

Youth Sports and the COVID-19 Pandemic: May 2020

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1. What age group do the psychological effects of not being able to play sports take a toll on the most?

The age of greatest psychological impact from COVID-19 cancellations depends on the sport and the level of competition the athlete has reached. For most athletes, the impact would be greatest once they have specialized into one sport. This usually occurs in high school and is the time when day-to-day life is very sports-centered. For these athletes much of their identity and self-worth are connected to being a high-level competitor. The loss of daily routines of fitness, stretching, practices, socialization, rehabilitation, and competition may cause worry, boredom, frustration, or disappointment. This may be followed by feelings of loss, fear, disillusionment, and social isolation.

For sports where early specialization and long practice hours are the norm (e.g., gymnastics, swimming, and figure skating), the impact may occur earlier, beginning in middle school. For College, Pro, or Olympic athletes, the loss of activity and identity is more impactful due to lost opportunities that may never return.

Despite the potential negative impacts that loss of sport presents, many athletes have demonstrated resilience during this time. Focusing on the opportunities that sport cancellation present, such as getting more strongly connected to family and friends and having enough time to pursue other interests, can reduce negative psychological effects and lead to positive mental health outcomes.

2. What kind of actions do you see children taking because of this?

Sports serve an important role in the life of the youth athlete and provide an opportunity for children to engage in something they enjoy, while getting exercise and alleviating stress. Without having sports as an outlet, young athletes may turn to other behaviors or activities to fulfill this need. In response to the loss of sport (and school), some younger athletes may struggle to establish a daily schedule leading to decreased motivation, lower activity levels, and disrupted sleep routines (frequently staying up later and awakening later). Late night activities such as movies, TV, social media or video gaming may become the norm causing sleep disturbance, as well as reduced energy and productivity.

In addition to disruptions in sleep schedule, motivation and activity levels, older athletes may adjust by increasing their use of substances, especially alcohol, tobacco (nicotine) and cannabis. Decreased activity levels and reduced motivation to maintain daily workout routines may also result in deconditioning and weight gain. Concerns related to fitness and weight can lead to depressive symptoms and negative self-image. Self-criticism related to lack of motivation and energy may activate other negative emotions, such as loneliness, emptiness, guilt, and irritability. Some may begin to question the value of their sport and consider dropping out.

3. What advice would you give a child going through this type of situation?

The best approach to adapting to restrictions on training and competition is to develop daily schedules focused on nutrition, fitness, flexibility, learning, and social connections. It can be helpful to view this time as an opportunity to work on something new, such as your mental game including relaxation, focusing drills, positive self-talk, visualization-mental rehearsal, mindset, intensity regulation, mindfulness and pre-competition routines. There are many mental skills coaches in this area that can help athletes and teams acquire or improve these skills using tele-video (see www.macsapp.net).

A particular challenge during this time can be motivation and accountability. Athletes are used to having a set schedule and practice routine outlined by coaches who are then there to witness their execution of the practice. Additionally, teammates add the components of competition and socialization which are both currently absent from workouts. Creating a desired schedule and sharing it with family, friends and coaches can help increase accountability. Setting times to work out with others, whether it be family members or virtually with teammates can also help increase motivation, commitment, and enjoyment of sport.

Many team sports are scheduling weekly televideo sessions to stay connected and/or to introduce new physical, technical or mental training methods. This can also be a good time to incorporate cross training and explore other athletic skills. For example, an 11 year old baseball player started riding his bike for fitness and

branched out to learning lacrosse stick skills and moves. A swimmer who lost access to his pool began cross training on a stationary bicycle and rowing machine. Others have used the time to read books about sports (autobiographies, sport psychology, peak performance) or listening to podcasts about self-improvement or self-awareness. Since social isolation can take a toll on athletes of all ages, keeping in touch becomes extremely important. Many athletes are engaging in routine daily activities on Zoom or other platforms, such as sharing dinner, workouts, or playing online games.

