

YOUNG ATHLETES, COVID, AND MENTAL HEALTH: What Fairfax County Parents and Coaches Should Know

The Current Situation

Disruptions to school, sports, and other activities as a result of the pandemic have had a dramatic negative impact on many young people. Here are some of the key trends and things parents and coaches should know:

- Limited in-person contact with friends, teammates, and caring adults outside the home has many youth feeling lonely and disconnected. *Find opportunities for kids to interact with others in non-structured settings, both virtually and in relatively safe in-person situations. Encourage your kid to participate in after-school programs through their school. All FCPS middle schools offer virtual after-school programs, and elementary and high schools also offer a wide variety of clubs and programs that allow students to engage with their peers. Please check your school's website or contact your school for information.*
- Many young people are confused and stressed about seemingly contradictory messages and regulations and limitations regarding COVID. *Help young people learn to identify trusted sources of information. Explain that safety is a continuum; no activity is perfectly safe, but there are measures (e.g., masking, distancing, being outside, hand washing) that can make activities safer.*
- Child abuse and neglect are significant contributors to mental health problems in youth, but the number of adults kids are connecting with (e.g., teachers) has been limited, restricting the reporting of child abuse cases. *Coaches and other adults who are communicating with kids need to be trained to recognize signs of abuse and neglect and to properly report it.*
- Many students are struggling with online schooling. *Work with your kids to establish a physical environment that supports learning from home. Take advantage of available supportive resources (see below), and regularly communicate with your child's teachers.*
- For many young people, it's not just one of these issues. It's a complex combination of them all. *Check in on all aspects of your kids' lives, and don't hesitate to reach out for help if they are struggling with any of it. Know that they are not alone, you are not alone, and help is available.*

What Parents and Coaches Should Know About Mental Health

There are signs that can help parents, coaches, and other adults recognize when kids may be experiencing a mental health challenge and are in need of support. It is important to recognize changes in behaviors, thoughts, and emotions that may be signs that your child needs help.

- Loss of appetite, significant weight gain or loss, lack of sleep or too much sleep
- A steep in drop in grades, getting into trouble at school or not attending school
- Depressed mood and/or mood swings
- Unrealistic or excessive anxiety or guilt
- Withdrawal from activities, family, or friends
- Becoming more irritable, hyperactive, energetic, fidgety, or aggressive
- Oversensitivity to comments/criticism
- Inability to manage responsibilities or loss of motivation
- Use of drugs or alcohol
- Low self-esteem or frequent self-criticism
- Difficulty making decisions, concentrating, and/or remembering
- Racing thoughts
- Thoughts of death and suicide

Never be afraid to directly ask someone "Are you thinking of killing yourself or hurting yourself?" Asking does not make someone more likely to do it. Rather, it tells them you care and that you will help keep them safe.

There are many pathways for young people to receive help. If your child states that they have had thoughts of suicide, remind them that there is help and that you will support them in getting help. Connecting youth to treatment for a mental health challenge and/or thoughts of suicide can help them begin to feel better. See the Resources section below for ways to find help.

Resources for Parents, Coaches, and Youth

These resources can help you determine if a young person you care about needs help and how to get them to that help:

- Contact the student's school psychologist, school social worker, or school counselor. All FCPS schools have people in these positions who can help assess the situation, provide services, and refer families to outside resources.
- [Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board Entry and Referral Services](#) (703-383-8500, TTY 711, Monday-Friday, 9 am - 5 pm) also provides assessment, services, and referrals.
- You can conduct a brief screening yourself to help assess whether someone you care about needs help by using [this online tool](#) or the [Columbia Protocol](#).

These sites provide a lot of additional information you may find helpful:

- The [Aspen Institute's Project Play](#) has developed and shared a number of resources for youth sports leaders, coaches and parents to adjust to the impacts of COVID.
- [Healthy Minds Fairfax](#) has many tips for finding treatment services and otherwise navigating the children's mental health system in Fairfax County.
- The FCPS [Healthy Minds Blog](#) shares many resources and tips for parents and other adults, including ideas for setting up a workspace for kids at home and supporting your kids in distance learning.
- The FCPS [Mental Health and Resiliency page](#) has a number of resources for helping students manage stress, make healthy choices, and develop healthy habits.

If you're looking to learn more, consider these training opportunities:

- [Free online trainings from Kognito](#) are available through the Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board (CSB). These evidence-based role-play simulations teach adults who work with young people how to recognize when a young person is showing signs of psychological distress, how to talk with them about it, and how to connect them to the appropriate support.
- The CSB offers [a number of other virtual and in-person trainings](#), including Mental Health First Aid. They can arrange a custom training for your group; contact them at 703-383-8451 or csbprevention@fairfaxcounty.gov for details.
- The [Eric Monday Foundation](#) has a number of resources and presentations geared towards youth sports coaches.

In Case of Emergency (Available 24/7)

Do not worry about making the wrong choice. Every number leads to someone who can help.

- Call 911 in an immediate life-threatening emergency. Make sure to notify the operator that it is a psychiatric emergency and ask for an officer trained in crisis intervention or trained to assist people experiencing a psychiatric emergency.
- [Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board Emergency Services](#): 703-573-5679, TTY 711
- [Children's Regional Crisis Response](#) (CR²): 1-844-627-4747
- [PRC CrisisLink](#): Call 703-527-4077 or 1-800-273-8255; text CONNECT to 855-11; or chat at suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat
- [Fairfax County Child Protective Services](#) (CPS) Hotline: 703-324-7400, TTY 711



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