



BETTER ATHLETES
BETTER PEOPLE



Teams Separating Practice By Skill, Not Age Group

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.

"Recently my swim team changed from an age based practice group policy (13-14, 15-18) to a skill based group. This has been a controversial change, with the argument against being that 8th graders are now practicing with Seniors in high school, and with age differences like this come very different maturity levels due to the social growth in those years of a student-athlete's life. "

PCA Response by Joe Terrasi, PCA Lead Trainer

Thank you for the candid and thoughtful question. I can certainly understand why such a shift in policy would be challenging and raise important questions for parents. On the face of it, neither age-based groupings nor skill-based groupings is inherently better nor worse than the other. Each can offer advantages and challenges for the organization, the swimmers, and the their families.

Before discussing such a policy shift, it's important for the organization to have a firm grasp on its culture and its mission. It must also fearlessly assess whether its operational culture – the way people truly say and do things – and its stated culture are truly aligned. We see some organizations that have mission statements that prioritize athlete development and well-being, but whose contests look and sound like they're more focused on winning at all costs. Identifying how close the actual culture is to the intended culture is a worthwhile and important endeavor. What we find consistently is that youth sports organizations whose cultures are not carefully and intentionally nurtured tend to drift toward a win-at-all-cost mentality.

Once we're clear and aligned on culture, we can start to talk about policies that make sense for the organization. In determining whether to make a shift like the one you describe, it's key that we identify the outcomes we think the policy will produce. Those desired outcomes should be firmly rooted in the priorities we defined in our mission and exhibit in our culture. We should also be honest about the challenges that may arise due to the policy shift

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Practice Separated by Skill, Continued

The way we implement the policy is as important as the policy decision itself. The policy itself doesn't tell the whole story of how it can support our culture or lead to our intended outcomes. For example, in the situation you describe, if high school seniors are grouped with younger, less mature athletes, what does that look like and how are we teaching each group to act in the situation? If we intentionally teach the seniors that our core ethic is stewardship and care for our teammates, and we follow that up by teaching them explicit mentoring skills, I could envision a team that gets great value from mixed-age groupings. If we are not thoughtful about our desired outcomes and the ways we'll achieve them, our results may not be as positive.

As you can infer from the thoughts above, it is dangerous to assume that just making a policy change will produce the results we want. We should also have some way of identifying over time whether the policy and its implementation are producing the outcomes we want.

Running a sports organization that truly leads to better athletes, better people for all its participants is remarkably challenging. As the adults (parents, coaches, and leaders), it's crucial that we have the courage to do the hard – and sometimes uncomfortable – work that goes into the development and growth of such an organization.

Thank you for your commitment to youth sports!

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