

How To Defend and Feel Good About Your Sport Boundaries

Caregivers often face difficult decisions when navigating youth sports: How can a family balance chores, time together, homework, or other hobbies with multiple sports, teams, camps, and extra coaching without negatively affecting the family unit? For families with more than one child, coordinating schedules, costs, and transportation can make that balancing act even more difficult.

And that is where [setting firm boundaries](#) with your young athlete becomes critically important, explains Dr. Melissa Streno, [TrueSport Expert](#) and licensed clinical psychologist. As a mom to two young athletes herself, she knows how hard it can be to say “no” to adding more things to the calendar, especially when your child is begging to go and the clinic or camp seems like a great opportunity. But defining your family’s boundaries can help maintain a sense of calm and control, even when the season is in full swing. Here, Streno explains how to work as a family to set boundaries that stick.

What exactly are sport boundaries?

You’ve likely heard or seen the term “boundaries” in other articles podcasts, or conversations about parenting. [But what exactly is a boundary](#)? Simply put, a boundary is a clear limit, or line in the sand that you aren’t willing to cross. The boundaries in this article relate primarily to the amount of time, effort, or even money that you as a family are willing to put into your athlete’s sporting life. And setting those boundaries can be difficult, especially around something that provides so many positive benefits to your athlete.

Unfortunately, Streno has seen far too many athletes become so overscheduled that they burn out and quit the sport entirely. “Right now, we’re in this pressure cooker where ‘more is better,’ and parents feel that as strongly as athletes do. An athlete might be on a school team and a club team, then have private lessons on top of that, plus they’re seeing a sport psychologist and a dietitian, and they have an intense travel competition schedule,” she says. “They’re so packed and over-scheduled that they end up unable to spend time with the important people in their lives. We don’t want to get to that point, where the athlete—and possibly you as the caregiver—are bursting at the seams and [pushing up against that feeling of burnout](#). That’s why we need sport boundaries.”

“Most boundaries will feel uncomfortable to set,” says Streno. “If it were easy, we would have done it a long time ago. But usually, we’re setting a boundary because we’re pushing up against something that’s starting to impact our physical or mental well-being. We or our athletes are getting to a place where we’re either close to burnout, or the athlete is struggling with a physical injury, slipping grades, or an emotional issue like social isolation.”

She adds that symptoms of burnout, repetitive injuries, or even mood changes may signal that an athlete’s schedule needs to change. In those moments, family boundaries can make it easier to say “no,” scale back commitments, or adjust the current schedule.

Boundary-setting basics

When caregivers set boundaries and expectations, it's important to explain *why* and *how* those boundaries are being created. Boundaries shouldn't be set in a vacuum, says Streno. Rather than tell your young athletes what new boundaries you've set, have them take part in the process, especially as they get older. Instead of telling an athlete that they can pick two sports each season, have a conversation about what constitutes "enough." Maybe for your soccer-loving teen, it's having a certain number of hours or days per week devoted to that single sport, while your nine-year-old who loves every sport can pick two sports to participate in each season.

When sitting down to set boundaries for the season ahead, start by looking at what has worked well in the past. Were two sports easy to balance, or was your athlete constantly feeling pulled in two directions? Did extra skills sessions with a coach add confidence or stress? Allow your athlete to have their say. "This is such good life practice," says Streno. "When your athlete is able to have boundaries that they've worked with you to set, they learn how to practice assertiveness and autonomy."

Ideally, this conversation doesn't happen during a stressful time in the season, says Streno. It's best if you're able to set the boundaries *before* new opportunities and situations arise where having a boundary in place would be helpful. Even if you and your athlete are currently feeling comfortable with the schedule, have the conversation. You may realize that you're both close to your limit and agree to not take on any new practices or travel games, or you may find that your athlete could actually benefit from one more practice session with a coach each month.

"Even if things are good right now, more opportunities will come up, and there are so many reasons why we should be thinking ahead, from available time to the financial implications to how many caregivers are in the house and able to drive athletes to and from events," says Streno. "There are so many variables. Creating the decision-making scaffolding now helps prevent stress in those moments when opportunities are presented."

