



# Establishing and Maintaining Healthy Boundaries with Athletes: A Practical Guide for Coaches

This document provides information aimed at:

- 1) Defining boundaries involved in the coach-athlete relationship,
- 2) Establishing guidelines for setting and maintaining healthy boundaries,
- 3) Clarifying misconceptions and navigating grey zones,
- 4) Outlining unacceptable behaviours and actions to take when boundaries are crossed.

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# Defining the coach-athlete relationship

The **coach-athlete relationship is inherently complex** due to its close and often prolonged nature, the presence of power imbalances, and the overlap between professional, social, physical, and emotional dynamics.

The complexity and quality of this relationship can be understood through **four key dimensions**:

1. **Closeness (*Emotional Connection*)**: the emotional bond between coach and athlete. It includes **mutual trust, respect, appreciation, and emotional support**.
2. **Commitment (*Dedication to the Relationship*)**: it reflects both the coach's and athletes' intention to **maintain a long-term relationship**, demonstrating their shared mindset of **valuing its continuity** and working toward **common goals**.
3. **Complementarity (*Cooperation and Interaction*)**: how well the coach and athlete **work together** through cooperative and coordinated interactions.
  - **Corresponding behaviours** are similar in nature and intensity—e.g., both people are friendly, relaxed, and responsive.
  - **Reciprocal behaviours** are different but complementary—e.g., the coach provides guidance, and the athlete listens and applies the feedback.
4. **Co-orientation (*Shared Understanding*)**: the **shared perceptions** both the coach and athlete have regarding their **closeness, commitment, and complementarity**. In other words, it's about how **aligned** they are in how they view and experience the relationship.

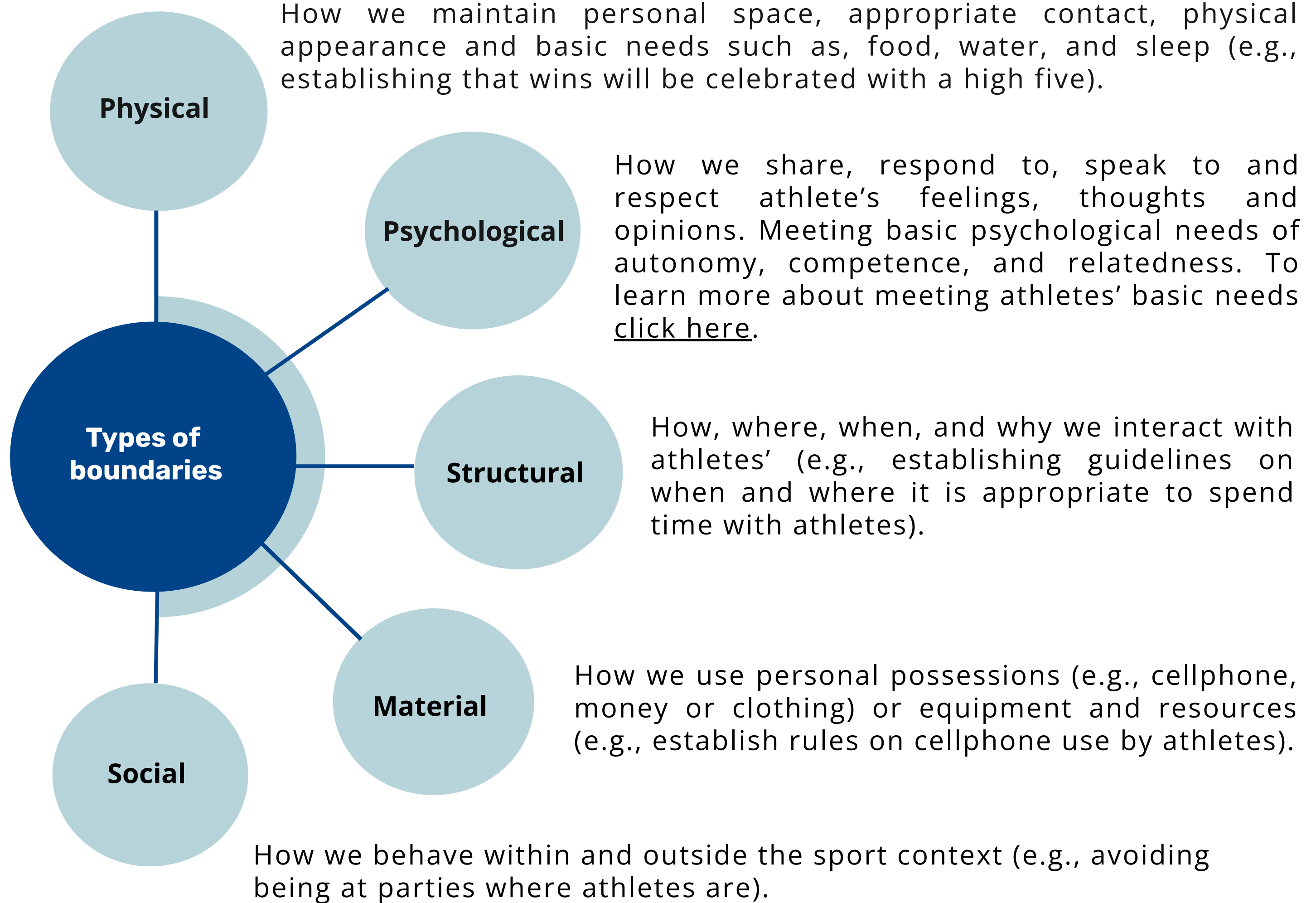
**Establishing and maintaining clear boundaries is essential** in attaining and maintaining healthy, respectful, and effective professional relationships. It is important to **maintain a balance in the four dimensions** mentioned above to uphold boundaries while preserving the quality of the coach-athlete relationship.



