Youth sport in the time of COVID-19: Considerations for researchers and practitioners

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COVID-19 represents an unprecedented challenge for the youth sport sector. Due to regional and national public health policies designed to slow down the transmission of this highly infectious disease and mitigate secondary impacts, youth sport programs around the world have experienced sudden interruptions to their sport activities. As such, this health crisis presents numerous considerations for key stakeholders in the sport environment. In this commentary, we put forward the Personal Assets Framework (PAF) as a tool to explore the potential implications of COVID-19 on youth sport development. Adaptations to the dynamic elements of the sport experience, including personal engagement in activities (i.e., virtual coaching; developmental trajectories), quality social dynamics (i.e., athlete relationships; health and well-being), and appropriate settings and organizational structures (i.e., social-cultural factors; safety concerns), are explored. This article will also discuss the potential consequences of changes in these dynamic elements on immediate, short-, and long-term developmental outcomes. Further, we offer contextual, methodological, and practical considerations for researchers and practitioners operating in youth sport to consider during this crisis. Finally, we suggest this crisis provides an opportunity to reflect upon existing youth sport structures and to develop strategies to improve the quality of youth sport programs.
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Abstract

COVID-19 represents an unprecedented challenge for the youth sport sector. Due to regional and national public health policies designed to slow down the transmission of this highly infectious disease and mitigate secondary impacts, youth sport programs around the world have experienced sudden interruptions to their sport activities. As such, this health crisis presents numerous considerations for key stakeholders in the sport environment. In this commentary, we put forward the Personal Assets Framework (PAF) as a tool to explore the potential implications of COVID-19 on youth sport development. Adaptations to the dynamic elements of the sport experience, including personal engagement in activities (i.e., virtual coaching; developmental trajectories), quality social dynamics (i.e., athlete relationships; health and well-being), and appropriate settings and organizational structures (i.e., social-cultural factors; safety concerns), are explored. This article will also discuss the potential consequences of changes in these dynamic elements on immediate, short-, and long-term developmental outcomes. Further, we offer contextual, methodological, and practical considerations for researchers and practitioners operating in youth sport to consider during this crisis. Finally, we suggest this crisis provides an opportunity to reflect upon existing youth sport structures and to develop strategies to improve the quality of youth sport programs.

Key words: Coronavirus; Pandemic; Lockdown; Athlete development; Personal assets framework; Sport experiences
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Introduction

COVID-19 represents a global health crisis that has challenged nearly every sector of our society. It is thus crucial for researchers and practitioners to examine the ways in which we can effectively address these challenges. To date (15th June 2020), this highly contagious disease has resulted in 7,823,289 confirmed cases and 431,541 deaths (World Health Organisation, 2020). As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to develop around the world, various protective measures have been introduced by regional and national authorities. One of the central public health mitigation strategies for COVID-19 has been the promotion of physical distancing and self-isolating practices, which encourage individuals to limit interactions with others (Hammami, Harrabi, Mohr, & Krstrup, 2020). Due to these measures and policies, youth sport has experienced an impromptu halt to regular activities in countries around the world (Parnell, Widdop, Bond, & Wilson, 2020). Given these unprecedented circumstances, it is important to reflect on how the COVID-19 pandemic may influence youth sport.

The Personal Assets Framework

In an effort to understand the far-reaching implications of COVID-19 within the youth sport context, we can examine this crisis through the lens of youth development. Although there are several applicable youth development models, we put forward the Personal Assets Framework (PAF; Côté, Turnnidge, & Evans, 2014; Côté, Turnnidge, & Vierimaa, 2016) as a representation of development in youth sport. Drawing upon work in developmental and sport psychology, this framework suggests that there are three integral dynamic elements needed for sport development to occur, including: (a) personal engagement in activities (i.e., the what), (b) quality social dynamics (i.e., the who), and (c) appropriate settings and organizational structures (i.e., the where). When these elements interact with each other, an immediate sport experience is
created that can influence short- (e.g., changes in athletes’ competence, confidence, connection, and character; the 4Cs) and long-term (e.g., performance, participation, and personal development; the 3Ps) outcomes. By highlighting the key mechanisms (i.e., the dynamic elements) and desired outcomes (i.e., immediate, short-, and long-term), the PAF provides a useful framework to summarize the potential implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth development in sport.

