-appropriate measures (Zimmer 2014).

Movement, play and sport can support personality development by acquiring physical, material and social experiences and building a positive self-concept. Furthermore, they provide experience in autonomy, self-fulfilment, social recognition and integration, and they can also help in the development of health. In this way, overall quality of life can be promoted and learning prerequisites can be optimized. In addition to the above aspects, an increase of self-efficacy, achievement motivation, willpower and emotion control count as positive influencing factors of movement. In particular, reduced tactile-kinaesthetic and vestibular perception processes impair the perception of the body and thus make it difficult to construct the body image, which is the main part of the self-concept in childhood (Dordel 2007).

The movement directly influences self-concept by influencing the body concept. Many studies have reported an improvement in self-concept, personality stabilization, and increased individual activity and responsibility through exercise. In addition to getting to know one's own body as well as assessing one's own abilities, the evaluation of one's own person is considered a further prerequisite for the development of the self-concept. Generally, self-esteem in boys is more related to perceived performance, while girls tend to focus more on physical appearance. Both can be positively influenced by movement. Motion can also help to properly evaluate oneself and one's performance, or to learn this assessment, since one is given the possibility to compare oneself.

Movement can give confidence in one's own abilities and an internal causal attribution, because children can experience themselves as causers of the movement and thereby attribute their successes back to their own performance. In this way self-efficacy and internal control convictions emerge, which are considered a prerequisite for motivated learning as well as independent exploratory action (Jahn & Senf 2006).

The early urge of children for independence also emphasizes the importance of physical experiences for self-efficacy development and self-assessment. Only through them can a positive self-concept emerge. On the one hand, motor skills can help children gain experience and positive personal perceptions; on the other hand, they can gain popularity among their peers. With the acquisition of motion control the child experiences independence and freedom from space. This promotes the development of self-confidence and awareness as well as psycho-emotional stability, which in turn has a positive effect on the development of the self-concept. The experience of the ability to act independently in motion also promotes self-esteem and satisfaction with one's own body (Greubel 2007). All these aspects usually lead to a positive self-concept and motivate children to expand their independence, which, in addition to the improvement of motor skills, is also associated with improvements in cognitive skills (Dordel 2007).

In the sense of a holistic movement education, which can promote the psycho-physical integration of the child, dance should be emphasized in particular. Dance offers the chance to develop character traits such as maturation, self-confidence and social skills that are promoted in dance education. Also, whether the children are successful at school depends less on factual knowledge and early reading ability, and more on measures of emotional and social nature. Especially in school, self-awareness training and being able to interact and communicate with other children has a great impact on children's learning. Because learning, thinking, creativity and intelligence are not just brain processes, but processes of the whole body. Sensations, movements, emotions and functions for the integration of the brain are based on the human body. Dance therefore fulfils this function, because no other education sector has the capacity to engage with the body as intensely (Baecker & Freytag 2013).

Man, in contact with the world that surrounds him is becoming more and more the main focus. It should also be emphasized that dancing is suitable for children, because of the way in which children process events and things, they are motivated to imitate them physically and give them shape. According to the latest educational knowledge, a sporting, psychomotor or musical promotion is not enough to achieve the mentioned advantages of a dance education when it concerns children. The aforementioned opportunities lack the expression of emotionality, individuality, creativity, the engagement with an artistic form of expression, the principle of repetition, the transmission of a sense of order and predictability, and the integration of different senses. These arguments should be sufficient to make dancing an indispensable part of children education (Vogel 2004).

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

In the first years, children gain experiences through experimentation and trying out as regards their contact with objects and situations. The more diverse and variable the material environment is for the children, the better and more pronounced is their development. As the literature review has shown, scientific research on the influence of physical-sport activity on self-concept of preschool children is rather limited. However, there is a broad consensus in the specialized literature that, in addition to a positive influence on motor development, movement in childhood can also be considered to have a beneficial effect on the overall development of children. Self-awareness and perception in the social context are of equal, if not greater, importance, because these perceptions develop a concept about one's self. This self-concept – as it could be consequently inferred - makes it possible to recognize and deal with risk situations, since self-concept can give a real picture of one's own abilities. Positive physical experiences can contribute to the appreciation and positive attitude towards one's own body and influence the body concept, and thus also the self-concept. The provision of motor and game activities offers the children the possibility of multiple experiences of perception and movement, through which it is possible to rationally address one's own self, as well as the material and personal environment, and which thus go beyond the exclusively physical-motor field. These opportunities offer every child the chance to experience success and receive feedback about his/her own competences. In differentiated game and motor activities, children can independently choose and/or revise movement situations at their own discretion, if they believe they are not able to cope with them. When engaging with motor activities, children experience the success of their action as directly affected by themselves- by their own ability and their own effort - they experience themselves as the originators of certain effects and thus realize that the success is not random or controlled by external influences. Thus, through the ability to influence, consciousness of one's competence can arise in different situations. The extension and refinement of personal, material and social competences make the children secure and confident of their ability to act and communicate. This feeling of security supports children's ability to deal effectively and potentially creatively with problems, to clearly experience their individual possibilities and limits, and thus to increase their scope of action. Furthermore, it leads to a constant reviewing and recording of reality, and to a realistic modification of the self-concept. In summary, it can be shown that early, movement-oriented

educational methods have a positive influence on children's personality development. The few scientifically documented results in this field clearly show the need for further research.

**Author Detail :** Dr. George F. Zarotis studied sports science at the German Sport University Cologne, prevention and rehabilitation through sport at the Ruhr-University Bochum (Master Degree) and sports economics and sports management at the Open University Hagen; Doctorate in the subjects of leisure science and rehabilitation at the German Sport University Cologne (PhD), Lecturer at the Institute for European Sports Development and Leisure Research of the German Sport University Cologne and at the University of Applied Sciences for Applied Management in Unna; since 2004 lecturer at the Faculty for Human Sciences of the Aegean University in Rhodes/Greece.

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