

How to Help Athletes Have Difficult Conversations

Whether you're a child or an adult, a coach or a parent, a teammate or a team leader, difficult conversations are never easy. Having frank discussions that feel confrontational can be intimidating and emotionally taxing at any age, but fortunately, there are ways to improve your athlete's ability to handle difficult conversations with teammates, coaches, and parents. And this won't just improve their ability to communicate with their team now—this is a skill that will help them navigate life.

Here, [Nadia Kyba](#), MSW, TrueSport Expert and President of Now What Facilitation, explains how to use a form of nonviolent communication when beginning a tough conversation, as well as how to practice it in a low-stress setting.

Be okay with emotion

The most important lesson to teach a young athlete is that it's okay to feel emotional when approaching a hard conversation, whether it's asking the coach how to get more playing time, or asking a teammate why she won't pass the ball during games. "People often avoid having hard conversations because they're afraid that they'll get emotional—start crying—during them," Kyba says. "But that's okay. And if you take the time to prepare and have a bit of a script, maybe even practice having the conversation out loud to yourself or a trusted adult, then it's going to be easier to do it. I try to get people to prepare ahead of time when possible, and then invite the other person to have the talk at a set time rather than just getting into it."

Think before you start

On the note of preparation, Kyba is a firm believer in scripting out what you want to say and knowing what you want to get out of the confrontation. The worst kind of difficult conversation is when both parties leave feeling as though they weren't understood and their needs weren't met. "Whenever you're feeling like you're about to have, or need to have, some kind of confrontation, the best thing to do is to step back and pause," says Kyba. Think about the conversation you hope to have. What are the facts that you're bringing in? Are there any assumptions that you're making that may not be true? What exactly is the problem that you want solved? Taking five minutes to journal through these questions can make the conversation much clearer, which means it's much more likely to get resolved in a way that benefits both parties.

Set the stage

For a young athlete, setting the stage for a conversation may mean setting a time to speak with the coach during his or her office hours, texting a teammate to see if they can talk before or after practice, or even leaving a note for a parent asking for a parent/child meeting in the evening. Having a face-to-face discussion is ideal, Kyba says, but video chat or phone will work if in-person meetings are impossible right now. She recommends avoiding text or email to have a tough conversation though, since tone of voice is critical. "If you're nervous about crying, then try having your talk on the phone—plus, that way you can have your notes in front of you," she points out.

Follow the script

Kyba recommends using this five-step approach to a difficult conversation. Of course, not every person will be on the same page, but having this script worked out in your head or on paper before beginning the conversation can be extremely helpful.

1. *Acknowledge*: "Thank you for taking the time to talk to me."

First, thank the person and acknowledge them for being willing to have this conversation, Kyba says. This helps establish a positive space for the discussion and emphasizes the desire to have a conversation, not a fight.

2. *Describe*: "In the game yesterday, I was open a lot, but I noticed that you never passed me the ball."

Without adding any emotion or feelings, explain what you want to discuss. Use facts and keep it as simple as possible.

3. *Feeling*: "I felt overlooked."

Now, you can explain how the incident made you feel, but beware of using a feeling to create a fact. For instance, saying, "I feel like you don't like me," or "I feel like you think I'm a bad player," isn't about your emotion. This part of the script should only focus on your internal emotion, not attaching blame. More specifically, try to avoid saying "I feel *like*," since that often adds an external element to your feeling instead of describing an internal emotion. For the person you're having the conversation with, this will feel less like a personal attack.

4. *Need*: "I need to understand if there was some reason you weren't passing me the ball."

Difficult conversations often go poorly when the person initiating the discussion doesn't actually know what they need in order to resolve the problem, so before you start speaking, make sure you know what you really want. "What do you need in order to feel better about the situation?" asks Kyba. Often, the answer is more complicated than you might initially think. In this example, for instance, the immediate assumption would be that the person starting the conversation wants the ball to be passed to her. But really, what she needs is the reason the ball wasn't getting passed in the first place. Did her teammate simply not notice her, or is there a social dynamic at play, or was another player just within closer passing distance?

5. *Request:* "Could you let me know what your thinking was during the game?"

After you've stated your need, it's important to break down your need into a request that the other person can respond to. Again, people often skip this step and leave a conversation unfulfilled because they couldn't articulate what the other person can do to meet their specific need. "In this case, you're not trying to change what happens in the next game yet, you're just trying to gather the facts and information from this last game and understand why the ball wasn't passed to you," says Kyba. Then, you have the information to either continue the conversation or make an action plan for the next game.

Your conversation may be concluded at this point. If you haven't come to a good understanding or found a solution, you can begin the process again. This is just a starting point, says Kyba. Thank the other person for taking the time to listen to you and try describing what you think the response to your request was, and how you feel about it.

Practice, practice, practice

Don't wait for a problem before teaching your athletes about this script! Parents and coaches can benefit from roleplaying a few difficult conversations with their young athletes. "You can role play some silly scenarios and let athletes work out their scripts, which feels like fun, but they do learn to be more prepared for when they need to have real conversations," Kyba says. "The more you get used to using this script, the easier it is to have a difficult conversation that ends with both parties feeling heard."

Takeaway

Having difficult conversations is never easy, but it is important for young athletes to learn this skill, as it offers benefits in both sport and life. These tips will help parents and coaches prepare their athletes to have difficult conversations and find effective resolutions.



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