

ADHD & Youth Sports

A Guide for Parents & Coaches

At **Soccer Parenting** we field a lot of questions around the topic of how best to navigate youth sports with a child diagnosed with ADHD or other learning differences. In discussions with parents and educators it becomes clear that while many teaching tactics and adaptations used in a classroom setting transfer to sports, it can be difficult to find sports-specific resources. While every player is an individual, with unique playing and learning styles, children participating in sports with ADHD can share some common needs and behaviors.

With this in mind we have created four resource documents:

- **Fostering a Positive Experience**
- **Tips for Coaches**
- **Parent and Coach Collaboration - Starting the Conversation**
- **Additional Resources**

The information in these documents was drawn from a range of sources and includes input from experts in the field as well as information learned from our Soccer Parenting “Working Group” of interested parents, coaches, teachers and experts. It is our hope that these resources, and the strategies outlined, will help to start the conversation and facilitate collaboration between players, coaches and parents that will create and provide a positive sports experience for all.

Key takeaways from the documents:

- Early and honest communication between parents and coaches is essential. This should include discussion about what the player and coach can expect as well as any management strategies that the family uses at home or in the classroom.
- Many teaching strategies and adaptations used in a classroom setting can often be applied to sports.
- Ongoing communication and collaboration between parents, coaches and players facilitates understanding and helps ensure a positive sports experience for everyone.

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Fostering a Positive Experience

What parents want coaches to know:

- All children have good and bad days, my child is no different.
- My child wants to be part of the team but often struggles knowing how to make connections.
- My child is not trying to be “difficult”.
- If a particular behavior is becoming a regular concern, please reach out to me.
- Please be patient, as a family, we are learning to navigate as we go as well.

What coaches want to know from parents:

- What can I expect from your child such as common behaviors and things that can motivate or distract.
- What strategies do his/her teachers use that may help me at practice or games?
- What are strategies you have found particularly helpful for your child?
- What can I do if your child is having a particularly hard time? Is there something I can set up to keep them safely occupied if they cannot/will not participate?
- Will you remain in the area? When should I ask for your help?

What NOT to do:

The goal is to find constructive ways to ensure young athletes have a good sports experience. There are some behaviors and language that are still heard often enough that should simply not be used. **Directing any of these, or similar, toward anyone with or without ADHD, is not appropriate.**

- Using a diagnosis of ADHD as a synonym of bad behavior of any child: “You are acting so ADHD today”.
- Using a child as a negative example: “If Sally (with ADHD) can focus so can you”
- Any public reference to medication: “You clearly did not take your meds”, “You must be off your medication”, “You need to be medicated”.
- Language evolves and words that were once commonplace can be particularly upsetting. (Examples include: Spazz, Space Cadet, Retarded, etc)

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Tips for Coaches

Give them something to do

- Help with the cones, balls, or anything that will help keep a child engaged during downtime.

Keep them close

- When left on their own or toward the back of a group any child, particularly one with ADHD, can be easily distracted and find it harder to focus. Keeping an easily distracted child close to a coach, or another adult, can help.

Have an individual conversation

- If processing multistep activities is difficult, breaking down an activity into parts during a one-on-one conversation with a player can help. When the athletes are older a leader or friend on the team may be able to do this.
- Conversations about a training topic before a session can also help set the tone without taking away from session time.
- A conversation afterward can help with processing any new information and setting up focus for the next session.

Set the example

- Players and parents will follow your lead. If you talk about a player as a “problem” this can become a self-fulfilling prophesy.
- Staying positive when navigating potentially disruptive behavior can be a challenge. However, your model of supportive and inclusive behavior will help others do the same and create a positive team and learning environment.

Allow for fidgeting

- While it may seem counterintuitive, fidgeting can be a tool that helps a child maintain focus. Shifting weight from foot to foot, playing with the hem of a jersey, if not disruptive or interfering with another player, are activities that should be left alone.
- Instead of telling a child to "stop moving", provide them with an acceptable action.
- If a behavior becomes too disruptive to the team, move the child to the side of the group, or next to another adult. Allow them a few minutes of alone time to get a drink.

Remember that every situation and child is different and some of these suggestions may work better than others depending on the child, coach and situation. It may take a bit of trial and error to find the strategy that works best for a particular child.

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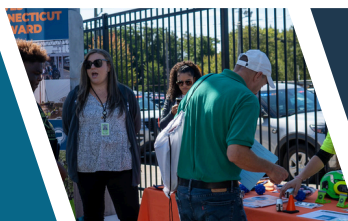
Parent and Coach Collaboration: Starting the Conversation

An honest and private conversation toward the beginning of the season between the parents, coaches, the child (when older) will help to set the tone and expectations for the season. Discussion about what the player and coach can expect as well as any management strategies that the family uses at home or in the classroom are always a great place to start. While this may seem obvious, these conversations can be difficult. The strategies below will help get you started.

Start the Conversation

- Find time for a private conversation with the parent and the coach, away from other players and parents. Use your judgement as to whether the child is included in this initial conversation.
- Ask the parent what kind of behaviors to expect from the child. This can include avoiding eye contact, prefers one on one interactions, tends to hyper focus on a topic, aversion to physical contact, etc.
- Ask the parent to share strategies that the family or child's teachers have found useful in creating a positive and constructive environment for the child in a team/group setting. These can include taking a break to get water or doing something else on their own that will help the child refocus.
- Discuss if there is a friend on the team who the child connects with and does particularly well when they are around?
- Discuss with the parent: If it is a particularly difficult day, will they be in the area during training, or can the coach call you?

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Additional Resources

The articles and websites below are a combination of research-based articles and personal experience pieces. While all children and situations are different, and you may find some resonate and are more relative to your situation than others, they provide additional insight and ideas for navigating sports with child.

ARTICLES

[ADHD and Youth Sports: How to Help Your Child Succeed](#) (healthline.org)

[ADHD and Sports: What Parents Need to Know](#) (nationwidechildrens.org)

[What's Up with Athletes and ADHD?](#) (CHADD.org)

[ADHD Symptoms in Girls Diminish with Extracurricular Sports Activity](#) (additudemag.com)

[How to Coach Athletes with ADHD from Personal Experience](#) (trainingpeaks.com)

["My On-Court Advantage: How Tennis Shaped My ADHD Resilience."](#) (additudemag.com)

[What can athletes with ADHD teach us about the condition?](#) (The Guardian)

[Sports Psychology Tricks That Work for ADHD Brains](#) (additudemag.com)

[How to Talk So Teachers Will Listen: Communication Strategies That Work](#) (additudemag.com)

WEBSITES

[additudemag.com](#) - This site was recommended by a number of parents

[CHADD.org](#) (Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder)

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