



# Back on the Field

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A study of the COVID-19  
pandemic's effects  
on youth sports



This report is based on original research and analysis designed by TeamSnap, in partnership with The Aspen Institute's Sports and Society Program, and conducted by Dr. Travis E. Dorsch, Utah State University, Families in Sport Lab; Dr. Jordan A. Blazo, Louisiana Tech University, Department of Kinesiology; and Mr. Daniel J. M. Fleming, Utah State University, Families in Sport Lab.

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### **About TeamSnap**

Since its formation in 2009, TeamSnap has been singularly focused on taking the work out of play. Twenty-five million coaches, administrators, players, and parents rely on TeamSnap's powerful and easy-to-use tools for communication, scheduling, payment collection and registration, and organizing every sport and group activity in the world.

For more information, visit [www.teamsnap.com](http://www.teamsnap.com).

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### **About Aspen Institute**

The Aspen Institute is an educational and policy studies organization based in Washington, DC; Aspen, Colorado; and on the Wye River on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Its mission is to foster leadership based on enduring values and to provide a nonpartisan venue for dealing with critical issues. It also has offices in New York City and an international network of partners.

For more information, visit [www.aspeninstitute.org](http://www.aspeninstitute.org).

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### **About Project Play**

Project Play is an initiative of The Aspen Institute's Sports & Society Program, The mission of which is to convene leaders, facilitate dialogue, and inspire solutions that help sport serve the public interest. Since 2013, Project Play has shepherded the national conversation around what good looks like in youth sports. Hundreds of organizations have used Project Play frameworks and ideas to introduce programs, expand grantmaking, shape government policy, advance research, and develop tools to train coaches, empower parents, and mobilize leaders.

For more information, visit [www.ProjectPlay.us](http://www.ProjectPlay.us).

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# Executive Summary

In 2021, TeamSnap, which provides industry-leading sports management and communication software for amateur sports, designed a study in collaboration with The Aspen Institute's Sports & Society Program, Families in Sport Lab at Utah State University, and Louisiana Tech University's Minds in Motion Lab, to explore the effects of the pandemic on young people and youth sports.

This research will help shape the growing conversation about the important role of sports in youth development and the wide-ranging negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. While not directly explored in this study, some of the data reinforces equity concerns that are and should be part of the youth sports conversation. By understanding how the lives of young athletes have changed and how to deliver a better experience, TeamSnap and its partners can be an even more valuable resource to help young people get back out on the field.

The partners were able to deploy the study quickly to capture a snapshot of what was happening on the ground during the pandemic across the U.S. and Canada. The study results demonstrate significant findings about the connection between youth sports and mental health, with 9 in 10 parents (89%) citing mental health as a top reason their children participate in youth sports, and the majority of parents (52%) reporting that their children's mental health and physical fitness decreased during the pandemic.

### Key findings from the study include:



**Fun, mental health, and physical fitness are parents' top three goals for youth sports:** Parents say the most important outcome of playing sports is having fun (95% of respondents), followed closely by supporting mental health (89%), and enhancing physical fitness (88%). However, parents indicated that their children's achievement of these goals during the pandemic was significantly lower, with only about half of parents saying their children did very well in terms of having fun (54%), supporting mental health (52%), and enhancing physical fitness (52%).



**Mental health and physical fitness declined among young people:** More than half of parent respondents reported that their children's mental health (52%) and physical fitness (53%) decreased during the pandemic, and nearly half of parents said their children's emotional control (48%) and social wellbeing (45%) decreased.



**Social distancing and lockdowns increased children's screen time:** The pandemic had significant effects on the activities children were involved in. Over 60% of parents reported a decrease in participation in the following activities: organized sports, free play at school, and free play with friends. Meanwhile, their screen time increased dramatically. In fact, 8 in 10 parents (82%) said that their children's screen time increased or greatly increased during the pandemic.



**Community responses to COVID-19 were looked at more favorably than national responses:** The more distant an entity is from a family, the less satisfied parents were with their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly 3 in 4 parents (74%) were satisfied with their child's coach's response to the pandemic, while only 40% were satisfied with their state's response, and even less (33%) were satisfied with their country's response.



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## Introduction

In March 2020, as the coronavirus arrived in force in North America, parents across the U.S. and Canada scrambled as schools closed, afterschool activities were canceled, and childcare providers went into lockdown.

While children have proven resilient in the face of the virus, the full effect of school closures and isolating at home for so many months is yet to be fully understood. Early evidence indicates that it has taken a toll on children’s mental and physical health. According to the CDC, mental health-related visits to the emergency department increased 24% for children ages 5-11 and 31% for ages 12-17 starting in April 2020 through at least October of that year. In 2021, pediatricians also started raising the alarm about an increase in the prevalence of childhood obesity. A study published in *Pediatrics*, the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, found that obesity had increased 2% in the last six months of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. The study also found that racial disparities around childhood obesity had worsened.

