

To: Colorado Soccer Association Membership & City, County, and State Leadership
From: Nate Shotts, Chief Executive Officer, Colorado Soccer Association
Date: Monday, February 1st 2021
Re: Significance of Returning to Outdoor Youth Soccer

Ten months and a full statewide Colorado fall soccer season of more than 30,000 youth have allowed the Colorado soccer community and the greater worldwide network of youth advocates, soccer professionals and enthusiasts to research, develop and implement safe outdoor youth soccer programming. In fact, consistent participation in organized outdoor youth soccer has statistically proven to be safer for youth from the transmission of COVID-19 than forced isolation and/or unregulated activities.

Between June 2020 and November 2020, Colorado Soccer Association (CSA) hosted 36,302 players, 7,714 games and 1,982 teams in outdoor youth soccer. With mandatory restrictions from CSA meeting or exceeding all local, county, statewide, or national restrictions, including mandatory contact tracing for every known case of COVID-19. With appropriate protocols and measures in place from local Colorado non-profit soccer clubs, not a single instance of COVID-19 transmission was reported in relation to outdoor youth soccer in Colorado under the guidance of CSA.

According to recent studies by the [University of Wisconsin](#)¹ (UW), when participating in organized youth soccer with appropriate protocols and restrictions in place, the incidence of COVID-19 among youth athletes has shown to be up to 35% lower than those reported by the American Academy of Pediatrics for the general child population during the same timeframe¹. This research is important in the current pandemic as it shows that without consistent access to organized, safe, outdoor youth soccer, where proper protocols and procedures are in place, children are more likely to be put, or put themselves, into less safe situations in unorganized local playgrounds, pickup sports, neighborhood play, or other indoor options, such as playdates and going to the mall, which cannot be controlled to the same level as organized outdoor youth soccer.

Not only is there a current immediate threat to our children's health with misguided care of their time and energy, but additionally, if our youth are not looked after now, it could create potential long-term effects to their physical, mental, and emotional health with [forced isolation directly relating to increased depression and anxiety](#)². Physical activity levels among respondents in the UW survey dropped by 50% during the pandemic and symptoms of depression increased dramatically. In a full nationwide sample, 38% of children reported moderate to severe depression and 35% reported moderate to severe anxiety with females particularly affected, [with 40% and 45% reporting moderate to severe symptoms of depression and anxiety, respectively](#)³, with [experts citing](#) peer interaction as an important grounding mechanism currently missing with the pandemic⁴. According to The Aspen Institute's [Project Play Initiative](#), active, engaged kids are,

- 1/10th as likely to be obese;
- are less likely to smoke and use drugs;
- are 15% more likely to attend college; and
- have reduced risks of long-term health complications⁵.

[In a 2014 study](#) published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, researchers analyzed obesity prevention strategies and their ability to reduce obesity by the year 2032. They found afterschool physical activity programs would reduce obesity the most, 1.8% among children ages 6 to 12⁶. That's twice the projected impact as any ban on child-directed fast-food advertising. More alarming is during the last economic recession, [sport participation dropped from 45% in 2008 to 38%](#) and has remained at lower levels since⁷. Should physical activity not rebound after the pandemic, the long-term health of our youth could be massively impacted. The extensive list of benefits to the individual and his or her community can be found on [The Aspen Institute's Project Play website](#).

Even more profound is the increasing concern for both child abuse and child mental health and suicide due to lack of access to social, emotional, and physically safe spaces during this pandemic. [Research shows](#) that increased stress levels among parents is often a major predictor of physical abuse and neglect of children. Stressed parents may be more likely to respond to their children's anxious behaviors or demands in aggressive or abusive ways. The support systems that many at-risk parents rely on, such as extended family, child care and schools, religious groups and other community organizations, are no longer available in many areas due to the stay-at-home orders and closures⁸. Additionally, in a [national survey](#) of 1,000 high school and college students, almost 25% reported they knew a peer who developed suicidal thoughts since the start of the pandemic, which coincides with the [increase in mental health visits amongst adolescents in 2020](#) — and 5% reported making a suicide attempt themselves since COVID struck. In addition, more than half reported they were worried about their own mental health⁹.

In comparison to many other outdoor team sports, youth soccer statistically provides one of the safest environments. A standard soccer field is nearly two acres of space, or over 80,000 sq/ft with typically no more than 22 players in that space at one time during matches and 36 players during training. And while soccer may have contact, the actual time in 'close contact' is minimal, with [98% of matches presenting minimal or no risk](#) for players to transmit coronavirus to one-another, with average close contact (4.5 ft or less) exposure time of 90 seconds or less per match¹⁰. [Experts estimate](#) a minimum of 15 cumulative minutes of close contact with an infected individual is likely necessary to lead to a COVID-19 transmission¹¹.

There are competing risks that must be acknowledged within any specific setting. The potential contribution of youth sports to viral transmission and community spread must be balanced against the tremendous physical and mental health benefits organized physical activity and sport participation provide children with peer interaction, physical activity, and fresh Colorado air as a treatment to pandemic related health consequences. Unfortunately, non-organized activities such as playgrounds, pickup sports, neighborhood play cannot be controlled, monitored, or operated under the guidance of specific rules and regulations from a governing authority. [Supported by the top infectious disease specialist in Colorado](#)¹², Colorado Soccer Association's goal is to provide the resources, the governance, and the safety to our youth soccer athletes in Colorado by providing strict oversight of all training, games, and protocols and procedures, which when done correctly, will not only reduce the spread of COVID-19, but provide our youth the necessary physical, mental, and emotional benefits of outdoor youth soccer.

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