

What is considered Bullying?

In the sports world there is a fine line between harmless teasing and trash talking amongst competitors and bullying.

Bullying is when one or more team members or coaches intentionally sets out to hurt a person. When it comes to team sports and athletic bullying, the most common forms of bullying are **Verbal bullying** (name calling, taunting, rudeness and threats of violence and/or harm to a teammate or another student.) **Physical bullying** (hitting, slapping, towel snapping, tripping and physical violence against another's will. **Relational bullying** (excluding another player, gossiping, hurtful trash talk and embarrassing a player in front of others.)

This can include:

- Ganging up on team members because a "leader" on the team does not like them.
- Harassing team members when they make a mistake during the game.
- Intimidating the most promising players in order to eliminate the competition for the best positions and the limelight.
- Targeting, intimidating, and coercing new team members and forcing them to prove they belong on the team.
- Targeting someone because they get more attention and praise from the coach or because they appear to be the coach's favorite.
- Threatening team members about doing well in games and practices because they might steal the limelight.
- Targeting team members who do not perform as well as others.

There is such a thing as harmless teasing between players and then there is making a teammate with less talent or power feel badly.

Signs kids and teens are being bullied on the sports field:

- Look for changes in behavior in your child.
- Your child no longer wants to participate in their favorite sport
- Your child doesn't want to see their friends or a particular friend
- Your child complains stomach aches and other ailments that do not exist

Have regular conversations with your athletes.

Don't ask outright if they are being bullied, but do ask:

- Do they enjoy being on the team
- Who are their close friends on the team
- Have they ever seen someone on the team being bullied or teased
- Have they been bullied on the team
- Have they ever bullied anyone on the team
- Listen to them
- Empower them
- Teach them self-advocacy skills

If you learn that your child is being bullied or harassed by a teammate or their coach, and they ask you to stay out of it, ask your child what steps he or she will take to help solve the problem. You can help teach them how to overcome adversity and learn to be resilient if you can help them come up with their own ideas. If they can not handle it on their own, you can reach out to the coach or school face to face. Let them know that it is unacceptable and that you want the situation addressed and things to change.

If you've taken all of these steps and the issue is not resolved, you might need to take your child out of the situation. First, you'll need to ask yourself a few important questions. Can your child play on a different team? If your child is determined to find a way to stay on the team, commit to working with them on strategies to deal with bullies. If they choose to handle it on their own, keep checking in with them to make sure they are OK. If the bullying continues and becomes intolerable, then it's time for you to step in, talk to your child and determine how to stop it.

While parents need to be an advocate for their kids and empower them, it is also important that we teach them to advocate for themselves as well. We know some coaches can be bullies. Coaches need to be role models, set the tone for all players on the team and not tolerate any kind of bullying behavior.

Athletic bullying can occur on school or community teams. We must teach our children good sportsmanship and to treat others with respect and begin that education early on. Otherwise the probability for going way past playful trash talk into bullying becomes more likely. Unfortunately, bullying is not uncommon. Over 70% of teens report seeing some kind of bullying in athletics, and 30% admit to having taken part in bullying themselves.

Your role as a Coach

Coaches should work on character building as well as sportsmanship and give players a fun and competitive learning experience that everyone benefits from regardless of skill level. As a coach, you are one of the single biggest influences in your athletes' lives. In many ways, ending bullying behavior begins and ends with you. Here are nine ways to both prevent and stop bullying on your team:

1. **Be an anti-bullying role model.** Coaches can be a strong deterrent to bullying if they make it clear they are firmly against it.
2. **Encourage players to report bullying** and create an environment at the start of your season that does not condone it. Discuss bullying and make sure you are there to supervise your players' unstructured time during practices and games.
3. **Have open discussions.** Talking about what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior on and off the field is an important part of reducing bullying. For example, discuss the difference between being aggressive during the game and using that aggression outside of practice and competition with the intention to harm.
4. **Clearly state the punishment for bullying.** Be clear about the procedure that will be followed if bullying occurs (e.g. "If you bully, the punishment will be..."). Be particularly aware not to inadvertently blame the victim for being bullied.
5. **Identify the origin of the bullying.** Coaches should take the time to identify the sources of bullying to help diminish reactionary behavior, such as retaliating against the bully. As a coach, you should help the victim find constructive ways to respond to the bully and remind them to always report incidents instead of retaliating.
6. **Keep your players' attention.** Supervising athletes closely and providing them clear goals can help reduce the frequency of negative interactions. Increased supervision during unstructured play is essential to prevent and reduce bullying, as this is the time in which most bullying occurs.
7. **Protect all athletes equally.** Coaches and teachers tend to be more vigilant in protecting overweight victims against bullying, but make sure you look after and support all athletes equally.
8. **Break up cliques.** Research shows that strong cliques within teams can lead to strong bullying and antisocial behavior toward other teammates. Emphasize the team as a whole over subgroups to maintain a positive and healthy team dynamic.
9. **Don't encourage harmful behavior.** Do not teach or condone aggressive behavior on the field, as it can result in aggressive behavior off the field. Minimize retaliation against a team that is playing dirty by having your players channel their anger into more productive actions within the game.