TeamSnap, which provides industry-leading sports management and communication software for amateur sports, saw in real-time how the pandemic was affecting sports. Usage of their software nearly stopped as communities went into lockdown and then quickly resumed as sports organizations worked to find other ways to keep participants engaged. In 2021, Team Snap commissioned a study in collaboration with The Aspen Institute’s Sports & Society Program, Families in Sport Lab at Utah State University, and Louisiana Tech University’s Minds in Motion Lab, exploring the effects of the pandemic on young people and youth sports. Combining their resources and expertise, these partners were able to deploy the study quickly, capturing a snapshot of what was happening on the ground during the pandemic.

The study results demonstrate significant findings about the connection between youth sports and mental health, as parents from across the U.S. and Canada reported a strong link between sports and their children’s social and emotional wellbeing. Nine in ten parents (89%) cited mental health as a top reason their children participate in youth sports, and the majority of parents (52%) reporting that their children’s mental health and physical fitness decreased during the pandemic.

### The key findings in this report fall into the following three categories:



**What parents want from youth sports:** Having fun, mental health, and physical fitness are parents’ top three goals for youth sports.



**The pandemic’s effects on young people’s mental health and physical fitness:** Parents reported that their children’s mental health and physical fitness decreased during the pandemic. Additionally, children spent much less time being active and much more time with screens.



**How parents viewed community responses to the COVID-19 pandemic:** Community responses were viewed more favorably than national responses.

The study findings were fairly consistent across subgroups, including by race, gender, income, and geography. Parents from all walks of life want similar things for their children – to be happy and healthy. While there were some differences in the survey responses, families from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, different income brackets, and rural and urban communities, seemed similarly affected by the pandemic. Where differences did exist, they indicated concerns about equity that existed before and could deepen in the wake of the pandemic.

While the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on this generation of young people remains to be seen, the social isolation of 2020-2021 clearly had a profound impact. As the world has opened back up, even in fits and starts, most parents have enthusiastically returned to youth sports as a way to provide some normalcy to their children while supporting their mental and physical health. Families with more resources, however, have been able to provide continuity or return to play more quickly than other families. Sport shouldn't be another place where inequity accrues; all children deserve access to fun and meaningful youth sports experiences. In conclusion, the report offers suggestions to both parents and organizations for getting young people more active. To address any inequities, organizations and communities need to be intentional about how they design their programs and provide increased access to sports and recreation.

This research will help shape the growing conversation about the important role of sports in youth development and the wide-ranging negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. By understanding how the lives of young athletes have changed, TeamSnap and its partners can be an even more valuable resource to help young people get back out on the field.



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# Methodology

The survey, hosted and distributed by Qualtrics International, Inc. in Provo, Utah, was a research instrument built by key stakeholders at TeamSnap. Thought leaders at The Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program, Dr. Travis Dorsch, associate professor and founding director of the Families in Sport Lab at Utah State University, and Dr. Jordan Blazo, assistant professor of kinesiology at Louisiana Tech University provided scientific consultation.

This survey was conducted online within the United States and Canada from April 13 through May 3, 2021, among 2,097 parents, adults ages 18 and older. Respondents included parents from 49 U.S. states, D.C., and Puerto Rico, as well as from 9 of the 13 Canadian provinces. As reported by the respondents, race and ethnicity roughly align to the demographics of the U.S. and Canada. Nearly 64% of respondents described their communities as suburban, 22% said urban, and 14% reported rural. The median household income fell in the \$100,000-\$149,999 range, which is higher than the national average for both the U.S. and Canada.

Although wide-ranging, this report is not comprehensive; additional analyses are being conducted by Dr. Dorsch, Dr. Blazo, and Mr. Fleming at the discretion of TeamSnap. One or more manuscripts outlining this study's findings are being prepared for submission to peer-reviewed journal outlets.

Surveyed Demographics	
 <b>United States &amp; Canada</b>	<b>2,097</b> parents
<b>\$100,000 to \$149,999</b> Median household income	Suburban – <b>64%</b> Urban – <b>22%</b> Rural – <b>14%</b> 



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## Key Findings

The study results demonstrate significant findings about the connection between youth sports and mental health. Parents from across the U.S. and Canada reported a strong link between sports and their children's social and emotional wellbeing. Many children, however, were trading sports and other activities for screen time during the pandemic.

## What Parents Want from Youth Sports

Parents say the most important outcome of their children playing youth sports is having fun (95% of respondents), followed closely by supporting mental health (89%), and enhancing physical fitness (88%). However, parents indicated that their children's achievement of these goals during the pandemic was significantly lower, with only about half of parents (54%) saying their children had fun, and even less (52%) saying their children were able to support their mental health and enhance their physical fitness through sports.

### Why It Matters

People involved in youth sports often cite the many benefits of athletic activity and team play, which include social, emotional, and physical skill development. Still, it was surprising to TeamSnap to see that parents made a strong connection between mental health and youth sports. Dave DuPont, one of the founders of TeamSnap, noted that the study showed how much parents valued sports and why, and even still it was a little surprising to see how much people wanted to get back to playing sports during the pandemic.

