

Frequently asked questions for Youth Sports

What are the basic points of the youth sports guidance?

The COVID-19 pandemic has weighed heavily on everyone. Kids need healthy outlets and activities over the summer. This is important to their mental and physical health and well-being. Many parents have expressed concerns about children who have been stuck inside and feeling down. For many kids, sports provide an outlet where they can release pent-up energy and an opportunity to play and socialize with peers.

Broadly, [the State's Youth Sports Guidance](#) is a framework that points to ways to allow our kids to participate in sports in a manner that limits risk, consistent with the [CDC guidelines](#). The CDC's central principle is that the more people interact, the closer the physical interaction, the more sharing of equipment there is by multiple players, and the longer that interaction – the higher the risk of COVID-19 spread.

This guidance focuses on low-risk approaches to help kids get active. It focuses on the development of skills, not competition.

How long will this guidance be in effect?

From June 1 until further notice. Data will drive its duration. It will depend on what epidemiologists at the Rhode Island Department of Health are observing in the rate of coronavirus spread and related metrics across the state. If COVID infections are not increasing despite the many ways that the Rhode Island economy is being reopened, it is possible that the State will loosen this guidance later in the summer. Future steps could include allowing for more participants and/or flexibility around intermixing between teams. But again, data on the key indicators – infections, hospitalizations, testing, contact tracing, and deaths – will drive decision making.

How many children can participate in sports? What are the limits?

Stable groups of 15 or fewer, counting coaches or adult leaders, may participate. “Stable groups” means the same kids will be in the same groups every day there’s practice or team meetings. Kids are not going to be able to change from one group to another. That would destabilize the group and increase the chance of someone (who may be COVID-positive but “asymptomatic”) spreading the virus. Parents are encouraged to choose one stable group per child for the summer. No combined groups or games between more than one stable group will be allowed during this phase of the State’s reopening.

Will physical distancing rules be in effect?

Yes, physical distancing will be critical to youth sports this summer. Adult leaders must always maintain 6-foot physical distance from children. Youth activities should be designed to maintain at least 6-foot physical distance whenever possible, but 14 feet of distance is optimal. Stable groups sharing a practice space, whether it’s indoors or outdoors, should maintain a minimum of 14 feet between the outer limit of their play area. (See previous answer for definition of stable groups.)

How can kids possibly do physical distancing and do sports?

Although this guidance is not sports-specific, different sports and outside activities surely pose different levels of risk. For example: running, walking, biking, playing tennis or golf, and skateboarding all can be done in stable groups with individuals keeping a 6-foot distance from one another. More challenging but still possible would be swimming: maintaining 6-foot physical distancing in a chlorinated, public swimming pool.

For team sports that involve a high level of cooperation and physical contact – such as basketball, football, soccer, and lacrosse – now, we are strongly recommending that coaches and parents not organize games even in stable groups of 15. We advise coaches to emphasize the development of skills, not competition, during Phase Two of reopening.

Do our kids have to wear face masks? That could be hard when they're running or exercising.

The guidelines encourage face coverings for youths, but they're not required when kids are engaged in active play within a stable group and maintaining 6 feet of physical distance. Face coverings are always required for adults.

Playgrounds and parks might have water fountains, but not all of them have restrooms. How are our kids going to keep their hands clean?

Organizers and sponsors of youth sports programs and leagues will need to make sure that kids, staff, and coaches have hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol if soap and water are not available. We have known since the start of the pandemic that hand washing is one of the easiest, most effective ways to slow the spread of the virus. We strongly advise parents to make sure their kids wash their hands vigorously before and after participating in sports. Also, organizers and coaches should schedule daily cleaning, frequent cleaning of high-touch areas, and cleaning and disinfection between sessions.

How risky is it for kids to share bats, balls, and other gear?

It is risky. The guidance discourages use of shared equipment. By “shared equipment,” we mean protective gear, balls, bats, racquets, mats, and water bottles. To reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread, we want coaches and parents to minimize the sharing of equipment and clean and disinfect it between use by different children. Participants should bring their own equipment when possible.

