

The Rejection of Physical Activities by Overweight Children and Adolescents and Its Relief Paths

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Abstract: The psychological rejection of physical activity among overweight children and adolescents has become a critical bottleneck hindering their physical-health development and social integration. From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, this phenomenon essentially stems from the persistent frustration of three basic psychological needs — autonomy, competence and relatedness — in physical-activity settings. It is specifically manifested as resistance to participation triggered by a lack of autonomy, experiential alienation resulting from insufficient sense of competence, and social avoidance brought about by weak sense of relatedness.

Its underlying causes lie in the suppression of autonomy needs by the social utilitarian orientation, the impairment of competence needs due to the poor adaptability of activity ecosystems, and the neglect of relatedness needs stemming from inadequate social support. To alleviate such rejection psychology, an intervention system centered on need satisfaction should be constructed so as to rebuild positive connections between overweight adolescents and physical activity. Addressing this psychological dilemma is not only a practical requirement for improving students' physical fitness, but also a theoretical demand for reflecting on the value of physical education and returning to its essential goal of talent cultivation.

Keywords: overweight; children and adolescents; physical activities; rejection; relief paths

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For a long time, the health problems of children and adolescents have received much attention. With socio-economic development, health problems among children and adolescents, such as obesity, myopia, psychological and behavioral abnormalities, spinal curvature abnormalities, and dental caries, are becoming increasingly prominent, seriously affecting their physical and mental health and overall development. With the in-depth implementation of the "Outline of the Plan for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024-2035)," students' physical health has been given unprecedented strategic importance. A series of documents, such as the "Action Plan for Promoting the 'Five Healths' of Children and Adolescents," aim to comprehensively improve the physical health of children and adolescents, laying a solid foundation for cultivating socialist builders and successors who are well-rounded in moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education.^[1] Overweight students in primary and secondary schools have a low participation rate in physical activities, and psychological exclusion has become a more prominent obstacle to participation than physical weakness. Overweight has become one of the core issues affecting the physical fitness of primary and secondary school students^[2] This phenomenon not only affects the current physical and mental health of adolescents, but may also solidify into long-term lifestyles and psychological patterns, helping overweight students improve their physical fitness and establish a positive attitude towards physical exercise^[3].

1.Theoretical Interpretation of Physical Activity Exclusion Psychology in Overweight Children and Adolescents

The self-determination theory reveals that the internal growth of human beings is driven by three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relationships. These basic psychological needs are essential for humans to transcend age and culture, and their degree of satisfaction directly determines an individual's psychological state and behavioral tendencies. The continuous lack of these needs will lead to a systematic

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imbalance between psychology and behavior^[4] When these needs continue to be frustrated in physical activity scenarios, the phenomenon of exclusion will naturally breed and solidify. The essence of the psychological exclusion of overweight children and adolescents from physical activities is precisely the distortion of the relationship between individuals and themselves, others, and physical activities themselves, which is formed when these three basic psychological needs are not satisfied in the physical activity field^[5].

2. Real-world manifestations of the aversion to physical activity among overweight children and adolescents

The following analysis examines the specific psychological and behavioral manifestations of this group's aversion from three dimensions.^[6]

2.1 Lack of autonomy: Passive resistance to exercise

The lack of autonomy is most directly reflected in the lack of initiative, sense of coercion, and resistance among overweight children and adolescents in physical activities. In physical education classes, they are often the ones being arranged, directed, and required to participate. The activities, intensity, and pace are all uniformly prescribed by the teacher, and they rarely make choices based on their own interests or physical sensations.^[7]

2.2 Lack of competence: Self-denial and avoidance

Lack of competence is mainly manifested in overweight children and adolescents experiencing frequent setbacks, lacking confidence, fearing failure, and self-denial during exercise. In standardized physical activities, they often struggle to keep up with their peers in terms of speed, endurance, and agility. They tend to fall behind in running, make frequent mistakes during skill practice, and often fail to meet physical fitness test scores. Each participation can lead to frustration.

2.3 Weak Sense of Relationship: Lack of Belonging in Sports

A weak sense of relationship is an important external manifestation of the psychological aversion to physical activities among overweight children and adolescents. It is prominently manifested as social withdrawal, interpersonal alienation, and a lack of belonging in sports settings. In group physical activities, overweight students are more likely to be teased, ignored, or implicitly rejected by their peers due to differences in body shape and athletic ability. These negative social experiences can directly trigger feelings of inferiority, embarrassment, and shame, making them feel insecure in the sports environment.

