

## PlayCore Virtual Chat

### Scholarly Scoop: Family and Youth Summertime Physical Activity during COVID-19

Attendee Questions (June 1, 2020)

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#### Outdoor Activities & Social Distancing

1. **How to have families and children enjoy/engage physical activities outdoors without putting their health at risk??**

Dr. Sallis: Most of the restrictions that I have heard of are trying to keep apart people who are not household members. So, if you're out with your household, you should be able to be within six feet of each other and do activities that would be relevant, including, let's say, soccer or basketball. The goal of this is keeping apart people who are not exposed to each other all the time. So, getting out in a park or, we had beaches here and so, people are now allowed to do that. But out in your yard should be no problem at all if you have a yard. And otherwise, probably are going to have to be resourceful in identifying good spaces. Use simple equipment like a frisbee or a soccer ball, or throw a baseball or football. All of those things can be good, and, of course, the simplest activity of all is get the family out for a walk, and with the reduced traffic during the shutdown that's safer and more pleasant.

Dr. Pratt: In the last few weeks, as the park's are re-opening, hey, organized facilities, tennis courts, playgrounds, et cetera, are not open. We've taken advantage of open, green space, and I think we see a lot of other families with young kids doing that. I think that there's some degree of rediscovering the joy of just wandering around. You don't need to get a whole lot of structure to get outdoors and have a good time.

2. **Pandemic made community parks, trails, etc., extremely important. How can we continue this mentality after all loosens up?**

Dr. Pratt: I'll take a stab at this and I would add public spaces more generally, because I think one of the things that's really important to getting our societies to be more active is recognizing that public space is a huge asset. The biggest acreage of of public space are actually streets. Already mentioned that we're getting more traction with open streets. They need to find space for people to get out and do things that with less traffic, it's much easier and safer. I think it's a real opportunity to re prioritize public space, both green and paved and make sure that it's available to everybody. In all neighborhoods where we don't have enough green space, let's take advantage of streets and turn them into temporary parks.

Dr Sallis: Yeah, thank you Mike. And maybe we can take that a step farther. Some cities, most of the ones I know about are in Europe, are saying, Well, this is a good time not just to make temporary changes in street, but to make permanent changes in streets. So they're widening sidewalks. Which makes a lot of sense because if you live in a place like I do with all narrow sidewalks, well, you can't pass by somebody and safely social distance. So, I think that's an argument for widening sidewalks where that's possible. In Milan, they're not only doing that, they are putting more protected bike paths on streets. So putting more walking and biking in the streets, and reducing space for cars. That's a pretty radical thing in the US, but I think people have been confined to their homes in their neighborhoods for quite a while. So they hopefully,

are appreciating the value of what's around them and would be supportive of improving that for physical activity.

3. **Curious about the innovative options for youth sports as restrictions change and the ability to gather in small groups is allowed.**

Dr. Sallis: Having done a bit of research on youth sports, I have some recommendations that should apply almost any time. The main idea is to make sure young players are physically active during their practices. It was surprising to us how inactive the players were, and girls were much less active than boys, regardless of the sport. The other general idea is that sports leagues, parks and recreation departments, schools, and other youth-serving groups need to have more sports opportunities that are about participation and enjoyment, not competition. Especially as children get older, sports programs cater to the physically talented, and the vast majority of kids have no options for sports unless they organize themselves in their neighborhoods. I would like to see the recovery from the pandemic find ways of creating opportunities for all kids who want to play sports, regardless of their skill level.

4. **Do you all have any suggestions for activities/events for communities utilizing open greenspace during COVID-19?**

Dr. Sallis: I think it would be great for neighbors to collaborate in creating safe activities in neighborhood parks during the pandemic and the transition back to full park use. Individual activity stations could be set up in a circuit that would keep kids active but separated. This would be a great community-building activity as well. I'm sure there are online resources to give parents ideas how they can do family activities at parks or other green spaces anytime.

#### Playground Use & Maintenance

5. **What (if any) changes to playground structure design/layout should be considered moving forward?**

Dr. Sallis: OK, well it might make sense for playground equipment to be a little more spread out. But, that, that's probably going to be feasible in some places, and not feasible in other places. Maybe a more feasible option is, perhaps, blocking off every other swing in a large swing set. But, beyond that, I don't have any particular ideas. But I am sure the National Recreation and Park Association is dealing with these things and I would assume they have some resources and ideas on their website.

