



8 Ways Athletes Can Resolve Conflicts Without Bullying

When athletes on your team are having disagreements, as a coach it's natural to want to jump in and solve the conflict for them. But while you can help make athletes more ethical, you shouldn't make decisions for them — you'd actually doing them a disservice by helping them avoid conflict.

Before you can teach how to resolve disagreements, it's important to understand that conflict and bullying are different things. Conflict is a disagreement where both sides can express their views, while bullying is a negative behavior in which one person has power over another.

Here's how you can facilitate disagreements amongst teammates to keep conflict from turning into bullying.

Establish a conflict policy early

As your season begins, sit down with the team and create a conflict plan or policy: A set of rules and recommendations for how teammates can best deal with conflicts amongst themselves. This might include a journaling exercise, bringing conflicts to you as the coach before hashing them out with a teammate, or setting a weekly team meeting where your athletes can address problems they're having.

"Set clear rules about behavior and expectations — if you set those expectations for teams early, it makes it clear how things like conflict or bullying will be handled when it does come up," says Bailey Huston, a coordinator at PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center.

Focus on building team culture

One study suggests that the best way to deter bullying is to create strong team camaraderie. If your team has a strong culture of mutual respect and friendship, disagreements are more likely to be resolved in mature, healthy ways.

As a coach, whether it's conflict or bullying, you have a big role to play when you see a disagreement — but you're not going to be the one to solve it. "Talk separately with the students first — that allows you to assess the situation and get both points of view," says Huston. "If the conflict is still 'hot,' bringing everyone together sometimes isn't the most productive way to get to the root of what's going on."

"Start with a one-on-one conversation. You want to get to the core of what's actually going on before you help them hold a conversation to resolve the situation."

Help students find resolutions separately

Huston suggests telling athletes to pause and think about the ways in which they would like to see the conflict resolved — what is the outcome they're hoping for? Younger athletes may not have the emotional ability to calmly work through conflict when they haven't had time to sit with it.

Try having your athletes do a journaling exercise where they write out the conflict and their preferred resolution. "Putting pen to paper is a great way to do this — seeing things written out can give you a new perspective," she adds. "It can also help them work through what to say and how to respond to people."

Teach assertiveness versus aggressiveness

"At PACER, we promote this idea of self-advocacy, which is speaking up for yourself and what you need," says Huston. "That's assertiveness, but there's a difference between that and aggression. Aggression comes off as attacking others or ignoring others' needs and has negative emotions around it. Being assertive is stating your opinion and thoughts while being respectful of the needs of others."

Press pause when needed

Teach your students that a conflict sometimes requires more than one conversation to solve. "Try to keep your emotions in check, remain calm, and keep eye contact," says Huston. "Conversations can get emotional and that's fine. It's OK to tell the other person that you need a minute to collect yourself. Just say 'I want to finish this conversation, but I need to take a minute,' and then you can talk when it's a better time.' Don't just storm away though — that escalates the situation."

Practice 5-4-3-2-1

"Teach students this activity to ground themselves when they're feeling stressed or emotional," says Huston. "Think of five things you can see around you, four things you can touch around you, three things you can hear around you, two things you can smell around you, and one thing you can taste. It's a great way to bring yourself back to the present and calm yourself down. Sometimes, conflicts get blown up and can turn from conflict to bullying—where a student is trying to hurt the other — when a student gets overly emotional and out of the moment. This exercise can help to ground them."

Keep conflict resolution in real life

Urge your athletes to keep conflicts in real life versus allowing the communication to continue online. "In-person is best so you can see the other person's reaction," says Huston. "With cyber-bullying, what we see is that it's easier to say things to a person that you would never say to their face because you'd have to see their emotional reaction. Things can also escalate and easily get misinterpreted when communication is digital."

Handling group conflict

Unfortunately, team conflicts often end up starting with two people and escalating to team-wide drama. "This is when it's a good time for an adult to get involved and help unwind these complex relationships," says Huston.

"With bullying, power can come in numbers: a group of people versus one person creates a power imbalance, so that's something to watch for. Trying to break conflict resolution into one-on-one conversations is ideal. Try to create a level playing field for your athletes because that's where conflict will be best resolved. As a coach, if you can balance that power and let those students separate to have those conversations, that's super helpful."

It's important to keep in mind that conflict is okay and it's a natural thing experienced between people.

"As adults, we know that conflict is part of everyday life. But you have to understand the difference between conflict and bullying," says Huston. "Strong words can be exchanged, but not all conflict is

bullying. Conflict is a great opportunity to make relationships better, and an important part of expressing your needs. It can be stressful, and it can hurt, but a lot of good can come out of it.”



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TrueSport® inspires athletes, coaches, parents, and administrators to change the culture of youth sport through active engagement and thoughtful curriculum based on cornerstone lessons of sportsmanship, character-building, and clean and healthy performance, by creating leaders across communities through sport.

You can link back to the TrueSport article beginning October 1st at:
<https://learn.truesport.org/8-ways-athletes-can-resolve-conflicts-without-bullying>