

Kids and sport: Impacts of the pandemic



Poll report

Poll 22, November 2021

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Report highlights

- Half of Australian children (50%) have participated in less organised sport and other physical activities since COVID-19, with one in three doing a lot less or no sport.
- The impact of COVID-19 on sport participation has been greatest in Victoria and New South Wales, with twice as many children doing less organised sport and physical activities compared to those in all other states and territories.
- Sports clubs and organisations have been innovative and responsive during the pandemic, with most children in Victoria (63%) and NSW (54%) participating in at least some of their activities online.
- Cost is the leading concern related to re-engaging in organised sport and physical activities with most parents (58%) saying the registration, fees, sports clothes or equipment are too expensive.
- Many children have lost interest, lost fitness or become despondent about participation due to frequent disruptions of sporting activities.
- One in three parents (37%) say that their child's participation in sport and other organised physical activities is even more important now than before the pandemic.

Half of Australian children (50%) have participated in less organised sport and other physical activities since COVID-19



Child participation in organised sport and other physical activities 'pre-COVID-19'

Prior to the pandemic, 79% of school-aged children (5 to <18 years) were participating in organised sport or other physical activities (PA). Participation rates were the same for boys (79%) and girls (79%) and highest in NSW (81%) and Victoria (80%), followed by all other states and territories combined (77%). Participation was greatest among families of higher socioeconomic status (based on SEIFA), with 87% uptake among the top quintile compared to 70% in the bottom quintile. Participation rates were higher among children living in major cities (81%) than those living in regional and remote areas (71%). Rates of participation were the same for teenagers (82%) and children aged eight to 12 years (82%) and lower in younger children aged five to seven years (72%).

How has the pandemic affected participation in sport and other organised physical activities?

Among those children who participated in organised sport and PA before the pandemic ($n = 2,318$), half (50%) were reported to have participated in less organised sport and PA over the first six months of 2021. The greatest decrease in participation was in Victoria (66%) and NSW (58%) followed by other states and territories combined (29%) (see *figure 1*). Children living in major cities were more likely to report a reduction in sport participation (51%) than those living regionally (43%). These geographical discrepancies are almost certainly due to more lockdowns in major cities. The fall in

participation was greater among families of higher socioeconomic status (based on SEIFA), with 57% of those in the top quintile participating in less sport and PA as compared to a reduction of 47% in those in the lowest quintile. The reduction in participation was similar for girls (48%) and boys (52%).

Face-to-face versus online participation

The introduction of restrictions to reduce community transmission of COVID-19 has meant that many children's organised sport and other PA moved to online delivery methods. Among those who continued to participate in sport or other organised PA during the period of January to July 2021, this included online activities for most children in Victoria (63%) and NSW (54%). In all other states and territories the majority of activities were conducted face to face only (52%).

Importance of participation in sport and other organised physical activities since COVID-19

The majority of Australian parents believe that their child's participation in organised sport or other PA is just as important (59%) or even more important (37%) now compared to before COVID-19. This finding was more marked in Victoria (46% say it is more important) and NSW (40% say it is more important) compared to other states and territories combined (26%) (see *figure 2* on the following page). There was no meaningful difference in these findings across socioeconomic status, gender, regional versus metropolitan place of residence and language spoken at home.