Dynamic Elements

**Personal Engagement in Activities**

When examining youth sport during this crisis, it is important to recognize that the emphasis has often been focused on the influence of physical distancing and self-isolation policies on organized youth sport. We know, however, that youth sport extends beyond the boundaries of sport organizations. Indeed, youth sport is comprised of a wide range of activities beyond structured practices and competitions, such as practicing free throws in the driveway and playing backyard soccer games. Previous research suggests that sport activities can be characterized by: (a) their primary focus (i.e., practice activities focused on skill development vs. play activities focused on enjoyment) and (b) who directs the activity (i.e., adult vs. youth-led; Côté & Erickson, 2015). Consequently, researchers and practitioners should explore the influence of COVID-19 on youth’s engagement in both practice and play-based activities.

Most noticeably during the COVID-19 pandemic, young athletes have experienced an interruption of their regular routine of organized, adult-led practices and competitions. The disruption of these activities has the potential to influence young athletes’ developmental trajectories. Côté and colleagues (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014; Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007) propose the Development Model of Sport Participation (DMSP) to outline the processes,
pathways, and outcomes associated with youth sport development. From a high-performance perspective, for example, the DMSP offers two pathways during childhood that can positively influence the attainment of senior professional status, including: (a) early diversification (i.e., increased engagement in multi-sport activities; Gullich, 2017) or (b) early specialization (i.e., increased engagement in sport-specific practice and competition; Zibung & Conzelmann, 2013). Thus, the removal of these activities for a prolonged period may influence sport-specific development and performance. From a recreational outlook, Côté, Lidor, and Hackfort (2009) offer seven postulates of the DMSP, which promote not only performance, but also continued participation and personal development for all youth involved in sport. Côté and Vierimaa (2014) suggest that the DMSP and its postulates integrate the various outcomes of sport by focusing on key proximal processes and the environment in which the processes are happening. Thus, the changing landscape of these proximal processes (e.g., the removal of coach-led practice) and the environments in which young athletes are restricted to (e.g., increased access to parents and siblings) may affect youth’s developmental pathways and subsequent outcomes of youth sport development. Given the current uncertainty regarding these effects, it would be worthwhile for future research to examine how participation in sport activities (e.g., coach-led practice, youth-led practice, youth-led play, competition) during the time of COVID-19 influences youth’s developmental trajectories.

Among the many changes associated with COVID-19 (e.g., engagement in sport activities within the home), the restricted access to traditional, coach-led practice has also led to the use of alternative delivery solutions to continue engagement in youth sport settings. Due to the COVID-19 restrictive measures, the emerging role of structured online activities appears to be a commonly used method to resume organized youth sport provision amongst practitioners.

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and their athletes (Sherwin, 2020). The regular use of these virtual tools is still in its infancy and practitioners’ methods for engaging young athletes is constantly evolving. For instance, team meetings, skill challenges, and physical routines, represent some examples of activities that have shifted to structured, online delivery. As such, the way in which these activities are being delivered should be monitored to explore the most effective methods of delivering structured online activities in youth sport. Given that even beyond the recent COVID-19 restrictions, the dynamics of technological advancements and their rapid integration into different social spheres such as youth sport (i.e., the 4th Industrial Revolution; Smith, Erickson, & Malete, 2019) were already beginning to outpace traditional predictions, it will also be important to explore how these virtual methods of delivery may continue or evolve once sport activities resume.

Where available, children and young athletes have been engaging in sport activities within a wide array of settings such as backyards, bedrooms, hallways, and any other accessible spaces. Whilst it is not uncommon for children and adolescents to utilize these spaces for sport activities during their development, the frequency and volume of play-based activities may have significantly increased during the lockdown period. Given the demands and responsibilities currently expected of adults during this pandemic (e.g., coaches, parents), it is also possible that there has been an increase in youth-directed sport activities. Previous research suggests that an increased accumulation of youth-led activities, such as deliberate play, can positively influence athletes’ long-term participation, performance, and personal development (e.g., Côté & Erickson, 2015; Till & Baker, 2020). Additionally, more practice-oriented activity types (that are nonetheless still youth-directed), such as ‘spontaneous practice’ (Côté & Erickson, 2015) in which young people independently engage in self-chosen/directed sport activities with skill improvement as the goal (without external direction from a coach), may be particularly salient.
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under lockdown conditions. Overall, it will be worthwhile to capture the types of activities in
which youth are engaging, their experiences of these activities, and the potential outcomes
resulting from these activities.