Dr. Pratt: It's very important when we're in public spaces to wear masks, wash your hands frequently, and avoid exposures. While the COVID 19 virus can survive on hard surfaces for a while, the evidence so far is that very few, if any cases are transmitted this way. Transmission of viruses and bacterial infectious diseases are dose dependent, and while there's some degree of virus survival, it's generally not a high dosage. So common sense measures greatly reduce the likelihood of picking up an infection from the surface, so frequent handwashing, avoiding touching hands or face, wearing a mask, helps us. So I'm not really sure that we make long term dramatic changes in playground infrastructure, other than probably more equipment, so we spread people out.

6. **a. What are your recommendations around public playground use?**

Dr. Pratt: I think this falls into the realm of opening up pretty much anything. I think the key is to do it in a safe way. What does that mean? It means maintaining social distancing, lower capacity than we would have under regular circumstances, and some sort of monitoring to make sure that happens. And I think this is completely doable. We need to get people back to work, including Parks and Recreation employees, and we don't want them just guarding the parks to keep people out. So I think the idea is people should follow the general principles that they're following when going out and going shopping, they're going to restaurants or wear masks. And I know it's tougher with kids than with adults, and we should have capacity control on playgrounds and play spaces. It's quite possible to have kids and adults at lower density in these spaces and being active. It would be great to have people taking advantage of the open spaces. Kids are going crazy to get out and play. And I think we just have to use good common sense.

Dr. Sallis: The only thing I would add to that is as soon as you can figure out ways to get your children to wear masks when they're on a playground and around other kids, that's probably good. And the other thing is, there's concerns about viruses being on the playground equipment. So I'm sure it's not a new idea for parents to take sanitizer with them into places like that and have the kids clean their hands while they're playing on commonly used equipment.

**b. Are you aware of any research around this and COVID-19?**

Dr Sallis: I have not heard of anything about how to open up all kinds of spaces for physical activity. Maybe I will pitch a paper that I've done with an international group where we developed a set of research priorities related to physical activity and Covid-19, in particular. This paper should be on line now or soon at the Journal of Sport and Health Science. I'm the first author on it. And for any researchers, at the end of that article, there is a link to a Google form where we are asking people who are planning research on physical activity and Covid-19 to describe their research there, so that others can find what they're doing, and perhaps collaborate. Or, if you're looking for people to collaborate with similar interests, we're hoping this can be a place to do that. So, we think that we need to act quickly, to do research on physical activity and Covid-19. We're helping to stimulate and support that work.

**General Physical Activity Engagement Challenges**

**7. How do we connect to our students during summertime, especially considering varied socioeconomic status and lower incomes?**

Dr. Sallis: Yes, that, that is an excellent question, and a difficult question. because if we're, talking about people in vulnerable communities, they have fewer resources to start out with. Fewer parks, lower quality parks in many cases, and school grounds that are closed up during the summer. So, we need to really call on organizations that can help with this. And so we would call on the schools to find ways of opening up their fields, and perhaps even gymnasias in the summer, and that might take shared use agreements with the park department. We would like to see maybe churches and other faith organizations provide activities on their grounds because there are churches in so many disadvantaged neighborhoods that are leaders for the community and so this is a way that they can contribute. We'd like to see parks departments reaching out, going into communities where there are not parks, and doing things like open streets events, play streets events where they just close off a block and set it up for kids to play. There are other organizations that could organize those, like boys and girls clubs, YMCA. To solve this problem of getting kids more active in the summer, especially lower income kids, community

organizations are going to have to step up and provide some kinds of resources and supervision that they are not doing now. To make that happen, it may require the communities to organize, to some extent, to make those requests to schools, parks departments, YMCAs, boys and girls clubs. So, it's not an easy solution, but it's one that we need to make progress on.

