

Psychological Mechanisms and Empirical Research Progress of Sports Interventions in Promoting the Socialization of Left-Behind Children

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Abstract

This study reviews the psychological mechanisms and empirical research progress of sports interventions in promoting the socialization of left-behind children. Findings indicate that prolonged parent-child separation exposes these children to multiple socialization risks, while sports activities play a unique role in facilitating socialization due to their multifaceted functions. However, this effect is influenced by various factors including individual psychological characteristics and activity context design. Existing research reveals that physical education promotes socialization by enhancing mediating variables such as psychological capital and perceived social support. Nevertheless, limitations exist, including narrow variable dimensions, methodological shortcomings, regional constraints, and a lack of diversity in intervention types. Future research should deepen the construction of multi-path psychological mechanism models, strengthen longitudinal tracking and mixed-method studies, and emphasize innovation in localized intervention programs alongside home-school-community collaboration. This will foster a more scientifically rigorous and widely applicable research framework.

Keywords

Physical education intervention; socialization of left-behind children; psychological mechanisms; research progress

1. Introduction

In recent years, accelerated urbanization and uneven urban-rural development have perpetuated widespread rural-to-urban migration in China. This has resulted in millions of adolescents being separated from their parents for extended periods, forming a large-scale population of left-behind children. According to relevant statistics, in some rural areas, left-behind children account for over one-third of all rural mi-

nors. This means millions of children grow up without direct parental companionship and effective guardianship [1]. Prolonged parental separation often exposes these children to multiple risks during their socialization process: emotionally, they may experience loneliness and feelings of neglect [2]; in interpersonal interactions, they may exhibit poor social skills and difficulty regulating emotions; and in developing values and behavioral norms, the lack of timely guidance and feedback increases the likelihood of engaging in undesirable behaviors [3]. Although national and local governments have successively introduced a series of guiding policies, including the “Guiding Opinions on Caring for and Protecting Rural Left-Behind Children,” and implemented various service practices in psychological counseling, academic tutoring, and livelihood support, challenges persist in implementation. These include uneven resource distribution, lack of continuity in activities, and insufficient targeting. Particularly pressing is the practical challenge of integrating educational, community, and social organization resources to build a sustainable, comprehensive mechanism for promoting socialization.

Among numerous pathways to promote the socialization of left-behind children, sports activities demonstrate unique and irreplaceable importance due to their multifaceted functions encompassing physical exercise, emotional exchange, and value internalization [4]. Sports not only provide children with platforms to expand their social circles and build trust and cooperation but also subtly shape their self-identity and sense of social responsibility through practices involving rule adherence, teamwork, competition, and resilience. Simultaneously, the inherent challenges and sense of accomplishment in sports activities can stimulate positive emotions and intrinsic motivation, enhancing psychological resilience, stress management capabilities, and self-regulation skills [5]. However, the positive impact of sports on the socialization of left-behind children does not occur naturally; it is influenced by multiple factors such as individual psychological characteristics, activity context design, and the quality of interactions with peers and instructors [6,7]. Without a precise understanding of the psychological mechanisms through which physical activities promote socialization, maximizing intervention effectiveness becomes challenging. Therefore, conducting a systematic review from a psychological mechanisms perspective not only helps reveal the pathways through which physical activities improve the socialization process of left-behind children but also provides scientific support for policy formulation, curriculum development, and practice promotion. Furthermore, such research holds significant theoretical and practical implications for optimizing the allocation of rural educational resources, advancing balanced urban-rural educational development, and promoting social equity and the protection of children's rights.

1. Current Research on the Socialization of Left-Behind Children

1.1. The Concept of Socialization, Theoretical Models, and Problem

Characteristics of Left-Behind Children

Socialization refers to the process by which individuals gradually develop their social identity and adaptive capabilities through learning social norms, values, behavioral patterns, and role expectations during interactions with society [8]. In Western sociological theory, Parsons viewed socialization as a foundational mechanism for societal functioning, emphasizing that individuals must internalize role expectations within institutional and cultural norms to ensure social stability and continuity. This theoretical framework highlights socialization's dual functions: transmitting culture and behavior while reproducing the social system. In China, scholars such as Li Fengchao and Song Guangwen have offered localized interpretations of socialization within the context of China's social transformation. They emphasize that socialization is not merely a process of learning norms and values but must also account for uniquely Chinese contextual factors such as shifts in family structures, urban-rural disparities, and intergenerational relationships. This localized perspective aids in more accurately understanding the socialization challenges faced by left-behind children. Research reveals that left-behind children exhibit a distinct set of challenges during socialization: deprived of parental emotional companionship and daily interaction, they are prone to emotional deprivation and insecurity [9]; prolonged separation weakens parent-child bonds, severing crucial channels for emotional and value transmission during socialization; In peer interactions, they may encounter social barriers due to inadequate communication skills and defensive attitudes; in value formation, the absence of sustained family guidance and positive social feedback often leads to delayed identity development and unstable behavioral choices. These phenomena indicate that the socialization of left-behind children is not merely a natural delay in developmental tasks but is also constrained by multidimensional factors including emotional, cognitive, and social resources.