Remember that as a coach, you are in the most influential position to prevent and stop bullying on your team. Take the time to educate your players on unacceptable behavior and clearly explain the consequences for bullying.

Bullying in Youth Sports: What is the impact?

Youth sports are often celebrated for their ability to foster teamwork, camaraderie, and personal growth. However, beneath the surface of the playing field, a darker reality sometimes lurks: teammate bullying. This pervasive issue can have profound and lasting effects on young athletes, impacting their confidence, mental well-being, and love for the game.

Bullying, what's the harm?

The impact on the victim can be devastating. Bullying undermines a player's sense of belonging and self-worth, creating feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression. It can erode their confidence and passion for the sport, turning something they once loved into a source of fear and dread.

Moreover, teammate or Coach bullying can have long-term consequences that extend far beyond the playing field. Research has shown that victims of bullying are more likely to struggle academically, experience social difficulties, and develop mental health issues later in life. The scars left by teammate bullying can last a lifetime, affecting relationships, career aspirations, and overall well-being.

Creating an Anti-Bullying culture

As coaches, parents, and administrators, we have a responsibility to create a culture of respect and inclusion in youth sports. This begins with fostering open communication and sportmanship among players, encouraging them to speak up against bullying and support each other as teammates and friends. By establishing clear guidelines and consequences for bullying behavior, we send a powerful message that such actions will not be tolerated.

Empowering Victims and Bystanders to speak out

In addition to addressing bullying behavior, it's essential to empower victims and bystanders to speak out and speak up. Victims of bullying should feel safe and supported in reporting incidents to coaches, parents, or other trusted adults. Likewise, bystanders have a responsibility to intervene and support their teammates when they witness bullying, whether by speaking up, offering assistance, or seeking help from a coach or authority figure. Teaching players to assertively communicate their boundaries, seek support from trusted adults, and cultivate a strong support network of friends and teammates can help them navigate challenging situations with confidence and self-assurance. Together, let's stand up against bullying and work towards a future where youth sports are a source of fun, development, and empowerment for all.

Youth sports are a great environment for learning teamwork, developing confidence, and building character, but unfortunately it is not an environment immune to bullying. Despite increased awareness and education about bullying, coaches may not always notice it and kids may not want to talk about it.

How to recognize if your athlete is being bullied.

Sudden loss of interest in sport or activity

It is perfectly normal for kids' interests to change over time, but a sudden loss of interest in sport or activity may have a more acute cause. Kids are drawn to sports to have fun, spend time with their friends, improve their skills, and compete. If that environment no longer feels safe or welcoming due to bullying from a teammate or coach, the activity is no longer fun or appealing and they may try to avoid the environment altogether.

Inexplicably lost or damaged equipment

In a non-sports environment, lost or destroyed clothing, electronics, toys, or school supplies are common signs of bullying. In youth sports, the list expands to include lost or destroyed apparel or equipment, particularly if you notice an increase in frequency.

Not wanting to change clothes or shower in locker room

Bullying often occurs when there is less supervision and greater vulnerability, making bathrooms and locker rooms particularly uncomfortable. Young athletes who are being bullied may suddenly start avoiding the locker room or waiting until they are home to use the bathroom or shower. This can also extend to not wanting to ride the bus to away games.

Complaining of illness or non-visible injury

The stress and anxiety around being bullied can sometimes manifest as real physical symptoms, including headaches and stomach aches. To avoid being around a bully, kids may also fabricate illnesses or minor injuries to get out of going to practice or a game.

Starts bullying siblings or friends

Bullying is about exerting control and power, leaving victims to feel they have neither. One response is to attempt to regain control and power by bullying someone else, often a sibling or sometimes a friend.

Doesn't want to talk about practice or games

Sports are exciting, fun, and social, so it can be a sign of trouble if your young athlete is suddenly withdrawn and reluctant to talk about practices or games. This is particularly the case if they are equally sullen after wins and losses, or good performances and bad.

Outbursts and mood swings

Bullies feed off of their victims' emotional responses, so kids who are being bullied often try to keep their emotions bottled up. Parents and coaches may inadvertently encourage this response by telling kids to simply ignore their tormentors. Those emotions eventually come spilling out, sometimes as angry outbursts, sudden tears, or exaggerated responses to minor stressors.