

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF EARLY SELECTION ON CHILDREN IN WRESTLING

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Abstract

Early talent selection in wrestling, though often necessary for high-performance development, poses significant psychological risks when not tailored to children's emotional and maturational stages. This study investigates the mental and emotional consequences of early selection practices, especially in athletes aged 6 to 10. Drawing from self-determination theory and the Developmental Model of Sport Participation, the paper highlights how rigid, performance-based selection can lead to stress, anxiety, identity foreclosure, and sport dropout—particularly among early-maturing girls. Case studies from ACS Pătru Academy and CS Petrolul Ploiești illustrate the real-world impact of early puberty, with findings emphasizing the importance of psychological readiness, gender-sensitive coaching, and biological-age-informed criteria. The paper proposes a child-centered, ethically grounded approach to selection, integrating physical assessments with emotional monitoring and parental guidance. Recommendations include avoiding labeling, adjusting expectations based on pubertal timing, and promoting long-term engagement over short-term success. Ultimately, early selection should serve not as a filter for exclusion, but as a structured opportunity to support each child's holistic development in sport.

Keywords: early selection, wrestling, psychological development, early puberty, gender-sensitive coaching, youth sport, emotional safety

INTRODUCTION

Early selection plays a crucial role in shaping athletic trajectories, particularly in physically demanding sports such as wrestling. However, identifying talent at a young age—typically between 6 and 10 years—can have profound psychological implications if the process is not tailored to the emotional and developmental stage of the child.

Children participating in competitive selection events may experience stress, anxiety, and performance-related pressure, especially if they are rejected. These experiences can result in decreased self-esteem, early dropout from sport, and a negative relationship with

physical activity. For this reason, early selection methodologies must be child-centered and psychologically informed.

Theoretical Foundations: Early Selection and Psychological Development

Scientific literature highlights both the opportunities and risks associated with early talent identification in sport. On the one hand, structured and age-appropriate training in early childhood can enhance motor skill acquisition, physical literacy, and social competencies such as teamwork and discipline. On the other hand, when the selection process emphasizes performance over development, the psychological costs can be substantial.

According to Wiersma (2000), “youth sport specialization and selection at an early age can expose children to burnout, social isolation, and anxiety,” particularly when success is framed as the only desirable outcome. The author warns that early labeling of children as “talented” or “untalented” can affect self-perception and lead to early disengagement from physical activity.

Similarly, Gould and Carson (2008) argue that “exposure to high-performance environments at an early age can limit the development of broader life skills and increase dropout rates in sport” (p. 62). These environments often lack room for failure, experimentation, or emotional expression—key components in child development.

Furthermore, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) suggests that the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness must be met to sustain intrinsic motivation. In selection processes that are highly controlling or outcome-focused, children may feel a lack of control over their experiences, leading to anxiety or even aversion toward sport.

In the context of wrestling—a sport with strong cultural associations with physical dominance and toughness—the risk of identity foreclosure is particularly high. Children selected at an early age may define their entire identity around their athletic role, often at the expense of other social or academic interests. According to Brewer et al. (1993), “over-identification with the athletic role can result in emotional distress when performance declines or when exclusion occurs.”

Côté and Vierimaa (2014) propose a Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP), which identifies three distinct phases: sampling years (6–12), specializing years (13–15), and investment years (16+). The sampling phase is characterized by deliberate play, enjoyment, and multi-sport exposure—factors that contribute to psychological resilience and long-term sport engagement. Bypassing this stage through early, rigid selection may result in:

- Overtraining and early injuries;
- Anxiety linked to adult-like expectations;
- Reduced adaptability due to limited sport experiences;
- Loss of enjoyment, which undermines sustained participation.

Finally, early selection often lacks adequate consideration for individual variability in psychological maturity, emotional regulation, and social development. Girls and boys develop at different paces—not only biologically but also in terms of self-concept and coping mechanisms. Ignoring these differences in favor of uniform, performance-based selection criteria can alienate young athletes and distort the purpose of early sport involvement.

In summary, while early selection can be a gateway to performance pathways, it should be approached cautiously and ethically, with developmental appropriateness and psychological well-being at its core.

Gender Differences and Early Biological Maturation

In recent years, researchers have documented a marked trend toward earlier biological maturation in girls, with menarche often occurring as early as 8 to 10 years of age (Herman-Giddens et al., 2012). This acceleration in pubertal onset is attributed to a range of environmental, genetic, and lifestyle factors, including improved nutrition, increased exposure to endocrine disruptors, and rising obesity rates (Biro & Deardorff, 2013).

