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# SUPPORTING YOUTH ATHLETES DURING COVID-19

Advice for parents  
and guardians





## INTRODUCTION

This document aims to provide psychological guidance for parents and guardians of youth athletes during the current Covid-19 pandemic. Since lockdown (on 23 March 2020), and the subsequent emergence from lockdown in the United Kingdom (UK), youth athletes have been forced to significantly change their training, with the cancellation of formal training sessions and reintegration with social distancing. Throughout this time competitive sport was suspended,

and in this transition phase, it is still unclear when all competitions will commence. These changes for some can lead to feelings of anxiety, frustration, and uncertainty. We offer psychological guidance to help parents and guardians maintain their own wellbeing, and support their children in their return to competitive sport. Three key priorities have been identified as critical for supporting youth athletes in managing the Covid-19 transition. These include:

1. Self-management for parents and guardians
2. Navigating uncertainty
3. Motivation and goal setting.

Consider the ways  
you can manage your  
own psychological  
self-care.

# 1. SELF-MANAGEMENT FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

As parents/guardians of young athletes, you are no doubt having to navigate the additional and varied roles in your household that have been brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. You may be supporting your family, working from home, planning on returning to work, leading your child's home learning, facilitating online 'meet up' opportunities for your children, as well as helping them to cope with not being able to participate in their usual

training and competitive schedules. At this time, it is important to consider the ways in which you can manage your own psychological self-care and continue to support your child through these extraordinary times. In the first instance it is important to remain a positive role model as it is well documented in research that behaviours and perceptions exhibited by parents will likely influence your child's behaviours<sup>1,2</sup>.

## Being a positive role model

Follow government guidelines and stay updated with information on restrictions and any changes to these.

Respond positively to changes being made from the sport organisation or Governing Body to avoid creating negativity (develop a plan to implement the changes/decisions made). These changes are different across the various regions of the UK, and guidance refers in some areas to those regarded as 'elite' athletes.

Manage and be aware of your own emotions, identify how you are feeling, recognise your early signs of feeling pressure and what particular stressors are triggering these. Helping athletes and coaches to develop a range of self-management skills<sup>3,4,5</sup> has been well documented, and we suggest parents may find these useful also.

**Take care of the basics:** Nutrition, staying hydrated and sleep are important. Eating healthy balanced and nutritious meals is fundamental to wellbeing. Feeling dehydrated will negatively impact on your daily energy levels, so remember that if you only drink when feeling thirsty you have perhaps left it an hour too late to hydrate. Regarding sleep, maintain a routine and try to wake up and go to sleep at approximately the same time each day. It is also helpful to 'prepare for sleep', so switch off from what you were doing at least one hour

before sleep time. If you are struggling to sleep it is also helpful to monitor caffeine and alcohol intake as these are both known stimulants.

**Develop a routine and structure your day:** If you are working from home, continue to manage your time and learn what daily structure is most effective for you. It will be helpful to prioritise your goals, identify the stepping stone tasks needed to achieve certain goals, and develop a ritual that enables you to know that your day has started and ended. It is also important to monitor your online meetings and screen time. It has recently been recommended not to spend more than four hours during one day on video calls/meetings.

**Take a time out:** You will be getting a stream of information on Covid-19 on the news and social media. While it is important to stay updated, it is also important to know when to switch off. To do this, you can build physical activity into your daily routine (this could also contribute to having some family time activities). Practice relaxation and use deep breathing to 'regain control' and feel more relaxed. There are a number of user-friendly apps that can help you with this.

**Stay connected:** You have friends too! Continue to build your own support networks. Stay in touch with friends and family members (from outside your household) while staying within government Covid-19 guidelines and remember virtual groups can also offer support.

## Keeping informed

Much has been written about keeping parents abreast of changes and developments, and thus enhancing knowledge and understanding leads to positive outcomes in the sporting environment for young people<sup>6,9</sup>.

A known stressor is a lack of information<sup>7,8,11</sup>. Not knowing what is going on when, and for what reason, can create negative emotions, worry and feelings of uncertainty for all involved in supporting children in their sporting endeavours. Using the **CORE** principles, you can minimise this risk of a lack of

information and support the wellbeing of yourself and your child/young person.