1.2. Analysis of Influencing Factors and Socialization Pathways

Existing research predominantly employs a macro-meso-micro integrated analytical framework to explore the influencing factors and pathways of socialization among left-behind children. At the macro level, family, school, community, and media constitute the primary environments shaping their socialization. Prolonged parental absence results in deficiencies in emotional foundations and behavioral role models [10]; Schools, while imparting knowledge, assume a substitute socialization role in cultivating behavioral norms and social skills; communities provide venues for interpersonal interaction and social participation, with their inclusiveness and support levels directly influencing the social integration of left-behind children; media, especially new media, plays an increasingly prominent role in contemporary adolescent socialization, yet its intertwined positive and negative content renders the media environment a double-edged sword. At the meso-level, research focuses on the mediating role of psychosocial variables such as self-esteem, trust, and social

support in the socialization process: high self-esteem facilitates more active participation in social interactions and enhances role identification[11]; trust serves as a crucial psychological foundation for building stable interpersonal relationships and social adaptation; and robust social support systems effectively buffer the negative impacts of adverse environments. Additionally, moderating variables like cultural background and gender differences significantly shape socialization pathways. For instance, within collectivist cultures, individuals more readily gain a sense of belonging through group activities. Differing gender role expectations manifest in variations across behavioral patterns, interaction strategies, and the pace of value internalization. These mechanisms collectively form a dynamic socialization network, rendering the socialization process of left-behind children complex with intricate interactions and feedback loops. Systematically mapping these influencing factors and pathways not only deepens theoretical understanding but also provides scientific grounds for designing targeted intervention measures.

2. Domestic and International Research on the Relationship Between Physical Education and the Socialization of Left-Behind Children

2.1. The Promoting Role of Physical Education in Socialization and Domestic Research Findings

Within the fields of sociology and psychology, physical education is widely recognized as one of the effective pathways for promoting individual socialization. Its mechanism of action can be explained through multiple theoretical frameworks. Social interaction theory emphasizes that sports activities provide individuals with high-frequency face-to-face interaction opportunities and platforms for emotional exchange. Participants learn social skills such as rule-following, role-playing, conflict resolution, and cooperative coordination through these interactions. For left-behind children who have long lacked parental companionship and social resources, such structured interactive settings are particularly crucial. Group dynamics theory indicates that individuals in group settings are influenced by collective goals, group norms, cohesion, and interdependence, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging and group identity while alleviating isolation stemming from emotional deprivation [12]. Positive psychology further explains the value of sports from a psychological growth perspective, positing that physical activities stimulate positive emotions and satisfy autonomy and competence, thereby fostering self-worth and psychological resilience. Building on this foundation, domestic scholars have conducted extensive empirical research on left-behind children [13]. For instance, Yang Hongyuan et al. demonstrated through combined questionnaire and experimental studies that regular physical exercise significantly enhances left-behind children's self-identity and interpersonal skills. This improvement indirectly promotes socialization by strengthening self-efficacy and improving emotional states. Ren Linan's research

further revealed that team sports (such as basketball and soccer) effectively help left-behind children acquire cooperative, sharing, and fair-competition behavioral patterns through peer interactions, thereby compensating for social skill deficits caused by insufficient family support. Some intervention studies also indicate that sports can reduce social anxiety levels among left-behind children and enhance their adaptability in unfamiliar groups. Research indicates that short-term, intensive sports interventions not only improve emotional stability among left-behind children but also sustainably enhance their psychological resilience for weeks to months after the intervention concludes [14,15]. These domestic research findings provide robust evidence and practical guidance for applying sports as a socialization tool within this population.

