



How to Set Up Safe Athletic Programs During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Considerations for Independent Schools

Table Of Contents

Introduction.....	2
How COVID-12 Spreads	2
Six Risks Phases for Youth Sports	3
Sports and Academic Cohorts	3
Gaiting and Milestones.....	3
Assessing the Risk of Each Sport or Activity	4
Reducing the Risks	5
Conclusion	5
About Fusion Cell.....	6

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Introduction

At many independent schools, athletics and recreational activities are critical elements of the school program that help to develop well-rounded young men and women. But the contagious nature of COVID-19 is causing schools to rethink how they can deliver these programs and still prevent the spread of the disease. The science behind COVID-19 tells us that there are actions that schools can take to significantly reduce the risk of virus transmission both in the classroom and in athletic areas. This paper outlines some actions schools should consider when developing a plan for competitive athletics and recreational programs.

Important Considerations Before Evaluating Athletics

When considering the recommendations in this paper, keep in mind the following:

1. Athletics and academics will never reach zero-risk while COVID-19 has community spread.
2. The foundation for a safe athletic program is a safe academic environment. Academics are the number one priority and a strong COVID-19 risk mitigation strategy needs to be in place before considering athletic programs. Athletes and coaches interact with students, teachers, and staff in the academic setting before moving to the sports fields. If the academic environment doesn't limit the spread of COVID-19, the any potential exposure may spread within the academic environment. If the academic or athletic COVID-19 prevention strategies fail, schools should restrict athletic activity to lower risk phases to reduce risk and disease spread.
3. These considerations are meant to supplement – not replace – any state, local, territorial, or tribal health and safety laws, rules, and regulations with which youth sports organizations must comply.

How COVID-19 Spreads

The focus of independent schools is to maintain in-person interaction in the face of COVID-19. In-person interactions are critical to not just learning, but also social development. They are, of course, also vital to athletic and recreational activities. Sports offerings must be supported by a strong prevention strategy by the academic institution, one which can handle the challenges of COVID-19 exposure without translating to COVID-19 disease. The most common exposure route for COVID-19 transmission is from contaminated air - either from droplets or aerosols. Contaminated objects are a secondary, but less common, route of exposure.

Six Risk Phases for Youth Sports

The risk of COVID-19 spread increases in youth sports settings depending on the closeness of the physical interaction. Risks can generally be classified into these six phases:

- **Lowest Risk:** Performing skill-building drills or conditioning at home, alone, or with family members.
- **Increasing Risk:** Team-based practice for students attending class in-person.
- **More Risk:** Within-team competition for students attending class in-person.
- **Even More Risk:** Within-team competition including students from different academic cohorts.
- **Higher Risk:** Full competition between teams from the same local geographic area.
- **Highest Risk:** Full competition between teams from different geographic areas

The lowest risk phase: individual skills, and drills, will always be the baseline for sports. Intramural sports are classified as medium risk of COVID-19 exposure and interstate or intercounty sports will be the highest risk of COVID-19 exposure.

These risk phases have defined metrics that outline whether it would be safe or advisable for a school to progress from a lower phase to higher phases or to return to a lower phase depending on the current levels of COVID-19 in the local community. Each phase should be built around the risk definitions of the CDC. Each sport will have unique risks and may require different modifications to maximize everyone's safety.

Sports and Academic Cohorts

With the right modifications and limitations, sporting contests may be played (i.e., a school can operate at the higher risk phases). This is true for 100% in-person academic models and for hybrid or concurrent academic models. Both models need to demonstrate no classroom-linked disease transmission before that contest takes place. If no classroom-linked disease transmission is noted, the academic prevention strategy integrity is assumed to be intact and effective with each new phase.

Athletics are considered cohorts that differ from academic cohorts. Participating in school-sponsored sports does not fundamentally break the school's academic cohort model. Not all students will participate in youth sports and therefore, student-athletes will be in a different cohort for sports than they would be assigned during the academic day.

Athletic cohorts may be based on the coach's ability to have smaller groups that make sense based on the individual sport, such as having a "defensive cohort" and an "offensive cohort." These cohorts may be based on positions played by the students and not on their academic cohort assignments.

Engaging in intramural sports in the absence of classroom-linked transmission does not break the cohort model. It is assumed that sports may increase the chances of exposure. The absence of classroom-linked transmission indicates the academic prevention strategies are effective.