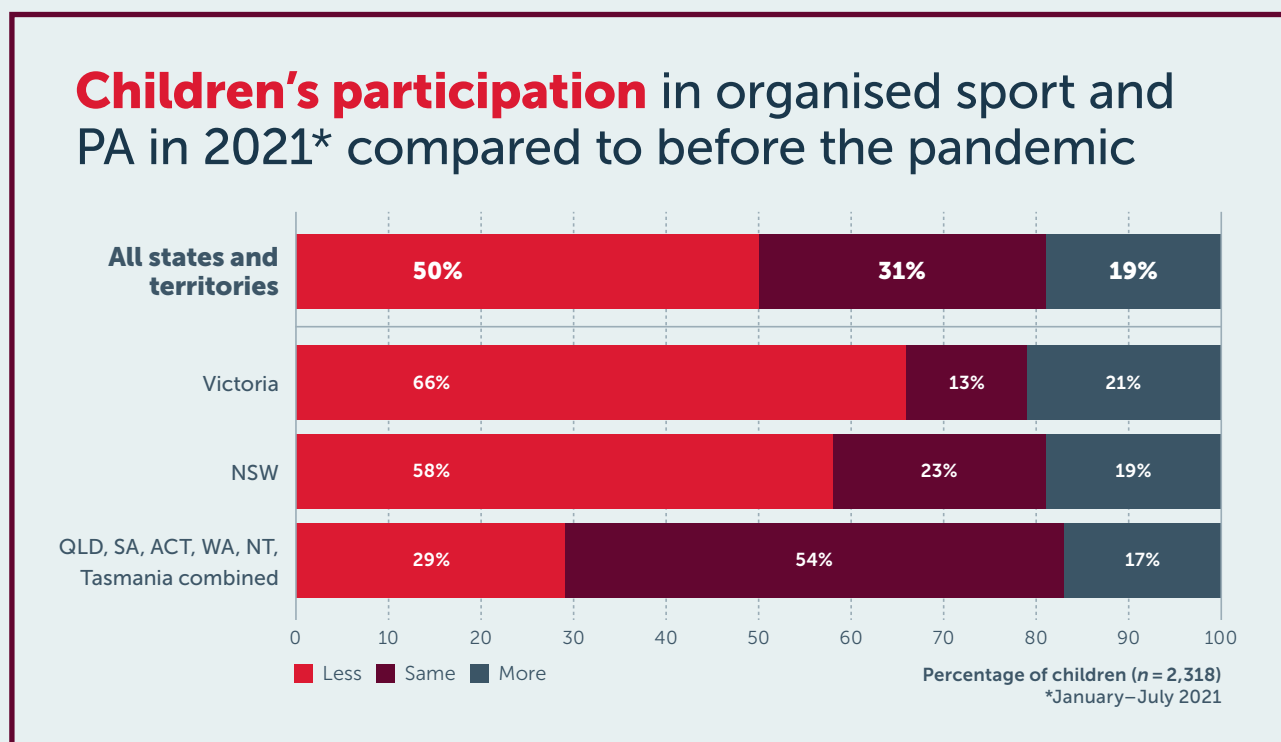


Figure 1.

Parents' view on **importance of children's participation** in organised sport and PA compared to before the pandemic

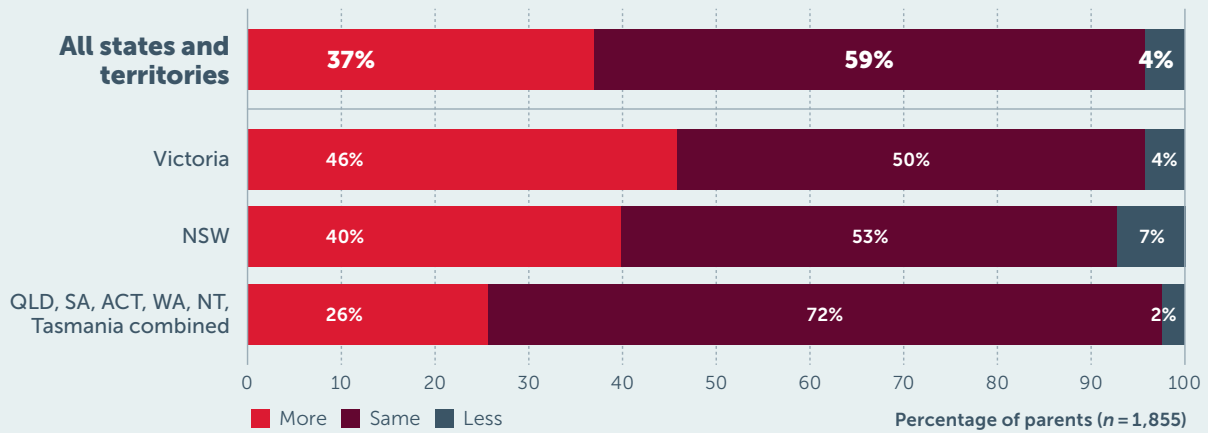


Figure 2.

What are the concerns about engaging in face-to-face sport and organised physical activities?

Parents hold a range of concerns about their children returning to face-to-face sport and other organised PA since COVID-19. The leading concern is cost, with 58% of parents saying the registration, fees, sports clothes or equipment are too expensive. Other concerns include parent and/or child being worried about catching

COVID-19 while participating (34%), feeling that it is not worth it due to too many disruptions (36%), the activity or team the child wants to join has been discontinued due to COVID-19 (33%), child has lost interest (29%), child's schedule is too busy (22%) and the child is no longer fit enough (14%) (see figure 3).

Parents' concerns about their child participating in organised sport and PA since the pandemic

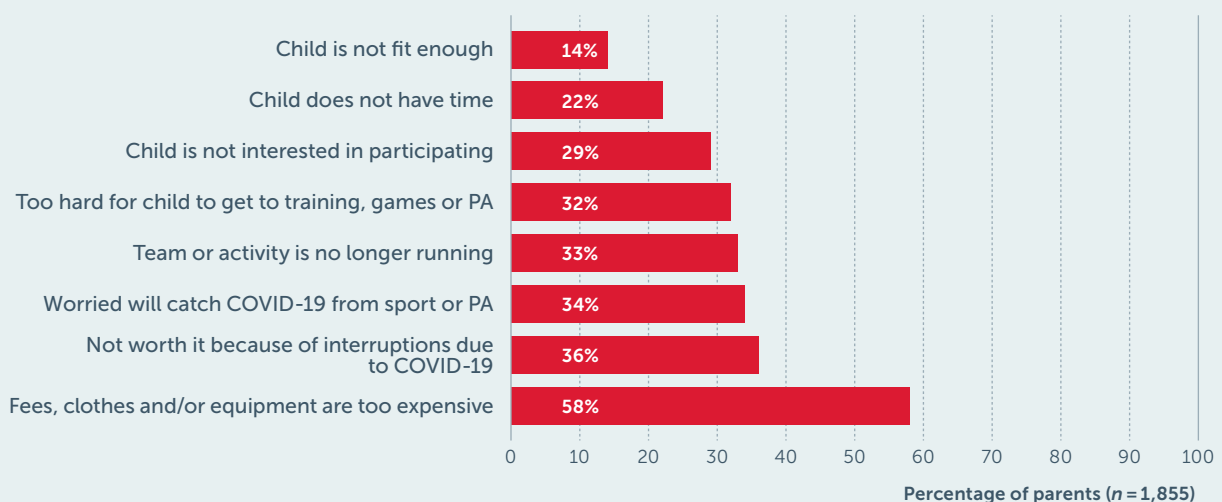


Figure 3.