3. The Root Causes of Physical Activity Rejection in Overweight Children and Adolescents

3.1 Suppression of Autonomous Needs: Utilitarian Orientation and Deprivation of Choice

The persistent suppression of autonomous needs is the core issue in the formation of physical activity rejection in overweight children and adolescents. Its root lies in the utilitarian manipulation of physical activities by modern society and the systematic deprivation of their autonomous choice. The excessive emphasis on standard body size and health indicators in modern society forces overweight children and adolescents to pursue single utilitarian goals such as weight loss, meeting standards, or improving physical fitness, while their own interests, desires, and individual needs are completely ignored.

3.2 Frustration of Competency Needs: Imbalanced Activity Design and a Simplified Evaluation System

Repeated frustration of competency needs is the key issue exacerbating rejection. The core issue lies in the one-size-fits-all approach to physical activity design and the rigid, singular evaluation system, which fails to provide fertile ground for successful experiences. In self-determination theory, the acquisition of competence depends on the fit between task difficulty and individual ability, as well as timely and positive feedback mechanisms. When individuals consistently encounter setbacks and their efforts go unrecognized during activities, they fall into self-denial.

3.3 Lack of Relationship Needs: Weak Social Support and Insufficient Atmosphere

Long-term lack of relationship needs is a key factor in the solidification of rejection psychology, manifested in a weak social support network and a lack of inclusiveness in the activity atmosphere. This causes physical activities, which should be a space for emotional connection, to become a source of negative social experiences. Self-determination theory posits that as social beings, humans have an intrinsic and core need for belonging and emotional support. When individuals experience isolation, discrimination, or neglect during activities, their relationship needs are frustrated, leading to an instinctive resistance to the scenario.

4 Pathways to Alleviate the Psychological Resistance to Physical Activities in Overweight Children and Adolescents

4.1 Guaranteeing the Need for Autonomy

Self-Determination Theory posits that a sense of autonomy is pivotal to stimulating intrinsic motivation. When individuals gain control over their behavioural choices and express their genuine preferences, they will voluntarily form a positive bond with the activity itself. To address the root cause of deprived autonomy, we should not only expand options through empowerment, but also eliminate utilitarian goals such as “meeting weight-loss targets” at the source, and drive conceptual shifts among families, schools and communities. This transforms physical activity from an externally imposed obligation into a self-directed experience that nurtures physical and mental well-being.

Preferences should be respected to diversify available activities and break free from rigid, standardised physical exercise frameworks. A multi-faceted activity provision system shall be built in accordance with the interests and fitness levels of overweight adolescents^[8]. School physical education courses can adopt modular content design. Beyond traditional competitive sports, low-intensity, inclusive and engaging programmes including yoga, tai chi, fun sports meets and outdoor hiking may be offered, enabling students to select courses based on personal interests. Furthermore, home-school-community collaboration should be promoted for after-school arrangements, with resources such as parent-child fitness sessions, interest-based sports clubs and community recreational sports festivals to broaden independent participation scenarios.

Decision-making power shall also be granted to strengthen participants’ sense of agency. The adult-led traditional model should be revised by offering greater room for self-determination during physical activities, so as to foster a sense of ownership and control. Physical education classes may adopt cooperative group learning, where students form teams, assign roles and jointly design activity procedures and rules. Adolescents can be encouraged to organise small-scale events such as class-based fun sports competitions and community fitness check-ins. Shifting their role from mere participants to organisers helps rebuild their positive engagement with physical activity through autonomous decision-making.

4.2 Meeting the Need for Competence

To address the lack of successful experiences, differentiated design and diversified evaluation should be adopted to build a stepped growth path, enabling adolescents to gain a sense of achievement from every participation. First of all, activity difficulties should be set in a differentiated way to construct a progressive growth ladder. The one-size-fits-all design shall be abandoned. Based on the physical differences among overweight adolescents, a hierarchically progressive difficulty system is established, with a single sport divided into multiple levels. For instance, running can be split into brisk walking, jogging and moderate-pace running. In this way, adolescents start with low-difficulty tasks matching their current abilities before moving on to greater challenges.

Secondly, personalised growth goals need to be formulated. In accordance with individual fitness conditions and improvement ranges, attainable “stretch” goals are set, such as increasing jogging duration by five minutes within a month. Timely recognition is provided once these goals are achieved, allowing adolescents to clearly perceive their own progress, continuously accumulate feelings of competence, and gradually get rid of the negative self-perception of “I cannot do it”.