While 84% of parents said that their kids still played some sports during the pandemic, parents reported low rates of their children achieving the sports-related goals of supporting mental health and physical fitness. Just over half of parents said that their children did well in achieving those goals through sports during the pandemic. This indicates that parents were prioritizing sports for their kids throughout the pandemic, but sports didn't have a chance to do their job, often because of local COVID restrictions. Researchers like Dr. Travis Dorsch of Utah State University's Families in Sport Lab worry that parents and young people may have become disenchanted with sports during the pandemic, and that could cause young people to drop out of sports earlier than usual. Most kids start playing sports around the age of 5 or 6, and participation peaks around the age of 11 or 12. Early engagement in sports is important for skill development, but it also shapes young people's attitudes about physical activity that carry into their adulthood.

### What We Can Do

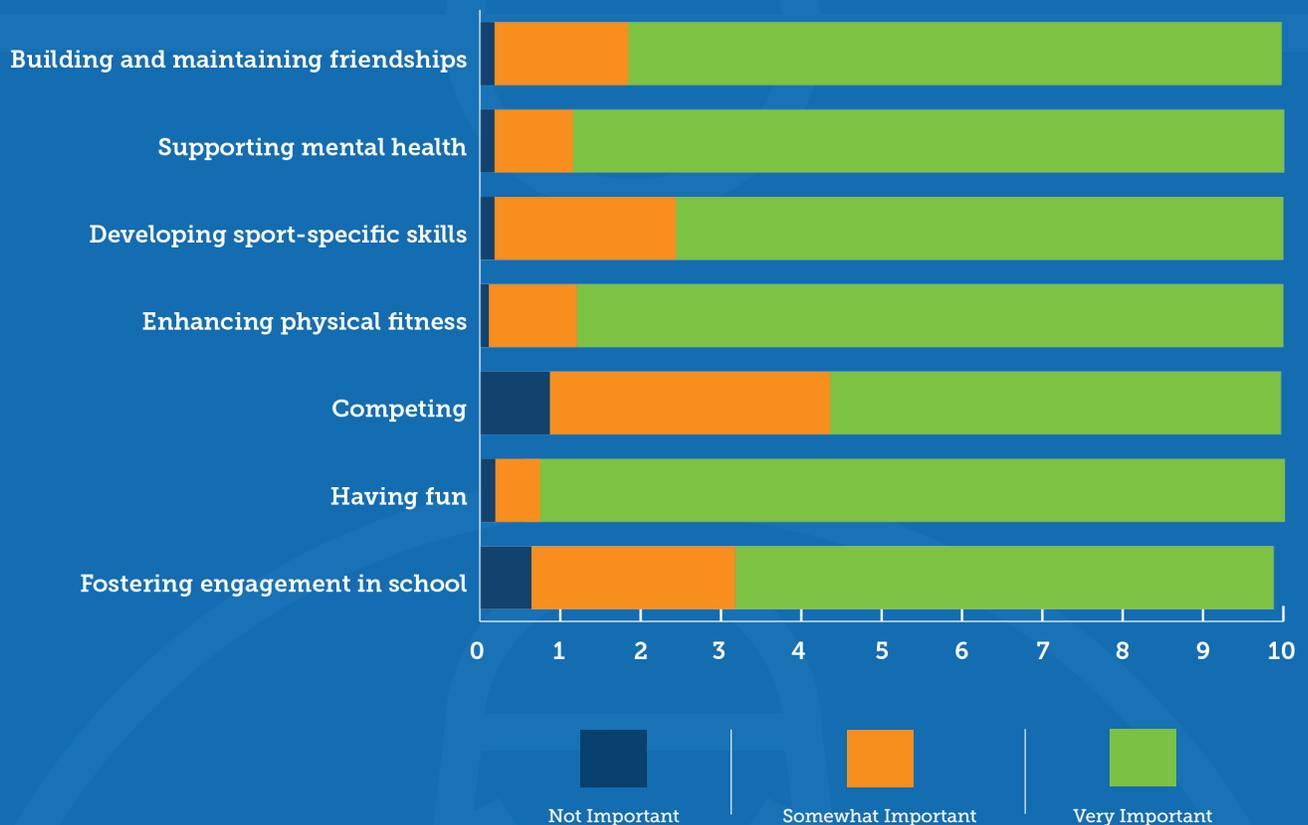
If we want to set this generation of young people on a path to healthier outcomes, we must reengage them with youth sports. One way we can do that, Dr. Dorsch says, is to create youth-centric sports experiences. A good place to start in shifting focus back to young people is by following [The 8 Plays](#), developed by The Aspen Institute's Project Play. Play 1 is to ask kids what they want – that can be as simple as letting the team pick its own name or asking players to pick one activity each practice.

