

## **How To Cultivate Empathy and Tolerance in Young Athletes**

by David Benzel



Character development is arguably one of the greatest benefits your kids can gain from playing sports.

Thanks to exposure to new challenges, opportunities, coaches, and teammates, character traits that may not have come up at home are brought to light during sports participation.

**Daily interactions during practices and games give plenty of space for young athletes to “exercise” their character muscles.**

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Two such traits that seem to have buzzword-status in the adult world right now are **empathy and tolerance**. But how do you teach *younger* athletes about words that some adults would actually have trouble defining correctly?

In the case of elementary and middle school athletes, it might help to break these qualities down to the end result.

## **In other words, what would each of these look like when it is lived out?**

For empathy, it would look a lot like simple kindness – which most kids start hearing about when they are 3 and 4 years old.

Tolerance can be interpreted as a respect of others even when they are different than you. Since kids easily spot differences in others, parents are given many opportunities, early on, to have discussions about respecting all people.

**However, obviously, these lessons are not one-and-done. It is something that must be learned and practiced over and over.**

Here are 3 important areas to look at when trying to cultivate empathy and tolerance. Since our focus will be younger athletes we will refer to kindness and respect because they are in fact the building blocks AND the end goal.

## **1) Model It**

Kids learn what they see.

This is why “modeling” pops up on just about every “How-To-Teach guide” out there. So it goes without saying that showing kindness and being respectful of others starts at home.

## **But what does cultivating these qualities look like in the team setting?**

You don't really have to look too far in the news to see that adults are NOT always modeling kindness or respect in the athletic environment.

But you can be sure that kids are always watching and taking notes – even when you don't think they are.

Parents and coaches should be asking themselves these questions regularly:

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- How am I treating the other fans or parents before, during, and after a game?
- Am I respecting the calls the officials make?
- Do I encourage all the athletes in their efforts? Or is my focus on just one or two of them?
- Am I polite towards the opponents?
- Do I give generously of my time and resources for the ENTIRE team?
- How do I act toward everyone when our team has lost?

If it is easy for adults to get pulled into the emotions of a game, then it is probably more so, for our young athletes. When parents and coaches make it a priority to model kindness and respect consistently, we set the stage for growing these traits in our kids.

## **2) Talk About It**

Kids that SEE character modeled by the adults in their life learn what it looks like. But TALKING about kindness and respect helps to connect the traits back to your athlete.



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**It is another layer of the learning process because it helps them to understand the part they can play in demonstrating them.**

Parents and coaches can be on the lookout for these perfect teaching moments:

- An athlete is struggling with a teammate – help him to explore ways to respond with kindness
- A difficult call was made in a game and an athlete is angry – talk about the importance of always being respectful of the authority placed in our lives
- Encourage your athlete to offer to help pick up equipment – even when they are tired
- Insist on your athlete being polite and courteous to other parents and fans – even when they don't seem deserving
- A slower, less-skilled athlete continues to make mistakes – encourage your athlete to be supportive
- One athlete is very different than the rest of the team and really stands out – help your child to look at this as an opportunity to befriend someone who probably really needs one

Responding with kindness and respect is not usually the easy choice. Your athlete needs to know this.

In fact, often it may feel very undeserved.

Talk to him about it. Remind him that not only does his acts of kindness and showing respect impact his relationships but it also positively impacts who HE becomes.

### **3) Praise It**

So often when there are things to be learned our attention stays on what is NOT right.

We get laser-focused on the things we need to correct instead of noticing and acknowledging the many small GOOD decisions made by our kids.

Since cultivating character is a worthy goal, it's important for parents and coaches to get in the mindset of "catching" their athletes doing something right.

Does that mean we throw out praises all day long? No, because that just minimizes their effect.

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**Instead, we pay attention and make it a point to celebrate character victories.**

Here are some creative ways to let your athletes know that kindness and respect are important to you, to them, and to the whole team:

- Each week choose one kind act or one respectful response that you noticed and praise it. Most younger children do not mind being “called out” but be sure this is the case before you call attention to one athlete
- In the meeting before a game, let the kids know that opponents, fans, and officials should all be recipients of your team’s kind acts and respect – remind them that you will be on the lookout for good decisions in regards to both traits
- Don’t be afraid to point out kindness and respect that you notice from the other team. Share with your athletes what you saw and why it is admirable
- Do some role-playing once a week with your athletes and give them scenarios that show that choosing kind or respectful responses may be hard but is beneficial and contagious

## **Moving Forward**

Character matters.

At the end of the day, we realize that it has a more lasting impact on our kids’ lives and those around them than any sport-specific-skill we are trying to teach them.

Make it a point to be purposeful about what you model in front of them. Have regular conversations about the qualities of kindness and respect. Always praise and celebrate good responses.

As they grow and mature, empathy and tolerance will naturally emerge as a more specific version of the kindness and respect they have learned to exemplify.

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