



# CORONAVIRUS & YOUTH SPORTS

# CALLS FOR COACHES

During this time of physical distancing, stay-at-home orders, and shelter-in-place practices, kids have been forced to rapidly change the way they build relationships with peers, engage in activity and communicate with other trusted adults. While many kids have healthy home lives where the benefits of sport are being reinforced at home, many kids rely on their local sport programs to fill these needs. This is a time of high anxiety, grief and trauma for all kids and families. Coaching goes well beyond the diamond, field or court, and this time of crisis provides an opportunity for coaches to be a pillar for their teams.

The Aspen Institute Project Play has adapted our report [Calls for Coaches](#) for remote engagement to continue providing social and emotional support for your players during a time when they need it most.



## 01 KNOW EVERY ATHLETE'S STORY

- Make a plan for virtual meetings just like you would for in-person practice. Plan your meetings to include guided, open-ended questions in order to learn more about your players. E.g. *If you could hang out with your friends today, what would you go do? Tell me about what you miss most from school, sports? Etc.*
- When kids log in to join a remote meeting, acknowledge each of them by name and tell them you're glad they made it.
- Ask questions that acknowledge the situation while also providing a sense of hope and something to look forward to. We need to convey a light at the end of the tunnel. E.g. *What is helpful for you when you are feeling isolated? Does this pandemic worry you, and what do you think about when you get worried? Etc.* These types of questions can help you assess how a child is coping as well as get a sense if you have families that need extra support.



## 02 ESTABLISH A SUPPORTIVE TEAM CULTURE

- Establish norms for remote interactions, such as no phones or other devices during team time that could be distractions, when someone is responding we are actively listening, create a hand signal for when kids agree with something so there is a positive visual response after a kid speaks (e.g. snaps, sign language, etc.)
- When a kid says something encouraging or positive to the group or another student, pause to highlight that behavior.

## 03 CELEBRATE EFFORT

- Same as when your team is playing, you want your players cheering each other on.
- When meeting remotely, try to include some kind of activity and encourage the kids through it. (e.g. paper/wastebasket HORSE, soccer dribbling challenge, handstands, pushups, etc.)
- Most likely, kids are still cranking through online learning with their school, so ask how that's going. No matter how well they say it's going, tell them you're proud of them trying to figure it out and working through it.

## 04 FOCUS ON THE SKILLS THAT MATTER

- Sport-specific skills are going to take some creativity, using what is available at home. When meeting virtually, kids can adjust their cameras to see each other. Model a skill for them that you'd like them to work on. Have kids take turns leading an activity during each meeting.
- Physical fitness is important for any sport, so take time to lead kids safely through some exercises that they can do on their own at home. This will help keep their bodies in shape and prevent injuries when sports get back to fully swing. This can be a great opportunity for team building through group activity.
- Set goals for some exercises so kids have something to work on such as 30 pushups at one time, or being able to jump rope for a full minute, etc.
- Include mindfulness activities to promote social and emotional skills and self-care. Work on some breathing exercises and encourage them every day. (E.g. Harvard's EASEL Lab's Belly Breathing exercise: Coaches have kids breathe deeply through their noses and notice their bellies expand, and then exhale through their mouths and notice as their bellies collapse. Coaches then ask kids: *Did you feel a difference before and after the breaths?* Then ask kids to think of times during the day to use belly breathing to calm their emotions.)

