



# Bullying and Exclusion of a Teammate

*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 12-year-old daughter is new to her soccer team and is being bullied by a group of her teammates. In practices and games, whenever she makes a mistake, this group of teammates whisper and seem to snicker about what she did. They always exclude her, ignoring her attempts to join in conversation. My daughter loves the game, but this is making her miserable. I think the coach notices it, but doesn’t do anything about it. Any suggestions for us?”**

## PCA Response by Amanda Golert of Kidpower

I have been playing soccer since I was 12, and it would be a great pity if the unkind behavior of her teammates caused your daughter to stop playing. Having your support to deal with this upsetting experience can help your daughter learn to protect herself and others from bullying and harassment throughout her life.

Tell your daughter that the unkind behavior of her teammates is NOT her fault. Explain that bullying can happen anywhere, on or off the playing field, to anyone at any age and that “People Safety” skills to address bullying get better with practice, just like you need practice to learn to play soccer well.

At Kidpower, we believe you can help your daughter by practicing with her how to be respectful, persistent, and powerful in protecting her feelings from hurtful behavior, in speaking up for herself, in setting boundaries, and in getting help. We coach our students to use body language, choice of words, and facial expressions that show confidence, assertiveness, caring, and calm rather than tentativeness, whininess, irritation, or anger.

For example, you could rehearse with your daughter how to speak up after a practice by saying something like, “I know I am not perfect and that I make mistakes on the field, but I want to improve and help our team succeed – AND I feel distracted from working on improving my game when you whisper and point. Would you please make helpful suggestions and be encouraging instead?”

Prepare your daughter to deal with negative reactions by giving a positive response, such as, “I am committed to keep working to improve my play and to be a supportive teammate AND I would like to have your support by having you be direct, respectful, and specific about how I can do a better job of this.”

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Emotional safety techniques we teach in Kidpower include:

- imagining throwing hurtful words into a trash can and replacing them with an affirmation
- imagining a screen that lets you take in useful information and keep out insulting behavior
- wearing an emotional raincoat, and other practices.

We also teach how to enter a conversation by listening with interest to what people are saying, giving a compliment without expecting a compliment in return, and asking for advice. Encourage your daughter to consider whether other teammates might be feeling left out and whether she can support them while also feeling a greater sense of support herself.

If the above suggestions don't produce favorable results, then prepare your daughter to let the coach know that the bullying is bothering her, even if she thinks the coach is aware of it, again staying assertive and upbeat. Explain to her that, unfortunately, well-meaning adults often overlook bullying behavior, especially when it's subtle, because it doesn't look that bad from the outside.

As with the practice for addressing teammates, you can help your daughter by having her rehearse a conversation with her coach. You might role-play as a busy coach who doesn't listen at first. Guide her to be very specific about her teammates' actions rather than using insults or making assumptions about her teammates' intentions. This communication gives the coach another opportunity to address the bullying, something any truly responsible coach would want to do.

If the coach's response to your daughter is unsatisfactory, then you, as parent, should talk to the coach about your concern. This gives the coach a final opportunity to take action before you take your concern to the soccer organization board.

Even with all of the upsetting media coverage about the emotional damage caused by bullying, not many youth sports organizations effectively implement an anti-bullying policy. Still, ask the organization's board for recommendations on getting the coach to create a team culture where your daughter is accepted. At least that will make the board aware of a coach who tolerates bullying-type behavior by team members.

Most of the time, steps like these can turn a negative situation around. If nothing works, however, the best answer might be to leave and join another team or league. Playing sports is supposed to be fun and build character – and being stuck in a situation where you are constantly being bullied can be miserable and emotionally harmful. Learning when and how to leave a destructive situation is also an important life skill.

*Ask PCA occasionally features a response from a PCA supporter, partner or representative of an allied organization. This response comes from Amanda Golert, former goalkeeper for the Swedish Women's National Soccer League and now senior program leader at Kidpower [www.kidpower.org](http://www.kidpower.org).*

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