# What are boundaries?

Boundaries are the **guidelines** established within a relationship to ensure the **safety, respect, and comfort** of all individuals involved.

## What type of boundaries exist in the coach-athlete relationship?



## Why are boundaries important in the coach-athlete relationship?

Establishing clear and well-communicated boundaries can allow individuals to **feel comfortable** in their relationships. This process can foster **improved trust, communication and understanding**, while creating opportunities for ongoing dialogue. Such a process has the potential to support the overall well-being of both coaches and athletes. In turn, this heightened awareness enables coaches to **better support** athletes, aligning with how they wish to be coached.

**Establishing boundaries is essential for coaches to protect their well-being and maintain a healthy work-life balance.** Like in any profession, it's important to set limits and to respect your boundaries consistently.

**\*\*Attempting to build closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation within the coach-athlete relationship while also maintaining healthy boundaries can be challenging.** The Grey Zone model captures this complexity whereby different situations can be categorized as being in the **red, grey, or green zone**.



# The continuum of zones in the coach-athlete relationship

## GREY ZONE

A situation that can lead to multiple interpretations of an interaction based on the context, intent, and individual perceptions. Consequences for the athlete are **not always identifiable**.



## RED ZONE

A situation where behaviours are unacceptable and/or punishable by law. The **negative outcomes** are clearly identifiable and harmful to the athlete.

## GREEN ZONE

A situation where the behaviour fosters a safe environment, with a relationship based on mutual respect and trust, resulting in **positive outcomes** for the athlete.

## How to prevent crossing boundaries in the coach-athlete relationship?

As a coach, establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries with athletes is essential for fostering trust, respect, and a positive sport culture. Here are a few key tips and examples to help guide you:

### REFLECT intentionally on your actions:

- Take time before and after practices or competitions to consider whether your behaviour aligns with organizational guidelines and athlete-centered values.

*Ask yourself: What went well? What could I improve? How did my actions impact the athletes?*

This kind of self-reflection sharpens your judgment, improves performance, allows you to continuously grow and ensures boundaries are respected. Refer to the end of this guide for an exercise to help your reflection.

### Apply ORGANIZATIONAL GUIDELINES:

- When you need specific guidance on rules and regulations (e.g., digital communication with athletes) refer to guidelines established by your sport organization. If certain guidelines are not established or clear, you can encourage their development.