**8. What activities have people successfully implemented that engage both youth and parents together?**

Dr. Pratt: We touched on one of these earlier. Just getting out together as a family, being outdoors. It's one of the things that's very consistent in the research on kids. First, the biggest step is getting outdoors. Kids who are outdoors are more active, and, to some extent, we don't care too much what the activity is. If we get them outside, though, there'll be active. And then the second thing is parents are really important role models and potential play partners for kids. So parents should do things with the kids. And these can be competitive sports together, or they can just be playing and running around playing games, going to playgrounds, modeling for kids being outside and being active. So I think that parents play a really important role, both being active with their kids and getting them to places where they can be safely active, and be active with other kids.

Much of this goes back to Jim's answer to the previous question. We have to have spaces. This is way easier if you live in a safe, wealthy neighborhood with parks, and where the schools have shared use agreements, and their grounds are open. Where that's not the case we need to do everything we can to repurpose public space, so that it's actually available for the people who live around it. This is the silver lining to the current clouds over the world and in our country, attention to better use of public space, and more focus on equity. We need to take action.

**9. How is the lack of physical activity affecting the stress levels of children?**

Dr. Pratt: That's a really good question and I don't know if we have data on that yet. Jim's a little closer to studies of kids and may have more insights. This is probably going to show up over time. I think it's another one of those research questions we should be asking. How does it affect kids to not be in the school, to not have in-person social interaction, to have more limited options for going out? I suspect it's not a good thing.

Dr Sallis: This is another example of how the research enterprise is not very nimble. Things are changing so quickly. The shutdown happened so quickly and it seems like it's been forever, 2 or 3 months since we've been dealing with this. But places are opening up now, so things are shifting. And even if somebody had been on the ball enough to figure out a way to collect data early in the shutdown, maybe part of an existing study, there's been very little time to analyze, write that up, and let other people know. So I'm sure there are some studies bubbling away under the surface, but it may be some time before we see what they learn. And I think a webinar series like this is a good opportunity to hear about research that is too fresh to be public, but is something that still people would want to know about and want to act on. I think we need to explore ways of finding out about the research earlier, rather than just waiting for it to show up in journals. For the biological sciences, there are these kinds of websites, and their purpose is to put pre-prints online before they're even accepted. So, I don't know how much behavioral or physical activity research is showing up there, but we kind of need more rapid communication of research that's done so that it can be acted on. And, of course, it's much more difficult to do research now, because people can't go into their universities and can't do data collection in person. I think the human subjects review boards are just overwhelmed, and probably taking longer to approve anything, so this experience is pointing out some of the

weaknesses of our research system. When we need answers quickly, we're not good at moving quickly.

**10. How can we develop a messaging campaign that communicates the importance of PA and encourages adherence to health guidelines?**

Dr Pratt: This is really the same issue we have with physical activity messaging in general.

Obviously we're in a global pandemic crisis, so that sense of urgency and salience of going for a walk every day or getting your kids to go to the playground seems low. But we actually have the same problem in normal times. Rarely is physical activity at the top of the agenda because it seems sort of mundane, and many, especially for adults, of the benefits are often positioned as being prevention of chronic diseases we talked about, which is years in the future. I think partners are reconfiguring how to promote physical activity. Part of it is we need, as in any social movement and protest, we need to speak loudly and frequently. And second, we need to be focused on the urgency: it's good, for mental health, you feel better sleep better, you're not going to go crazy with your kids cooped up in the house. Being active has an immediate effect on people: their brains work better, their bodies work better if they're happier. Somehow we need to make physical activity an answer to many questions people have. We need to speak up and to create a sense of urgency, and we need to position physical activity as a solution.

Dr. Sallis: Well said, Mike, and one of the things that I keep asking is, well, millions and millions of people are committed exercisers around the country, and potential advocates, but otherwise, whose job is it to speak up for physical activity? Whose job is it to communicate about the importance of, and how to do physical activity? You might say, well, that's, that's certainly something that CDC does, and I think people at CDC would love to do that, but the physical activity branch has had its budget cut a lot over the past few years. And I don't mean, only in this administration, even during the financial crisis. Starting in 2008 the CDC budget was reduced and that made the physical activity branch even smaller than it was and they have really not come back. So who is going to provide that communication? Really, there is no organized communication about physical activity in general. There's advertising to go to particular gyms, but nobody is educating the public in a systematic or sufficient extent. So, to just give you an example of my own difficulty with this: When the pandemic started and it became obvious this was going to be really difficult. I had just given a talk on physical activity immunity and inflammation. It had to do with cancer, but, then I realized, this has top line relevance to the Pandemic. So I said people are not talking about this; do people really know physical activity can help with the infection? This is an emergency. So, Mike and I wrote our blog, which was originally meant to be an op-ed and, after we got it rejected five times, we said, we're just going to get the word out ourselves. That's when we started spreading it around, and people in the physical activity field said, yeah, this is important. So, our blog is now posted on quite a few websites around the world, but that's just within mainly the physical activity field. We have not done a good job reaching the broader public or decision makers. So, this lack of communication is something that as an overall field or all the fields related to physical activity, we need to be working on and it's just a particularly acute problem right now.

