



## Chris Murphy of Sports For Learning: “5 Things I Learned From The Social Isolation of the COVID19 Pandemic”



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*With the success of the vaccines, we are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel of this difficult period in our history. But before we jump back into the routine of the normal life that we lived in 2019, it would be a shame not to pause to reflect on what we have learned during this time. The social isolation caused by the pandemic really was an opportunity for a collective pause, and a global self-assessment about who we really are, and what we really want in life.*

*As a part of this series called “[5 Things I Learned From The Social Isolation of the COVID19 Pandemic](#)”, I had the pleasure to interview Chris Murphy.*

*Chris Murphy is CEO and co-founder of Sports For Learning. SFL serves over 250k students at 75 school districts in California, blending physical activity and social-emotional learning inside and outside the classroom. Chris grew up in Ireland and has a passion for getting kids moving through fun and engaging activities.*

**Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Our readers like to get an idea of who you are and where you came from. Can you tell us a bit about your background? Where do you come from? What are the life experiences that most shaped your current self?**

**T**hank you for having me. Well, I was born and raised in Dublin, Ireland. The other co-founder of Sports For Learning, Nick Telford, is actually my best friend who I grew up with in Dublin. We've known each other since the age of two. Nick and I attended the John Scottus School together and enjoyed an alternative education that strongly emphasized mindfulness, character building, and outdoor exercise. Together, we were exposed to languages like Latin, Greek, and the most ancient of all languages, Sanskrit.

At the age of 14, Nick and I started our own little business detailing and cleaning cars, which resulted in us being recipients of the Young Entrepreneurs Award for East Dublin.

In 2004, after receiving our bachelor's degrees in Sports Science and Health, we moved to the U.S. to coach soccer. For several years, we ran Irish soccer camps during the summer and would bring out coaches from Ireland to work the camps. It was really this endeavor that gave us the springboard to start Sports For Learning. We needed to turn our summer camp enterprise into a year-round business; and because schools liked how we operated and were intrigued by our concept of using sports and games as a vehicle for educating students, we decided to seize the opportunity. Now, after only a few years, we are working with over 75 California school districts that use the Sports For Learning curriculum, and we're actively growing.

**Are you currently working from home? If so, what has been the biggest adjustment from your previous workplace? Can you please share a story or example?**

From a workplace perspective, the pandemic has been a blessing in disguise. For the first couple of months, Nick and I were meeting up outside coffee shops with our laptops charged and using our hotspots to get online — not the most optimal of working environments. As the summer heated up, working outside was no longer an option and we stumbled upon a flexible shared workspace as an alternative. This was a game-changer as it gave us access to all the amenities we needed while allowing us to network and make some valuable connections with other entrepreneurs and small business owners.

It has been tough not being able to interface with our management team or connect in person with our school district partners, but I can definitely see this changing in the near future.

### **What do you miss most about your pre-COVID lifestyle?**

As an Irishman living in California, this might sound like a bit of an anomaly but I'm actually an avid salsa dancer. I took this up about five years ago and every weekend I would be out at the salsa clubs practicing my routines. I've really missed this.

However, living in Orange County gives you lots of outdoor options so I can continue to pursue my other passion which is surfing — socially distanced, of course!

From a work perspective, it's been hard not being able to get out to schools and seeing the Sports For Learning coaches in action and the students engaging in our games and activities.

### **The pandemic was really a time for collective self-reflection. What social changes would you like to see as a result of the COVID pandemic?**

The pandemic has really shown us the importance of social interaction — especially for children. I think there should be greater emphasis on mental wellness, and this should start in schools as early as possible. I would love to see schools adopt new pathways to learning such as learning academic content through sports, arts, music, and other mediums of education.

**What if anything, do you think are the unexpected positives of the COVID response? We'd love to hear some stories or examples.**

I've been delighted to see how we have all utilized technology to improve our lives and I think this will be something that will help us both in the education sector and beyond. The real challenge will be to find the right balance between our reliance on technology and making sure we create environments for children and adults to get together again and remember the great connections that can be made when we are face-to-face with each other.

Through technology, we were able to bring the Sports For Learning program directly to the student's homes. We adapted our curriculum to ensure our physical activities could be done in small spaces using household objects, like a wastepaper basket and a pair of socks for example. We found ways to get creative through the use of technology, enabling children to remain engaged despite the remote circumstances.