Quality Social Dynamics

Sport is an inherently social activity. Interactions with teammates, coaches, parents,
officials, and our broader sport communities represent an integral component of the youth sport
experience. Within the context of COVID-19, it is these social interactions which are being
directly challenged. As we strive to stay home and stay safe, sport stakeholders are being asked
to refrain from engaging in face-to-face interactions and to adapt to virtual environments. It is
thus important to examine how these interactions are changing, how we experience these
changes, and the implications of these changes on development.

One social group that has been brought to the forefront during this crisis is family. While
often relegated to the literal sidelines of sport, parents and siblings have been brought to the
frontline of sport activities. Indeed, since many of us are being asked to limit social interactions
to our immediate households, parents and siblings are now fulfilling multiple roles: play mates,
activity directors, and rule arbitrators for those inevitable disputes that arise. To date, a
predominant focus of sport research has been on parents’ supportive functions (e.g., providing
tangible resources, spectator behaviours; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2013). While they are still
supporting their children, parents are also playing a very active role in shaping youth’s current
and future sport experiences. Thus, it would be worthwhile to investigate how parents may be
directly and indirectly influencing youth’s engagement in practice- and play-based activities
during this crisis. Moving forward, parents will also play a key role in the return to play
transition. Understanding the needs and concerns of parents will be crucial for coaches and sport
organizations as they adapt their sport programs to this new era (Solomon, 2020a). Lastly, it may be beneficial to examine how this crisis has influenced the quality of parent-child relationships and how these relationships may influence youth’s immediate, short-, and long-term outcomes.

In addition to the parent-child relationship, we need to explore how parents are interacting with coaches and sport organizations during this crisis. More specifically, how can parents, coaches, and sport organizations effectively engage with each other? It is also important to consider the multi-faceted nature of parents’ engagement in youth sport. In many countries around the world, parents represent not only the consumers of youth sport, but also their volunteer workforce (e.g., coaching, officiating, fundraising; Trussell, 2016). In a time of both health and economic uncertainly, we may need to reflect on the demands being placed on parent volunteers and to explore ways to support these integral members of our sport systems both now and in the future.

Another family relationship to consider in the context of COVID-19 is youth’s relationships with their siblings. While often separated into different activity settings based on sport type, gender, or age, physical distancing and self-isolation policies may lead to a resurgence in engagement in sport activities with one’s siblings. This is particularly important since our understanding of sibling relationships in sport remains relatively limited (Blazo & Smith, 2018; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2013). Nonetheless, the opportunity to engage in sport activities (both adult- and youth-led) with younger and older siblings may offer unique benefits for youth. Previous research highlights that mixed-age play can positively influence the sport experiences for both older and younger participants (Downey, Condron, & Yucel, 2015). It would thus be worthwhile to examine how COVID-19 has influenced opportunities for engaging
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in sport with siblings, as well to investigate potential developmental effects of engaging in these activities.

Beyond the family unit, the COVID-19 crisis has also created unique challenges for youth sport coaches. Coaches represent an integral element of the youth sport environment (Côté et al., 2014). With the sudden halt to organized sport activities, coaches were asked to quickly adapt to ever changing circumstances. From delivering sessions and hosting team socials online to dropping off equipment to young athletes, the roles and responsibilities of coaches have dramatically changed due to the pandemic. As such, we need to examine how these experiences are influencing coaches’ relationships with their athletes, whilst also exploring how coaches are experiencing these changes themselves. This leads to several interesting questions for researchers and practitioners, including: (a) how can we foster effective coach-athlete and coach-team relationships given the contextual constraints; (b) what are the implications of COVID-19 on coaches’ physical and psychological well-being (i.e., how can coaches balance work, coaching, and family demands during a very unpredictable and stressful time; how might job insecurity influence coaches’ well-being); and, (c) what resources (e.g., education, funding) are needed to support coaches during time?