She adds that it can also be helpful to have these boundaries in place ahead of time so that a "no" to a travel camp doesn't feel like a punishment, it is simply a pre-made decision. And for parents who are often presented with last-minute opportunities or high-stress registration windows that close within minutes, already having a yes/no system in place can be invaluable.

Remember, though, the boundaries that you set are meant to protect you, your athlete, and the overall family unit—which means your athlete may not always agree with the boundaries that you think are best.

How do you know if your boundaries are slipping?

Setting boundaries when life feels calm is relatively easy. The harder part is maintaining them when an athlete wants to add another practice, a coach encourages participation in a travel tournament, or other families seem to be saying yes to every opportunity.

"The 'everyone's doing it' fear and excuse are real," says Streno. She calls it the contagion effect—and when you give in once, it shows young athletes that the boundaries were never real.

“Once you give in, all of a sudden, boundaries that were set and the work it took to create them are totally gone.”

Streno adds that when you allow these boundaries to be broken, you’re weakening a trust with your young athlete—and because the boundaries were there to protect them, allowing that boundary to relax may be doing them more harm than good. For instance, if you had initially set a boundary to safeguard extra time for schoolwork and suddenly, you’re allowing that boundary to relax, you’re sending a message that schoolwork isn’t as important.

As the caregiver, Streno notes that you may need to be the one to communicate to the coach when your athlete can’t attend extra practices or participate in a last-minute trip. It’s also important to recognize that a family’s boundaries may not align with every coach, club, or level of competition.

“Setting boundaries comes with the possibility that they might not fit well with a particular coach, a particular club, or a particular level of sport, and that can be really difficult,” says Streno. “We’re losing talented athletes and kids who loved the sport because of these expectations. But as caregivers, we have to uphold the boundaries that protect families, even when doing so feels hard.”

Holding those limits may have consequences, such as less playing time, missed opportunities, or the need to leave a team. “If your child loses a starting spot because your family upheld a reasonable boundary, it is worth asking whether that was truly the right team environment for your family,” says Streno.

Sometimes, one family’s willingness to set a clear limit can give other caregivers permission to reflect on their own schedules, resources, and priorities. Over time, those conversations can help create a healthier team culture.

How to renegotiate a boundary without giving in

Finally, there may times when a family may decide to revisit a boundary. Perhaps a meaningful opportunity has come up, and while it was not part of the original schedule or budget you agreed to, it would be a positive experience for your athlete.

“There needs to be some flexibility when life changes or an athlete’s interests shifts,” says Streno. “Maybe they make a higher-level team, and travel is part of participating on that team. That might shift things.”

When families first set boundaries, Streno suggests considering scenarios such as what opportunities could arise and, if they do, how they can be handled. As long as the outcome still aligns with the family’s values, boundaries can be shifted.

However, when an unforeseen opportunity arises, don’t give in right away, says Streno. Instead, use this as an opportunity for growth with your athlete. Involve them in the conversation. Ask them why the opportunity matters to them, what they hope to gain from it, and how the

commitment would affect the family's time, finances, school responsibilities, and other priorities. Not only does this force the athlete to truly [consider whether the opportunity is right for them](#), it teaches them how to ask for what they want while considering the needs of others.

Setting boundaries doesn't make you the "bad guy" even when saying no feels uncomfortable. Clear limits help families make intentional choices that protect an athlete's well-being, enjoyment of sport, and long-term participation.

TAKEAWAY: While considering the needs of the entire household, work with your athlete to set clear boundaries around sports, training time, travel, and spending. These limits can help both you and your athlete avoid overwhelm and burnout, while also creating a framework for evaluating new opportunities. Boundaries are likely to feel uncomfortable when they're being tested but holding to them whenever possible helps reinforce the priorities behind them. At the same time, families can revisit and thoughtfully adjust boundaries when circumstances, interests, or needs change.



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