



# APPROPRIATE ATHLETE-COACH RELATIONSHIPS

For the purpose of this document “a coach” refers to any person working, volunteering or otherwise interacting with athletes in sport. “Athlete(s)” refers to anyone participating in sport.

This document does not address every situation nor is it meant to be an exhaustive list of acceptable or unacceptable conduct. It is meant to provide a framework within sport in which individuals are expected to exercise common sense and good judgment when interacting with athletes.

A coach might be one of the first relationships a young person has outside of their immediate family. Positive relationships between athletes and coaches generate trust, better communication, and a growth mindset. With open communication, honesty and transparency young athletes thrive, leading to stronger training, athletic progress, and personal growth.

**An analysis of 159 cases of sexual abuse of young people in sport revealed that the perpetrators of the abuse were coaches, teachers and instructors in 98% of the cases. It’s important to understand the warning signs of potential abuse so that attempts may be made to stop the abuse before it occurs.**

## POWER IMBALANCES IN A COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

The coach and athlete relationship is characterized by a power imbalance in favor of the coach. Relationships between coaches and athletes should be built on respect, communication, and honesty. Appropriate relationships have healthy boundaries between an athlete and their coach that centers age and content appropriate conversations, clear, verbal consent before any physical touch, and an encouragement of relationships between the athlete and other coaches and teammates. Coaches focus on positive reinforcement and empowering the athlete to reach their goals on and off the field.

Healthy relationships value open communication from the athlete in the form of honest feedback and engagement in how they feel within the sport and what they see as areas of growth for both themselves and the team. Coaches that support athletes value their wellness outside of the sport and assist them in reaching their academic goals while supporting their mental and emotional wellness.

## **Undoing a Submissive Culture in Sports**

Athletes are taught to respect and listen to their coaches. In an unhealthy coach-athlete relationship, respect equates submission. Aggressive methods, such as yelling in an athlete's face or throwing training equipment, creates a culture of fear and submission where athletes become fearful to engage with the coach beyond what is expected of them. When coaches perceive any amount of feedback as "talking back" or not respecting authority, an unhealthy power dynamic is reinforced that silences athletes and teaches them that their voice is not valued in that space or by that coach. On the contrary, coaches who allow time and space dedicated to receiving feedback from players on their training methods experience greater results of buy-in and higher performance.

## **Athlete Dependency on Coaches**

Athletes are dependent upon the coach's knowledge and training to further develop their skills, as well as their referral power to advance them in their sport. Athletes face extreme vulnerability to abuse because of their isolation, the intimate nature of coaching and sporting skills, the increased physical care and scrutiny, the pressures and stressors of athletic competition, as well as concerns about career opportunities in a finite time frame. Many athletes are dependent upon coaches to connect with university and professional level scouts who will advance their careers. Without the support of the coach, athletes may lose access to career opportunities and scholarships for higher education. Coaches that are intentional about empowering athletes to provide feedback on coaching methods and invest in athlete relationship and wellness can reduce the likelihood of athletes tolerating abusive systems due to fear of retaliation and long term negative impacts on their career and education.

## **Respecting Athlete Boundaries**

Boundary violations occur through breaking trust and exploiting power to prioritize the adult's needs (personally or professionally) and these needs are placed above the needs of the athlete. The responsibility is always with the coach to establish and maintain appropriate boundaries with athletes as they are the ones with the power.

**Even if a coach has an athlete's best interest at heart, it is important that they model appropriate relationships so that athletes can more easily identify coaches who may be pushing boundaries and abusing their power.**

# **STANDARD FOR MAINTAINING APPROPRIATE BOUNDARIES**

All interactions and activities with athletes (including electronic communication) should be:

- Transparent
- Accountable
- Related specifically to coaching/volunteer duties and athlete wellness.
- Age appropriate
- Have a parent, guardian, trusted adult, or counselor included (when the athlete is a child)
- In response to the athlete's needs
- Reflect a duty of care and protection

## EXAMPLES OF ENCOURAGED INTERACTIONS

- Praise, encouragement, acknowledgments, and goal-oriented communication
- Rewards available to ALL who achieve
- Outcome focused interactions with athletes
- Asking permission to touch for necessary safety purposes or to give touch corrections and only using touch when observable by other adults and team members
- Side hugs (only if initiated by the athlete), handshakes and high fives
- Warmth and kindness
- Public social media alerts to groups of athletes (including their parents if athlete is a child)
- Model professional physical and emotional boundaries - engaging with the athlete in a manner that would be seen by a reasonable observer as maintaining reasonable boundaries
- Communication with athletes that is transparent and accountable and tied to the coach's job description and professional qualifications
- Positive techniques of guidance including redirection, positive reinforcement, and encouragement
- Encouraging and respecting an athlete's right to say "No"
- Responding to athletes with respect and consideration with equitable treatment regardless of gender, race, religion, sexual identity, size, immigrant status, or culture
- Reporting any suspicion of abuse to proper authorities
- Communicating clear boundaries at the beginning of the season, for example, high fives and side hugs only.

