

How Caregivers Can Encourage Growth with Calculated Risk Taking

Encouraging young people to take risks and take ownership of making their own decisions can be hard for caregivers who are used to helping their children avoid failure. This is understandable and natural, but board-certified family physician and [TrueSport Expert Deborah Gilboa, MD](#), explains that most caregivers are far too risk-adverse and as a result, our athletes actively avoid risk. Unfortunately, that means they don't have the opportunity to learn from new experiences and failures. We need to allow kids to make decisions and live with the consequences, and Gilboa is sharing the blueprint for how to help your athlete take—and learn from—calculated risks.

See the opportunity in sport-specific risk

When you hear the word 'risk,' you may automatically call to mind unsafe behaviors like opting out of a seatbelt or experimenting with illegal drugs. The idea of your athlete making decisions for themselves can leave you wondering if they'll 'decide' whether to obey the curfew you had set. But when she talks about calculated risks and making decisions, Gilboa is referring to risk in a more controlled context, such as taking on a leadership role for the first time or trying a new sport or a new skill. These sport-related risks and decisions may not seem like much, but for a young person, they can be daunting, and they may need you as their caregiver to nudge them into trying something that feels scary.

We don't develop resilience when everything is going well, Gilboa adds. [We grow our resilience muscles when we have setbacks and failures](#), and an athlete who never takes risks or makes their own decisions will never have the opportunity to test and strengthen their resilience.

Your athlete failing means you've succeeded

Gilboa puts it another way: "Caregivers should be looking for more opportunities for their athletes to fail with purpose," she says. "These failures are essentially a stress test for an athlete's resilience. [We need these small failures and disappointments in order to grow](#)—and experiencing them in a safe environment like sport helps prepare your athlete for the real world."

"In short, your child is full of short-term goals, but they are your long-term project," Gilboa says. "And as a long-term project, you have to find opportunities for them to fail, or else they're never going to learn to handle failure, which is going to be inevitable as they get older. So while it's hard to watch your athlete go through a struggle, [it's great news for you when they do fail](#). It means you're doing your part to help them learn."

How to help your athlete make risky decisions

When Gilboa talks about risks, she specifically talks about 'calculated risks.' A calculated risk simply means that the risk has been assessed: [There's still a chance of failure, but the potential positive or negative consequences have been weighed](#), and the risk level seems reasonable for the athlete.

"A calculated risk means your athlete is looking at a step-wise progression," says Gilboa. She likes to use the example of a high dive: If your athlete is new to diving, they won't immediately go from the lowest diving platform to the highest. They'll gradually build up, adding complexity

to their dives and slowly going higher and higher. The calculated risk isn't going from the lowest platform to the highest, it's moving up to a slightly higher platform knowing that there's a chance that the athlete won't be able to perfectly execute the dive.

A calculated risk is actually about mitigating the risk, says Gilboa: It's taking a risk, but breaking it into pieces that are slightly outside of your athlete's comfort zone.

How to talk about risks and consequences

As Gilboa says, failure is part of the learning process. But that can be difficult for athletes to accept, since no one really wants to fail. Still, when making a plan for progression and taking calculated risks, she notes that it's important to help your athlete assess the positive and negative consequences. The higher dive may yield a better score and chance of winning a meet if it goes well, but if it isn't well-executed, it could result in a lower score than the athlete could have gotten if they stayed on the lower platform and did the easier dive.

She recommends having your athlete think about the worst-case scenarios, and how they will navigate them if they do happen. "When taking risks, kids also need to be aware of what happens if one doesn't work out," she says. "What's the plan for when it is harder or scarier than they thought, or when it doesn't go as well as they thought it would?"

"We need to let athletes learn from failures," she says. "Where we tend to mess up as adults is that we try to protect our children from consequences, instead of letting those consequences play out. We should have empathy, but we shouldn't try to solve things for our athletes unless they're in actual danger. These moments are where they learn, and if you're always solving their problems for them, all they learn is that you don't believe that they are capable of doing that for themselves."

When and how to intervene

There will be times when, deep down, you don't think your athlete is ready to take the calculated risk that they want to take. Maybe you don't believe that your athlete is really ready for a team leadership role, but they tell you that they plan to try out to be team captain. It's tempting to try to steer them away from risks that you don't believe they're ready for. But Gilboa says that unless there's a genuine danger involved, avoid saying no. You can ask for more information and help them walk through various scenarios, but try not to dissuade them from the risk.

The only reason to potentially intervene (other than if it's a truly dangerous situation) is if your athlete has been consistently failing, trying the same risk over and over again and not seeing any progress. In this case, your athlete may need to work on developing a better plan, starting with smaller steps.

"But ultimately, living with consequences is one of the main things that builds resilience," she says. "Our children's lives will be full of risk, and if we protect them from everything now, we are accidentally telling them that we don't think they can handle anything themselves. And in the long run, they end up a lot less confident and competent as they grow."

Takeaway

Most caregivers are too risk-adverse and it's making our young athletes avoid risk and avoid making decisions, which means they can't grow by learning from new experiences and failures. We need to allow kids to make decisions, take risks, and live with the consequences.



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