



# The Parent Playbook: Mental Health Resources for Parents of Athletes

## DEAR PARENTS OF ATHLETES.

*On Our Sleeves* knows, just as much as you do, that it is important to build a healthy foundation with your athlete about all aspects of their life. This includes making sure they feel comfortable talking with you and other trusted adults about the issues they face. Having conversations with your young athlete can help you to recognize any signs of burnout and address the issues before they become a larger problem.

But maybe you don't know where to start! That's where *On Our Sleeves'* experts can help, along with the experts at Dayton Children's Center for the Female Athlete. In this playbook you will find:

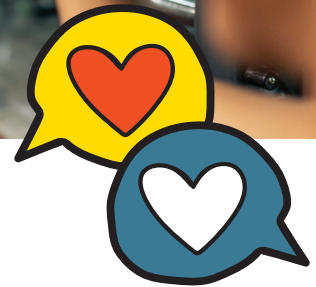
- ▶ A guide to creating a positive environment for conversations with your athlete
- ▶ Tips for working well with your athlete's coaches
- ▶ A guide to creating a positive playing atmosphere for your athlete.

We know that you want your athlete to perform their best and learn life lessons from being involved in athletics. We hope that you find this playbook useful for your team!

Signed,

### The *On Our Sleeves* Team

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## Scoring Conversations with your Athlete

It goes without saying that you are your athlete's biggest fan! And you have an important role in helping them navigate the challenges with being an athlete and a kid at the same time. Having consistent, healthy conversations with your athlete that makes them feel heard and understood can be just as beneficial to them as strength or conditioning training. Your athlete needs to know that they can trust you and other adults to share what they're going through on a day-to-day basis, to help them process emotions, feelings, frustrations, struggles, injuries and more.

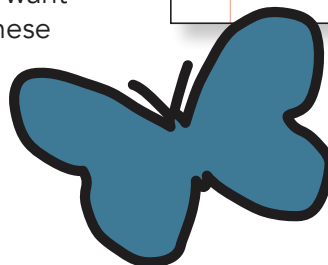
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If you haven't already created a culture of sharing, and want to know where to start, here are four important topics you can be exploring with your athlete.

- 1. The importance of the sport in your athlete's life:** Start by encouraging your athlete to recognize why this sport is important to their life. You can remind them that the sport (or sports) are teaching them how to challenge themselves, how to be a part of a team, how to practice discipline, how to move their bodies in a positive way and have an outlet for fun and discipline.
- 2. Helping your athlete keep a well-balanced life:** Take time to brainstorm ways your athlete can keep their life balanced. You can help them create healthy habits like balanced nutrition and sleep hygiene (keeping a regular bedtime, avoiding exercise and screens before bed, not sleeping in). Share with them that balancing life with school, social life and sports is a challenge but can be done!
- 3. Keeping your athlete engaged in the sport:** Check in often with your athlete to make sure that they're enjoying the sport. Ask if they're overwhelmed with expectations from coaches, teammates or even family. Your athlete needs you to help them decipher whether they're having some bad days or moments, or if they need to take a break entirely from the sport.
- 4. Understanding challenges your athlete may encounter:** If there is a change in behavior or a decline in performance, your athlete may be struggling with their mental wellness or experiencing burnout. Talk with them about how they're feeling and where the sources of stress are coming from. Can you work through these challenges together, or do changes need to be made to the level of your athlete's participation? It may also help to enlist support from your athlete's athletic trainers or a mental health therapist if needed.

It's easier to approach these topics if you have conversations with your athlete often. If you want to know how to start the conversation use these conversation cards as a starting point. Car rides to and from practice or games are the perfect time to use them and don't forget to keep the conversation open-ended and positive!



● Did you have fun?

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● What is your favorite part about playing \_\_\_\_\_ sport?

● Did you do your best?



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● Were you a good team player out out there?

● What did you learn today?



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● What did you want to improve on?