## EXAMPLES OF PROHIBITED INTERACTIONS

- Isolated one-on-one time with the athlete where the interactions are not observable
- Offering one-on-one transportation or transporting athletes in private vehicles.
- Inappropriate jokes or using profanity
- Bullying, hazing, or harmful initiation practices
- Humiliating or intimidating athletes
- Favoritism or preferential treatment such as gift giving to an individual athlete
- Private interactions through social media, computers, mobile phones, or handheld devices
- Initiating any kind of hug, full frontal hugging, touching of personal areas, or patting of the buttocks.
- Touching of personal areas including face, mouth, breasts, stomach, genitals, buttocks
- Corporal punishment of any kind including physical abuse, verbal abuse, mental abuse or neglect
- Confiding or sharing overly personal information with the athlete (e.g. financial, health, or relationship problems)
- Asking athletes to keep information from others like family members or friends - asking the athlete to keep secrets.
- Treating a child athlete as an "adult" under guise of maturity
- Electronic communication with athletes that is personal and not directly tied to coaching duties
- Showing or involving youth in child sexual abuse material
- Encouraging comparison, criticism, or excessive competition
- Using or being under the influence of alcohol, marijuana, or illegal drugs during work hours
- Smoking or use of tobacco in presence of athletes
- Being alone with athletes outside of the program. This includes babysitting, sleepovers, and inviting athletes to their home.
- Using training as punishment
- Conversations regarding romantic relationships beyond the scope of healthy mentorship
- Dating an athlete\*

**\*A coach should never date an athlete or anyone they have a position of power over even if both parties are adults.**

Even if an athlete and coach are both adults and consenting, it is never appropriate for a coach to date an athlete due to the hierarchical nature of the coach-athlete relationship and power differential. Beginning a relationship with the foundation of one partner having physical, mental, emotional, and financial power over another creates long lasting power dynamics that can lead to an athlete feeling unsafe about having honest conversations with an intimate partner among many other possible repercussions. Additionally, if the relationship becomes toxic or abusive, the athlete will face additional barriers in leaving that partner that could also end their career.

## RED FLAGS OF AN ATHLETE-COACH RELATIONSHIP

### Seeks Control of Life Outside Athletics

If a coach seeks a high level of control over the athlete's life beyond athletics, such as controlling their relationships or food intake beyond nutritional support, they are displaying a red flag of abuse of power beginning to emerge. Good coaches will establish a clear and transparent training plan for the athletes they coach. When a coach requires athletes to adhere to demands or rules outside of athletics and the training plan (for example rules regarding: family life, restrictive eating habits, social activities, or dating), the coach may be starting to exercise coercive control over the athlete.

### Isolating the Athlete

A coach should never isolate an athlete from parents, friends, or their community outside of athletics. Aside from observable one-on-one training, the coach should not create an environment in which athletes feel isolated from the team. When coaches provide extensive praise for one athlete and not others, or invests in athletes at disproportionate rates, this can lead to strained relationships among the athlete and their teammates. This type of control could allow the coach to cut off health and natural relationships in an athlete's life outside of athletics, thus isolating them and allowing the coach to exert more control.

### Frequent Comments or Critiques About Physical Appearance

Coaches need to be focused on quality of training, encouragement, and equitable access. Appearance does not define performance. Even though a compliment on appearance may seem harmless, it could connect appearance to praise for an athlete, thus diminishing other actual performance factors like strength, sleep, fuel, and more. Comments about looks can reinforce dangerous and harmful cultural messages that equate appearance to value.

### Utilizing Fear-Based Coaching

Fear-based coaching trades long-term wellness for short-term performance. While an athlete might respond in the moment out of fear of the coach, long-term, the effects of fear-based coaching are both physically and mentally harmful leading to low self-esteem, and high burn out. Recent research has shown that coaches who utilize overly aggressive methods, such as yelling in an athlete's face, leave athletes feeling like they need to "tiptoe around" them and avoid engaging with the coach if possible.

Fear-based coaching and negativity are less effective than positive, human-centered coaching and language. A coach using fear-based coaching may be causing unintentional or intentional harm to the athletes through this method.

**Examples of fear-based coaching include:**

- Screaming at players
- Withholding praise
- Loss or threat of reduced playing time
- Negative reinforcement
- Punishment-centered coaching (for example: focusing on what happens if the team loses rather than focusing on what happens if the team wins)

**Respect Means Submission**

If a coach believes that in order to demonstrate respect, an athlete must always say “yes,” never disagree or question the coach, and submit to everything without autonomy, then it is a red flag. This type of behavior teaches athletes that authority is a tyranny and should never be questioned. A good coach will understand that respect can still be had while giving athletes the agency to speak up and question the coach’s actions or thoughts in a respectful way.

