How to Navigate Conflict in an Athlete's Circle of Care
By TrueSport

Young athletes are often under a lot of pressure from the different people involved in their sports. A multisport athlete may have coaches pulling them in different directions, while an athlete who plays on both a school and club team may have conflicting training schedules. An athlete nursing an injury may feel pressure from their coach to return to play by a certain date, even when their physical therapist says they aren't ready. As a caregiver, that often leaves you in the position of helping your athlete navigate these situations, which can be tricky.

Here, Charron Sumler, PhD, TrueSport Expert and Director of Mental Wellness and Performance for the Tennessee Titans, explains how caregivers can help athletes build a trusted circle of care, navigate conflicting expectations, and keep their health, well-being, and goals at the center of the conversation.

Define your athlete's circle of care
A circle of care is a group of trusted people with different roles and expertise who work together to support an athlete's health, well-being, and goals. For a young athlete, that circle may include their coaches, caregivers, and pediatrician, with other professionals introduced as needed. These might include a registered dietitian, sports psychologist, mental performance consultant, physical therapist, sports medicine physician, or athletic trainer.

Some teams have professionals on staff or a list of recommended resources. When those connections aren't available, caregivers and athletes can work together to build their own circle of care.

To get started, Sumler suggests making a simple list with your athlete: Who is already in their circle? Are there coaches, a school athletic trainer, or a trusted pediatrician they feel comfortable approaching? Then, identify the needs that are not currently being met through your athlete's organization or school. A nagging injury or difficulty figuring out how to fuel their body, for example, may point to a need for a sports medicine physician or a registered dietitian.

"Creating a circle of care is simply empowering you to invite others in to help your athlete, instead of feeling like you need to switch your athlete's program entirely to get them more support," says Sumler. "Collaboration is key. Your school may not have access to a nutritionist, but is there a solid athletic training squad? Great. That's a good starting point, and now you just need to figure out how to find a dietitian for your athlete."

Start by exploring the connections and resources you already have. Ask a coach or healthcare professional for recommendations, check whether your insurance covers the service, and find out whether virtual appointments are an option.

"As a caregiver, don't feel as though you need to be the expert for your athlete, and consider yourself to be more of a coordinator of your child's healthcare," Sumler says.

Coordinate your athlete's circle of care
Once you've built out a circle of care, the next step is helping everyone work together, especially when addressing a concern like a nagging injury or chronic under-fueling. The shared goal should remain your athlete's long-term health, well-being, and development.

"Often, a caregiver's main job is to keep everyone in the loop," says Sumler. "That may look like calling the nutritionist and then calling the athletic trainer to get everybody on the same page about what's happening with your athlete."

A group conversation can help clarify the plan, but coordinating everyone's schedules isn't always practical. As a caregiver, you can help establish how relevant updates will be shared, who will handle next steps, and when to check in again. Keep your athlete involved in those conversations and focus on the information needed to coordinate support rather than broadly sharing private health details.

Start by establishing open communication with your athlete's coach. Ask how they prefer to communicate and approach the conversation proactively and respectfully. Let them know that your athlete is working with another professional, explain what support or coordination would be helpful, and make it clear that you want to work together.

Ideally, the people in your athlete's circle of care are in communication from the beginning of the season and share an understanding of your athlete's goals, whether that's simply getting through the season healthy or winning Nationals or making the Olympic team. Depending on the goal, the approaches for helping an athlete stay healthy for the season will look different.

Navigate common sources of conflict
Conflict can arise when people in your athlete's circle of care have different expectations, priorities, or approaches. A coach may interpret outside support as a sign that a caregiver has lost confidence in them, while a caregiver may feel they're simply seeking help with an unmet need, Sumler explains. When an athlete plays on multiple teams and multiple coaches are part of the circle of care, competing schedules and coaching expectations can add another layer of complexity.

"When there's conflict or tension, I always recommend focusing on the shared goal," says Sumler. "People are in the circle of care because they have a shared goal, which in this case is the health and athletic progression of your athlete. The hope would be that the coach would readily agree that having a dietitian consult with your athlete privately to work on their under-fueling issues would be helpful."

When introducing another professional, explain what support your athlete needs and how you hope everyone can work together. The purpose isn't to question someone's value to your athlete. It is to bring in expertise that complements the support already in place.

When you're concerned that your athlete needs more support, Sumler recommends first understanding what resources are already available through the team or school. "If you're feeling frustrated about the care your athlete is receiving, don't immediately default to finding solutions

to a problem before anyone is made aware that it is a problem," she explains. "Instead, try to gain a better understanding of why the problem is happening, and what options already exist. Have a conversation with the coach about what resources you think your athlete needs." The goal is to coordinate care, not to seek permission to access it.

Even with a shared goal and open communication, people may disagree about the best approach. That doesn't necessarily mean the circle of care isn't working. Different perspectives can help clarify a concern or reveal options you hadn't considered. "Caregivers need to understand and respect different approaches to coaching," says Sumler. "It's okay if you don't agree with a coach's philosophy, but it's helpful to work to understand why they have that philosophy and how it helps athletes reach their goals."

Ask questions about the coach's approach and consider how it fits with your athlete's needs and goals. Understanding the reasoning may help you find common ground. If the program remains a poor fit, you may need to explore other options.