This guidance is going to take all the joy out of sports. How are we going to keep kids from high-fiving and hugging?

It's natural for kids to high-five when they've scored a goal or to hug a friend they haven't seen in a while. However, we're counting on coaches and parents to educate – and model – safe behaviors, just as you do in other elements of coaching and parenting. Give them alternatives and be creative, like cheers or dance moves that can be done from a safe distance.

Can my child's travel team play other travel teams?

No, not in this phase of the reopening. The [CDC Guidance on Youth Sports](#) describes “full competition between teams from different geographic areas” as the “highest risk” sports activity because it could lead to the spread of COVID-19 between communities. “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,” the CDC states.

Stay local. Don't travel to other locations or invite teams from other places to visit and compete against your team.

What role will parents play in youth sports this summer?

Parents play a crucial role in every aspect of their children's lives and it will be no different with youth sports this summer. We all want kids to be able to exercise and return to play, but in a way that reduces the risk of contracting or spreading the virus. Kids don't perceive threats – including COVID-19 – in the same way as adults. We strongly encourage parents and coaches to instruct, model the right behavior, and speak up at games and practices if, for example, kids aren't keeping 6 feet of physical distance from one another.

What about sports like basketball, football, and soccer? Do the State guidelines say it's OK to play these sports?

The State guidelines are not sports-specific. The CDC recommends going slow and this guidance recommends going slow. Stable groups of 15 or fewer. Emphasis on skills, not competition, at first. Maintaining 6-foot physical distancing. We can't start with the riskiest activities. During this ramp-up, we encourage a focus on conditioning, drills, and activities where physical distancing can be maintained. This is possible within the context of all sports.

Most especially, what we want to avoid is teams or groups intermingling or playing each other. Pick-up games where kids come and go increases the risk of spreading the virus considerably.

What about baseball, tennis, cross country, and other sports where children can keep their distance?

This guidance is not sports-specific. However, different sports certainly pose different levels of risk, and that means the outcomes will not be the same for all sports. In Phase Two, a tennis camp could allow singles competition within the stable group, taking special care to limit contact and sharing of equipment. Similarly, a cross country or golf team could stagger start times to limit contact. It all comes down to the ability to maintain 6 feet of physical distance, limit interactions between groups, and the other factors outlined in the guidance. The State is counting on leaders to interpret and apply these rules, and to continue to work to keep people safe.

Who did you talk to in developing these guidelines?

Department of Environmental Management (DEM) Director Janet Coit and her staff consulted with a broad range of administrators, recreation directors, scouting leaders, and coaches from across the state. These included representatives from the RI Recreation Association, RI Interscholastic League, Little League of RI, YMCA of Greater Providence, Boys and Girls Club, Girl Scouts of RI, Narragansett

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Council of the Boy Scouts of America, Soccer RI, Providence Recreation Department, Bristol Parks and Recreation, and other municipal leaders. Also, Rep. Gregg Amore, who is the athletics director at East Providence High School, was extremely helpful.

The CDC's guidelines and resources also helped inform Rhode Island's guidance.

This guidance doesn't let our kids do anything. Can't you loosen it up?

No. Every decision the State has made has been based on the facts and data available at the time. Restrictions on youth sports are not ideal but opening them gradually and incrementally is the only way they can be opened at all. COVID-19 does not affect kids at the same rate as adults, but children are not immune. This guidance will only be temporary. We hope if organizers, coaches, parents, and children comply with the restrictions broadly, we will be able to loosen them for Phase Three of our reopening.

But how can it be real Little League baseball or softball if there's not even going to be any games?

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended every aspect of our lives and forced everyone to adjust and readjust our expectations. Part of the challenge for parents this summer is adjusting expectations of children's sports experiences. We have confidence that parents, coaches, and volunteers – who are so influential in children's lives and outlooks – will recognize the risk of reopening sports too quickly and will work as partners to ensure safe youth sports experiences this summer, even if the sports aren't the same as before.