## CREATE AN INFORMATION LOG

This may seem an odd thing to do, but now more than ever with the amount of information we are receiving, it pays to be organised. You might create a folder on your phone, computer, or write it down on paper. The point is to make a note of important information you receive and know where it is. Think how often you have seen something online and then can't find it; organising all sporting information avoids any self-doubt and reduces uncertainty.

## OPEN CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

It is important that you stay in regular contact with the key personnel within your child's sporting network, depending on the sport and performance level this may include managers, coaches, and the National Governing Body. This contact may be direct through personal phone calls and emails, or indirect through regular update communications. If you have questions do not be afraid to discuss your concerns. Importantly, when information is delivered en mass to all, this might not fit with your personal circumstances, so be prepared to ask questions or arrange a follow-up phone call as required. Sometimes it helps to write a list of the points you want to discuss. Only if you are informed and understand the plans can you support your child/young person with what they need to do.

## RELIABLE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Information is likely to be presented via online more so now, than before Covid-19. Therefore, it's important to be aware of your information sources and remember that messages can get distorted. So, if you are unsure about something you have heard, seen or read do not be afraid to ask the primary source of the information, or most

relevant person. Sometimes, it is the one person asking that brings awareness of miscommunication. In the resources section below we provide links to five social media tips for parents.

## EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR CHILD/YOUNG PERSON

We know these are challenging times and it is important that when you have information about the sport you share it with your child, whether the news is good or bad. These may be difficult conversations but there are several things you can do to make the process easier.

Make time to have the conversation. Limit other distractions and ensure you have enough time to let them assimilate the news and ask questions.

Manage your own emotions. Don't fall into the trap of saying 'I know how you feel' or 'I am disappointed as well' – give them space to share their feelings, listen, and support.

Ask them what they need now? And what do they want to do next? Do not assume what support is needed; have the conversation and plan together.

## 2. NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY

There are daily or weekly updates in the scheduling of events, and this can vary across different regions of the UK, so with many events and competitions postponed indefinitely and no certain confirmation of when some will resume, there is a likelihood of increased amounts of distress for your child.

They will also have been isolated from their friends and team mates for an extended period of time as lockdown reduces, and so are unable to engage in activities that represent their strongly valued identity as an athlete. This stress and 'loss' of identity is likely to provoke negative emotions and perhaps low mood, which are likely to have a detrimental impact on their wellbeing, especially if they do not seek support or begin to take proactive measures to cope<sup>12,13,14,15</sup>.

Following is some guidance for parents on recognising and responding to these emotional reactions, and how to help your child cope with the uncertainty caused by Covid-19.

**Negative emotions are a very normal response to uncertainty.**



## Recognising and responding to your child's emotional reactions

Remember that your child's emotional reactions to negative events are likely to be amplified compared to those of adults.

Bear in mind that stress and negative emotions are normal responses to uncertainty.

Take time to listen to and acknowledge their concerns and worries.

Give your child the opportunity to talk about how they feel.

Avoid trying to dismiss or minimise their concerns too quickly.

Youth athletes' emotional responses to uncertainty are likely to be amplified due to their psychological stage of development (school-child; puberty; adolescence<sup>16</sup>). However, these negative emotions are also a very normal and natural response to uncertainty. Therefore, trying to dismiss or minimise

your child's concerns too quickly may compound these feelings, as they may feel that they are not being heard<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, we would recommend that before attempting to help your child practically deal with their concerns, ensure that time has been spent listening to their worries first.

### Control the controllable(s)

Encourage and help your child to:

Identify what sources of uncertainty are in their control (e.g. exercising and training safely, seeing opportunities for personal development and growth, maintaining physical distancing but maintaining social interactions).

Identify what sources of uncertainty are outside of your control (e.g. when sporting events will be resumed, when physical distancing restrictions will be reduced or lifted).

Plan, organise, and deal with sources of uncertainty that are within their control.

As young athletes mature, it takes them time to develop ‘problem-focused’ coping strategies<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, your child may need assistance in identifying which sources of uncertainty are in their control and which are not. Your child can then be supported to cope with these sources of uncertainty that are within their control.

## Managing emotional reactions

To manage emotional reactions, your child can be encouraged to:

Practice deep breathing.

Use relaxing imagery.

