



**Short Research Report**

***Conflict management in Physical Education: The critical role of team-based activities in physical education to improve cooperation and wellbeing***

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Physical Education (PE) teachers' responsibility is critical in supporting the development of students' motivation, positive attitude and behaviour. . This study explored students' conflict management styles, the most common sources of conflicts during PE, and the relationship between conflict management styles, self-perceived health and social-emotional wellbeing among high school students in Hungary. A self-administered, anonymous, cross-sectional survey was completed by students in high school (n=385, 54.8 % female Mage =16.98 yrs, SD. 1.28). Only 2.9% of the students reported applying a collaborating management style. These students also rated their health higher. However, students with competitive conflict management were more satisfied with their lives. Most students never had conflicts with the teacher, and if any, they used accommodating conflict management strategies. Behavioural expectations, extreme performance requirements, and disliking the subject were the most common sources of conflicts in PE. The conflict management strategies did not significantly correlate with the psychosomatic symptoms scale; however, students with collaborating conflict management reported fewer sleep problems. These findings underpin the significant role of conflict management skills in health and social-emotional wellbeing.

**Keywords:** adolescent, team sports, physical education, wellbeing, conflicts

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## **Introduction**

Various strategies have been implemented to increase the physical activity levels of the Hungarian population. These included the 'Sport for All' policy, developing national recommendations and monitoring systems, and schemes promoting active travel to work and school. Furthermore, to increase the physical activity level of school-aged children, the government introduced the daily Physical Education (PE) program in primary and secondary schools (European Commission & WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2021; Hungarian Government, 2010).

However, studies using the Health Behaviour of School-aged Children (HBSC) survey conducted across countries in Europe found that less than half of the Hungarian students (11-17 years old) reached the recommended physical activity level (Inchley et al., 2020; Marzi et al., 2021). This shows that increasing the number of PE lessons in itself may not lead to the desired outcomes, and further actions are required.

Besides the family and peers (Keresztes et al., 2008; Yoon et al., 2023), PE teachers and coaches play a critical role in improving the physical activity levels of school children (Retsagi et al., 2011). Their responsibility is crucial in supporting the development of a positive, long-term attitude and motivation and maximising the benefits of physical activity on overall health, including social and emotional wellbeing. PE teachers need to incorporate activities that provide students with a feeling of success, growth, and pleasure (Retsagi et al., 2011).

In PE, conflicts often arise due to the competitive nature of games, escalated emotions, different abilities and life skills, and interpersonal issues among the students (Charrette, no date; Lenart, 2017). By recognising and addressing these conflicts, PE teachers may empower students with essential life skills such as conflict management, problem-solving, positive communication, and emotional intelligence, which may foster a positive learning environment for students. Such skills would not only help students while they are enrolled in school but may also benefit them later in life (Charrette, no date; NSW Department of Education, 2022).

Collaboration and competitiveness are both essential in sports. However, their rate significantly differs in individual and team sports (Nagy, 2012). In team sports, success can only be achieved through collaboration, with everyone taking responsibility and prioritising team success over individual interest, and if there is strong social cohesion (Baumann, 2006; Lenart, 2009).

Students' conflict management skills and their relationship with perceived health and socio-emotional wellbeing are understudied, especially in PE. Addressing this research gap, our study aimed to explore the most common sources of conflicts during PE lessons, students' conflict management styles, and the relationship between conflict management styles, self-perceived health and social-emotional wellbeing among high school students in Hungary.

A self-administered, anonymous, cross-sectional survey was completed by students voluntarily in high schools in Baja, Hungary, either online or paper-based. The total sample (n=385) consisted of Year 9 (n=116), Year 10 (n=137), Year 11 (n=71) and Year 12 (n=61) students from various high schools in Baja, including

grammar schools and technical colleges. Most (54.8%) respondents were female, and the mean age was 16.98 years (SD 1.28).

We created several items for this survey and also used other relevant items from validated survey instruments. The items we developed were students' demographic information, preferred activities in PE, and conflicts, including the frequency and source of conflicts and satisfaction with conflict management skills. The validated instruments included sports habits (Tari-Keresztes, 2009), Satisfaction with Life (Diener et al., 1985), self-perceived health (Piko & Keresztes, 2007), psychosomatic symptoms (Piko et al., 1997) and Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Management (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974), with cronbach alphas ranging from 0.64 to 0.83. The collected data were analysed using the SPSS data analysis software. Descriptive statistics, students t-test, and ANOVA test were conducted. Since we did not find significant differences in the basic descriptive statistics and correlations at various time points the data was collected, we created a single dataset by merging the data collected at different time points.

Most students were satisfied with their life ( $M=25.58$ ,  $SD 5.42$ ) and rated their health as good (56.1%) or excellent (34%). However, psychosomatic symptoms were common, especially anxiety-related diarrhea (55.6%), palpitation (36.7%), stomachache (33.9%), headache (33.3%) and sleep problems (31.3%). Most students reported their conflict management skills as good (52.1%) or excellent (12.2%).

Among the activities implemented during PE lessons, students preferred team activities over individual sports. Behavioural expectations, extreme performance requirements, and disliking the subject were the most common sources of conflicts with the teacher during PE lessons. However, 52.9% reported that they never had conflicts with the teacher. In conflict with teachers, students used accommodating conflict management strategies to resolve the conflicts. Only 2.9% of the students reported applying a collaborating management style, which signifies high assertiveness and cooperativeness.

Those with this collaborating management strategy rated their perceived health significantly better than peers who reported other conflict management styles ( $F=2.73$ ,  $\eta^2=0.03$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). However, students with competitive conflict management reported being more satisfied with their lives ( $F=2.18$ ,  $\eta^2=0.02$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). The conflict management strategies did not significantly correlate with the psychosomatic symptoms scale ( $p>0.05$ ); however, students with collaborating conflict management had significantly fewer sleep problems ( $F=2.97$ ,  $\eta^2=0.01$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

While the findings of this study should be considered in the light of its limitations regarding the multiple time points of the data collection and possible cohort effect, they underpin the significant role of conflict management skills in health and social-emotional wellbeing among high school students. The teaching methods have moved away from an authoritarian and discipline style in the last few decades, giving students more opportunities to apply various conflict management styles when a conflict occurs with the teacher. The results also highlight the need to implement more team activities in PE, which students preferred, which may facilitate developing and improving cooperative strategies. Future research should focus on a better understanding of the impact of the various conflict management strategies on wellbeing and the role of team-

based activities in improving students' conflict management skills in the context of physical education and sports.

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### Disclosure

The authors confirm that they do not have any conflict of interest concerning this paper.

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