2.2. International Research References and Implications for Domestic Practice

Internationally, research on the relationship between physical activity and children's socialization began earlier and has yielded abundant findings, encompassing both general child populations and extending to vulnerable groups and children with special backgrounds. Regarding mental health promotion, foreign scholars generally recognize that physical activity influences child development through multiple pathways: First, physiological mechanisms regulate neurotransmitter levels (e.g., dopamine, endorphins) through exercise, alleviating anxiety and depressive symptoms [16]; Second, psychological mechanisms enhance emotional regulation by boosting self-efficacy and perceived control; third, social mechanisms improve social adaptation through positive peer interactions and adult support [17]. For instance, longitudinal tracking studies in the United States found that children consistently participating in team sports exhibited higher levels of social responsibility and social skills during adolescence. Canadian research indicates that physical education programs, particularly outdoor adventure activities, significantly enhance children's sense of belonging and group cohesion. Australian studies further indicate that integrating cooperative games into physical education classes effectively improves language communication and cross-cultural adaptation among immigrant and marginalized children. More nuanced research reveals relationships between sport types and socialization effects: team sports often significantly enhance cooperation, communication, and conflict management, while individual sports (e.g., track and field, gymnastics) better cultivate self-discipline and goal orientation [18]. Regarding socialization pathways, international research particularly emphasizes the mediating role of “peer relationships,” viewing physical education as a low-pressure, highly structured social arena where children gradually learn group norms and receive positive reinforcement through repeated interactions. Furthermore, certain intervention programs abroad (e.g., the U.S. “Sport for Development” initiative, the UK's “School Sport Partnership”) emphasize integrating physical

education with psychological counseling and social support systems to maximize socialization outcomes. These experiences offer significant insights for physical education interventions targeting left-behind children in China: greater emphasis should be placed on structuring program design and ensuring contextual appropriateness, optimizing the quality of peer interactions, and integrating psychological support systems to form comprehensive intervention models. Concurrently, domestic research needs to further adopt international methods of scientific evaluation and long-term tracking to examine the sustained effects and mechanism differences of physical education in promoting socialization. This will facilitate the development of an intervention system that aligns with both international perspectives and local realities.

3. Psychological Mechanisms of Sports' Influence on the Socialization of Left-Behind Children

3.1. Primary Mechanism Models: Mediation, Moderation, and Chain Mediation

Research on the psychological mechanisms of sports' influence on the socialization of left-behind children centers on revealing its pathways and internal conversion patterns. Existing findings indicate that mediation models represent the most frequently validated hypothetical pathways. The first category of mediation models emphasizes the bridging role of “psychological capital” between sports participation and socialization levels. Psychological capital encompasses four core elements: self-confidence (self-efficacy), hope, resilience, and optimism. Sports activities enhance left-behind children's psychological capital through challenging tasks and positive feedback, thereby improving their social interaction skills, role identification, and internalization of norms [19]. For instance, questionnaire data analysis indicates that nearly half of the positive impact of regular physical exercise on socialization levels can be explained by the enhancement of psychological capital. The second category of mediation models focuses on the variable of “perceived social support.” During sports activities, left-behind children gain emotional support, informational support, and instrumental assistance through interactions with peers, teachers, and coaches. Over time, this accumulates into a stable sense of social support, enabling them to exhibit greater openness and cooperation in real-world social situations [20]. Beyond mediation mechanisms, moderation models provide crucial theoretical supplements, primarily examining the role of individual differences in the effectiveness of sports interventions. For instance, regarding personality traits, extroverted left-behind children tend to integrate into groups more readily in sports settings, receiving positive feedback that accelerates socialization. In contrast, introverted children may exhibit avoidance behaviors during initial interactions, delaying intervention outcomes. Motivational factors are equally crucial: highly achievement-motivated individuals may gravitate toward challenging and coopera-

tive activities that foster interpersonal integration, while low-motivated participants might only meet minimal participation requirements, yielding limited socialization gains [21]. Research on gender differences indicates that boys exhibit more pronounced improvements in social skills through team competitive sports, while girls may benefit more from cooperative and skill-based physical activities. The chain mediation model further integrates multivariable mechanisms. For instance, the pathway hypothesis “sports participation → peer relationship quality → well-being → socialization level” posits that sports first enhance emotional experiences and well-being by improving peer relationship quality. This positive emotional atmosphere then reciprocally promotes advancements across all dimensions of socialization. While statistically complex, this chain mechanism offers greater explanatory power for understanding the long-term effects of sports on socialization.