This physiological shift has significant implications for participation in physically and psychologically demanding sports—especially in wrestling, a discipline traditionally associated with strength, endurance, and full-body contact. For young female athletes, early

puberty introduces a complex intersection of biological, emotional, and social changes, which can directly influence their readiness for performance-oriented selection environments.

The onset of puberty typically brings about:

- Rapid changes in body composition, including fat distribution and breast development;
- Mood fluctuations, irritability, and increased emotional sensitivity due to hormonal changes;
- Growing self-consciousness about body image, particularly in mixed-gender training environments;
- Greater psychosocial stress, especially when competing with later-maturing or biologically immature peers.

In wrestling, where physical confrontation and body exposure are integral to the sport, girls experiencing early puberty may feel alienated, embarrassed, or overwhelmed, particularly when expected to perform under pressure or when compared against male peers or older adolescents. This can lead to avoidance behaviors, loss of motivation, and ultimately, sport dropout.

As Coakley (2011) notes, “early maturing girls tend to drop out of sport at higher rates, particularly in disciplines where body image and physical confrontation are central” (p. 119). These observations are consistent with findings by Slater and Tiggemann (2011), who highlight that body dissatisfaction and pubertal timing are strong predictors of withdrawal from competitive sport in adolescent girls.

Implications for Coaches and Selection Committees

To ensure equity and psychological safety in early selection, it is crucial to distinguish between chronological and biological age. Girls who enter puberty earlier than their peers may not be psychologically or emotionally prepared for the same training intensity, competition exposure, or public evaluation. Selection processes that do not account for **pubertal status** risk excluding girls based on transient or misunderstood developmental stages.

Moreover, young girls undergoing pubertal changes may benefit from:

- **Modified physical testing**, with emphasis on control, technique, and coordination rather than brute strength;
- **Gender-sensitive coaching**, which acknowledges bodily changes without reinforcing shame or discomfort;
- **Safe spaces for emotional expression**, mentorship, and the normalization of puberty within the sport context;
- **Education for parents and staff**, aimed at recognizing signs of emotional withdrawal or increased vulnerability.

Criterion	Boys (ages 6–10)	Girls (ages 6–10)
Biological age consideration	Correlated with motor skill development	Correlated with onset of puberty and emotional readiness
Strength testing	Gradual increase, motivational feedback	Reduced intensity, skill-focused, no public ranking
Psychological assessment	Focus on autonomy, confidence, cooperation	Emphasis on affective state, social comfort, and body awareness
Family involvement	Encourage realistic expectations	Include discussions on puberty and emotional transitions
Coach’s role	Behavior modeling, structured discipline	Provide empathetic guidance, normalize physical and emotional changes

Practical Implementation in Early Selection: Insights from ACS Pătru Academy and CS Petrolul Ploiești

At ACS Pătru Academy Ploiești and CS Petrolul Ploiești, a functional and multidimensional selection methodology was piloted to evaluate young athletes aged 6 to 10. The battery included standardized assessments of physical fitness—such as balance,

coordination, agility, grip strength, and explosive power—as well as behavioral observations targeting emotional regulation, adaptability, and peer interaction.

In addition to the physical and technical dimensions, particular attention was given to psychological readiness and biological maturity, with a focus on identifying indicators of early puberty, emotional distress, or behavioral withdrawal, especially among young girls.

Real-World Case Observations: Early Puberty and Emotional Impact

During the evaluation process, two female athletes—aged 8 and 9—presented clear signs of early biological maturation, both having experienced menarche before the age of 10. While these children were chronologically similar to their peers, their emotional worlds were dramatically different. One of the girls had begun menstruating at age 8—a stage at which many children are still immersed in symbolic play, imagination games, and attachment to toys.

This biological milestone, though natural, introduced confusion, embarrassment, and emotional instability. At such a young age, neither the girls nor their families were fully prepared for the physical and psychological changes that accompanied puberty. In both cases:

The athletes displayed reduced engagement in training, sometimes withdrawing from group activities without articulating a clear reason. They exhibited increased sensitivity to correction, particularly during strength testing or matches with older girls. Verbal and non-verbal cues suggested body discomfort, particularly when changing clothes or engaging in contact exercises.

These cases underscored the need for a flexible, human-centered selection methodology, where sport performance is not assessed in isolation, but as part of a larger developmental context.