Does the youth guidance apply to adults?

No. The youth sports guidance provides a set of rules and recommendations for adults to put into effect when putting on programs for children. It is based on the CDC guidance for youth sports. For Phase Two, we have developed a separate set of guidelines for adult sports. [Visit the Reopening RI website for more information.](#)

Should cities and towns keep outdoor basketball courts closed to the general public?

Yes, at least until July 1. Opening basketball courts could encourage either children or adults who are not in the same households or stable groups to play pick-up games. An open pick-up game where participants come and go presents much greater risks than organized sports supervised by coaches and parents who can help ensure only kids in stable groups – by which we mean the same small group of kids from the block or neighborhood – are playing with one another and other safety precautions are followed.

Is Rhode Island's guidance and timing for kids' sports in line with other New England states?

Some states, like Connecticut, are planning on issuing guidance but few have acted thus far. Massachusetts has outlined a phased-in plan, with the second phase focused on drills/training and the third phase possibly including resuming games.

What about pick-up games? Does this guidance apply to pick-up games at the playground?

If your child plays with the same small group of kids from the block or from the neighborhood – we call this a stable group – then, yes, this guidance applies. However, an open pick-up game where kids come and go presents much greater risks. So, whether in the neighborhood or part of a sports program, these guidelines advise parents to keep their kids together in stable groups of no greater than 15 members. We strongly recommend that a parent volunteer is present to help children remember the basics: physical distancing, face coverings when not actively playing, hand sanitizer, and limiting shared equipment. If you're sharing a ball, remember to sanitize it often.

What about the kids whose families can't afford organized sports? How does this guidance help them?

Sports can provide a lifeline for kids from poorer communities or for kids who are struggling. In developing the guidance, DEM worked with municipal programs, Boys and Girls Clubs, groups like the YMCA, and others that are focused on these same inequities and worried about how to continue programs that support kids in all neighborhoods.

There is no question that there's an equity gap in youth sports just as there is in so many other aspects of our society. The gap is between families who can pay for club or travel teams, spending as much as \$10,000 or \$20,000 a year on youth sports, and poorer households who cannot afford that and rely on parks and playgrounds and pick-up games. Although we cannot address the inequity of youth sports in this guidance, we've been mindful of it as we developed this guidance.

Can you give examples of low risk vs. high risk sports settings this summer?

An example of the **lowest risk** is children performing skill-building drills or conditioning at home, alone or with family members. Playing basketball, playing catch, working on soccer skills, skateboarding in the driveway.

Medium-level risks would be doing activities in public with non-shared household members physically distant such as:

- Running/walking/biking in more populated areas.
- Baseball/basketball/football/soccer/lacrosse training and drills at public parks and courts.
- Playing golf with your own clubs and keeping a 6-foot distance.
- Swimming in a chlorinated public pool with 6-foot distance
- Skateboarding at an uncrowded skatepark, or
- Playing tennis on a shared court.

The **high-risk activities** are ones in which children would be playing or training with non-household members not physically distant in private or public, and involving any use of shared equipment. For example:

- Running/walking in a crowded area.
- Team or pick-up baseball, basketball, football, lacrosse, or soccer in a public park or court with shared equipment.
- Golf with non-household members not social distancing.

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- Water parks and playgrounds or swimming with non-household members in a crowded pool.

What happens in Phase Three?

We cannot speculate or make promises. The State has consulted with stakeholders and experts and made data-driven decisions in developing [all COVID-19 guidance documents](#). We are hopeful that in the next phase, Rhode Island could allow games and approaches to competition with new restrictions in place to protect families. However, this will depend largely on compliance to Phase Two guidelines, and moreover, where Rhode Island stands on the key indicators of the State's pandemic response – infections, hospitalizations, testing, contact tracing, and deaths – in about a month to six weeks.