Finally, the evaluation system should be optimised with strengthened process-oriented and developmental assessment. The single outcome-driven evaluation model is replaced by a diverse and inclusive assessment framework that recognises effort and progress. Evaluation criteria focus not only on athletic performance but also on process-based indicators including participation attitude, effort, degree of improvement and teamwork, so that poor results will not overshadow all contributions. Multiple assessment perspectives are integrated, including teacher evaluation, self-assessment, peer assessment and parent evaluation. Tools such as growth portfolios, progress check-ins and achievement displays are used to visually document individual development trajectories. Evaluative feedback is primarily encouraging and affirmative, with constructive suggestions for shortcomings rather than criticism and negation. This ensures adolescents gain motivation instead of pressure through assessment.

4.3 Fulfilling Relationship Needs

To tackle social isolation and a lack of belonging among overweight children and adolescents, a support network should be constructed across family, school and community dimensions to create an inclusive and warm interactive atmosphere, making physical activity a carrier for emotional bonding^[9].

First, strengthen family companionship and support to consolidate the foundation of emotional connections. Parents ought to abandon utilitarian mindsets and shift their role from supervisors to companions and supporters, focusing on children's emotional experience rather than weight changes alone. They should proactively learn scientific exercise concepts, jointly formulate activity plans with their children, take part in activities together, share joys and overcome difficulties, and deepen emotional bonds through companionship. Communication styles should be improved: listening and encouragement shall replace criticism and comparison. Comfort and confidence are offered when children encounter setbacks, while timely affirmation and praise are given for their progress, so that the family can serve as a solid source of emotional backing.

Second, it is critical to cultivate an inclusive campus climate and establish a peer-support network. Teachers should eliminate implicit bias and offer more care and patience to overweight adolescents. Value-oriented education can be delivered through theme class meetings and case discussions to guide students to respect physical diversity, reject mockery and exclusion, and build a mutually respectful and supportive class culture. Diverse platforms for peer interaction should be created. Physical education lessons can adopt collaborative tasks, and sports interest groups and fitness clubs can be organised to provide opportunities for after-school interaction.

Lastly, collaborative social support needs to be developed to form a diverse and inclusive environment. The media should assume social responsibility, break the narrow aesthetic standard that equates thinness with beauty, and promote the idea that health equals beauty and diversity equals beauty. By showcasing the athletic vitality of adolescents with diverse body types, stereotypes and discrimination can be dispelled. Communities should make every effort to upgrade public sports facilities, add venues and equipment suitable for low-intensity, highly inclusive activities, and lower the barriers to physical participation. Authorities may support public-welfare programmes run by social organisations and professional institutions, such as sunshine fitness camps and peer-assisted fitness schemes, and provide personalised guidance. Through joint social efforts, a comprehensive support network can be established. Young people can gain sufficient emotional support in physical activities and break free from the shackles of social rejection.

5 Conclusion

The essence of overweight children and adolescents' psychological rejection of physical activity is the external manifestation of the sustained frustration of three basic psychological needs — autonomy, competence and relatedness — within physical-activity contexts under the Self-Determination Theory framework. Its practical manifestations are reflected in a lack of sense of autonomy, deficiency in sense of competence, and fragility of sense of relatedness. Its underlying crux is rooted in the utilitarian orientation of physical activity, the imbalance in activity design and evaluation systems, and the inadequacy of social-support networks.

To resolve this dilemma, it is necessary to take need satisfaction as the foundation: reconstruct spaces for autonomous choice through empowerment, foster successful experiences via gradient-based design, and build a friendly social ecosystem through diversified connections. Meanwhile, families, schools and communities should work in synergy to eradicate the utilitarian orientation at its source, return physical activity to its intrinsic value of nurturing body and mind, and help overweight children and adolescents improve their physical fitness and reshape positive attitudes toward sports.

Future research may further focus on the differentiated characteristics of rejection psychology among children and adolescents of different age groups and varying degrees of overweight, and conduct in-depth exploration of the targeting and long-term effectiveness of mitigation strategies. Empirical studies should also be strengthened to test the implementation effects of such strategies. In response to the educational and social-development demands of the new era, richer forms of activities and support models can be developed to break the vicious cycle of “weight anxiety — sports rejection — physical decline”. This will provide more practically valuable theoretical support and path guidance for comprehensively improving children and adolescents’ physical health and fulfilling the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education.

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