

How to Help Athletes Maintain a Positive Body Image After Sport

When a competitive athlete leaves sport, permanently or briefly to recover from an injury or pursue another activity, it's normal to feel a mixture of emotions. Even if the athlete is choosing to take a break from sport, issues surrounding body image, nutrition, and exercise outside of regimented practice can still come up.

Here, TrueSport Expert and licensed clinical psychologist Dr. Melissa Streno explains how parents can help guide athletes through this transition period while maintaining a positive body image.

Start before they finish

Parents should be helping athletes create an identity outside of sport and within other support systems even before an athlete is considering a break. Our interests contribute to how we define ourselves, so parents can help make their child's identity diverse by letting them choose many activities to try, and by role modeling and encouraging them with realistic, healthy expectations.

"This way, when sport does inevitably come to an end, they can feel there are other realms in their life where they're connected, comfortable, and accepted. Then it doesn't feel like their whole world is caving in after sport," says Streno. "And as a side note, diverse interests actually help us be more successful in sport anyway!"

Help them create new routines

"Many young athletes have followed a certain path that's centered around attaining or maintaining an appearance, often in a really detrimental way," Streno says. "They have very specific routines and behaviors, and they've been on autopilot. It's hard to change when that's all they've known. When redefining a relationship with food and exercise after sport, help them get the appropriate professional help to learn what their body really needs."

Finding a new way to move is important

Even if your child is leaving sport because he or she isn't enjoying it, movement is still important and healthy for any young person. Find exercise or movement that feels fun and not like training. This could be hiking, biking, strength training, yoga, or—depending on the situation—joining a recreational sport league. "Try to make sure that the urge to exercise is coming from a healthy place, not just being done to control what their body looks like," says Streno.

Understand what your child could be dealing with

"Any sort of shift in sport is significant because of the role this plays in our identity: not just the physical part, but also who we are," says Streno. "Struggling with the question of 'who we are' can lead somebody down a path of using food and exercise to maintain some sense of control when they feel everything else is shifting."

Encourage your child to dig into their identity

On a practical level, Streno recommends some journaling prompts for students struggling with identity beyond sport. Encourage your child to sit down and spend some time answering questions like:

- *Who am I?*
- *Who am I without sport?*
- *What is important to me outside of sport?*
- *What have I gained from sport?*
- *Who I am because of sport?*
- *How do I use that in this next realm, this next endeavor, and this next challenge?*

Prepare your athlete for changes

"After sport, there is going to be a transition period where your athlete likely experiences some body transformation," says Streno. "It's important to talk about the reality of what's going to happen. We're going to encounter physical changes throughout our entire life, so normalize that identity is not just how you look or how strong you are as an athlete."

"We also see a huge uptick in disordered eating and eating disorders post athletic career because it's the one thing that athletes feel they can control." Learn more about [disordered eating here](#).

Let your child grieve

Leaving sport for any reason can lead a child to feel a huge range of emotions. "I would encourage your child to wade through the really uncomfortable emotions. If they're not, that's actually riskier when it comes to eating disorders since coping with those feelings in private can become an avenue for disordered behavior," Streno says.

Takeaway

An athlete's body image can be dramatically impacted when it's time to move away from sport. Use this expert guidance to help your athlete navigate the transition and come out on the other side with a positive body image.



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