

As a grandparent who hasn't had physical contact with my five granddaughters since mid-March, I'm naturally eager to see the end of the lockdown. But if I can only receive that benefit at the high cost of my grandchildren sacrificing their most beloved activities, I prefer to FaceTime with them indefinitely. My demographic is the one at high risk, after all, not theirs. As the data everywhere indicates, COVID-19 is a significant problem for those over 70 and but seems to pose extremely limited risk to the very young. Remote academics can hold the line on kids' brain development. But the lockdown on athletics is at minimum an obstacle to the development of necessary skill-building and fun for all children, and — for those engaged in competition at a serious level — a catastrophe. For those engaged in competition at a serious level it's a catastrophe (—image—)

(—image—)

My Montreal granddaughters are both into sport in a big way, but with a crucial difference. Noa, 12, enjoys the excitement of her soccer and hockey games, but the greater attraction is the camaraderie: the team parties, the locker room TikToks and of course the matching jackets. Her soccer coach is valiantly Zooming twice-weekly sessions focusing on ball skills; but without the social and actual “play” aspects, Noa has lost motivation and interest. Toby, 15, is a true competitor. A passionately engaged hockey player since childhood, she's now playing Bantam AAA. Her team is — was — together six days a week at practices, games and off-ice workouts. Hockey is Toby's life pivot. It's her reason for pushing herself hard in everything she does, including getting good grades at school. She and her teammates dream of athletic scholarships, playing college hockey and maybe even, who knows ... They are bonded in a special way. The abrupt cancellation of the season with 10 games and provincial championships in the offing was shocking enough, but they understood why (even though they all wept for a week). Then came news of spring showcases being cancelled (opportunities to show off for scouts and play against teams they normally don't meet in the season), as well as the cancellation of Hockey Québec development and selection camps. (—image—)

A public tennis court in Toronto's High Park sits locked due to the COVID-19 pandemic on March 31, 2020.

Nathan Denette/The Canadian Press

All this while struggling to live socially solo. My daughter tells me that “the fun and passion have been sucked out of her and her teammates' lives.” Indeed, a just-published study out of the Université du Québec reportedly finds the lockdown has had negative psychological effects on a third of locked-down adolescents, but has hit the sports-deprived especially hard. Next year Toby is slated for the midget division in her hockey league and tryouts were supposed to have been — but of course weren't — held last weekend. There are no dates set for next season or even assurance there will be a next season. If there is, there is talk of new safety rules so stringent that the game will be drained of real competition and even fun. This is all wrong on so many levels. Although physical skills such as ball-throwing/catching, hand-eye co-ordination and efficiency in running — in sports research this is known as “physical literacy” — are occasionally acquired through trial and error by naturally gifted children, most kids need instruction and practice. But every skill has an optimal window for acquisition. Those who get it at the right age enjoy vigorous play, further developing their fitness and skills, while the less skilled are often left out, reinforcing discouragement and dropout. This is all wrong on so many levels (—image—)

(—image—)

According to sports research, the big dropout risk for girls occurs between the ages of 12-14. The longer a girl in this age group is deprived of sport, the less likely it is that she will go back. The pool for competitive girls' hockey is much smaller than for boys. In Quebec, for example, if a critical proportion of boys don't return to hockey when this crisis is over, three elite teams in a given age group might be reduced to two teams, or two to one. But if the same number of girls don't return, there won't be enough for even one elite team. In competitive hockey, if regional travel is restricted, boys will find a critical mass in local associations to form a team. Competitive girls' teams are grouped by region to ensure sufficient numbers, so without travel, girls' leagues will fold. Sports clubs rely on armies of volunteers, membership dues, sponsorships and tournaments. Government subsidies are not enough to keep the momentum going

through a long void. Anyway, no activity is risk-free. Parents already accept the risk to their kids of concussion, broken wrists, cracked pelvises, pulled muscles, split lips and flu contagion — not insignificant any of them — as the price kids pay for competitive sport. Open the parks and playgrounds. Let the skateboarders wheel and plunge. Open the tennis courts, the playing fields and the arenas. Keep spectators away (including parents) if necessary, and take whatever precautions are necessary for athletic staff. But we have to get the kids playing again. • Email: [kaybarb@gmail.com](mailto:kaybarb@gmail.com) | Twitter: [BarbaraRKay](#)

What Canada's 'new normal' will look like after the first wave of COVID-19, according to Dr. Theresa Tam  
Where can you live your best CERB life? Here's what \$2,000 per month will get you in cities across Canada  
Virus RmYN02: Researchers find another potential link between bats and COVID-19