3.2. Data and Experimental Methods

Domestic research on the psychological mechanisms of sports' impact on left-behind children's socialization has shifted from descriptive analysis to empirical testing in recent years. Data collection primarily employs two approaches: cross-sectional questionnaire surveys and small-sample experimental interventions. Cross-sectional studies typically employ standardized scales to measure sports participation frequency, socialization levels, and potential mediating or moderating variables. Structural equation modeling (SEM) or multilevel regression is used to validate the fit of mechanism models. For instance, some studies found that higher sports participation frequency correlates with greater self-esteem, self-efficacy, and peer cohesion among left-behind children, with these variables significantly mediating the relationship between sports and socialization [22]. Regarding experimental design, some studies implement 4- to 12-week physical activity intervention programs in schools or communities, such as team ball training, cooperative games, or outdoor adventure activities. Pre- and post-tests assess changes in psychological and behavioral indicators. Results show intervention groups outperform controls in metrics like reduced social anxiety, improved teamwork scores, and enhanced social responsibility. Other studies combined psychological counseling with physical activities for comprehensive interventions, revealing more pronounced improvements in emotional stability and social adaptation levels [23,24]. Furthermore, recent data analyses increasingly focus on multiple relationships among variables. Examples include employing chained mediation or multilevel models to address inter-school variations, or incorporating longitudinal designs to track the enduring effects of interventions. The adoption of these methods enhances the robustness of research findings and advances the development of psychological mechanism theories.

3.3. Reflections on Methods and Samples

Although domestic research has made some progress in theoretical models and sta-

tistical techniques, significant limitations remain overall. First, static studies predominate, with insufficient longitudinal tracking across time points, making it difficult to determine causal direction and the sustainability of intervention effects. For example, after an 8-week physical education intervention, peer relationship scores among left-behind children showed significant improvement, but the absence of follow-up tracking at six months or one year prevents verification of whether the effects are long-term and stable [25]. Second, some studies exhibit inadequate control of variables in experimental design. Differences in effects between distinct types of physical activities (competitive vs. cooperative) are often overlooked, and individual motivation levels are rarely systematically incorporated into analytical frameworks. Furthermore, regional sample bias is pronounced, with most current research concentrated in rural areas of economically central-western regions or specific provinces. The lack of cross-regional and cross-cultural comparisons limits the generalizability of conclusions [26]. Insufficient sample sizes also pose constraints, particularly in intervention studies, which often cover only dozens of participants due to resource limitations, resulting in low statistical power. Another shortcoming is the reliance on self-reported data for measuring mechanism variables, which may suffer from social desirability bias and subjective exaggeration, lacking corroboration from physiological indicators (e.g., heart rate variability, cortisol levels) or behavioral observation data. Regarding theoretical integration, existing research predominantly focuses on validating single models, with limited attempts at cross-model, multi-level variable analysis. For instance, incorporating mechanisms like emotional regulation, self-identity, and value internalization into causal models could provide a more comprehensive explanation of sports' impact on socialization. Therefore, future research urgently requires breakthroughs in methodological rigor, sample diversification, longitudinal tracking, and multidimensional indicator integration. Concurrently, strengthening alignment with international research is essential to develop a sports psychology mechanism framework that is both internationally comparable and locally adaptable.

4. Existing Issues and Research Gaps

4.1. Limitations in Variable Dimensions and Research Methods

A review of existing literature reveals that while research on sports promoting the socialization of left-behind children has expanded in terms of mechanism exploration and empirical testing, significant shortcomings persist in variable dimensions and model construction. Most studies habitually select single mediating variables (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy, social support) or single moderating variables (e.g., gender, personality), lacking complex statistical models involving multiple mediators, multiple moderators, or their interactions. This results in insufficient explanatory power regarding the mechanisms of sports influence [27]. For instance, chain relationships among mediators and the effects of moderators on mediating path-

ways are often overlooked, hindering the revelation of dynamic, multi-level mechanisms through which sports interventions influence socialization. Methodologically, while questionnaire surveys and cross-sectional analyses remain predominant, experimental designs—particularly long-term intervention studies with control groups and pre-post measurements—remain scarce [28]. The lack of longitudinal tracking makes it difficult to robustly validate the persistence and causal direction of intervention effects. Moreover, even when intervention studies exist, their sample sizes are often small, limiting statistical power. Furthermore, existing studies inadequately control for confounding variables. Factors potentially obscuring the relationship between sports and socialization—such as household economic status, educational disparities, and regional cultural contexts—are often insufficiently accounted for, further undermining the robustness and generalizability of research conclusions.

