

## How to Help Your Athlete Avoid the Pitfalls of Perfectionism

As caregivers, you want your athlete to perform at their best and achieve excellence in their sport, at school, and in their other extracurricular activities. But while striving to be their best is important, sometimes athletes can take these behaviors too far and end up hurting themselves as a result. So, how can you help your athlete strive for greatness—while avoiding the dangers that can come from perfectionist tendencies?

Here, TrueSport Expert Dr. Kevin Chapman, clinical psychologist and founder of The Kentucky Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders, offers a new lens through which to look at athlete behavior, along with a few tips to help parents navigate tricky topics like body image and social media.

### Why is perfectionism bad?

"[Perfectionism sets up our athletes with unrealistic expectations](#), and it creates a mindset where anything short of perfection is unacceptable," explains Chapman. "It's a pursuit of being flawless in one's performance, and it focuses on achieving outcomes rather than the process it takes to get to those outcomes."

"Perfectionism is too high of a standard and it's not actually achievable," he adds.

"[Perfectionism can increase negative emotions like anxiety, shame, and guilt](#), as well as the symptoms of depression."

Athletes can—and should—have high standards for themselves, he adds. But there's a distinct difference between a high standard and perfectionism.

### Where do caregivers fit in?

"Caregivers in particular need to be paying attention to how they might be contributing to their athlete's perfectionism," Chapman says. "A lot of the time, the fear of disappointing a caregiver is high, and that could be significantly contributing to these tendencies."

When it comes to identifying a problem, there are two 'symptoms' that Chapman wants caregivers to look for in their athletes:

1. **Heightened emotion.** "Heightened emotionality, like raging out, crying spells, and things that are different than their typical baseline behavior are warning signs," he says.
2. **Impaired functioning.** "Are they not performing on the court? Are they not doing well in school now? Are they messing up relationships? This is another big warning sign that something has changed for your athlete," he adds. "If your athlete seems to be struggling in areas they haven't struggled in before and/or if their new behaviors represent a significant change from their baseline functioning, that's a big red flag. Be especially aware if their grades, eating, or sleeping habits are suffering."

### **How can you help your athlete?**

Help your athlete reframe failure. "Your athlete should understand that failure is a part of the process and a sign of growth," he explains. "Yes, your athlete should have high standards, but if they're a perfectionist, they won't be able to accept failure as anything other than failure."

Instead, help your athlete learn from their mistakes. "To start, I like caregivers to ask athletes, 'What did you learn today?' after practices and games," Chapman says.

You can also listen to how your athlete talks about themselves. Unfortunately, [eating disorders and even suicidal thoughts can arise from perfectionist tendencies](#), says Chapman. So, listen to how your athlete is talking about themselves as well as others. Are they focused on how their body looks? Are they always pointing out flaws in themselves? Are their emotions heightened? Are they struggling in school when they hadn't been before?

Overtraining is another common issue that perfectionists deal with, says Chapman. "You need to be a detective," says Chapman. "Look at how they're training now and if it's changed significantly. Are they spending way more hours training instead of doing things they typically would do, such as homework, eating with the family, or hanging out with friends? When it starts impairing their normal functioning, that's a warning sign. Overtraining can be about much more than sport performance, and in some cases, it's actually a symptom of obsessive compulsive disorder, an eating disorder, or another type of anxiety disorder."

Additionally, look at how your athlete interacts with social media. We know that social media can lead to increased comparison and negative feelings. "We know that social media is not healthy for a developing brain," notes Chapman. "So first and foremost, I think parents need to give themselves grace and know that limiting social media may upset your child, but it's for the sake of their health."

Within social media usage, Chapman recommends setting certain boundaries with your athlete:

1. Avoid your athlete using social media directly following a sporting event to minimize negative comparisons.
2. Set times when your athlete can be online to maximize the time your athlete engages in healthy in-person conversations.
3. Model social media restraint. "If you tell your athlete that they can't have their phone at the dinner table, put yours away as well," Chapman adds. "Adults aren't any better at having healthy conversations when their phones are out."

If you're not sure how to help your athlete and you worry that they're struggling with perfectionism in a way that's negatively impacting their physical or emotional health, seek outside help. "Sometimes our athletes need help that we cannot provide and it's not a

reflection on your parenting," says Chapman. "If you need to seek professional help, look for professional, licensed therapists who have expertise in dealing with young people."

Finally, as the caregiver, you may also want to speak to a therapist. "You may need to change your dynamic with your athlete, and there may be some hard conversations that need to be had," reflects Chapman. "Even parents with the best intentions can unknowingly contribute to their athlete's struggles with perfectionism."

### **Takeaway**

Perfectionism in young athletes may seem natural, but it can have extremely negative consequences, including burnout, depression, and even suicide. Caregivers can help athletes by focusing on the benefits of failure, limiting social media usage, and seeking professional help when needed.



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