“ Building self-reliance, confidence, collaboration, these are some of skills that sport can help us build and that can also help support mental health. It was really gratifying to see that parents see that too and that they really value it. ”

Dave DuPont, Founder, TeamSnap

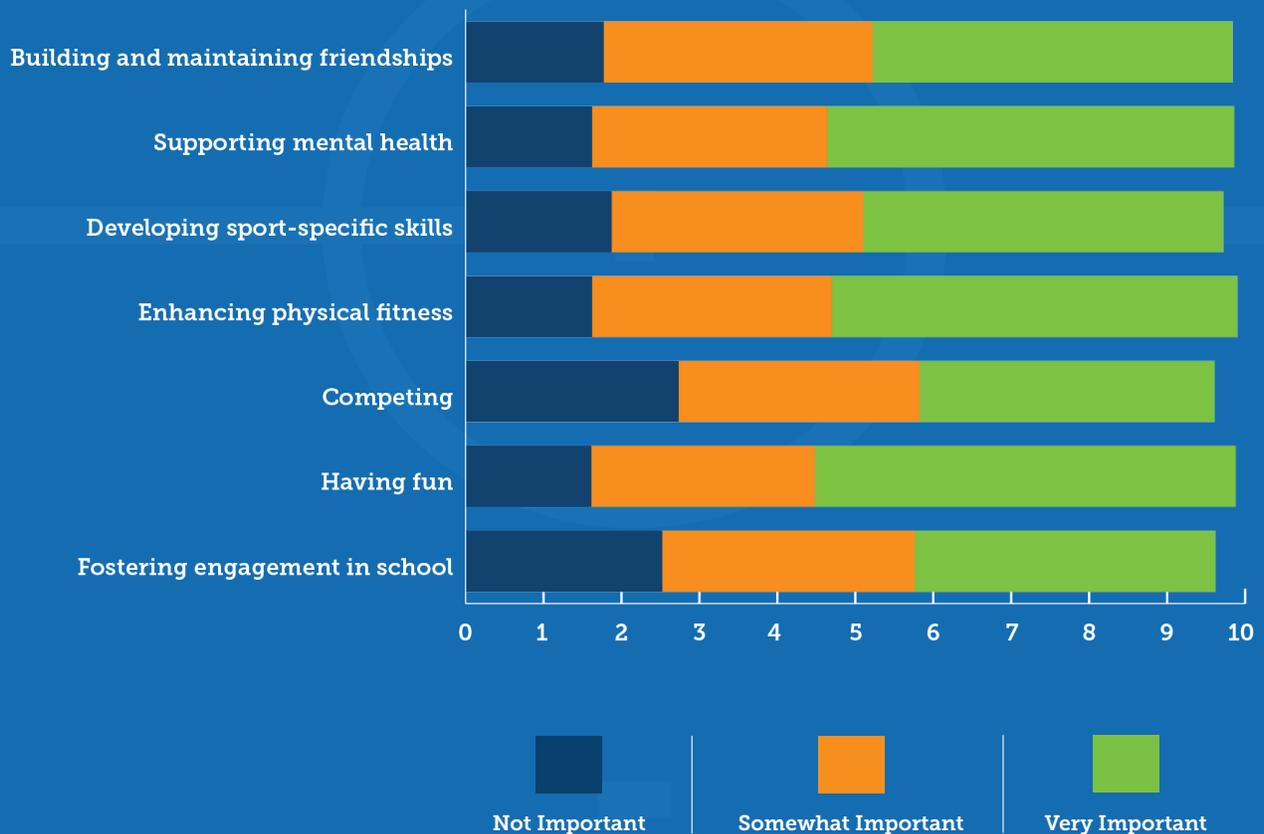
## 9 out of 10

parents say sports are very important for supporting mental health.



# Nearly 50%

of parents said their children struggled to achieve important sports-related outcomes during the pandemic.



## The Pandemic's Effects on Young People's Mental Health and Physical Fitness

More than half of parent respondents reported that their children's mental health (52%) and physical fitness (53%) decreased during the pandemic, and nearly half of parents said their children's emotional control (48%) and social wellbeing (45%) decreased. The decrease in overall fitness and wellbeing seems directly tied to youth being cut off from regular activities. The pandemic had significant effects on the activities children were involved in. Sixty percent or more of parents reported a great decrease in the time their children spent in organized sports (69%), in free play (60%), at school (68%), and with friends (72%). Meanwhile their screen time increased dramatically. In fact, 8 in 10 parents (82%) said that their children's screen time increased or greatly increased during the pandemic.