Lastly, youth athletes’ peer interactions have been significantly influenced by the pandemic. Often reported as a driving force motivating athletes to participate in sport, these central social interactions have been upended. Studies consistently demonstrate that peers greatly influence the quality of youth’s sport experiences, through increasing perceptions of fun, social identity, and motivation (Smith, 2003; Vierimaa & Côté, 2016; Visel et al., 2018; Weiss & Petlichkoff, 1989). We thus need to investigate how high-quality peer interactions can be facilitated given the current constraints. For example, how can we enable young athletes to
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socially connect with their peers while physically distancing and self-isolating? In addition to
examining ways to connect with peers, it may be beneficial to explore how changes in peer
interactions may influence youth’s desire to engage in sport activities and their developmental
outcomes in both the acute and recovery phases of this pandemic.

Taken together, it is evident that COVID-19 may influence the quality of our social
interactions. When examining common frustrations expressed in relation to the restrictive
measures, as well as with regards to proposed rule changes to sport (e.g., no handshakes or
celebrations involving physical contact) it is interesting to note how many are related to our
interactions with others. While the activities of sport hold value on their own, our passion and
love of sport is often derived from engaging in those activities with others. Our teammates,
opponents, coaches, and communities represent an integral component of the sport experience.
As such, it is crucial to examine how we can support these social dynamics in the time of
COVID-19.

Appropriate Settings and Organizational Structures

In addition to influencing the activities and social dynamics of youth sport, COVID-19
will also affect the settings in which these activities and social dynamics occur. Throughout the
previous sections, it is evident that several shifts in the settings of youth sport have occurred,
including moving away from community- to home-based activities. From micro-level settings
where youth play (e.g., backyard or driveway) to the more macro-level settings (e.g., city or
country) where youth live, the setting in which we participate in sport can have an important
influence on development. Previous studies demonstrate how setting features, such as the size of
the city in which an individual has early exposure to sport, can influence athletes’ performance,
participation, and personal development; commonly referred to as birthplace effects (Côté,
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MacDonald, Baker, & Abernethy, 2006; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & MacDonald, 2010; Turnnidge, Hancock, & Côté, 2012). Drawing upon these findings, it will be vital to explore how COVID-19 will affect the settings in which sport activities and social dynamics occur.

With regards to the youth’s immediate settings during COVID-19, children and youth have been engaging in sport activities in a wide variety of settings near their homes, such as backyards, bedrooms, hallways, and driveways. Thus, it is possible that engagement in sport activities (both practice and play-based) may have increased during the lockdown period. It is important to recognize that access to sport settings within the COVID-19 era may also differ depending on socioeconomic circumstances. In a lockdown context, young athletes whose living arrangements offer greater space, both inside (e.g., bedroom or playroom) and outside (e.g., backyard or garage), may be better able to continue participating in a wide range of sport activities. Conversely, young athletes in higher density physical environments (e.g., high-rise buildings) may have less indoor and outdoor space to participate in sport. These opportunities may be further limited by restrictive policies limiting access to public recreational areas (e.g., parks, nature trails, sport fields). As such, this crisis may exacerbate inequities between youth due to their geographic location and socioeconomic factors.

Another element of the setting to consider is the organizational structures that dictate youth’s engagement in sport activities. Several organizations at the local, regional, and national levels are currently developing return to play protocols. As these develop, we may also see new policies regarding the rules of the game (e.g., increased physical distance between players, limited social greetings, use of protective personal equipment; Mohr et al., 2020) that will influence youth’s experiences in sport. Given the limited evidence available to date on how to effectively develop and implement these policies, it is crucial for researchers and practitioners to...
share best-practices and to put evaluation plans in place to assess the effectiveness of these policies, as well as the implications of these policies (e.g., the affordability, practicality, side-effects, equity of policies and interventions).