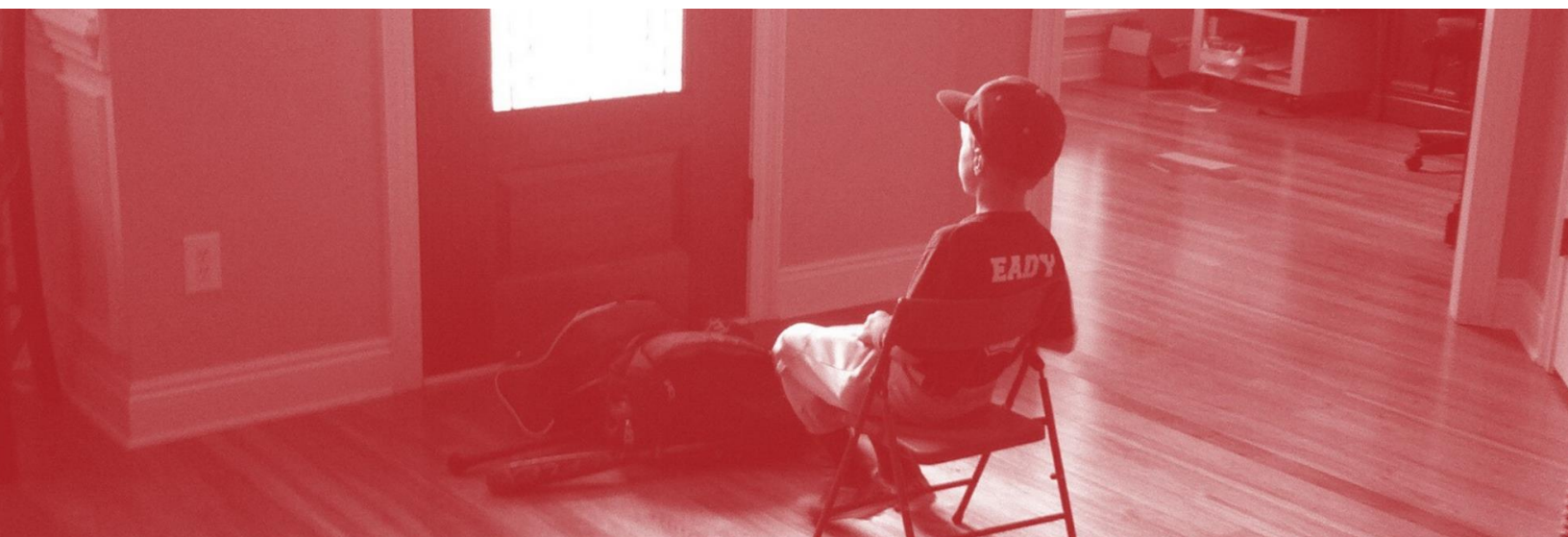


## 05 BE A ROLE MODEL

- Set an example of how you want the kids to interact. Be mindful that social cues can be read differently on a virtual platform. Avoid sarcasm and playful needling. Staying at home can be a source of anxiety for a lot of children, especially during times of crisis. This may be the only time they get encouraging words.
- Do the activities with them. Don't be afraid to fail in front of your players. Intentionally pick skills you're not good at so your kids know it is okay to struggle so long as they keep working to get better.
- Talk to kids how you manage your time. Whether work or sport, be an example of how you're productive during this time. Be honest about how challenging it can be for you too. Sometimes we just feel flat, lethargic, unmotivated, etc. There are reasons for that, so take that opportunity to talk through it and what are specific things you do to work through it. (e.g. daily goals, set alarms, schedule breaks, etc.)

## 06 BE COACHABLE

- Talk to other coaches and sport leaders about things they are doing to engage their teams.
- Utilize resources made available to learn more about coaching your sport so you can use this time to get better at the Xs and Os.
- Don't be afraid to explore and experiment with other platforms besides Zoom or Google Hangouts. Changing up what the kids are using is a good way to give some variety and help them stay engaged.
- Always be careful when working with minors. Be mindful of privacy. Whatever platform or resource you use, we recommend these guidelines from the [US Center for SafeSport](#) to keep you, your players, and families safe.



## CHECKLIST FOR VIRTUAL CONNECTION

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### 1. Make contact

- Communicate with families your plan to engage the kids during this time.
- Allow for opt-in as that will be more engaging, but strongly encourage participation.
- Make a schedule of regular meetups. Recommend 1-2 times a week in order to provide space/time for their other responsibilities and not to overwhelm them. Time between meets will also create opportunities for solo practice at home, which encourages self-direction and personal responsibility.

### 2. Plan your meetings

- Just like a practice without a plan creates chaos, the same is true for remote meetings.
- Give yourself hard start and stop times in order to respect schedules.
- Incorporate some activity each meeting whether it's sport-specific skills, free play or fun team dialogue.
- Incorporate social habits you want to foster that translate to the sport that you would like to carry over for when you can reconvene meetings. This is a perfect opportunity to teach, coach, and hold accountable for how you expect players to talk to each other.
- Give the players the opportunity to pick or suggest an activity for the next meeting. As you get used to these meetings, start letting players lead some of the activities.

### 3. After the meeting

- Include concrete home assignments that kids can complete before the next meeting. Include social emotional skills as well as physical skills. e.g. compliment your siblings 5 times a day AND do 25 pushups every morning. Say "Thank You" 5 times to a family member parents every day AND complete <insert workout> 3 times before next meeting.
- Give your team 1-2 sport-specific resources, videos, websites, etc. that they can engage with between meetings. This can be instructional videos or even having them rewatch a classic match that you think embodies how you want your team to play.
- Ask yourself questions. Evaluate what went well and what felt sloppy. Guided discussions with students can be challenging. Are your players bought in and engaged during this time? What questions can I ask to prompt more discussion? Are my expectations clear?

### 4. Ongoing

- Reinforce norms, rules, and routines.
- Ensure all youth are included, with equitable access to activities, being sensitive to different learning styles and at-home resources.
- Establish a code of conduct that prohibits online/cyber bullying and defines consequences.
- Be cognizant of your own and others' perspectives.
- Practice self-care, engage in reflection around your own social and emotional well-being.