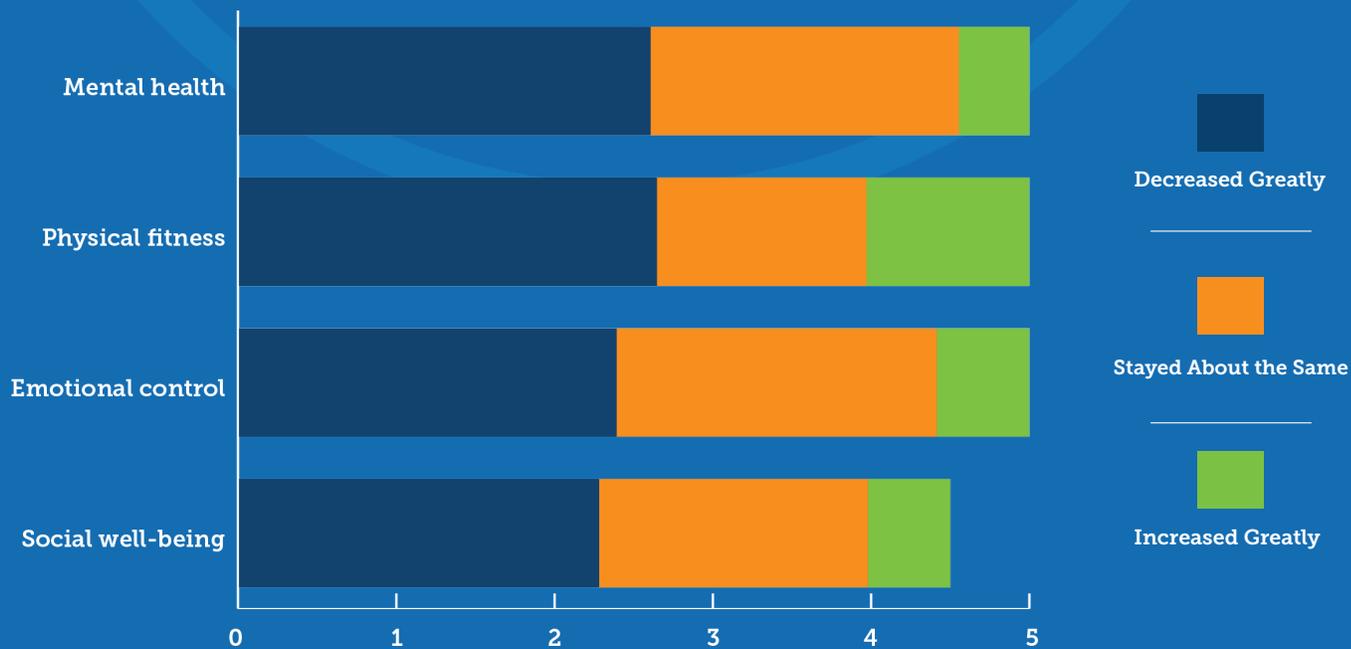
### Why It Matters

Young athletes are not alone. Across the U.S., data indicates that young people are struggling with their mental and physical health as a result of the pandemic. According to the CDC, mental health-related visits to the emergency department increased 24% for children ages 5-11 and 31% for ages 12-17 starting in April 2020 through at least October of that year. In 2021, a study published in *Pediatrics*, the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, found that obesity had increased 2% in the last six months of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. The study also found that racial disparities around childhood obesity had worsened.

Both the decrease in activities and the increase in screentime make sense as events and school went virtual, and many parents struggled to find childcare, whether they were working in or out of the home. With little alternatives, families turned to devices. The increase in screen time is one pandemic-related behavior shift that most experts agree needs to be undone.

### What We Can Do

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends children over 6 get at least one hour of physical activity each day. While pediatricians and psychologists don't recommend specific screen time limits for children over 6, most health care providers agree that having limits on screen time helps young people develop healthy habits for both physical activity and media consumption. It will be important to reengage young people with sports and to adjust programming to encourage young people to continue to participate past the age of 11 or 12, when participation in organized sports peaks.



52%

of parents reported that their children's mental health decreased.