**11. What are the largest benefits for communities when they invest in active play?**

Dr Sallis: The largest benefit is the accumulation of all the benefits of physical activity for physical and mental health, as well as quality of life. But if you are trying to convince a decision maker to invest more in physical activity, find out what that decision maker values and show

evidence about how physical activity helps with that issue. And it might community cohesion or reducing carbon emissions; the motivating factor does not need to be health.

**12. How kids with disabilities can stay active during Covid-19?**

Dr. Sallis: Children with disabilities certainly need to stay active during the pandemic. The burden is likely to fall on parents to find resources online tailored to children with disabilities. You might check with groups like the National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disabilities. <https://www.nchpad.org/>

**13. Kids and families need more than just physical activity. Please discuss your position on how we physically “educate” everyone.**

Dr. Sallis: Rather than repeat the goals of [SHAPE America](#), [Active Schools](#), and [Comprehensive School Physical Activity Programs](#), I will just refer interested readers to those resources.

**14. What is the best way to support equity affected individuals who experience addition barriers to being PA during COVID19?**

Dr. Sallis: There’s no quick and easy answer to this one. The usual resources promoting physical activity to people in disadvantaged communities are completely inadequate. Now, resources and assistance from schools, parks departments, and community organizations are almost completely sidelined. For the short term, people may need to rely on creativity within the family, support and ideas from neighbors, and online resources. But don’t overlook the simplest options, like going out for a walk. Unfortunately, we can expect worse effects of the pandemic on the physical activity of people in vulnerable communities. I’m hoping that a piece of the growing energy devoted to racial justice can be applied to advocating for more opportunities and resources to support lower-income people and communities of color to be physically active, which will support their quality of life.

**15. How much outdoor time, per day do you recommend?**

Dr. Sallis: My colleague who studies Vitamin D says that 15 minutes outdoors in the middle of day helps produce enough Vitamin D. Being outdoors is great for mental health. There is some evidence about adding benefits of being active outdoors (green exercise), but that evidence is not strong at this point. If being active outdoors helps you be active consistently, that is a huge benefit. If children are going to be active, it is likely they will have to stay outdoors more than 15 minutes. If people go outside for extended periods, please wear sunscreen and hats. If people cannot go outside for whatever reason, it is essential to find ways of being active indoors.

**Research Related**

**16. How can we track activity during the summer in research?**

Dr. Sallis: The same measures apply during the summer as in the school year, though the administration might be different. If you are interested in comparing physical activity during the school year and summer, as we were, it is essential to use the same measures. In our study we used by accelerometers and surveys. For many years we have mailed accelerometers back and forth. This takes effort, but it works. Surveys can be administered online, through the mail, or by interview.

**PA Post COVID**

**17. What will be the lasting effect on PA behavior that will continue after COVID-19?**

Dr Pratt: I think we want people to remember how important physical activity was to maintaining sanity and some sense of quality of life during the period of lockdown, because we haven't seen people care about this. Streets have been opened up during the pandemic. There's been a lot of attention to making sure people could be active. We need to build on that to continue to create spaces and time for people to be active and not just relegate attention to activity to a time of crisis.

Dr Sallis: Very well said. The only thing that I will add to that is, because there is no specific organization that's going to take this on, what Mike said about prioritizing physical activity post COVID, it's something that's really going to be up to us. I'm talking about those of us whose work is about physical activity in some way. We're going to have to push our governments, push our health organizations, push our community organizations to take physical activity seriously, because if we don't, we had decades of experience showing us that nobody else will.