

## Establishing Professional Boundaries With Athletes

Establishing clear boundaries between coaches and athletes is essential for creating a safe and productive training environment. Boundaries respect an athletes' rights and well-being while enabling coaches to fulfill their duties effectively. This guide offers insights and best practices for establishing, maintaining, and addressing blurred boundaries in a professional manner.

### What Are Boundaries?

There are four main boundary areas:

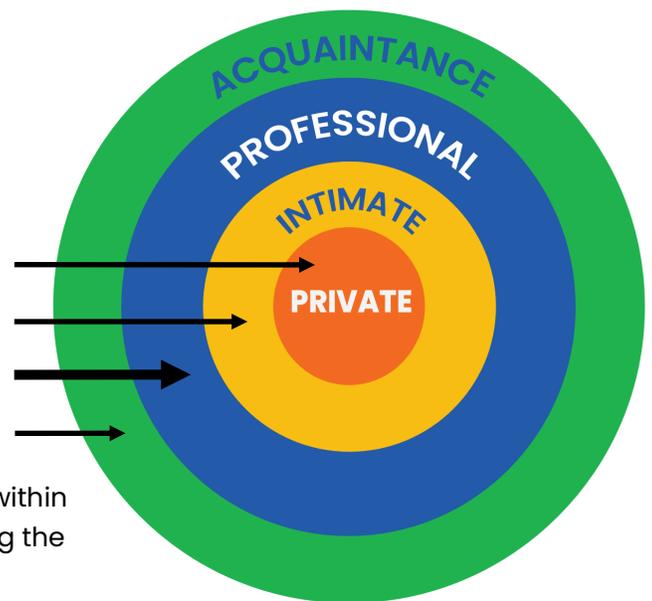
**Private:** Innermost personal thoughts and actions

**Intimate:** Close friends, family, romantic relationships

**PROFESSIONAL:** Colleagues, athletes and parents

**Acquaintance:** Strangers and casual acquaintances

Coaches should maintain engagement with athletes within the **PROFESSIONAL** area to ensure they are establishing the appropriate coach/athlete boundaries.



## Healthy Boundaries

Healthy boundaries involve coaches maintaining a professional demeanor without being distant. Maintaining healthy boundaries brings numerous benefits for both coach and athlete:

- **Trust and Respect:** Healthy boundaries build trust and respect between coaches and athletes, ensuring personal space and dignity are honored.
- **Emotional Well-Being:** Athletes can concentrate on performance without the stress of unclear coach-athlete relationships.
- **Focus on Athletic Development:** Clear boundaries keep the coach-athlete relationship centered on skill improvement and team success, enhancing coaching quality.
- **Reduced Conflicts:** Defined boundaries prevent conflicts of interest and favoritism, fostering a fair and harmonious team atmosphere.
- **Professionalism and Life Skills:** Boundary maintenance promotes coaching professionalism and helps athlete learn vital life skills such as setting boundaries and understanding respect.

# Types of Boundaries

Coaches should be mindful that there are many areas in which it is important to maintain boundaries. Listed below is an overview of the types of boundaries that coaches should maintain.



## Social Media

Allowing shared social media within professional circles, such as with athletes, parents, or colleagues, can be risky and lead to an oversharing of a coach's personal and private life. Maintaining social media boundaries can help protect the coach's privacy, and prevent the perception of favoritism and misunderstandings, as well as help the coach maintain rules regarding social media sharing.

## Physical

Respecting physical boundaries is vital. It acknowledges an athlete's space and prevents misunderstandings. It's imperative to always adhere to the USAG Safety and Response Policy, which provides guidelines and protocols to ensure the safety and well-being of athletes. This includes following proper procedures for physical contact, medical care and limiting one-on-one interactions. Examples of physical contact:

- **Appropriate:** Side hugs, handshakes, high fives
- **Inappropriate:** Full hugs, lap sitting, wrestling, tickling



## Celebration and Consolation

Coaches can celebrate and console athletes, but interaction should stay professional.

- **Celebration:** High fives, brief side hugs
- **Consolation:** Arm around, comforting presence

## Information Sharing

Information Sharing: Coaches should protect their privacy and only share personal details that are relevant to the athlete learning experience. As a best practice, coaches should consider the following before sharing information with athletes. Before you share, ask yourself:

- **Would I Share This Info with Parents?** Before divulging personal information to an athlete, consider whether it is information you would also share with the athlete's parent or guardian.
- **Does it Help?** Share only relevant information that helps in the athlete in their learning experience.
- **Is it about Me?** Keep personal info private and share only with family and friends.
- **Is it a Sensitive Topic?** Avoid discussing politics, religion, intimate relationships.