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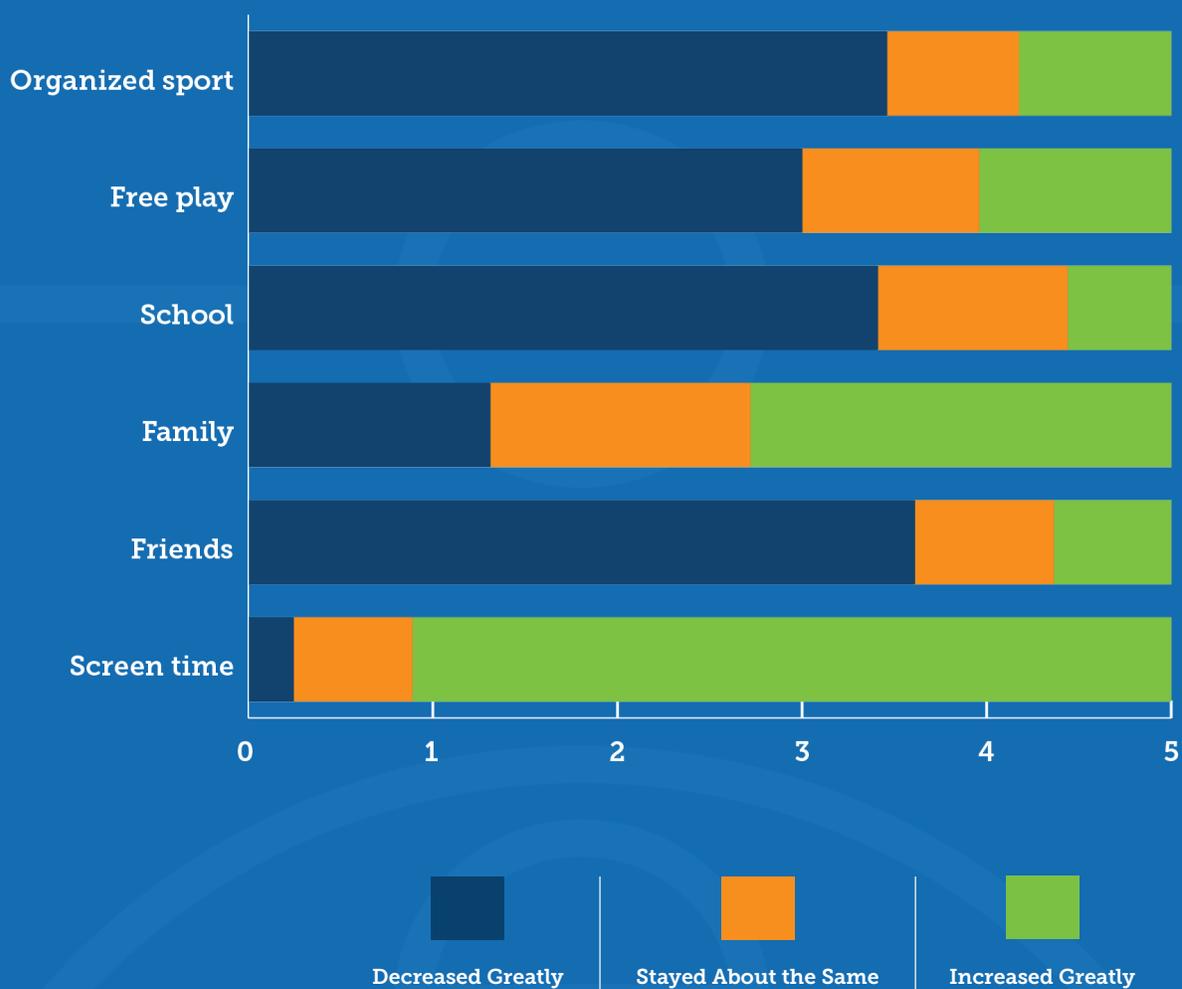
*There are critical windows in sports development, that some young people missed during the pandemic. Some kids are going to be left behind. To the extent that we can, we need to pick those kids up and provide simple opportunities to get out and play with their friends and family to rediscover some joy in physical activity.*

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Dr. Travis Dorsch, Utah State University, Families in Sport Lab

82%

of parents reported that their children's screen time **greatly increased**.



## How Parents Viewed Community Responses to the Pandemic

The more distant an entity is from a family, the less satisfied parents were with their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly 3 in 4 parents (74%) were satisfied with their child's coach's response to the pandemic, while only 40% were satisfied with their state's response, and even less (33%) were satisfied with their country's response.

### Why It Matters

As lockdowns went into effect, activity on TeamSnap practically ceased. That changed quickly. Dave DuPont noted that their team was surprised to see how much organizations, coaches, and parents were still using the platform to communicate during the pandemic, after an initial pause in activities. Even before league play restarted, organizations and coaches were trying to keep kids engaged with online skill building sessions or one-on-one meetups. It wasn't a perfect system, but this kind of outreach could contribute to why parents gave coaches higher marks for their pandemic response than the federal government.

Across the U.S. and Canada, community needs were different at different times during the pandemic. Early on, there were sweeping mandates from states/provinces and/or the federal governments. While these helped promote public safety, the tradeoff was that many young people disengaged from activities and school for months at a time, even when community transmission of COVID was relatively low. Even now, experts in the U.S., Canada, and in other countries are reevaluating how necessary lockdowns were and what the fallout might be.