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## Having a Healthy Huddle with Coaches



A young athlete's parents or caregivers and their coach should be a team. And these teammates' goals should be to create a positive, nurturing environment for the athlete to learn and grow in. It's important to respect a coach's position while advocating for your athlete.

This can be achieved by parents and caregivers making an effort to have consistent conversations with coaches. While it may be hard to know the right time or way to approach a coach, you can use some of these tips to build that healthy connection:

- ▶ **Consult the guidelines**  
Check with your athlete's sports organization for any guidelines or procedures for addressing concerns with coaching staff. You can also look at a handbook to find policies about addressing concerns.

- ▶ **Take a timeout**  
If your concern is about a game day decision, like your athlete's playing time or game day behavior, we recommend waiting 24 hours before addressing it with a coach. Taking a timeout will allow everyone involved some time to think through the situation and approach the conversation more calmly. And don't forget to be a team player. Ask the coach what you can do as a parent or caregiver to help your athlete improve in their performance or attitude.
- ▶ **Blow the whistle on unhealthy practices**  
Take time to talk to coaches about any safety concerns like injuries, over-training, or over-conditioning. Unhealthy practices can also include talking to the team in a belittling manner. And if you notice a change in your athlete's performance or general behavior, it's important that you speak up about this with the coach as well.
- ▶ **Set the rules for good boundaries**  
You need to model to your athlete good boundaries with conflict by not sharing your negative opinions about the team or coaches in front of your athlete. Talking with other parents about what makes you upset can cause anxiety, create pressure or otherwise impact your athlete's mental health. Also model having tough conversations to your athlete by having positive, problem-solving conversations with the coaches whenever necessary.

### BONUS:

If it's age-appropriate, you should encourage your athlete to talk to their coach themselves. You can role-play the conversation with them to help them feel confident and build resilience in your athlete.



## Winning with a Positive Atmosphere for your Athlete



There are many reasons why your athlete may have chosen to play their sport (or sports). Whether they have goals to play professionally or enjoy the community and activity they get from playing, we have to create positive environments for young athletes to flourish.

Young athletes aren't always as expressive with their feelings but pressure from playing sports and being competitive can wear on them and their mental health. That's why it's important as their biggest fan and supporter, you create a positive atmosphere. Here are some important points to remember:

▶ **Be on your model positive behavior**

As the saying goes: "more is caught, than taught." And that's especially true for impressionable young athletes. Whether you notice it or not, your athlete is watching you and how you behave in different settings. So stay aware of how your emotional expressions before, during and after competitions may affect your athlete. Modeling a positive attitude, is likely to encourage them to have a positive attitude too.

- **Make a Plan**

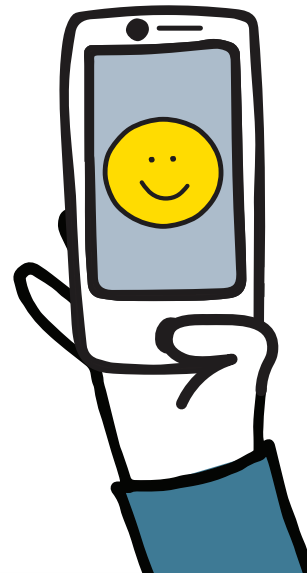
Many people are incredibly passionate about their love for the game or are just extremely competitive people. If you're struggling to manage your emotions and reactions on the sidelines, make a plan! Notice the signs of your emotions getting amped up and edging towards the negative. Apply helpful tools (like mindfulness or meditation) that can help you calm down. You can even get help from other adults at the game to keep you in check!

- **Take a timeout**

It's okay to walk away if you're feeling upset. Just make sure you don't return to the stands until you've calmed down. Panicking, angry outbursts or other intense emotions won't be helpful to your athlete.

- **Keep a positive perspective**

Be consistent in reminding yourself, and your athlete, that at the end of the day this is just a game! They may be passionate about their sport, but the purpose behind their involvement should be to build community, stay healthy and have fun!



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