

Youth Development & COVID-19: Tips To Adapt Your Youth Programming

January 25, 2021

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Before we were all disrupted and shifting our operations due to COVID-19, we offered an [introduction to the Long-Term Athlete Development Model](#), or LTAD. The goal of the LTAD model is to ensure the quality of sport and physical activity and to keep athletes and/or participants engaged in sport and recreation for life.

As our climbing programs move in and out of lockdowns and restrictions, we must consider how the COVID-19 experience may have impacted our participants, particularly in light of their growth and development. Many have not had the opportunity to be social with their friends. Where a typical 9-year-old may normally be placing a great deal of importance on friendships, with months of virtual learning, the child may behave more like an 8-year-old, preferring to work in pairs rather than a larger group.

The premise of working with youth within the LTAD model is to ensure what you are offering (and how you are offering it) is appropriate for the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development stage of the participant. For example, we would not let a 6-year-old belay because we would not be certain the attention span would be adequate to complete the task safely. For a detailed description of ages/maturity and signs of development in each area, [follow this link](#) to a document produced by Department of Health in Western Australia.

For many of us, lockdowns have meant more screen time, less social time, and less structure in learning and in our schedules. The impact that this can have on youth development will vary based on the personal experience of each child. Some youth may have been home with two siblings and six cousins, where another may be an only child, engaging only with their imagination, a screen, and a parent when the parent had time.

While the long-term outcomes from COVID-19 restrictions are not fully understood, studies have shown a dramatic reduction in physical activity. That reduction has also impacted physical development, social engagement, and lead to an increase in sedentary activities.

Just like summer vacation, the current COVID-19 restrictions may have caused a regression in the development of our athletes and youth in general. Participation in climbing may help counteract these consequences. Inherently, climbing forces the participant to become more resilient, to accept failure, and to problem solve. As coaches, it is important to recognize where each participant is in their current development and create opportunities to encourage social, cognitive, and emotional growth.

How? Here are some tips to keep in mind:

1. Remember to return to activity with a slow progression in physical challenge. Some young athletes will want to jump in with two feet, however, over-exuberance could lead to injury.
2. Begin with smaller group activity to encourage social development. If youth have anxiety about social distance, this will help with easing that anxiety.
3. Consider how you can encourage the development of focus. Screen time and a reduction on school structure can reduce the ability of youth to focus on one task for extended periods. Switch up activities more frequently, remind youth to sequence before climbing.
4. Given the fact that [domestic violence and child abuse may have increased during the pandemic](#), it is also important to be aware that anyone working with children should be vigilant for signs of abuse.

COVID-19 and the ensuing lockdowns and shifting regulations are impacting all of us, including kids. There are steps those who work with youth can take to be sensitive to these impacts. Climbing is an important activity for youth in a myriad of ways, especially now. Now is the time to capitalize on how the sport can support kids into this uncertain future.

For more information on the impacts of the pandemic on youth, here are some additional resources:

[The Impact of COVID-19 on children, from the United Nations](#)

[How COVID-19 Is Changing the World's Children, from the BBC](#)

[Social Distancing Effects on Social Development, from Healthline](#)

[Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Children and Adolescents' Lifestyle Behavior Larger than Expected, from Elsevier](#)

About The Author



Heather is a licensed kinesiologist, High Five Trainer (Sport, PCHD), CEC Climbing Coach, and CWA Climbing Wall Instructor Certification Provider Trainer. She blends her knowledge of movement, physiology, and education to develop a multitude of successful climbing programs designed to support and engage youth. Having worked with youth for over 30 years as a recreation instructor, leader and educator, Heather supports the values and expertise available in the High Five Program, bringing quality assurance to youth-based sport and recreation programming.



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