Gaiting and Milestones

Schools should consider the lowest risk phase their baseline position and they should start at that position or return to that position if they encounter a COVID-19 outbreak whether that outbreak occurs within the athletic or academic community. It is advisable to move from a lower risk phase to a higher risk phase in a step-by-step progression cycle. As previously stated, preserving the academic experience is the priority. Athletics are typically played after an academic day, meaning all student athletes have already been in-person within the academic facility. The assumption is that, in most cases, a potential exposure on the athletic field is likely after a potential exposure inside the facility. It is critical to demonstrate safety as school's move from phase to phase. This can be accomplished by using team-based protocols of a two-week (quarantine) period between phases. This precaution will provide time to show that any exposures did not translate into a disease process or infection.

Any school that has a strong prevention strategy capable of minimizing exposures between students in a classroom environment may proceed to a higher risk phase after the two-week quarantine period with no student or staff COVID-19 infections. If at any time an exposure linked to a classroom develops into an infection, the sports offerings should return to the lowest risk phase, and then the school would restart the progression cycle between risk phases.

Assessing the Risk of Each Sport or Activity

A sports clearance physical should be mandated. Additionally, before participating in any sport, students should sign a defined risk waiver for COVID-19, explaining that a student or parent may opt out of any activity they feel is an unacceptable risk for their child. Each sport has unique risks. Those risks are based on the amount of time of close contact, whether participants wear masks, whether the activity takes place indoors or outdoors, and the amount of shared equipment. Sports may need to be modified for safer play and to reduce the risk of exposure.

The way sports are played and the way equipment is shared can influence the spread of COVID-19 among players. When schools are assessing the risk of spread in sports, consider:

- **The physical closeness of players, and the length of time that players are close to each other or staff.** Sports that require frequent closeness between players may make it more difficult to maintain social distancing, compared to sports where players are not close to each other. For close-contact sports (e.g., hockey, basketball), play may be modified to safely increase the distance between players.

For example, players and coaches can:
 - focus on individual skill building versus competition,
 - limit the time players spend close to others by playing full-contact only in game-time situations, or
 - decrease the number of competitions during a season.
 Coaches can also modify practices, so players work on individual skills, rather than on competition. Coaches may also put players into small groups (cohorts) that remain together and work through stations, rather than switching groups or mixing groups.
- **Amount of necessary touching of shared equipment and gear (e.g., protective gear, balls, bats, racquets, mats, or water bottles).** It is also possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it, and then touching their own mouth, nose, or eyes. Minimize equipment sharing, and clean and disinfect shared equipment between use by different people to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread.

- **Ability to engage in social distancing while not actively engaged in play (e.g., during practice, on the sideline, or in the dugout).** During times when players are not actively participating in practice or competition, attention should be given to maintaining social distancing by increasing space between players on the sideline, dugout, or bench. Additionally, coaches can encourage athletes to use downtime for individual skill-building work or cardiovascular conditioning, rather than staying clustered together.
- **Age of the player.** Older youth might be better able to follow directions for social distancing and take other protective actions like not sharing water bottles. If feasible, a coach, parent, or another caregiver can assist with making sure that athletes maintain proper social distancing. For younger athletes, youth sports programs may ask parents or other household members to monitor their children and make sure that they follow social distancing and take other protective actions (e.g., younger children could sit with parents or caregivers, instead of in a dugout or group area).
- **Players at higher risk of developing serious disease.** Parents and coaches should assess the level of risk based on individual players on the team who may be at higher risk for severe illness, such as children who may have asthma, diabetes, or other underlying health conditions.
- **Size of the team.** Sports with a large number of players on a team may increase the likelihood of spread, compared to sports with fewer team members. Consider decreasing team sizes, as feasible.
- **Nonessential visitors, spectators, volunteers.** Limit any nonessential visitors, spectators, volunteers, and activities involving external groups or organizations.
- **Travel outside of the local community.** Traveling outside of the local community may increase the chances of exposing players, coaches, and fans to COVID-19, or unknowingly spreading it to others. This is the case particularly if a team from an area with high levels of COVID-19 competes with a team from an area with low levels of the virus. Youth sports teams should consider competing only against teams in their local area (e.g., neighborhood, town, or community) when competitions take place.

Reducing the Risks

This section outlines several ways to reduce the risks of spreading the coronavirus during athletic and recreational activities.

