

8 Easy Tips for Talking to Young Athletes About Physical Differences

From a young age, it's important that your athlete understands that not all kids are going to look the same or have the same abilities. This diversity can be tricky for very young athletes to grasp, but starting the conversation about physical differences early can help your athlete develop into a mature, caring individual.

Here, three [TrueSport Experts](#)—Michele LaBotz, sports medicine physician; Nadia Kyba, MSW, President of Now What Facilitation; and Kevin Chapman, PhD, clinical psychologist and founder of The Kentucky Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders, share a few easy tips to help you navigate a thoughtful conversation around physical difference.

1. Teach kids early that everyone is unique

"The biggest thing a parent can teach a young person is that there are [individual differences between everyone](#), and those differences don't mean one person is better than someone else," says Chapman. "It might help to start by explaining that everyone's output on the field is different because we're all different. Kids need to know that there's going to be a wide range of physical ability within their teams."

2. Teach them to find common ground

"Especially as you get into the teen years, the best thing an athlete can learn to do is to find commonality with their teammates," says LaBotz. "Peer groups are driven by commonalities. When there's a person on the team who is different or who has a disability, that commonality is diminished a bit, but it's still there. Help your athlete figure out that common ground, whether it's being fans of the same sports team or liking the same music."

3. Remind kids to focus on process, not outcome

Even on youth sport teams, young athletes can fall into the 'I want to win' trap. But that focus on an outcome—winning—is often detrimental to athletes with disabilities or less skill. "[I try to teach kids early on to focus on process and progress rather than outcomes.](#)" says Chapman. "Help young athletes understand that we're all created differently, and some people will be slower to make progress, but that doesn't make someone better or worse. That's the developmental message that parents need to reiterate because it's easy for young kids to mistakenly equate physical differences as being 'bad.'"

4. Use the right words

Your kids are likely going to repeat general ideas from you, but they'll also adopt specific phrases. So, your language needs to be impeccable, especially when discussing disability. For instance, using ['person first' language](#) is important.

"Always take a person-first approach," says Kyba. "Instead of saying 'a wheelchair athlete,' put the person first and say, 'athlete with a wheelchair.' When you're talking to your kids, always speak that way." It may take some getting used to, depending on what you grew up saying, but this shift helps show that you see someone as a person first, rather than focusing on their disability.

5. Help your child understand how to help without overstepping

It's important that your child doesn't automatically assume that a player with a disability will need help—but at the same time, your child should feel comfortable offering them a hand. This can be hard to navigate.

"I think teaching discretion is important. Most kids with differences don't want to be singled out in front of the team, even if an athlete means well," says Chapman. "[But simply asking in private](#), 'Is there anything I can do to help?' goes a long way. If the answer is no, encourage your athlete to be graceful and respond with, 'If you ever need help, let me know.' And that's it. Make yourself available but don't force it."

6. Teach kids how to ask questions the right way

Kids are naturally curious creatures, especially at very young ages. This means that if they see an athlete who has a physical difference, they're likely to be curious and to want to ask questions. There's an appropriate way to do that, and an inappropriate way. "Help your athlete understand that if they have questions that they want to ask other athletes or other adults, they can ask them in a respectful way," says Kyba, "Tell your athlete to remember the importance of language—focus on the person first—and to only ask questions with positive intent."

7. Teach your kids to stay alert

Unfortunately, bullying is still a common problem, and because of this, it's important that [your young athlete understands how to recognize it](#) and what to do if they see it happening. Teach your athlete to speak up if they notice a player being bullied in any way.

"The thing I see most often isn't that many athletes are bullying a kid, it's that one or two are bullying the kid but the other athletes on the team are complicit, often because they're too insecure to speak up," says Chapman. As Chapman and LaBotz both say, teach your kids to be [upstanders, not bystanders](#).

8. Understand their curiosity

It's tempting to tell kids to stop asking so many questions, or to simply ignore that other kids will have physical differences. But this is naive and not helpful. "Kids who aren't around a lot of people with physical disabilities will have curiosity," says LaBotz. "And if you don't help them navigate it, they will ask honest questions that could hurt another athlete's feelings. Instead, use this opportunity to talk about how we're all different and unique. By definition, sport is an activity that puts obstacles in our way, and we all adapt to accommodate those obstacles differently. People with physical disabilities need to accommodate and adapt in a different way."

Takeaway

Talking to kids about physical differences can feel daunting, but it's an important conversation to have early and to continue having as your young athlete gets older. The key principles are simple: put the person first and act with positive intent.



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