4.2. Regional Limitations and Homogeneity of Intervention Types

Restrictions also exist regarding research subjects and intervention content. Geographically, empirical research in relatively underdeveloped regions like eastern, western, and northern Guangdong has received insufficient attention. Most samples originate from rural areas in central and western China or mountainous regions in the southwest, reflecting an imbalance in research resources and policy focus. This regional disparity casts doubt on the nationwide applicability of conclusions and fails to account for socialization differences among left-behind children across diverse economic and cultural contexts. Intervention types exhibit a pronounced tendency toward uniformity, primarily centered on conventional school physical education classes or campus soccer programs. While these activities offer operational feasibility and accessibility, their impact on contextual challenges, diverse experiences, and emotional regulation remains limited. They struggle to meet the comprehensive developmental needs of children with varying personalities, motivations, and developmental stages. In contrast, international research has introduced interventions like outdoor adventure programs, team-building exercises, and multicultural sports exchanges. These initiatives offer unique advantages in enhancing team cohesion, cross-context adaptability, and psychological resilience. Yet, systematic implementation and evaluation of such approaches among China's left-behind children remain virtually nonexistent. Overall, future research should establish multi-variable interactive models, strengthen longitudinal and experimental methodologies, expand geographical coverage, and overcome the limitations of single-project interventions. This will foster a more comprehensive, scientific, and scalable research framework for leveraging physical education to promote the socialization of left-behind children.

5. Research Prospects and Directions

5.1. Pathways for Theoretical and Methodological Advancement

Future research on sports-facilitated socialization among left-behind children should explore multi-pathway, multi-level psychological mechanism models at the theoretical level. Existing studies often confine themselves to single-pathway analyses, overlooking the intertwined effects of mediating and moderating relationships. Therefore, it is necessary to construct a comprehensive model incorporating both “mediation-based regulation” and “regulation-based mediation.” Through nested and interactive analysis, this model should reveal the differentiated effects of sports interventions across varying individual characteristics and environmental conditions. Simultaneously, the model should integrate richer psychological variables such as emotion regulation, social identity, and value internalization to enhance explanatory power regarding the socialization process. Methodologically, mixed-method research should be promoted—combining large-sample quantitative surveys with qualitative field investigations. This approach ensures both the breadth and robustness of statistical analysis while preserving in-depth case descriptions and contextual features. Furthermore, designs integrating longitudinal tracking with intervention experiments should be advocated. By establishing control groups and tracking multiple time points, these studies can dynamically capture the changing trajectory and enduring effects of sports interventions on socialization levels. This approach not only strengthens the scientific rigor of causal inference but also evaluates the medium-to-long-term effectiveness and sustainability of diverse intervention models, providing robust data support for theoretical validation.

5.2. Practical Implementation and Localized Innovation Directions

At the practical level, future efforts should focus on designing locally adapted physical intervention programs for regions like eastern, western, and northern Guangdong, where left-behind children are concentrated and social resources are relatively limited. Formally, these programs should transcend conventional campus sports models by integrating diverse elements such as outdoor adventures, team-building activities, and multicultural exchanges to meet the varied needs of children across different personality types and developmental stages. Concurrently, these interventions should emphasize combining situational challenges with teamwork, providing left-behind children with a comprehensive platform that simultaneously builds physical fitness, psychological resilience, and interpersonal skills. Regarding resource integration, strengthening the tripartite collaboration mechanism among schools, families, and communities is essential. This forms a systemic support network involving schools, families, and communities, ensuring the continuity and implementation of intervention projects. For instance, schools can provide sports facilities and curriculum resources, community organizations can introduce professional coaches and psychological counselors, while families can extend the positive experiences gained from interventions into daily life. This multi-party coor-

dination not only supports sustainable program implementation but also enables left-behind children to achieve stable and positive socialization within a multi-layered support system. By integrating theory, methodology, and practice, future research on sports-based socialization holds promise for developing a more systematic, refined, and scalable knowledge framework. This will provide stronger academic and societal foundations for promoting the holistic development of left-behind children.

6. Conclusion

Sports interventions demonstrate unique value in promoting the socialization of left-behind children. However, existing research remains limited in terms of variable dimensions, methodology, regional coverage, and intervention formats. Future efforts should deepen the construction of multi-path psychological mechanism models, strengthen longitudinal tracking and mixed-methods research, and emphasize innovation in localized intervention programs alongside home-school-community collaboration. This will foster a more scientifically grounded and scalable research framework, providing robust support for the holistic development of left-behind children.

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