WHAT to SAY WithAll

GUIDE FOR **COACHES**

Dear Coaches,

Being a great athlete requires great health – mental and physical.

Today more is known about the powerful impact our words, as coaches, has on our athletes. This is particularly true with what we as coaches say to and around our athletes about food, bodies (shape, size, weight), and overall exercise. These are things that coaches did not know or realize in earlier decades. But we know them now. Here are commonly believed myths, along with practical things coaches can do to support athletes' physical and mental health.

Common Myths about Food, Body & Exercise for Athletes

MYTH **An athlete must be "skinny" to be good.**

TRUTH **Healthy athletes come in all shapes and sizes.**
Athletes do not have to look a certain way to be a good athlete.

- At every age, athletes compare themselves physically to others. Comparison is natural. However, comparison (especially to unrealistic images from media or to other body types that are genetically different) can quickly become detrimental to an athlete's self-esteem and body image.
- Commenting negatively about an athlete or anyone else's weight or body communicates to your athletes that their body is wrong and not capable of succeeding.

As a coach you have a powerful influence on your athletes; here are actions you can take:

- Model positive self-talk and body language with your athletes. Avoid saying negative things about your own body or others' bodies in front of your athletes
- Listen for comments your athletes may make about their bodies, such as negative comments about their own size or shape, or comparing/teasing teammates (even as "good-natured" fun).

WHAT to SAY **Respond with:** "Healthy athletic bodies come in all shapes and sizes; think of ways your body helps you play [your sport] well."

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MYTH Too much food or "bad" food makes you perform poorly.

TRUTH **Food helps you grow and gives your body energy to play your best.**
Different types of foods have different nutritional benefits that our minds and bodies need to feel balanced and healthy.

- Focusing on how food helps our brains and bodies grow, think, move, and stay fueled throughout the day helps athletes see food as beneficial for playing their sport and feeling their best.
- Research suggests that adults' beliefs and judgments about food can impact a child's thoughts and eating behaviors. When we are labeling food choices as "good/bad" or "clean/unhealthy", it can equate food with stress or anxiety about being a good athlete

As a coach you have a powerful influence on your athletes; here are actions you can take:

- Model non-judgmental thoughts and beliefs towards food with your athletes. Avoid talking about food in terms such as clean/junk, healthy/unhealthy. Emphasize that balance and variety are what's needed.
- Listen to how your athletes talk about food, whether they're talking about their favorite snack, what they had for lunch, or what they're having for dinner. If you hear them make comments about food in relation to body size or weight, try to redirect the conversation.

WHAT to SAY **Respond with:** "All food is fuel, and your body needs fuel to perform its best during practice or a game." "Food is energy. You'll play better when you have energy."

- At the end of practice, bring your athletes together and ask them how they felt during practice. Tired? Energized? Remind them that food, water, and rest helps them grow and gives their bodies energy to play their best.

MYTH Athletes need to practice hard and every day to succeed.

TRUTH **Athletes' brains and bodies need a variety of activities to be strong and succeed.**

- In our fast-paced world, we are often disconnected from our body signals and what they mean. As a coach, you can help athletes learn to listen to what their bodies are telling them and the value in doing and trusting what their bodies need (i.e. eating more, slowing down, or taking a break).
- Even young athletes may feel the pressure to obsess about or overdo a certain type of exercise to achieve their goals or meet expectations. It's beneficial to remind them that variety, moderation, and off-days are crucial for them to perform their best.

As a coach you have a powerful influence on your athletes; here are actions you can take:

- As you're coaching, ask your athletes about how their body feels at different points during practice to encourage them to be more in tune with their bodies' signals and what those signals are telling them.
- At the end of practice, encourage your athletes to listen to their bodies during the week. Tell them when they "refuel" with a snack or meal to pay attention to when they feel full or if they are still hungry.

Want to learn more?

Take the Coaches Challenge

Join our five-week challenge to learn how to discuss healthy body image and behaviors with young athletes. Sign up for weekly emails with key phrases, their significance, self-reflection prompts, and actionable steps for your next practice or game.

Thank you for all the ways you love and support the kids in your life. Your words mean so much to them, and your desire to support their health and well-being means the world to them and us.

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Support This Work

This guide is one piece of WithAll's work to help kids feel good in their bodies and with food. That work only happens because individuals and businesses fund it directly. If it helped you, consider making a gift at withall.org/donate.

Get Financial Help

If you or someone you love is facing an eating disorder, you are not alone. Our Recovery Support Program provides grants for groceries and housing during intensive treatment. Apply at withall.org/apply.

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