An important organizational structure to consider will be the costs associated with youth sport. The continued access to structured activities may come at a financial cost; and as a result of these uncertain times, monetary outlay for sport may not be a financial priority. Therefore, young athletes may be withdrawing from sports programmes, or moving even further away from being able to access them, due to families not being able to afford the fees. In North America (i.e., US and Canada) for example, it is common for youth sport program costs to be borne by participants’ families in a pay-to-play model. This increasingly privatized and professionalized structure means that family income was already a primary driver of access to youth sport (Solomon, 2020b). With the economic costs of the COVID-19 pandemic likely to be substantial, there is significant risk of further exacerbating existing inequalities in youth sport participation (Morning Consult, 2020). In the United Kingdom however, the government, registered charities, and private organisations often fund youth sport clubs (e.g., Sport England, 2020) and academies (e.g., Premier League, 2020). Therefore, it may be argued that those from the United Kingdom may have greater continued access to structured activities due to the potential reduced cost for these services compared to their North American counterparts. As a result, this suggests that national youth sport culture may be an important consideration whilst exploring who is at risk of youth sport dropout.

At a broader level, the incidence and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic has varied considerably around the world, as well as the governmental response to the crisis. Consequently, regional and national government policies may significantly shape the influence of COVID-19
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on the youth sport context. For instance, whereas sport has been halted in several countries (e.g.,
Canada, US, France, UK), sport activities have continued in others (e.g., Sweden; The
Telegraph, 2020). Since COVID-19 related policies can differ from country to country, cultural
implications may also be observed from a global perspective. When exploring the developmental
implications of this pandemic, researchers and practitioners should consider the geographical,
sociocultural, and political contexts in which youth sport occurs.

Lastly, an overarching consideration regarding appropriate settings in the time of
COVID-19 is the safety of the sport environment. According to the National Research Council
and Institute of Medicine (NRCIM, 2002), one of the key contextual features that can facilitate
positive development in youth is the physical and psychological safety of the environment.

While discussions of safety in sport have typically focused on important topics, such as
equipment and facilities, injuries, mental health, and abuse, novel safety risks have emerged in
light of the crisis. Indeed, everyday interactions (e.g., high fives, handshakes, body contact)
which represent many of the enjoyable social and competitive aspects of the sport experience,
now represent potential risks to health and safety. The importance of these threats to safety are
underscored at multiple levels of sport, as stakeholders of professional (e.g., BBC, 2020) and
youth sport (e.g., CBC Sports, 2020) have expressed concerns about how to engage in sport.

There are also potential risks to psychological safety during this crisis. Mental health may be
affected by both participating (e.g., fear, stress) and abstaining (e.g., social isolation) from sport
activities. These risks extend beyond the youth participants themselves, as there are also safety
concerns for coaches, parents, officials, and sport organizations. Likewise, these considerations
are equally important for physical education and school sport environments, whereby teachers,
coaches, and youth will be exposed to the same risks and challenges when returning to school

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(e.g., Association for Physical Education, 2020). It will thus be important to examine these effects and to develop appropriate interventions for supporting all stakeholders’ physical and psychological health throughout the crisis.

Immediate Sport Experiences

In both popular and social media, there are a myriad of examples of how youth sport stakeholders are continuing to find enjoyment through sport during these trying times. Whether through creative backyard obstacle courses, toilet paper challenges, or virtual team meetings, athletes, coaches, and parents are using sport as an avenue for fun. Previous studies suggest that young athletes emphasize how trying hard, positive team dynamics, and positive coaching are key determinants of fun in sport (Visek et al., 2018). As such, we need to reflect on ways to provide youth with opportunities for sport activities in which they can experience appropriate challenges and positive interactions with coaches and peers within the current constraints. For example, how can we offer competitive challenges for youth to show off their skills and creativity to their sport communities? Given that two of the key determinants of fun relate to quality social dynamics, it is also important to find ways to facilitate positive relationships while we may be separated.