**Withholding Encouragement During Difficulty**

If praise from a coach is conditional on performance or winning, the coach is teaching the athlete that they are only valuable if they are pleasing others. This leads to over-obedient athletes who may not understand how to use “no” effectively to prevent themselves from harm. Coaches should show unconditional support for the whole person, and the entire journey of the athlete through the ups and downs. This will set everyone up for success in sport, and outside of sport.

**Using Training as Punishment or Using Physical Punishment**

Training is meant to be constructive, building up physical and mental health and should be approached with a mindset of excitement, and joy. If a coach uses physical efforts as punishment, they are reinforcing the idea that to exert effort, or to build strength is punishment.

Physical punishment may look like: running sprints; holding a plank; doing push ups; performing any physical activity that is clearly beyond the athlete’s ability; forcing the athlete to do something that may result in harm; physically restraining athletes; depriving athletes of sleep, food, rest or water; forcing athletes to take performance improving substances

**Issuing Retaliation Based on Feedback from an Athlete**

Feedback is an important part of coaching. There must always be an open line of communication between the coach and the athlete. A coach who exercises retaliation based on feedback they have received from an athlete may not be able to adapt their coaching style effectively. It is important for coaches to be able to adapt, react, and implement feedback in order to be an effective coach.

**Focusing on Their Own Coaching Track Record**

If a coach prioritizes their own reputation or career over athletes, it’s a sign that the coach is not going to be a partner in supporting athletes. Athletes should feel supported by coaches on the path toward their goals rather than feel like a number on the coach’s stat sheet.

## **Exploiting Athlete Weakness**

Manipulative coaches intentionally look for emotional buttons of athletes and utilize them to harm. Coaches who exploit in this way will look for athlete weaknesses and then utilize those weaknesses to control. They may look for athletes who display people-pleasing tendencies, loneliness, fear of confrontation, or lack of assertiveness and then use these attributes to control athletes. This type of manipulation is always intentional, and exhibits the unnecessary need to control or cause harm.

## **Lack of Boundaries**

If a coach begins to push boundaries through inappropriate physical touch, discussing intimate details of their private life, inappropriate jokes, or risqué language, then it is a red flag. Coaches like this will likely continue to push boundaries with athletes until it becomes dangerous. It is important for athletes to set non-negotiable boundaries, and to be empowered to speak up if they are uncomfortable.

## **Betraying Confidence**

An athlete-coach relationship should be built on trust with an emphasis on the athlete trusting the coach to have the integrity to always act in the athlete's best interest. If a coach tells an athlete private details about another athlete, or in other ways betrays confidence, it is a concerning sign. A good coach should always be intent on building trust and encourage athletes to find community in one another when they are struggling. A good coach should not encourage an athlete to keep secrets, or to keep information from friends or family members.

Note: Coaches may need to discuss things an athlete said in confidence if they believe the athlete is in danger, or may hurt themselves or others.

## **Allowing, Ignoring, or Participating in Bullying, Hazing, or Harmful Initiation Rituals**

If a coach ignores or participates in bullying, hazing, or harmful initiation rituals, it is a sign of neglect. A coach should always be working toward creating the most healthy and positive environment for all athletes to thrive in. If they actively participate in, or consciously ignore this type of behavior, they are not doing what's best for the athletes.

Hazing may look like: Pressuring or forcing athletes to drink alcohol, take drugs, eat or drink something that they don't want; show body parts; endure physical punishment; or take performance enhancing substances.

# **ATHLETE SUPPORT SYSTEMS PLAY A ROLE**

We acknowledge the difficulty that comes with responding to a situation where you notice a coach and athlete relationship that appears to be inappropriate. Reporting inappropriate behavior with a youth creates accountability so that proper action can be taken and expectations re-established for both the coach and the athlete. It is important to report concerns or violations even if you believe the coach has the best interest of the youth athlete at heart, and would never cross the boundary to abuse. By displaying any of the aforementioned redflags or inappropriate behavior, the coach is normalizing inappropriate relationships with coaches.

Parents and coaches should have regular age-appropriate conversations with athletes about personal safety and boundary-breaking behavior. Topics could include: qualities of healthy relationships, importance of personal boundaries, and how to get help/where to bring concerns if a relationship becomes unhealthy. For child-appropriate books to start these types of conversations, check out our Kids Reading List.

## RESOURCES

<https://www.kidpower.org/youth-sports/d2l.org/codeofconduct>

[https://commit2kids.ca/pdfs/C2K\\_CoachingAssocCanada\\_Interacting\\_en.pdf](https://commit2kids.ca/pdfs/C2K_CoachingAssocCanada_Interacting_en.pdf)

<https://www.anncrafttrust.org/adult-coach-athlete-relationships-the-complexities-and-potential-risks-saferculturesafersport/>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4809874/>

<https://www.athleteassessments.com/coach-athlete-relationship-performance-factor/>

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00684/full>

<http://www.caresnw.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/6-tips-for-identifying-an-unhealthy-coach-athlete-relationship-.pdf>