



# Sport as compensation for infantile traits in young people

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## Abstract

**Objective of the study** was to identify the relationship between sports activity and infantilism traits using the example of sports youth.

**Methods and structure of the study.** The scientific work was carried out in Yekaterinburg, in the fall of 2023. The target group of the study is students of the Institute of Physical Culture, Sports and Youth Policy of UrFU, bachelors and masters, n=42, age from 19 to 23 years. A formative experiment was conducted in which non-athlete students attended mindfulness training sessions that included a unit on motivation to play sports, and they actively attended various sections, kept a diary, and reported. At the end of the experiment, infantile traits were measured in the group of «non-athletes» in December 2023.

**Results and conclusions.** As the study showed, medium and high levels of infantilism are associated with protective mechanisms of denial, regression and compensation, and low subjective control. In the group of athletes studied, infantile traits are less pronounced and are associated with intellectualization, reactive formations and projection. The influence of sports activity on the control group of «non-athletes» led to a decrease in infantilization.

It can be stated that infantile traits in young people are a spontaneous adaptation mechanism that is controlled through sport as a special activity that can act as a factor in the compensation of infantile traits, including the mechanism of infantilism on an unconscious level, making it irrelevant.

**Keywords:** sports, youth, psychological protection of the individual, character defects, infantilism, social security of youth.

**Introduction.** The activity that prevails in a particular person affects his personality, forms personal constructs, predetermines the appearance of specific traits, even deformations, or, conversely, affects the basic settings, correcting their negative manifestations. In the age of information technology, communication is deformed, and young people spend time on gadgets, smartphones, the «tactility effect» disappears, the visual analyzer «dehydrates»; difficulties are ignored, resilience is not trained, values are eroded and growing up is difficult. The psyche of a young man is labile and plastic, his personality is just being formed, and there are features that determine the high mental tone, flexibility, susceptibility to influence, and easy switchability of a young man [2]. However, the maturation of a young person in a modern social situation of instability has a special path: it is distorted, slowed down, provided by replacement mechanisms,

social deformations are formed as an option for adaptation to the conditions of growing up. This forms compensatory personal constructs that interfere with a harmonious, normal life. One such construct is infantilism, which provides mental protection but makes it difficult to effectively grow up.

The definition of «infantilism» does not have a single meaning and is generally interpreted as a child's model of behavior in social, psychological, and mental aspects. Infantilism in the psychological sense as personal immaturity (infantility) is manifested in the lack of formation of the emotional-volitional sphere of the personality at a level sufficient for a particular age [4]. The infantilization of the youth psyche is followed by social deviations, addictions and other deviations, which is why it is dangerous. Researchers state that infantilism is inherent in students of the 21st century [1, 5]. The structure of infantilism among students is



a low level of volitional activity, immature psychological defenses, refusal to assume responsibility, insufficient level of self-organization, self-awareness, and self-development [6].

The dominant social environment in everyday life creates the basis for the inclusion of congruent psychological defense mechanisms that can ensure the functional state of mental activity and eliminate deviations. If such an environment ensures awareness of oneself and one's choices, trains willpower and discipline, maintains activity (including physical activity), we assume that such activity will be able to compensate for personality traits of immaturity, and this activity can be sport. The actualization of sports activities creates the opportunity to demonstrate qualities that help cope with stress and the characteristics of age. In sports activities, subjects accumulate the effects of experiencing unfavorable functional states, pump up resilience and vitality, which allows them to be functional, effective and produce high results. Sport provides the opportunity for «effective sublimation», which allows you to strengthen authority and influence among young people, helps in the fight against difficulties, and effectively resets cortisol, the stress hormone that turns out to be a provocateur of health problems; regular exercise develops concentration, allows you to unite the group, and generally ensures the processes of adequate maturation. People who play sports develop endurance, patience, strength, agility, speed, reaction, coordination; sports allow them to become more stress-resistant to negative environmental phenomena, develop responsibility and reduce infantilism [3].

**Objective of the study** was to identify the relationship between sports activity and infantilism traits using the example of sports youth.

**Methods and structure of the study.** A study of sport as a way to compensate for infantile traits was conducted in Yekaterinburg in the fall of 2023. The target group of the study is students of the Institute of Physical Culture, Sports and Youth Policy of UrFU, bachelors and masters,  $n=42$ , age from 19 to 23 years. The study was carried out during school hours, but not simultaneously: the first measurement of infantilism traits was carried out in September in two groups of subjects: student-athletes ( $n=22$ ) and students of the same institute, but not involved in sports (Department of Organization of Work with Youth,  $n=20$ ). Next, a formative experiment was conducted during which non-athlete students attended mindfulness training sessions, which included a unit on motivation to play sports, and they actively attended various sections, kept a diary and reported. The

infantile traits were then measured in a group of non-athletes in December 2023.

