



Mott Poll Report

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Playing Through a Pandemic: Youth Sports and COVID

The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted many youth activities to a virtual format to meet guidelines for social distancing. However, sports require in-person participation. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children 6-18 years about youth sports participation between August 2020 and January 2021.

Overall, 23% of parents report their child participated in school, travel, or community sports, with participation slightly higher for older children 12-18 years compared to younger children 6-11 years (25% vs 21%). Among parents whose child did not participate, 34% report their child's sport was canceled due to COVID-19 and 25% felt it was not safe due to COVID-19.

Among parents whose child participated in one or more sports, most recall receiving information from the school or sports league about masks and social distancing guidelines for players (91%) and parents/spectators (92%). While 84% say they received information about when players should sit out of practice or games due to COVID-19 exposure, only 59% received information on when players should get tested for COVID-19.


Most parents (80%) recall that their child's sports organization provided information on when a child could return to play after having COVID-19. When asked what they would likely do if their own child had COVID-19 during a sports season, 40% of parents say they would wait the number of days specified by team/league guidelines, while 50% would have their child cleared to play by a doctor; 5% would base the decision on when the child felt well enough to play. More parents of older than younger children would wait the specified number of days (46% vs 33%), and fewer would have their child cleared by a doctor (44% vs 57%).

Most parents rate their child's school or sports league as *excellent* or *good* in terms of giving clear information about COVID-19 precautions (86%), treating children fairly (87%) and listening to parent concerns (83%). With regard to consistent enforcement of COVID-19 precautions, 72% rate the school or league as *excellent* or *good* while 28% give a *fair* or *poor* rating. Overall, 13% of parents feel their child's school or sports league has been too strict about COVID-19 precautions, while 14% feel they were too lenient. Three-quarters (73%) say the youth sport's precautions have been about right.

COVID-19 precautions in youth sports

Parent ratings for school, travel, or community sports organizations

	Excellent/ Good	Fair/ Poor
Giving clear information about precautions	86%	14%
Consistent enforcement of precautions	72%	28%
Treating children fairly	87%	13%
Listening to parent concerns	83%	17%



Source: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, 2021

Report Highlights

3 in 4 parents say their child's sport is about right in their approach to COVID-19 precautions.

Most parents give high ratings to their child's school or sports league for clear communication, treating children fairly and listening to parent concerns about COVID-19.

1 in 4 parents rate their child's sports league as *fair/poor* for consistent enforcement of COVID-19 precautions.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in January 2021 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 0-18 years living in their household (n=2,002). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 60% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 1,630 parents with at least one child age 6-18. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±2 to 7 percentage points.

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics, and the University of Michigan Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Center.

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C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health

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Implications

Youth sports allow children to improve their physical fitness and overall health while interacting with their peers and having fun. In the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, many youth sports were suspended, as schools and sports leagues waited for guidance on whether and how to safely proceed. This Mott Poll focuses on August 2020 to Jan 2021, when some youth sports had resumed in-person activity.

Resumption of youth sports required school and sports league officials, along with state and local public health officials, to consider whether children would be able to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission during practices and competitions. While the risk of severe COVID-19 infection is low in children, transmission through youth sports may have serious effects for participants with extenuating circumstances, such as a child or coach with a chronic illness, or for family members of the players. Among parents in this Mott Poll whose child did not participate in a sport, 1 in 3 parents noted that their child's sport was canceled, while 1 in 4 would not allow their child to participate due to COVID-related safety concerns.

Where youth sports were offered, school and league officials had to create safety protocols accounting for the sport's setting and ability for players to maintain distance. Some policies were spelled out in state and/or local guidelines. Sports officials also had to communicate about their new COVID-19 policies. In this respect, parents largely felt those efforts were successful. Nearly 90% of parents rated their child's school or sports league as *excellent* or *good* in terms of giving clear information about COVID-19 precautions. The vast majority of parents recalled communication about masking and social distancing requirements for both players and parents, as well as information about when children should sit out due to COVID-19 exposure. Ensuring compliance with COVID-19 protocols was more challenging, with 28% of parents rating the school or sports league as *fair* or *poor* in consistent enforcement.

Overall, three-quarters of parents felt their child's sport mostly got it right in their approach to COVID-19; roughly equal numbers of parents felt officials were too strict vs too lenient. Most parents gave *excellent* or *good* ratings for treating children fairly and listening to parent concerns; perhaps parents understood the difficulty of enforcing safety protocols.

In addition to school or league policies, parents should reinforce commonsense actions to minimize COVID-19 transmission during practice and competitions, such as not sharing water bottles or food, and using hand sanitizer during breaks in activity. Parents also should consider their own actions, such as maintaining social distance and wearing masks while attending games.

One area where communication was notably lower was around COVID-19 testing. It is unclear if the lack of information was an oversight or if schools and leagues did not have clear guidelines from public health officials. As more youth sports resume activity, results of this poll indicate that parents will need further direction on whether, when and where their child should get tested. This is particularly important given recent COVID-19 outbreaks among youth sports teams.

Most parents in this poll indicated they received information about when a child could return to play after having COVID-19. Half of parents would involve the child's doctor in this decision, while forty percent would follow school or league guidelines on the number of days to sit out. Parents of older children were more likely to rely on league guidelines; however, since older children have a greater risk of serious COVID-19 infection than younger children, relying on general guidelines may be unwise. Experts say that return to play should be based on the severity of the infection, whether there is a pre-existing medical condition, and if the child is exhibiting any red flags, such as ongoing fatigue, fever, dizziness or chest pain. If their child contracts COVID-19, parents of young athletes should consult their child's doctor for specific guidance on resuming sports activity.