Parent perspectives on COVID-safe practices at sporting clubs and organisations

All sporting clubs and organisations have, or will be required by law to have, a COVID-safe policy as jurisdictions transition through the stages of the national COVID-19 plan.¹ Four in ten parents (37%) were not aware of a COVID-safe policy at their child's club or organisation. There was greater awareness of COVID-safe practices and policies in Victoria and NSW than other jurisdictions. The majority of parents (73%) felt that the COVID-19 precautions in place at their child's sports club or organisation were 'about right', with 14% feeling they were too strict and a further 13% believing they were too lenient. Parents in Victoria were more likely to feel precautions were 'too strict' (22%) than those in NSW (14%) and all other states and territories combined (8%). Victorian parents were also more likely to feel that a potential exposure while their child was participating in sport or other PA would be safely managed (60%) than NSW parents (51%) and those in all other states and territories combined (54%).

Implications

The unprecedented change to daily life brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health measures has led to impacts on many aspects of child health related behaviours with follow-on effects on their health and wellbeing.² This study shows a concerning reduction in participation in organised sport and physical activities in Australian children, with those children living in states subjected to prolonged periods of stay-at-home restrictions being most affected.

It is well recognised that community sport and organised physical activities play a vital role in promoting positive social, emotional, cultural and economic outcomes, as well as contributing to physical health and wellbeing. Research shows many children have experienced negative mental health impacts from the pandemic² and loneliness has been well described by children and adults as one of the most challenging experiences. A loss of engagement in community sport may have contributed to this. Community sport plays a critical role in community connectedness, providing children and young people with avenues for friendships and support outside the home, and a giving a sense of purpose to many adults and family members.

Among those children who continued to participate in sport and other physical activities, many did so online. Community sporting clubs and organisations are to be commended on their innovation and efforts to maintain a sense of connectedness for many children, families and coaches through the pandemic. The need to implement COVID-safe policies to keep children protected has further added to the challenges for clubs and this study

COVID-safe sport

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shows that most parents are aware of COVID-safe policies at their club and feel confident that any potential exposure would be safely managed.

Given the well-established physical and mental health benefits of community sport and physical activities, re-engagement of children and young people in these activities should be an urgent priority as restrictions ease across Australia. Cost was identified as a leading concern for parents, with many families experiencing significant financial hardships during the pandemic. Local, state and federal governments have a critical role to play to addressing this barrier and providing equitable access to community sporting activities for Australian children. Adequate resourcing and supports for clubs and organisations is needed to allow for implementation of COVID-safe policies. Other potential barriers include concerns about fitness and a loss of interest, suggesting that a public health campaign may be required to support sporting clubs and community organisations to attract and re-engage young people. As we progress through the pandemic, consideration should be given to minimise disruption to community sport and physical activities wherever possible in future public health measures to mitigate transmission of COVID-19.

Data source and methods



This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The survey was administered from 20–28 July, 2021, to a randomly selected, stratified nationally representative sample of adults aged 18 and older. All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged between five years and 17 years. The sample of 1,855 parents yielded data on a total of 3,005 children. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect Australian population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate, the completion rate was 65 per cent.

Survey participants were asked a series of questions about their experiences during the past six months of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to organised sport and organised physical activities (PA) for their children. Parents were asked whether their child had participated in organised sport and other PA (such as dance, karate etc.) prior to the pandemic. They were also asked if their child stopped participating due to the pandemic and their plans about returning to sport and PA. Parents also reported on barriers they might face in returning to sport and PA. A copy of the survey can be found on the [RCH Poll website](#).

In the six months preceding data collection, residents in the states of Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) had longer periods of stay-at-home directions (also known as 'lockdown') than residents in all other states and territories (QLD, SA, ACT, WA, NT, Tas) who, for the most part, were not under stay-at-home restrictions. There were, however, varying levels of public health measures (such as social distancing and density limits) in place in other states and territories which affected the way sport and other activities were conducted.

References



1. Australian Government. (2021). *National Plan to transition Australia's National COVID-19 Response*. Retrieved 1 November, 2021 from www.pm.gov.au/sites/default/files/media/national-plan-to-transition-australias-national-covid-19-response-30-july-2021.pdf.
2. Rhodes, A., et al (2020). *COVID-19 pandemic: Effects on the lives of Australian children and families*. Retrieved 1 November, 2021 from www.rchpoll.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/nchp-poll18-report-covid.pdf.

For a full list of references please email child.healthpoll@rch.org.au

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