The following practices were implemented to support these girls:

- ✓ Private, respectful conversations with the child and parent, offering reassurance and psychoeducation about puberty and sport participation;

- ✓ Reduced testing pressure and restructured drills to emphasize movement quality over competitive outcomes;
- ✓ Pairing with empathetic older teammates for modeling behavior and boosting confidence;
- ✓ Ongoing emotional monitoring, with the coaching staff providing space for breaks, check-ins, or modifications in training intensity.

Findings and Methodological Implications

These cases revealed that early puberty in young female athletes should not be treated merely as a physiological event, but as a transformative emotional process that can shape a child's entire relationship with sport. Emotional safety, predictability, and empathy are non-negotiable pillars when working with early-maturing girls in high-intensity environments like wrestling.

When appropriately supported, both girls remained active in the sport and later reported positive emotional outcomes, including improved self-confidence, stronger peer connections, and a growing identification with the athlete role—not defined by performance, but by perseverance and self-respect.

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Conclusions and Recommendations

The psychological impact of early selection in wrestling is both significant and multifaceted. While identifying athletic potential from a young age is important for building competitive pathways, such efforts must be grounded in an ethically responsible and developmentally appropriate framework. In particular, young athletes—especially girls experiencing early puberty—require careful, individualized support to prevent emotional overload and identity disturbance.

Early selection should never come at the cost of a child's psychological well-being. The process must do more than measure physical abilities; it should also cultivate confidence, emotional regulation, and a healthy relationship with sport. For early-maturing girls, wrestling can be both empowering and intimidating. Without appropriate interventions, these athletes may associate sport with anxiety, discomfort, or exclusion.

Therefore, a future-proof selection system must:

- Integrate psychological safeguards at every stage of the selection process;
- Recognize biological variability as a factor—not a flaw;
- Provide empathy-driven coaching, especially in moments of emotional vulnerability;
- Encourage a long-term vision of development that honors effort, growth, and resilience over short-term performance metrics.

As Côté and Vierimaa (2014) affirm, "an environment that supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness is essential not only for athlete performance, but also for long-term psychological well-being and social inclusion."

Wrestling coaches, educators, and sport institutions have both a responsibility and an opportunity: to redefine early selection not as a filter for exclusion, but as a gateway for

supportive development, where every child—regardless of maturation stage—feels seen, safe, and inspired to grow.

Recommendations include:

- Child-centered methodologies.
- Basic psychological training for coaches.
- Avoidance of labeling.
- Biological-age-based adjustments.
- Promotion of long-term development over short-term performance.

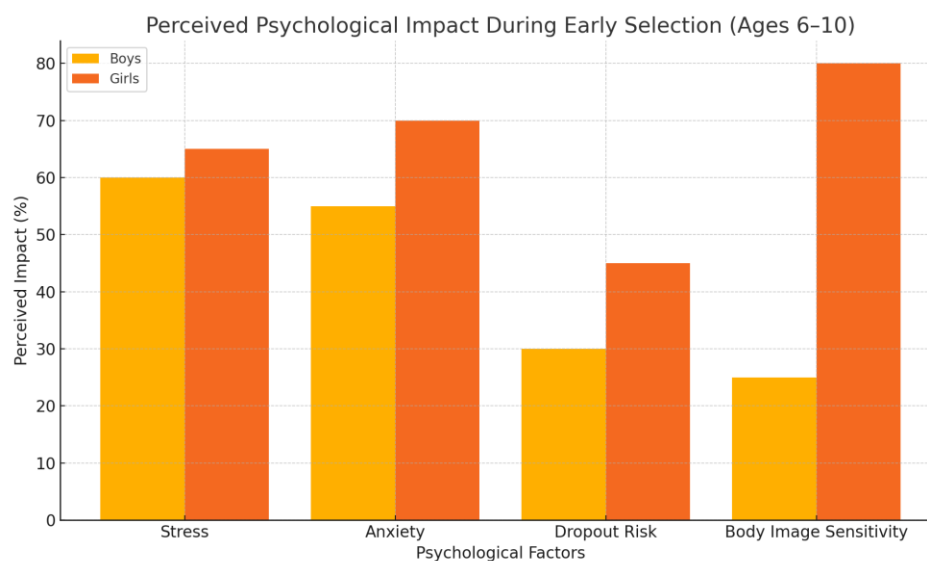


Figure 1. Psychological Impact by Gender During Early Selection (Ages 6–10)

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