## Prioritize COMMUNICATION:

- Explain and normalize boundaries to athletes:

*“Boundaries aren’t about shutting people out—they’re about creating a foundation of trust and respect. They help us build strong, healthy relationships as a team.”*

- Encourage athletes to set boundaries and speak up:

*“Everyone is different regarding touch and how we feel with proximity both physically and emotionally. Set boundaries and communicate when possible with teammates, parents, and other support staff to set clear physical boundaries.”*

*“You’re allowed to say no. Whether it’s staying late for drills or being in a situation that feels off—your voice matters.”*

*“If you ever feel uncomfortable with physical contact—even during drills—speak up.”*

- Establish clear rules and boundaries at the beginning of the season:

*“If you’re struggling with something personal, I will listen and if needed, I can help you find the right person to talk to.”*

*“If you need to reach me, please use the team app or email me. I don’t respond to messages after 9 PM unless it’s an emergency.”*

*“Team events are a great time to bond, but outside of practices and games, I’m not hanging out with players. That’s your space.”*

- Create a safe and open-door policy for athlete concerns:

*“My door is always open if you have questions about the rules, the boundaries we’ve set, or if something ever makes you uncomfortable. I want you to feel safe and respected.”*

## Obtain and reevaluate CONSENT:

Maintaining consent is an **ongoing process**, not a one-time action. It’s essential to continually check in with athletes—both verbally and nonverbally—to ensure that your coaching practices **respect their comfort, boundaries, and autonomy**.

### 1. Introduce Consent at the Start of the Season

- Explain what consent means in a coach-athlete relationship: Consent is **the voluntary, ongoing and affirmative agreement to engage in an activity, without pressure or coercion**.
- Outline your approach to things like **pedagogical touch, video recording for training**, and **celebratory gestures (e.g., high fives)**.
- Let athletes know they can say “no” at any time—and that their decision will always be respected.



**2. Ask Before Acting: Use Clear, Direct, and Open-Ended Language** - Never assume comfort—always check in using respectful and clear questions that offer choices.

*“How would you feel if I showed you by adjusting your arm?”*

*“What support do you need from me?”*

*“This activity is optional— what is your comfort level with participating?”*

*“What setting would make you feel most comfortable to have this discussion?”*

**3. Respect "No" Without Pressuring** - A “no” whether expressed verbally or non-verbally (e.g., shaking head, recoiling, looking away) is valid. Do not challenge, guilt, or try to persuade an athlete to change their mind. Instead, support their right to set boundaries.

*“Thanks for letting me know.”*

*“That’s totally okay. We don’t have to talk about it.”*

*“No worries at all. You know your limits best.”*

*“I just want you to know the doors open — if anything changes, I’m here.”*

**4. Reevaluate Consent Over Time** - Comfort can shift with time, mood, or context. Checking in regularly keeps communication open.

*“How are you feeling about the way we’re working together? Is there anything we can adjust moving forward ?”*

## Guidelines for navigating the grey zone

As a coach, you might avoid certain behaviours out of fear of crossing boundaries or damaging your relationship with athletes. The complex coach-athlete relationship can present challenging situations and athletes may not always feel comfortable expressing their opinions.

Creating a space that **enables athletes to share their opinions** freely and **empowers** them to do so can enhance relationships and provide the opportunity for increased communication and understanding.

**Personal beliefs and sport norms may influence how you choose to handle challenging situations. While grey areas can be tricky to navigate, here are a few common misconceptions that may help you address them effectively.**



## ***"I can't touch athletes at all anymore."***

- **Pedagogical touch:** When used sparingly, with consent, and respect, touch can be valuable for learning and safety in sports. Touch should only be used when necessary, focusing on areas relevant to training (e.g., arm, leg). In some cases, touch may not be appropriate, especially considering an athlete's comfort, cultural background, or history of trauma.
- **Congratulatory gestures :** Can be important for athletes' self-esteem and for the coach-athlete relationship. Establishing these gestures at the start of the season (e.g., giving an athlete a high five after a win or a loss) can help to avoid uncomfortable situations.
- **Consent:** Always ask for consent before touching an athlete, specifying where (e.g., hip, arm) and how (e.g., move, straighten, spot).
- **Communication:** At the start of the season, have an open conversation with athletes (and parents of minor athletes) about the purpose of pedagogical touch in coaching (learning, safety) and establish congratulatory gestures. Refer to the previous section for in-depth guidelines on consent and communication.