### What We Can Do

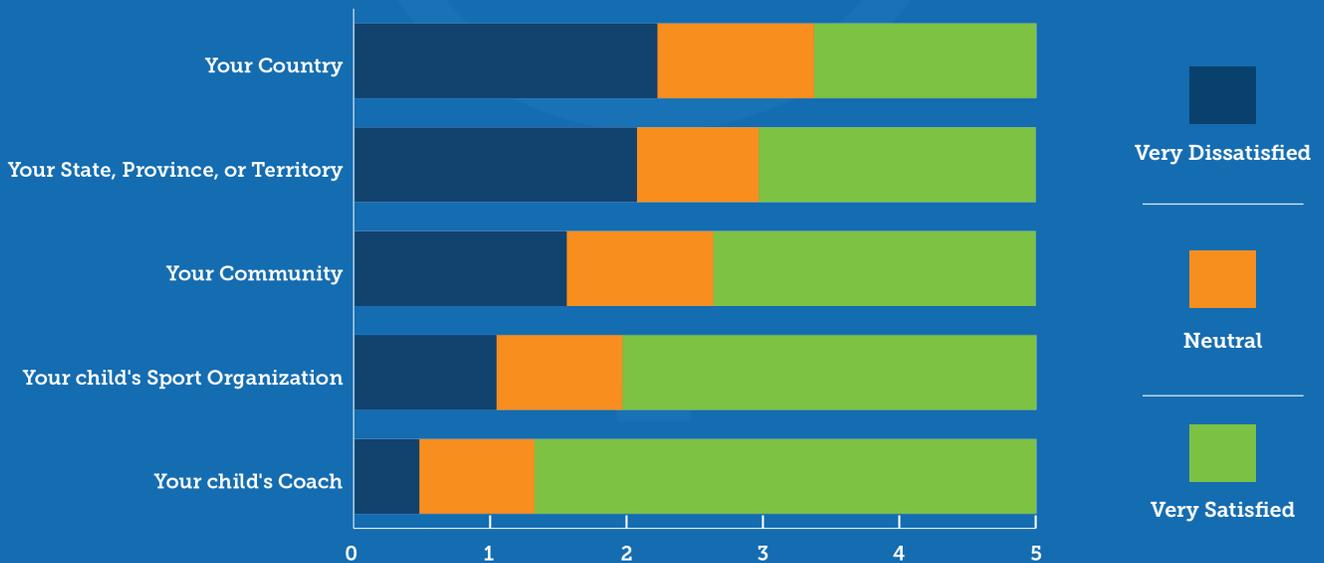
In a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic, there are a lot of variables to manage. This data indicates that parents largely trust their own communities to take the variables into account and design solutions that work best for them. Of course, state and federal governments still have a role to play in helping to ensure public safety and compliance without trying to institute a one-size-fits all solution.

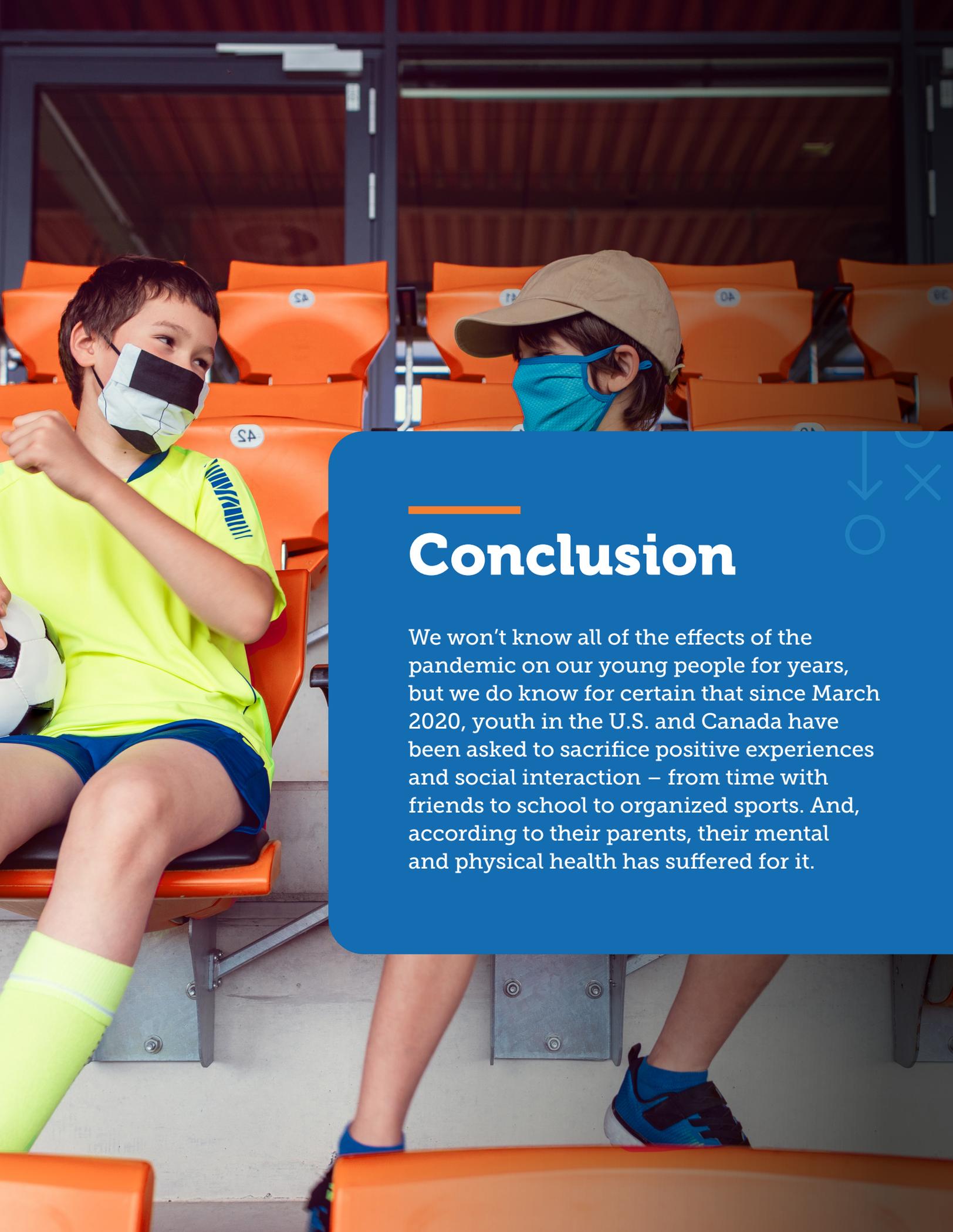
“No one seems to be looking forward to the next pandemic; we hope there isn't a next time. But, if this happens again, perhaps one lesson we can learn from these data is how to be flexible so that we can see what communities hold as important and figure out how we can help them accomplish those things in a safe way.”