Finally, it is also important for athletes to focus on what they can control. Due to the high degree of uncertainty with the COVID-19 pandemic, young athletes may find themselves worrying not only about being exposed to the virus, but also about if/when they might return to school or official practices/training. Some may even lose their motivation to train. In these situations, athletes can shift away from uncertainty and focus on what they can control like daily schedules and goals, social connections, and new learning.

4. Is there a particular sport that impacts a child the most?

Not really. Athletes in individual sports often train for more hours per week (20-30) and may miss the once or twice a day training sessions and the way that they help activate their energy, motivation and creativity. Athletes participating in team sports may miss the social connections and shared experiences but may also struggle with the loss of routines and a predictable schedule. Additionally, athletes who play sports that they can practice at home (e.g., basketball) may have an easier time staying connected to their sport than athletes who do not have the opportunity to practice at home. The type of sport is less important than individual differences between athletes. Those who are most disconnected from their sport, whether it be due to motivation, team dynamics, or to accessibility (swimming, gymnastics, those living in apartments), may be most significantly impacted during these times. If an athlete is having difficulty coping with the changes brought about by the pandemic, it may be helpful to speak to a family member, teammate, friend, or sports/mental health consultant.

5. How do parents typically react to the situation?

Parents will exhibit a range of responses to our current situation. It is important to remember that for most parents, their daily lives have changed significantly. In addition to maintaining previous responsibilities, they are now faced with balancing their own work schedules while also being called upon to be teachers and coaches.

Parents may encourage their children to stay with their Pre-COVID sleep-awake patterns, but most children and adolescents end up going to bed later and getting up later. This is okay unless motivation, energy, and productivity drop. In this case, a gradual shift back (30 min every few days) to a more normal bedtime is recommended.

Some parents may push their child to stay fully engaged in the physical and technical training for their sport so that they do not get deconditioned or lose technical skills. This may be much harder for the child in the absence of a coach or other training partners and may cause conflict between the child and parent. Some reduction in training and conditioning can be expected, although the absence of exercise and training is discouraged.

6. Is there any advice you would give parents on how to talk to their child about this or how to react to this situation?

Being locked in a house with your children will make it hard to be anything other than genuine in sharing how you are experiencing the pandemic. For this reason, it is important to talk to your children openly about what is happening, the best ways to remain healthy and safe, and the challenges that you and our society are facing due to this unprecedented situation. Children and adolescents often form their attitudes and perspectives about crises situations like pandemics from parents, coaches and teachers. Parents should model healthy routines through daily fitness (walking, hiking, biking etc.) and balanced nutrition making it likely that their children will adopt those same positive behaviors. In addition, it can be a good time to initiate new family activities like outdoor games, walks or hikes in nature, or listening to podcasts or audiobooks. Finally, it is important to stay optimistic by highlighting small positive moments that occur each day and promoting the view that with adversity comes many unexpected opportunities to explore new interest, learn new skills, and reach out in service to others.

There are many resources available on how to talk to your child specifically about COVID-19. For example see: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/talking-with-children.html>

7. Do you see the future of sports at schools changing because of the pandemic? If so, how?

Organized competitive sports are likely to be closed for many months. When they do reopen, practices are likely to be modified by public health approaches like social distancing, mask wearing, temperature taking, and systematic monitoring of the current health status of athletes, coaches and parents. In addition, competitions may start with few spectators unless social distancing can be maintained.

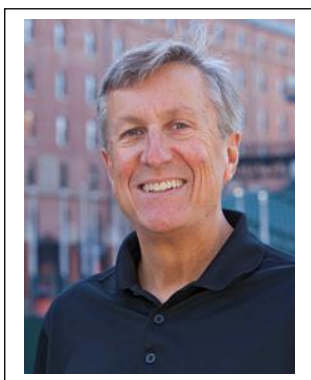
It is important to assure athletes that these approaches will give us our best chance to reopen, while at the same time protecting the health and safety of all. To avoid alarm or fear, you can be creative when you return to practice and play. For example, put your team logo on masks, develop a new team “mantra”, or develop drills that incorporate distancing in a humorous or fun way for team building and competitive excitement. Finally, group mental skills, dynamic stretching, mindfulness or yoga practice sessions can be added in ways that enhance confidence and performance consistency

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