## ***"I can't have a individual conversation with athletes."***

- **Individual conversations:** Can allow athletes to express themselves freely without external influences thus, fostering an environment of trust and openness. Ensure that the conversations occur in a public setting (e.g., a quiet corner of the field where you are visible to others but can have a private discussion).
- **Consent:** Ensure the athlete feels comfortable having an individual conversation and agrees with the location and context of these conversations prior. Inform the parents or ask them to be present when having discussions with minor athletes.
- **Communication:** Ensure that conversations can be initiated by the coach but also by athletes to increase their sense of control and autonomy.

## ***"I can't attend social/non-sports events with athletes."***

- **Purposeful Participation:** Attending team-related social events (e.g., awards banquets, end-of-season celebrations, or group outings to competitions) can strengthen trust, build team cohesion, and foster positive relationships when done professionally.
- **Consent:** Always check that the athlete is comfortable attending an event with you. For example: "I'm so proud of you for receiving this award—who would you like to attend the event with you? Or would you prefer to go alone?". For minor athletes obtain parental consent.
- **Communication:** Before attending any social event—especially one-on-one—establish clear boundaries with the athlete and, for minors, involve their parents. Coaches should also follow organizational rules and codes of conduct related to social interactions outside of sport settings.



## ***“I can’t communicate with athletes via social media or text messages.”***

- **Digital Communication:** In today’s digital age, text messages and social media are often the quickest ways to communicate with athletes. In line with the rules of sport organizations, these platforms may be used professionally (e.g., scheduling, team updates, wellness check-ins). To avoid crossing boundaries, communicate with athletes using group chats instead of individual messages and do not accept or add current athletes on social media.
- **Consent:** Always ask athletes if they are comfortable with the chosen method of communication. As a coach, establish your own boundaries, such as only responding within certain hours or allowing for a certain delay in your response time.
- **Communication:** At the start of the season, set clear boundaries on the communication channel that will be used (e.g., using a team app like GroupMe or Slack) and how it will be used (e.g., no response after 9pm, communication can be in regards to schedule, logistic but sensitive matters such as playing time should be discussed in person). For minors, ensure parents are included in all communications with athletes.



The grey zone situations listed above highlight the complexities of boundaries and the challenges that can arise in the coach-athlete relationship.

The key takeaways are to **always ask for CONSENT, COMMUNICATE openly**, and continue to **REFLECT on your actions and their impact**.

## **The red zone: Unacceptable behaviour**

Certain behaviours, commonly referred to as interpersonal violence, are **ALWAYS** off limits, and must be prohibited to ensure a healthy and professional coach-athlete relationship.



The following forms of violence can occur through various modes, including contact (i.e., physical interactions), non-contact (verbal and non-verbal), and online (i.e., social media, text messages).

In the context of sport, some of these behaviours may be normalized or even glorified for instrumental purposes (e.g., to enhance performance or motivate athletes); however, they remain unacceptable.

### **Psychological violence:**

- Yelling insults, humiliating, ridiculing an athlete,
- Rejecting or deliberately excluding an athlete,
- Excessively criticizing , for example, an athlete’s performance or attitude,
- Forcing or pressuring an athlete to undergo excessively intense training—sometimes as punishment—until they are extremely exhausted or even to the point of vomiting.



## Neglect:

- Abandoning an athlete during a training session, competition, or sports trip,
- Allowing or forcing an athlete to participate in training/competition despite an injury, even against medical advice,
- Asking an athlete to limit or restrict their social connections (friendships, romantic relationships, family) to focus more on their sport.

## Physical violence:

- Shaking, pushing, grabbing, or throwing an athlete,
- Hitting an athlete with a hand or an object,
- Punching or kicking an athlete.