Dr. Travis Dorsch, Utah State University, Families in Sport Lab

# Nearly 3 out of 4

parents were very satisfied with their child's coach's response to the pandemic





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## Conclusion

We won't know all of the effects of the pandemic on our young people for years, but we do know for certain that since March 2020, youth in the U.S. and Canada have been asked to sacrifice positive experiences and social interaction – from time with friends to school to organized sports. And, according to their parents, their mental and physical health has suffered for it.

Even as youth sports resumed in the summer and fall of 2020, some families opted for different options that felt safer or kept their kids home altogether. Many children remained out of school, stuck at home, and spent a lot more time with their electronic devices well into 2021. Families across the board found themselves with fewer recreational opportunities. It is telling that travel leagues restarted more quickly and more robustly than school sports or other community recreation leagues.

Sports could be yet another area where families with higher incomes fared better during the pandemic than families with lower incomes. But at the end of the day, parents from diverse backgrounds generally want the same things for their kids when it comes to sports and to their lives – to be happy, healthy, and have fun.

Whether or not a child is involved in organized sports, it's important that families still find ways to be active and have fun while moving their bodies. Families don't have to hit a set target of an hour of activity or 10,000 steps a day. Start small – anything to get your body moving. Start with what your family enjoys – a dance party in the living room, racing back to the house from the school bus, a quick bike ride around the neighborhood, going for a walk, or playing ball in a nearby park. Helping children learn how to use their bodies and develop these kinds of healthy habits will pay dividends in the future.

To help more young people engage in positive sports experiences, we should rethink the way we currently deliver sports opportunities to kids. As we adjust to the new normal, we are largely doing business as before, but perhaps we should take this opportunity to rethink our approach. As communities and sport organizations think about how to provide athletic opportunities for young people moving forward, they would do well to keep a few things in mind:

## 1. Create sports experiences that are youth-centric and not parent-centric.



When sports organizations design programs, they often think about what parents want – building skills to prepare kids for the “real world.” And, while youth sports do offer important lessons in cooperation and resilience, as we saw in the survey results, parents really want their kids to have fun, which likely more closely aligns with what young people also want out of sports. To create more youth-centric sports experiences, Dr. Dorsch recommends organizations and coaches look to [Project Play's “The 8 Plays”](#) for guidance. Play 1 suggests a pretty simple solution – asking kids what they want.

## 2. Be intentional with equity and inclusion efforts.



A sports opportunity gap between higher income and lower income communities existed before the pandemic. The youth sports arena can take this opportunity to reset the status quo. Again, the 8 Plays help provide a roadmap for creating more inclusive sport opportunities. Play 4, which calls for revitalizing “in-town” recreation leagues, is a great way to increase access to sports. Local in-town leagues tend to cost less money and focus more on skill development and fun experiences for all kids than more competitive travel leagues.

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TeamSnap and its partners believe that all children deserve access to fun and meaningful youth sports experiences. While the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on this generation of young people remains to be seen, it is clear that the social isolation of 2020-2021 had a profound impact. As the world has opened back up, even in fits and starts, parents have enthusiastically returned to youth sports as a way to provide some sense of normalcy to their children while supporting their mental and physical health. As we move forward, let’s endeavor to bring out the best that youth sports has to offer – positive experiences that support young people’s social, emotional, and physical development.

“*The pandemic has exacerbated financial inequality in our society. We have already seen there is a division in sports between people who have more resources and those who have less. For TeamSnap, this survey highlights the value of sport in people’s lives and reinforces our commitment to creating greater access to opportunities to play sports.*”

Dave DuPont, Founder, TeamSnap





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