Engage in mindfulness or meditation.

Listen to music.

Develop routine contact with family, friends, team mates or coaches.

For example, practical ways of helping your child cope with uncertainty could include helping them to plan their weekly training schedule ensuring that they maintain regular contact with their coaches, or to help them organise and prioritise competing commitments (e.g. school work).

Write their thoughts, feelings, and worries down regularly.

Physically train or exercise (within social distancing guidelines).

Take a walk in a green space where possible (this has been shown to reduce stress levels).

Do an activity with members of their household.





### 3. MOTIVATION – GOAL SETTING

Your child may have begun this year with a sense of sport purpose and clearly defined performance goals; in turn you may have created your own plan of how to help them achieve this. The impact of Covid-19, and the cancellation and suspension of competitions and some training,

means that the goals they had may no longer be attainable, at least in the short term. This non-attainment of goals can lead to demotivation, a sense of loss, and a lack of focus. Below are some ways to help alleviate some of these factors.

#### Daily structure and alternative goals for wellbeing

Without goals and the normal daily structure of training and school, young people can lose focus and drift through the day; this, in turn, can impact on mental wellbeing. Using positive goal setting will not only provide structure but can lead to a sense of accomplishment<sup>19</sup>. Helping your young

performer set goals should be a joint effort. Importantly, research has shown that ownership and investment in goal setting leads to positive attainment<sup>20</sup>. To help your child/young person set goals, you can use the SMART goal setting concept. That means that goals should be:

**Specific** – Discuss with your child/young person what they want to achieve and set a target.

**Measurable** – ask how the target can be measured, this will help with determining when it has been achieved

**Attainable** – Goals should challenge but must be realistic. When setting goals in this current situation you should also factor in how they might change with government guidelines. This may relate to the impact of environmental constraints, for example space and equipment, team versus individual sports.

**Recorded** – A goal setting chart where progress can be monitored and reviewed is a useful way of maintaining motivation, providing feedback and charting improvement.

**Time framed** – Set a time frame for when the goal can be achieved; be prepared to review this.

## Daily life areas you can set goals around

Physical wellbeing, for example sleep patterns, nutrition, exercise to name a few.

Personal development, such as learning a new skill or fitness work for improvement in sport.

Family goals such as exercise and physical activity together.

Enhancing psychological skills training (e.g. imagery, self talk, concentration).

Developing a balance between schoolwork, family time, sport, and leisure activities.

## CONCLUSION

We hope you find the psychological advice provided in each of the three priority areas within this guidance report useful, and that it helps you and your family to adjust and cope with the current situation to maintain positive mental health and wellbeing.

## RESOURCES

Further resources are available to support your mental health at this time. Below are examples available.

[Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health](#)

[NSPCC](#)

[Headspace](#)

[Every Mind Matters](#)

[Minding Your Head](#)

[Five social media tips for parents and teachers](#)

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## AUTHORS

This guidance report was produced by the Covid-19 Sport and Exercise Psychology Working Group on behalf of the British Psychological Society's Division of Sport and Exercise Psychology.

**Professor Moira Lafferty**, Professor of Sport and Exercise Psychology, School of Psychology, University of Chester.

**Dr Gavin Breslin**, Senior Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Psychology, School of Psychology, Ulster University, Northern Ireland.

**Dr Darren Britton**, Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Psychology, School of Sport, Health and Social Science, Solent University.

**Professor Joanne Butt**, Professor of Sport and Exercise Psychology, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University

**Dr Ruth Lowry**, Reader in Exercise Psychology. School of Sport, Rehabilitation and Exercise Sciences. University of Essex.

**Dr Robert Morris**, Lecturer in Sport Psychology, Faculty of Health Sciences and Sport, University of Stirling.

**Dr Jamie Barker**, Senior Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Psychology, Loughborough University.

**Dr Matt Slater**, Associate Professor of Sport and Exercise Psychology, School of Life Sciences and Education, Staffordshire University

**Dr Martin Eubank**, Principal Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Psychology, School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University.



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St Andrews House  
48 Princess Road East  
Leicester LE1 7DR, UK

☎ 0116 254 9568

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✉ [info@bps.org.uk](mailto:info@bps.org.uk)

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BRE30i | 09.07.2020