

How to Work With, Not Against, Your Athlete

Dealing with a resistant athlete—whether they don't want to go to their practice or they are skipping homework for an extra workout—can be frustrating for any caregiver. But often, the reason for an athlete's resistance may be more nuanced or valid than we realize, says board-certified family physician and [TrueSport Expert Deborah Gilboa](#), MD. And whether your athlete is in the right or the wrong, if you lead with assumptions and judgment rather than curiosity and an open mind, you're unlikely to reach your athlete and find resolution.

Here, Gilboa explains the simplest way to validate your athlete's feelings while coming to a solution that makes sense for both of you.

Be curious, not confrontational

As a caregiver, it's tempting to assume that you know best, and that your athlete is just resisting because they're young and misinformed. "However, if you lead with condemnation, then what you'll get is disconnection and resistance from your athlete," says Gilboa. "Try to take your feelings, your frustration, and your impatience out of the equation so you can try to understand their feelings and thoughts."

"The strategy you want to use first is *curiosity*. Assume that you don't know exactly what's going on in their life," says Gilboa. "When you start with curiosity, you give your athlete the benefit of the doubt, and open up to the possibility that they're making a decision that seems right to them."

Try to avoid making assumptions

"One of the problems we have as caregivers is that we are more likely to make assumptions about people that we know, especially our own children," says Gilboa. "So, when your athlete says, 'I don't want to go to practice,' you may think you already know why. I'm not even saying that you're wrong, but I'm saying those judgements do not help. If you can really lead with curiosity rather than judgment, you'll build connections and strengthen your relationship."

Even if you "know" you're right, use this process

Not only should you avoid making assumptions, try to be open to the possibility that you're wrong. Even if you are right, says Gilboa, avoiding assumptions and leading with curiosity still helps to ease resistance.

"For parents, this is the hardest part for us, [because we really think we already know what's happening with our athlete](#)—and honestly, we're usually right," says Gilboa. "The assumptions and judgements we have may be accurate, but if we don't lead with curiosity and listen to our athlete, they won't be able to hear us. They can hear you better if they know that you heard them. Give them the opportunity to prove you wrong, because you being right doesn't help anything."

Be aware of how you're asking questions

Even if you're truly trying to lead with curiosity, [teen athletes are going to hear judgment](#) because that's how their brains are wired in adolescence. "Try to keep your questions as non-judgmental and open-ended as possible," says Gilboa. "It also helps to keep them short, so there isn't time for your tone to come into the question."

For example, “Can you help me understand why?” is Gilboa’s favorite open-ended question to start a conversation.

Be okay with silence

When you ask questions of your athlete, be willing to sit in silence while you wait for their answer, says Gilboa. Often, parents are quick to want to fill the silence and not leave a pause in conversation, but your athlete is more likely to answer you and reflect thoughtfully on their answers if they have the space to do so. “We often want to be three steps ahead,” says Gilboa. “But with teens, you have to give them space.”

Actually listen to the answer

Finally, when your athlete does answer your questions, actually listen to them! “Often, you’ll be surprised at their answers and [the reasons for their resistance](#),” says Gilboa. “But you have to actually hear them. For example, your athlete may not want to go to practice because they just found out their best friend might be moving away, and they cannot imagine playing a sport they love after that news. And maybe it’s hard for your athlete to talk about.”

Here, Gilboa walks us through a couple more examples of how to find resolution in the face of resistance from your athlete.

Situation: An athlete doesn’t want to miss practice to attend a study group, despite having a low grade in the class and being in danger of failing

Start with curiosity! Instead of saying that your athlete needs to go to study group in order to improve their grade, ask why they don’t want to go to study group. Ask what their plan is for passing the class if they don’t go to study group. Gilboa adds that you may be surprised to hear that the athlete does actually have a plan! “We can get ourselves into conflict because we assume that the athlete is being irresponsible, when that might not be the case,” she explains.

Situation: An athlete has had an ankle injury, but wants to play in the next game

Start by asking questions: Why do you think you need to play in the next game? Who can you speak with to ensure you’re physically ready to play? You may find that the athlete mistakenly believes that if they don’t play in the next game, they’ll be on the bench all season. Help your athlete figure out next steps based on these questions. In this case, that might mean a discussion with the coach about the rest of the season and a meeting with a physician to determine whether your athlete is ready to return to play.

Takeaway

When dealing with a resistant athlete, lean into curiosity rather than assumptions by asking them questions to understand where they’re coming from. Often, your initial assumption may be correct, but if you lead with judgment, you’ll still face that resistance from your athlete, and it will be harder to find resolution. And sometimes, you may be surprised to realize that your athlete has a valid reason for their resistance.



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