



How Coaches Can Build Safe, Trusting Relationships

Building safe, trusting relationships with and amongst your athletes is the foundation for creating a Positive Youth Sports Culture. These relationships have many benefits, including helping athletes...

- Make friends more easily
- Collaborate more effectively
- Perform at a higher level
- Experience improved mental health
- Feel safer
- Take on challenges without fear of failure
- Engage more fully in learning
- Increase their effort

To create these safe and trusting relationships with their athletes, **coaches can:**

- **Learn names quickly** - ask athlete their preferred name and call them by that name
- **Get to know each athlete as an individual** - be curious, ask open ended questions, and reflect on any personal biases that may be affecting your interactions
- **Use informal pre and post-practice time to connect** - move around the space to connect with all athletes
- **Reflect on your own assumptions** when evaluating athletes skills and areas for growth. Focus on behavior, technical skills, and process, versus the person.
- **Create empathetic connections** by listening to understand your players' experiences
- **Give specific, positive, and information-based feedback** - research shows that the amount, type, content, and tone of coach feedback can alter how athletes will perform and develop, both physically and mentally
- **Be clear and concise with instructions** - be aware of how your tone of voice impacts athletes, and when making corrections be sure to praise the athlete when you see improvement
- **Set clear, collaborative group expectations** about how athletes treat themselves, each other, coaches, opponents, and referees





How Coaches Can Build Safe, Trusting Relationships [Continued]

- **React quickly** to prevent put-downs, bullying, or cliques
- **Observe constantly** and notice if any athletes are being excluded. Be proactive and create ways to include anyone feeling left out.
- **Play with them**, laugh and smile. Show athletes that you want to be there.

To forge connections amongst teammates, **coaches can:**

- **Begin a season, or a training session with an activity that encourages interaction**, finding common ground, and inclusion
- **Run team building activities** that promote collaboration, communication, and trust
- **Utilize personal check-ins** so your athletes know how their teammates are doing. For example, during the opening of practice ask your athletes to show a thumb up, sideways, or down to share how they are doing that day.
- **Use a Buddy System** by pairing up athletes, or by creating smaller groups. These buddies can provide support and encouragement.
- **Include relationship questions** in your debriefing of a practice or game. For example you could ask "Who saw a teammate trying hard?" Or "Who saw someone else improve today?"
- **Teach players how to give positive and information-based feedback** to each other by ensuring they identify the specific skill and recognize growth and effort
- **Use positive team rituals** to build camaraderie and team unity
- **Know when to get out of the way** and let athletes play with each other

