

9 Ways to Help Athletes Cope with Anxiety Around Tryouts

As a coach or caregiver, it's easy to forget the anxiety and nerves that come up for athletes around team tryouts. Or maybe you have an experience of your own that you remember and shudder about decades later! But how do you hold tryouts and make the right selections for your team while still helping athletes navigate those nerves?

Your actions before, during, and after tryouts can make the process less intimidating and more fun—while still ensuring that your team has the right blend of athletes. Here, Amanda Stanec, PhD, kinesiologist and the founder and owner of MOVE + LIVE + LEARN, shares a few tips for how to best help athletes thrive in tryouts this season.

Help Athletes Understand That Some Anxiety Is Actually a Good Thing

Not all anxiety is bad: In fact, [some level of anxiety can be positive](#), and anxiety can be sending us messages that we need to adjust our actions in order to be better prepared. Additionally, common levels of anxiety are a part of life, and sport is a great way for athletes to learn to cope with anxiety so they can apply such skills off the field of play, now and in the future. "It is normal that kids feel a bit anxious before tryouts and that's because they care," says Stanec. "If coaches and caregivers talk to their kids about it, then it should be in that context. Say things like, '[You feel anxious?](#)' That's normal and tells me that you care about the tryout, which is appropriate. But all you can control is your effort and attitude so focus on doing your best and staying determined and positive and you can be proud of yourself.'" And if your athlete isn't talking about their nerves, don't bring it up: There is no need to put it in their heads!

Coaches

Be extremely clear about the tryout process.

Often, [anxiety that is unhelpful stems from an athlete's nerves around unknown elements](#). What exactly will they need to do at tryouts to make the team? The more information you can share with all athletes about the try out the better. This can be done at a pre-tryout meeting or in written form—just make sure it's accessible to all, not just athletes who have been on the team in the past. "Coaches should also let athletes know to focus only on what they can control: their attitude and effort," says Stanec. "Encourage athletes to visualize themselves participating in the tryout while giving their best effort and staying positive when they make mistakes. Remind athletes that everyone, even the best athletes in the world, make mistakes in competition and practice and that making mistakes is really one of the only things guaranteed in sport."

Best practice for tryouts

- Offer multiple occasions to see kids competing for a spot. Hold tryouts over several weeks to help balance if kids aren't feeling their best at one particular session, or if certain athletes can't make tryouts one day due to work, family or religious commitments.
- Be as objective as possible. When possible, have kids wear numbers rather than name tags to mitigate bias. You may even want to have other evaluators (ideally ones who do not know the athletes trying out) help with tryouts.
- Be transparent with data [if tryouts are data driven](#). Athletes should know where they stand, and not be left guessing.

Know That You Won't Get It Perfect—But Have Integrity with Your Results

"No matter how much coaches and clubs try to be objective in tryouts, often there will be bias and some decisions will be made based on subjective measures," Stanec admits. "It's impossible to think that coaches will always get it right or that caregivers will always be happy with the result. The key is for everyone to do their very best, model integrity, and take measures to increase the objectivity of the tryouts." She also notes that coaches should be future thinking as they assess athletes: Athletes who haven't hit a growth spurt but have a lot of skill and drive may blossom next year.

Constantly Assess Your Biases

[It's nearly impossible to avoid all bias](#), whether it's a more obvious racial, gender, ethnic or religious bias, or simply a more personality-focused bias, like the idea that louder or more popular kids make natural leaders. "Coaches need to realize that their biases can be unfairly and unnecessarily detrimental to children when they aren't checked or challenged," says Stanec. "It's important that coaches have a strong grasp on everyone's ability and potential so that they don't favor those they might know a bit more than others." Another major bias Stanec often sees is when the coach has a relationship with the athlete's family, which is very common in youth sport. "It's also important that they keep personal relationships with parents separate from their role as coaches which can be difficult as often youth sports coaches are parents of a player on the team," she adds. "As a result, their friends' kids or their child's classmates may be trying out for the team along with kids who have no previous or personal connections. In these instances, the most professional coaches will implement key steps to mitigate bias."

Give Feedback To All Athletes

Before, during and after tryouts, coaches should remind every kid trying out for a sport that they are human beings first and valued as humans. Sport is something they do; it is not who they are. "Remind them that while some will be disappointed at the end of the tryouts, it is your goal that they feel proud of themselves, had fun during the tryout, and know exactly what to focus on if they fall short so they can come back and try out again another season," says Stanec. Ideally, even athletes who don't make the team will leave with specifics to work on for next year and feel inspired to develop in these areas.

Caregivers

Avoid These Topics/Statements When Talking to Your Athlete:

- Statements that add pressure. Caregivers almost always mean well but put undue pressure on young athletes when they say things like "your college scholarship is riding on this tryout" or "you'll definitely be the best one out there".
- Talking about other players. For example, Stanec suggests not asking them "how did a particular person play" since then your child may view that person in question as their direct competition and be hyper-focused on that rather than just doing their best.
- Complaining about the coach. "If caregivers think that the coaches or club directors favor a particular athlete for a certain reason, avoid talking about this with your child as that may cause them unnecessary stress or frustration or simply steal some joy from the experience," Stanec says.

Focus On Fun

After tryouts as you're driving home with your athletes, or at dinner, don't ask how the tryouts went. Instead, Stanec suggests asking the simple question: "Did you have fun?" She explains that research shows the number one reason kids play sport is to have fun and the number one reason they quit is when it's devoid of fun. "If the child wants to talk more about the tryout, that's fine but make sure they are driving the conversation," she adds. "If the athlete is bummed about a mistake they made, empathize with them but remind them that everyone makes mistakes."

Remember Everyone Experiences Not Making a Team

There's likely a time in your life where you wanted something that you didn't get, whether it was a spot on a team as a teen or a job you applied for last year. You can share this with your young athletes, along with anything you learned from that hardship. "Caregivers need to keep in mind that many professional athletes were cut from sports teams at some time in their life," Stanec says. "The youth sport experience is a journey, and athletic development happens at different rates, as does physical growth and maturation. It's important caregivers don't let their own egos cause [unnecessary stress and anxiety in their children](#) as the purpose of sport is not to make a top team or to become elite—although it's great when that happens. The purpose of sport is to learn valuable life skills, in an upbeat and fun environment, that will serve them now and in the future."

Takeaway

Anxiety around tryouts is natural and can actually be a good thing for young athletes. Coaches and caregivers can help athletes put their best foot forward at tryouts by giving them as much information as possible, avoiding bias and making objective decisions, and by having conversations that focus on the process and the fun rather than the results and the competition.