Short-term: The 4Cs

With regards to the influence of COVID-19 on short term outcomes, it is important for researchers and practitioners to take a holistic perspective. Within the PAF, short-term outcomes are conceptualized as competence, confidence, connection, and character (the 4Cs; Côté et al., 2010; 2014). While it may be tempting to focus on the influence of physical distancing policies on competence related outcomes, we need to examine the potential effects of these changes on athletes’ broader developments. For example, how will youth’s physical development be affected
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due to the sedentary nature of the COVID-19 restrictive measures? Also, how might engagement in youth-led activities in settings where they dictate the boundaries of the activity influence perceptions of confidence? It may also be worthwhile to examine the varying effects of this pandemic on athletes’ connections with others. Lastly, this pandemic may influence the development of young athletes’ character. From caring for siblings, connecting with grandparents, or displaying acts of kindness in their community, COVID-19 has shone a light on humanity’s capacity to come together during times of need. As such, researchers and practitioners should strive to capture and celebrate these stories and experiences. COVID-19 may have important implications for the short-term outcomes that youth derive from their sport participation. Given the unprecedented nature of this crisis, we will need to consider these effects both now and in the future. In doing so, we can develop better programs and policies to support youth sport athletes’ development.

Long-term: The 3Ps

One of the challenges of this crisis is the sheer volume of unknown long-term consequences. Within the PAF, long-term outcomes are conceptualized as performance, participation, and personal development (the 3Ps; Côté et al., 2010; 2014). Although there is a tendency to focus on long-term development in sport, this crisis may require sport stakeholders to reconsider this approach. If we place our focus on the dynamic elements and create: (a) engaging activities, (b) quality social dynamics, and (c) appropriate settings, we can create the real-time sport experiences that will keep youth interested and engaged in sport. It is this real-time engagement that can eventually lead to both those short- and long-term outcomes.

Nonetheless, it will be important for researchers and practitioners to keep track and reflect on the decisions they make during this time that could influence short- and long-term developmental
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outcomes. Moving forward, athlete development studies will need to account for this crisis in examining their results. It will not be just the existing participants who will be affected. Future generations of athletes, coaches, and parents are being shaped by this important event. Capturing these stories and experiences will be instrumental in designing programs and policies for youth sport for years to come.

**Conclusion**

Colleagues working in athlete development and are urged to examine the impact of COVID-19 on youth sport (see Table 1). Through utilising the PAF, it offers researchers and practitioners a useful framework to illustrate the potential mechanisms and outcomes of youth sport during restrictive measures. For instance, through evaluating the engagement in activities, social dynamics, and appropriate settings, it will allow us to better understand the potential implications on immediate, short- (4Cs), and long-term (3Ps) development outcomes. Slowing down the spread of COVID-19 to manageable levels may result in prolonged self-isolation and physical distancing measures. As such, it is unknown when or how youth sport activities will resume. Regardless, the opportunity to evaluate existing youth sport structures, alongside carrying forward the impactful strategies that have been forcefully developed during lockdown, may facilitate a greater emphasis on positive youth development in the future.

***Table 1 near here***
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Table 1. Contextual, methodological, and practical considerations based on immediate, short-, and long-term outcomes in youth sport.

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<th>Immediate</th>
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<td>Contextual</td>
<td>How can peer, parent, coaches, and sport organizations effectively engage with each other, both during the crisis and during recovery?</td>
<td>How can the crisis influence the quality of parent-child relationships?</td>
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<td>What resources (e.g., technology, funding) are needed to support coaches through these times?</td>
<td>How can COVID-19 influence positive opportunities to engage in sport with children?</td>
<td>How will social distancing change because of COVID-19?</td>
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<td>Methodological</td>
<td>How do sport psychologists, coaches, and sport contexts in which youth sport can influence immediate sport experiences?</td>
<td>What are appropriate interventions for supporting athletes' physical and psychological development throughout the prevention, treatment, and recovery processes of this health crisis?</td>
<td>How will COVID-19 affect the outcomes in which sport activities and social dynamics occur in the future?</td>
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<td>Pragmatic</td>
<td>What role does physical and psychological safety of the environment play in these? How is youth engaging in sport activities during the crisis and what are the potential implications of these activities on developmental outcomes?</td>
<td>What are the various effects of this pandemic on athletes' connections with others?</td>
<td>How will the changing landscape of the professional and the environment influence athletes' perceptions of competence and confidence?</td>
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