**How did you deal with the tedium of being locked up indefinitely during the pandemic? Can you share with us a few things you have done to keep your mood up?**

To be honest, I made up my mind early on that I was not going to let the pandemic dampen my spirits. I've made sure to keep in regular contact over WhatsApp with my closest friends. I call my family in Ireland on a daily basis and go on regular walks with my girlfriend.

One thing Nick and I have done together as partners is to discuss business while enjoying physical activities like long walks or stand-up paddleboarding. I've realized that not all business discussions need to take place in an office. In fact, I find that my mind works better when moving; we generate lots more ideas and agree with each other more. We've made some of our best business decisions while paddleboarding.

**Aside from what we said above, what has been the source of your greatest pain, discomfort, or suffering during this time? How did you cope with it?**

I would say the greatest pain and suffering occurred when we realized how serious this pandemic was. I remember the day when almost all the school districts announced that their schools were closing. Since our business model was founded upon providing in-person support services to schools, I had no idea how we were going to keep the business going. This led to many sleepless nights and stressful discussions.

The best decision that we made around this time was to have as many conversations as possible with potential customers, current customers, advisors, work colleagues, and anyone who just wanted to talk and be optimistic. Through these conversations and the work of our amazing team, we were able to develop an online platform for our business which we would not have done had our hand not been forced.

**Okay, wonderful. Here is the main question of our interview. What are your “5 Things I Learned From The Social Isolation of the COVID19 Pandemic? (Please share a story or example for each.)**

1. **Exercise is essential:** I am part of a men’s soccer team — Irish Rovers FC—and I certainly took my participation in training sessions during the week and games every Sunday for granted. When this was not part of my regular weekend routine, I realized how important it was to have an active hobby like this. Our team captain set up a competition for everyone to run one mile per day, with an aim to increase either distance or time slowly over time. This gave me back an exercise routine and also a goal to hit each day. It was truly invaluable.
2. **Mental wellness is a must:** Keeping your body healthy is important but I certainly became more aware of the value of mental health during the pandemic. As part of my education when I was young, I was introduced to meditation. It has been extremely beneficial throughout my life, especially when faced with stressful challenges. During the lockdown, I found that I needed to make this part of my daily routine every morning and evening. It has been very impactful to just sit and do nothing for a few minutes each day.

3. **Technology is our friend:** Our reliance on technology sometimes gets portrayed in a negative light. I think we have all realized how important technology has been in order to allow us to conduct our personal and professional business during this unique time. Having happy hours, meetings, and quizzes through Zoom are certainly not a substitute for the real thing, but it was a lifeline to be able to keep connected during the long days of lockdown.
4. **Value social interaction:** Like everyone, I took things like meeting up with friends for dinner or going to events for granted. When this was no longer possible, I quickly realized how important this was to me. I've made sure to keep in regular contact with a close circle of friends and when the opportunity presents itself, I try to safely meet up as often as possible.
5. **Perspective is everything:** The pandemic has forced many businesses to explore new ways of operating in order to stay alive. I think that this has been a silver lining to the last year in terms of people looking at obstacles as opportunities rather than barriers. If you change the way you look at something or how you approach a challenge it can have a very positive outcome. I aim to continue implementing this mindset post-pandemic too.

**Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Can you share how that was relevant to you during the pandemic?**

One of my favorite quotes is an old Persian adage used to reflect the temporary nature of the human condition — *“This too shall pass.”* It has obviously been the perfect phrase that I use to remind myself that this pandemic will end, and the frustrations and anxieties caused by this period of isolation will end too. What I like most about this quote is that it is always relevant. It reminds me never to get too carried away with good fortune and never get too down when things don't go my way.

**We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them.**

I've always been fascinated by Sal Khan — the founder of Khan Academy. When studying for my MBA in 2007, I used to watch a lot of his videos and found them extremely helpful. He was able to break down the most complicated concepts into bite-sized digestible bits of information that I could then reformulate clearly in my mind. I don't know if I could have got through my courses without his videos.

**How can our readers further follow your work online?**

Website: [www.sportsforlearning.com](http://www.sportsforlearning.com)

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**Thank you for these fantastic insights. We greatly appreciate the time you spent on this. We wish you continued success and good health.**