One of the trickiest sources of conflict tends to be after an injury, when assessing whether an athlete can return to play. "Often, when it comes to injury, there isn't one clear 'right' answer, and often, most of the choices have negative repercussions," says Sumler. "In these situations, having an open, honest conversation with the circle of care is key. They can help offer a risk-benefit analysis of the situation from different angles.

For instance, if you're trying to make a decision about whether your athlete should have surgery in the middle of the season or wait until the end of the season, the coach, a sports medicine doctor, and the athlete may all have differing opinions. The coach may want the surgery right away in hopes that the athlete comes back for the end of the season to play in the championships. The sports medicine doctor may suggest having the surgery now and taking the rest of the season off entirely. The caregiver may listen to the athlete's plea to just keep playing for a few more games. All three members of the circle of care are unlikely to come to a perfect agreement, but it's helpful to hear everyone's opinion in order to make an informed decision."

"You're trying to collect expert perspective so that you and your athlete can make a decision, not to have somebody else make the decision for you and your athlete," she adds. "Your job is to help your athlete filter through all the opinions and facts and then decide what's best."

Your athlete's circle of care may change over time. Some professionals may become less involved as your athlete's needs change, while others may provide ongoing support. For example, there may be a point where a dietitian is no longer needed on a regular basis because your athlete now has an easy-to-follow meal plan and is feeling comfortable with their fueling strategies.

Sometimes, the concern is not changing needs but how someone communicates. Respectful disagreement is different from communication that is repeatedly dismissive, combative, or unproductive.

“If someone is unproductive in meetings, if they can’t engage in open dialogue and communication, it’s okay to say you’re going to find someone else,” says Sumler.

Communicate through conflict

How you communicate matters when you are dealing with conflict or tension in your circle of care, such as a coach pushing for a travel camp when the athlete is already on the brink of burnout or has school obligations. Sumler recommends a simple framework: shared goal, observation, ask, and agreement.

Start by using the communication channels the coach has established, says Sumler. They may prefer email, scheduled phone calls, or conversations during designated times after practice. Respecting those preferences helps create space for a productive discussion. If a coach has asked caregivers not to raise concerns immediately after games, request another time to talk.

When you connect, work through these four parts:

- **Shared goal:** Sumler suggests starting by identifying what you both want for the athlete. For example, “I know we both want him to keep developing as a basketball player while staying healthy and keeping up with school.”

- **Observation**: Describe what you’ve noticed without assigning blame. “He’s fallen behind on several assignments, and he’s told me he’s worried about missing more school for this camp.”

- **Ask**: Invite the coach to explain their perspective. “Can you help me understand what he would gain from attending this camp and whether there are other ways to work toward those goals?”

- **Agreement**: Work together to identify next steps. Ask, “Given those concerns, what options can we explore?” Using ‘we’ and ‘our’ reinforces that you’re looking for a solution together. Before ending the conversation, confirm what each person will do and when you’ll reconnect. If you need to discuss the options with your athlete first, make that your next step.

Keep your athlete involved

Being able to ask for help and communicate with people like coaches and athletic trainers in an honest, direct way is an important life skill, says Sumler. As a caregiver, you can help your athlete access support without taking over every conversation or decision. You may need to schedule appointments or coordinate communication, but your athlete should still have a voice in their care.

When adults are focused on solving a problem, it’s easy for conversations to happen around an athlete rather than with them. Coaches, healthcare professionals, and caregivers may discuss next steps, then present a plan without first asking what the athlete is experiencing or what concerns

they have. Along with advocating for your athlete, help make space for them to ask questions, share their perspective, and understand the plan.

“For young athletes, especially those who are struggling in a certain area, these conversations can feel overwhelming, and they may end up seeming uninterested or have a hard time participating,” Sumler says. “But it’s important that they don’t feel left out, or like their opinion doesn’t matter. They don’t need to be involved in every single meeting, but they do need to be part of the process, especially when it comes to big decisions like returning to sport after an injury or potentially needing to take an extended break from a sport.”

TAKEAWAY: As a caregiver, you can help your young athlete navigate competing expectations and opinions within their circle of care, especially if they play on multiple teams or participate in multiple sports. Your role isn’t to satisfy everyone’s demands. It’s to keep your athlete’s health, well-being, and goals at the center of the conversation. Work with your athlete to identify who fits into their circle of care, help them access the right experts at the right time, and encourage communication among experts when needed. Throughout the process, make sure your athlete has a voice, understands the next steps, and feels supported in asking questions and advocating for themselves.

About TrueSport

TrueSport®, a movement powered by the experience and values of the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, champions the positive values and life lessons learned through youth sport. Backed by U.S. Congressional mandate, 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, while also creating leaders across communities through sport.

For more expert-driven articles and materials, visit TrueSport’s comprehensive collection of resources.

This content was reproduced in partnership with TrueSport. Any content copied or reproduced without TrueSport and the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency’s express written permission would be in violation of our copyright, and subject to legal recourse. To learn more or request permission to reproduce content, click here.

For the most current version of this article, please see the following link on TrueSport.org, which will be live as of **December 1, 2026**: https://truesport.org/conflict-resolution/navigate-conflict-athlete-circle/