In testing infantile traits, we used 1) the «Level of Infantilism» Questionnaire (A.A. Seregina); 2) the Life Style Index (LSI) technique, it allows you to diagnose psychological defense mechanisms and identify their degree of maturity; 3) Rotter's method for diagnosing the level of subjective control (adapted by E.F. Bazhin, S.A. Golyunkina, A.M. Etkind).

Results of the study and discussion. Both groups were tested on the «Level of Infantilism». The questionnaire allows you to obtain information on eight indicators: the emotional-volitional sphere, work motivation, value orientations, entertainment/hedonism, reflection, position of dependency/dependence/irresponsibility, disordered/chaotic behavior, overcoming behavior. The results obtained are as follows:

Groups	Low level of infantilism	Average level of infantilism	High level of infantilism
Student athletes	43%	49%	8%
Non-athlete students	13%	57%	30%

Very high levels were not found in any group of students; both groups presented different levels of infantilism - from low to high. The difference is also obvious: 93% of athletes have a low and medium level of infantilism, which means that this is their ability to control emotions, there is an understanding of the prospects associated with sports, pleasures are controlled, reflection allows you to regulate behavior, a desire for order and rationality is expressed, a willingness to overcome is expressed difficulties and own weaknesses. Non-athlete respondents showed the opposite tendency, which indirectly indicates the importance of sports in matters of personal maturity and overcoming infantilism.

According to the Life Style Index method, a group of non-athletes shows defense mechanisms: denial – 79,60%; suppression – 46,56%; regression – 77,73%; compensation – 78,52%; projection – 49,04%; replacement – 56,47%; intellectualization – 52,65%; reactive formations – 49,82%.

We focus on the high importance of denial, regression, compensation as defense mechanisms; these mechanisms are primary, immature and also indicate a tendency towards infantilism in non-athletes. The second group is dominated by defenses such as projection, intellectualization and reactive formations. Let us as-



sume that it is sport that forces subjects to project their own processes and emotions outward, to rationalize, to «convert» accumulated tension into reactive formations.

According to the «Level of Subjective Control» test, statistically significant differences were revealed between the two groups. In the group of athletes with the scale of general internality, the majority (97%) had a high level of subjective control, i.e. These young people believe that most events in life are the result of their own actions, that they must control them, feel responsible for these events, want to control them, are nervous when they fail, blame themselves if control is unsuccessful, and are dissatisfied with themselves. It seems to us that these athletes have blocked mechanisms for «dumping» negative emotions and weakly expressed positive ones, in general, satisfaction with life.

Students in the non-athlete group do not demonstrate such uniformity: the majority of subjects (67%) have average values, i.e. they do not have any claims to control, responsibility for all life events, do not worry about this and do not feel guilty if this fails, i.e. «not loading». There is no unified direction of the entire group to achieve high social goals.

Thus, we can state the presence of infantile personality traits in both groups of students, however, among «non-athletes» their severity is higher. Next, an attempt was made to reduce the detected traits of infantilism. «Rewiring» compensation mechanisms takes a certain time, and therefore the study turned out to be longitudinal and its formative part lasted the entire fall semester. At this time, students in psychology courses attended a series of classes on mindfulness, where a significant part was devoted to motivation to play sports, and regular physical activity was a condition for inclusion in the control sample.

Four months later, in December 2023, the traits of infantilism in «non-athletes» were re-measured. A repeated study using the «Level of Infantilism» method showed an increase in indicators of low levels of infantilism from 13% to 33%; the average level of infantilism decreased but only slightly; the high level of infantilism also remained, but at 8% (versus 30% previously). The results of the Life Style Index methodology show a redistribution of defense mechanisms: regression and compensation are also manifested, but in a smaller percentage, but denial is practically not detected and intellectualization has increased, which was previously identified in a group of athletes.

Calculation of the Spearman correlation coefficient showed that the  $\rho$  criterion is equal to 1.000. The connection between the studied characteristics is direct,

the closeness (strength) of the connection on the Chaddock scale is functional. The number of degrees of freedom ( $f$ ) is 6; the critical value of Spearman's criterion for a given number of degrees of freedom is 0,738;  $\rho_{obs} > \rho_{crit}$ , the dependence of the signs is statistically significant ( $p < 0,05$ ).

**Conclusions.** Adaptation of young people growing up to modern conditions as a process is burdened with infantilism. Infantilism as a psychological defense mechanism has a structure: in our study, medium and high levels of infantilism are associated with the protective mechanisms of denial, regression and compensation, and low subjective control. At the same time, in a group of athletes, infantile traits are less pronounced and are associated with intellectualization, reactive formations and projection. The influence of sports activity on the control group of «non-athletes» led to a decrease in infantilization.

With some confidence, we state that infantile traits in young people are a spontaneous adaptation mechanism that is controlled through sport as a special activity that can act as a factor in the compensation of infantile traits, including the mechanism of infantilism on an unconscious level, making it irrelevant.

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