Identify Small Groups and Keep them Together (Team Cohorting)

- Keep players together in small groups with dedicated coaches or staff, and make sure that each group of players and coach avoid mixing with other groups as much as possible. Teams might consider having the same group of players stay with the same coach or having the same group of players rotate among coaches.
- Consider staging within-team scrimmages instead of playing games with other teams to minimize exposure among players and teams.

Ensure Proper Symptom Screening Before Participation

- All athletes, coaches, staff, and officials should complete a health screening with temperature check before participation in any event.
- Anyone who is sick should never come to a practice or game.

Hand Hygiene and Respiratory Etiquette

- Hand washing and the use of hand sanitizer should be used regularly throughout the period of time youth are engaged in team sports.
- Do not allow spitting and everyone involved in team sports should follow the CDC recommendations for appropriately covering a cough and using disposable tissues.



Masks

Teach and reinforce the importance of using masks with sports. Masks may be challenging for players to wear while playing sports, but they should be used whenever possible. Masks should always be worn by coaches, youth sports staff, officials, parents, and spectators.

Wearing masks is most important when proper physical distancing is difficult. One example of a deviation is that masks should not be worn if there is a significant safety concern with the entanglement of gear or the potential to cover the eyes. If outdoors, participating in an activity with no potential for unintentional contact, and proper social distancing can be maintained, masks do not need to be worn. Mask should be worn when an activity has limited unintentional or intentional contact, especially indoors. The American Academy of Pediatrics indicated that masks are not recommended during vigorous activities, water activities, or where it poses a safety issue.

Signage and Messaging

COVID-19 prevention posters and signs encouraging the proper wearing of masks should be visible in the entrance and exit areas and in the outdoor restrooms.

Modified Layouts and Social (Physical) Distancing

- Identify adult staff members or volunteers to help maintain social distancing among youth, coaches, umpires/referees, and spectators (if state and local directives allow for spectators).
- Space players at least 6 feet apart on the field while practicing the sport (e.g., during warm-up, skill-building activities, simulation drills)
- Eliminate unnecessary physical contact, such as high fives, handshakes, fist bumps, or hugs.
- Prioritize being outdoors for practices and play as much as possible.
- Create distance between players when explaining drills or the rules of the game.
- If keeping a physical distance is difficult with players in competition or group practice, consider relying on distancing during individual skill work and drills.
- Encourage players not to congregate in groups while waiting for practice or games to begin. As an example, players can wait in their cars with their guardians until just before the beginning of a practice, warm-up, or game, instead of coming too early and forming a group.

- Limit the use of carpools or van pools. When riding in an automobile to a sports event, encourage players to ride to the sports event with persons living in their same household.
- If practices or competition facilities must be shared, consider increasing the amount of time between practices and competitions to allow for one group to leave before another group enters the facility. If possible, allow time for cleaning and/or disinfecting.

Physical Barriers and Guides

Provide physical guides, such as signs and tape on floors or playing fields, to make sure that coaches and players remain at least 6 feet apart during practices and drills.

Common Use Spaces

- Close shared spaces such as locker rooms, if possible; otherwise, stagger use and clean and disinfect between use.
- Limit the number of players sitting in confined player seating areas (e.g., dugouts) by allowing players to spread out into spectator areas if more space is available.

Isolation and Quarantine Measures

Follow the established School Isolation and/or Quarantine policies for addressing any COVID-19 cases associated with school sports.

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Conclusion

There are numerous steps that schools can take to reduce the risks of spreading the coronavirus and COVID-19 during athletic and recreational activities. A safe athletic environment begins with a safe academic environment. Once that is in place, the proper steps for a school to take regarding athletics will depend on the sport's current risk phase and the unique risks presented by the individual sport. By taking a sport-by-sport approach, schools can provide students a satisfying and safe athletic experience.

About Fusion Cell

Fusion Cell's team of board-certified public health epidemiologists and logistics experts are helping numerous schools adapt to the risks of COVID-19. Our consultants are all current and former US military specialists with decades of experience managing pandemics and disease outbreaks in U.S. military bases around the world. We bring the experience and expertise that schools lack and apply a science-based approach that helps schools reduce transmission risk.

Our experts partner with your COVID-19 planning team to help you keep students, faculty, and staff on the campus at the highest possible safety, academic, and quality-of-life levels.

For assistance in creating health and safety plans for your school, contact Fusion Cell at **contact@fusioncell.com**.

