

News For

SWIM PARENTS

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Setting Goals: The Parent, Coach, Athlete Relationship

Setting goals and working toward those goals is one of the most important life skills our young swimmers learn. What are the benefits of goal setting, what is the goal setting process and what are the respective roles of parents and coaches?

In the American Swimming Coaches Association and USA Swimming's Foundations of Coaching Course* these benefits of goal setting are listed:

1. goals challenge swimmers, giving them something to work toward
2. goals direct swimmers to develop their skills
3. goals provide a means of evaluating a swimmer's progress and offer opportunities for success for the athlete.

Simply put, goals give direction and meaning to the day to day workout routine.

The goal setting process begins with a review of current achievements. What are the swimmer's best times? Next, what significant and attainable goals can be worked for over a reasonable time frame. Goals can be related to a time standard or to a competitive achievement. In general, younger swimmers should have a shorter time frame and the goals should be time based. Older swimmers may have the patience to set longer range goals that may be two, three, or four years away and often those goals are based more on a competitive result rather than a pure time. Too often

swimmer's concentrate only on the "outcome goal" and not enough on "performance goals." An outcome goal might be "to qualify for senior nationals in the 400 IM in the summer of 2001." Related performance goals might include: "Increase practice attendance to 9 times per week," "improve my 200 breaststroke best time by three seconds," "lose 5 pounds by May 1st by eliminating empty carbohydrate snacks," and "increase my freestyle stroke rate from 1.3 seconds per stroke to 1.1 in the 400 IM." Some people refer to performance goals as "objectives."

Both outcome goals and performance goals should be specific and time framed. Specific means quantifiable – it can be measured. Time framed means there should be a target date for achieving the goal or objective. Goals should be flexible because stuff happens that we cannot predict and the course may need to be altered.

The positive role of parents is vital. The three elements of good parenting in the goal setting process are:

1. Parents encourage their children to set goals.
2. Parents ask their children what their children's goals are.
3. Parents provide emotional support for their children as they pursue their goals.
4. Parents work with and support the coach for the interest of their children.

Coaches are the primary goal facilitators. They:

1. Guide the swimmer to set realistic but challenging goals.
2. Establish a timetable, or progression for reaching the goal.
3. Discuss split times or other technical strategies for achieving the goal.
4. Remind the swimmer of the relationship between workout performance and goal times at daily practices.
5. Evaluate progress toward goals with the swimmer.
6. Create team support for individual goals.

Case Study: What can go right and what can go wrong in the parent, coach, athlete relationship?

Jennifer had just started swimming on a year around program at age 11. Previously she was a summer league swimmer and swam only 25's and 50's. Her summer league coach was a student and never talked to Jennifer about goals. She was a big girl and quite a bit overweight. She had some natural speed in the freestyle but very poor endurance. On the new team she improved rapidly in the 50 free from a 32.0 to a 30.8 from September to February. An "A" time and the qualifying standard for the local JO's is a 29.89. The coach began talking to her about trying to make that time. The next week at a B meet Jennifer went a best time of 30.3 and the coach noticed Jennifer's dad looking at his stop watch and shaking his head in disappointment. After the swim Jennifer went directly to her dad to talk to him. Later the coach approached Jennifer's dad and said, "I noticed you were disappointed in her swim. What were you hoping she would do?" Jennifer's dad said he thought she should go a 28.5. That was a goal he and her had set. The coach pointed out that her 30.3 was a best time and that 28.5 was not a reasonable short term goal. Jennifer's dad became upset and said that he didn't need any help setting goals with his daughter. The coach became upset and said that goal setting was exclusively the role of the coach.

Mistakes by the coach: From the very start

there should have been better parent education: an initial conference with the parents with one of the topics being goal setting and time standards. Some teams have a parent handbook that explains these issues. Later, the coach should have had a conference with Jennifer and clearly identified 29.89 as a goal. He should have also talked to her about performance goals she would need to make in order to achieve her outcome goal. Some coaches work with the swimmer to fill out a goal sheet listing both performance goals and outcome goals. A copy of this sheet along with a copy of the JO qualifying times and National Time Standards can then be sent home with Jennifer for her parents. Later, in a moment after a practice or before a swimming meet the coach can have a brief chat with the parents about Jennifer's goals.

Mistakes by the parent: Jennifer's dad should not have helped Jennifer set such a difficult goal. His effort to have Jennifer be goal oriented was correct but his knowledge of the sport, of rates of improvement, and of Jennifer's abilities as a swimmer were not very good and this led him to make a poor judgment. It would have been better to approach the coach and ask the coach what reasonable short term and long term goals are for his daughter.

Goal setting is one of the most profound skills we can help our children acquire. Parents who encourage their children to set goals, and who listen to the expert advice of the coach, and then cheer their children on can look forward to years of smiles.