## Sexual violence:

- **Sexual harassment** (e.g., sexual comments or jokes, intimidating sexual propositions).
- **Sexual violence without contact :**
  - Sexual behaviours that make an athlete uncomfortable (e.g., brushing against, whistling, giving a massage),
  - Voyeurism (e.g., a coach intentionally appearing in the locker room while athletes are changing),
  - Filming or photographing an athlete while they are undressing or masturbating.
- **Sexual violence with contact :**
  - Touching genital or non-genital parts,
  - Kissing,
  - Penetrative and non-penetrative sex.



**Consent can NEVER be legally invoked when a minor is involved.** Refer to your jurisdiction's current laws such as the one established in Québec (Éducaloi).

**Consent in sexual relationships between coaches and older athletes is also a grey zone, as such relationships involve a clear power imbalance. Certain sport organizations have taken a clear stance and explicitly prohibit coach-athlete relationships.**

\*For more information on the negative impacts of violence on athletes refer to the previous guide "Challenging the concept of 'Mental Toughness': A coach's guide to developing athletes' resilience and ability to navigate adversity."

# Actions to take when a boundary is crossed

Boundary crossings can and will happen. What matters most is how you respond. Addressing the situation with **honesty, care, and respect** ensures open communication, strengthens trust, and helps prevent it from happening again.



Remember: **Crossing a boundary (grey zone) doesn't make you a bad coach.**

What's important is your **willingness to learn, grow, and adapt.**

## Be open to feedback:

Even if the boundary crossed wasn't obvious to you, it's important to respect the athlete's experience. Defensive reactions and trying to justify yourself can shut down communication. Instead, listen, stay curious and open to understanding their perspective.

## Reflect honestly:

Take a moment to consider your actions. Ask yourself how your words or behaviour may have impacted the athlete and whether a boundary may have been crossed—even unintentionally.

## Acknowledge and own it:

- Address the situation directly with the athlete. Be clear and sincere *"I realize I crossed a line when I made that comment during practice."*
- Validate their emotions *"I can see that made you uncomfortable."*
- Reinforce their boundary setting *"I appreciate you being honest with me."*
- Invite an open dialogue *"Would you be open to talking about how we can set clear boundaries moving forward?"*

## Take responsibility:

When appropriate, it may be necessary and beneficial to apologize to the athlete for your actions. Even if you don't believe you crossed a boundary, the athlete's feelings and experience are valid. Acknowledging their perspective and offering an apology can strengthen the relationship and build trust.

## Listen with intention:

Demonstrate that you genuinely care by practicing **active listening** (e.g., maintain eye contact, give your full attention, nod, avoid interrupting). This creates a safe space for the athlete to share openly and helps build stronger, more respectful relationships.

## Express your boundaries:

As a coach, it's essential to clearly communicate your boundaries and address instances when they are crossed (e.g., letting an athlete know that speaking to you in a disrespectful manner is unacceptable). Doing so not only **helps maintain your sense of security and comfort**, but it also serves as an **important model** for athletes in learning how to set and respect their own boundaries.



# Want to learn more?

Navigating the coach-athlete relationship can be difficult with the many different interactions and situations that may occur. Here are some additional resources to help you.

**Boundaries in  
coaching -  
International  
Coaching federation**

[Click here](#)

## **Podcasts**

**The mindset mentor -  
How to set boundaries**  
[Click here](#)

**Fast talk - Drawing Ethical  
Boundaries in the Coach-  
Athlete Relationship**  
[Click here](#)

**Safe sport  
Allies**

[Click here](#)

**Safe Sport 101  
playbook on  
boundaries**

[Click here](#)

**The  
ConnectedCoach  
Podcast: Why  
setting boundaries  
with your athletes  
is 100% necessary**

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**Video on consent :  
Tea consent**

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# Putting it into practice

1) Describe a situation you have observed or experienced in the coach-athlete relationship where boundaries were crossed (the grey zone) or were clearly breached (the red zone).

2) Reflect on your actions in the situation that could have made the athlete uncomfortable or crossed a boundary.

- 3) Refer to the information in this guide to reflect on what you could have done differently to ensure staying within the green zone, focusing on:
- Addressing the situation (best practices, rules, and guidelines),
  - Obtaining clear and explicit consent,
  - Enhancing communication.

	How to ensure moving towards the green zone?
Adressing the situation	
Obtaining clear and explicit content	
Enhancing communication	



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