## Advice and Confidentiality

Coaches should use caution with providing advice unrelated to the gym environment and they should not keep athlete secrets. If an athlete confides private information, the appropriate response is to inform the athlete that they are a mandatory reporter and, thus, obligated to share the information with the proper authorities.

# Establishing and Communicating Boundaries

Setting and communicating expectations is the key to building coach-athlete boundaries. To effectively establish boundaries, consider the following:



**Set Boundaries Early:** Set clear boundaries right from the start and ensure that all athletes understand appropriate and inappropriate conversations and class expectation.



**Establish Meeting Times:** Communicate designated times with athletes where they discuss training. Remember, all meetings must be in the open and interruptible.



**Maintain Professionalism:** Explain the importance of the professional coach-athlete relationship, emphasizing that it is not a personal friendship.



**Involve Parents:** Include parents when necessary for transparency.



**Promote Transparency:** Ensure that interactions are open and interruptible.



**Be Prudent with Gifts:** Athlete gift-giving should be equitable and transparent. Coaches should only accept gifts shared within reason, such as an athlete or parent providing a small gift for a winter holiday or a parent providing a small token of appreciation.

## Boundary Violations

Boundary violations can take various forms, and it's important to recognize these violations to maintain a safe and professional learning environment. Further, violating certain boundaries can be a U.S. Center for SafeSport and/or USAG Safety/Response violation, especially if they violate the one-on-one policies. As a reminder, one-on-one contact is defined as interaction between one Adult Participant and one Minor Athlete and is not permitted under the USA Gymnastics Safety and Response Policy.

### Examples of Coach/Athlete Boundary Violations

Out of Gym Contact	Selective Favoritism	Oversharing	Inappropriate Communication	Breaking Confidentiality
Engaging with minor athletes outside of the club environment or events	Giving gifts or privileges to certain athletes unfairly	Sharing personal information not associated with the job	Sending inappropriate texts or messages	Sharing confidential information without consent
Discussion of Other Athletes	Unauthorized Transportation	Inappropriate Social Interaction	Misuse of Social Media	Excessive Contact
Talking about other athletes without permission	Giving rides to athletes without consent from parents and the club	Inviting athletes to private homes without involving others	Sending private messages on social media	Contacting athletes for reasons not associated with coaching

# Addressing Boundary Violations

Addressing boundary violations is critical, and includes instances where athletes may ask the coach personal questions. When athletes ask personal questions, it is important for the coach to kindly but assertively refrain from responding to question that would violate boundaries.

## Examples of questions athletes may ask, and ideas on how to respond:

**Athlete:** *"Can you keep a secret?"*

**Coach:** *"As your coach, my primary responsibility is to ensure your safety and well-being. I cannot keep secrets, especially if they relate to anything that might harm you or others. If you have a concern or need to talk about something important, please feel free to share it with me, and I will do my best to help."*

**Athlete:** *"Can I friend you on Facebook?"*

**Coach:** *"No, I don't friend athletes on social."*

**Athlete:** *"Where do you live?"*

**Coach:** *"Well, that information won't help you with your gymnastics, so let's focus on your training. I don't share that information with athletes."*

**Athlete:** *"Do you like to drink alcohol?"*

**Coach:** *"That is not an appropriate question, let's keep focused on our class."*

**Athlete:** *"Who did you vote for?"*

**Coach:** *"Voting is a personal and private matter and not something that I discuss with students. Let's focus on your gymnastics."*



# Maintain Transparency

An integral part of upholding boundaries is leading and maintaining a transparent coaching environment. Coaches can establish transparency by:

- ✓ **Setting Clear Boundaries:** Stick to professional boundaries with athletes and parents.
- ✓ **Documenting Incidents:** Keep records of all interactions, especially contentious ones.
- ✓ **Communicating Clearly:** Be open about team policies and expectations.
- ✓ **Following Guidelines:** Adhere to club and USA Gymnastics rules on behavior and coaching ethics.
- ✓ **Having a Witness:** Always have a third-party present during interactions.
- ✓ **Seeking Consent:** Get permission for any activities involving athletes.
- ✓ **Addressing Concerns:** Act swiftly on safety or behavior concerns.
- ✓ **Remaining Open and Interruptible:** Ensure all interactions can be observed and interrupted.

Setting and maintaining professional boundaries is also important for personal well-being, especially in coaching. Professional boundaries help prevent misunderstandings and inappropriate relationships, reducing the risk of misconduct or accusations and are critical to establishing a safe environment for athletes overall.



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