



How Parents Can Help Coaches Understand Their Athlete With ADHD

This resource stems from a question submitted to the Ask PCA blog. Responses come from our experts including PCA Trainers, who lead live group workshops for coaches, parents, administrators and student-athletes.

"My daughter is 15 and has been playing club soccer since she was 6. She is adopted and is diagnosed with ADHD Inattentive. So despite making the team, the coach has made it so miserable she cannot handle the constant humiliation. She has been offered a spot on a lesser quality team but is playing up a year in the Club. Our club claims they believe in Positive Coaching but when they have an actual situation in front of them...the coach who's style is the antithesis of positive coaching is supported. Is there a legal position that I can work from?"

PCA Response from Karen Collins, PCA Trusted Resource and Associate Professor of Kinesiology (Sport Studies) at University of New Hampshire

Thank you for your question. This sounds like fairly complex situation, with a number of intersecting parts. First, think about encouraging your daughter to help her coach understand her play, personality, and learning a bit better. That is, is the coach aware of her Inattentive ADHD diagnosis? Perhaps a meeting with the coach and your daughter is in order. We recommend that your daughter try and be proactive in talking to the coach. Specifically, she can ask the coach for a meeting and in that meeting, explain her ADHD inattentive diagnosis. In doing so, help the coach understand what this means for her as a player (e.g. describe when she gets unfocused or seems like she isn't paying attention, etc). Perhaps she is more focused and understands best when asking a question for clarification, or given a specific task on which to focus. Give the coach information and collaborate to develop a plan for improvement. Working with the coach to develop some patterns about peak performance relative to her diagnosis is important. Athletes are often hesitant to tell coaches about learning differences, ADHD, and other situations that can be a roadblock to learning, and ultimately performance, for fear of being singled out or evaluated differently. Your daughter has been given place on the team. Coaches are often eager for the information that will help him/her coach your daughter most effectively. At this age (15 yrs), if possible, the athlete should advocate for her own needs. The coach hears it differently from an athlete than a parent, so let your daughter lead the discussion. It is scary and hard, but ideally the best situation moving forward. In sum, give your daughter an opportunity to advocate for herself, at the same time giving the coach important information with which he/she can help your daughter reach her goals.

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Athlete with ADHD, continued

Second, it is important not to dismiss the trauma of the bullying and assault. This requires a long-term healing process from both a physical and emotional perspective. It is important that your daughter feels safe and also that she is getting the professional help she might need. The Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP- www.appliedsportpsych.org) might be a good place to start. These sport psychology professionals combine experience in clinical psychology, sport psychology, and understanding of sport to help athletes get the most from their sport experience. This link will help you search for a sport psychology professional in your area.

A coach has certain legal duties which range from safety to properly planning activities (Martens, 2012) and these duties vary from state to state. Almost always included in a list of coaches' legal duties is to protect against physical and psychological harm. Above all else, it is important your daughter is safe and therefore would recommend playing for team where she feels the most at ease. Check with the policy manual for your club if you have questions about rules and regulations for coaches, etc. and follow those guidelines as indicated. Remember Club systems are often privately owned and don't necessarily have the same guidelines as educational organizations.

Finally, if the decision to switch clubs and teams comes in to play, keep the new coach informed as well. Perhaps in that meeting, your daughter can talk about ways to help transition to a new team where she doesn't know many people. And remember, the girls on the team all have one thing in common—they love to play soccer, so build from that. Best of luck!

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