



Parents: Keeping the Fun in Sport

By Suzie Tuffey, Ph.D.

Note: Although this study was done by USA Swimming, the implications apply to all youth sports. Substitute the name of any sport as you read the article.

A few years ago, USA Swimming conducted a survey to try to understand why kids participate in swimming and why kids drop out of swimming. Probably the most important finding from this survey was that 'fun' played a huge role in participation. Kids stay in the sport because it is fun and, conversely, kids leave the sport because it is no longer fun. Based on this finding, USA Swimming decided to conduct a follow-up research project to try to identify *exactly what is fun and what is not fun* about swimming. In the first phase of this project, we held focus group interviews with a total of 48 age-group swimmers (Ages 8-18) from three USA Swimming clubs. The athletes were asked a variety of questions to uncover their perception of 'fun aspects' and 'not such fun aspects' of swimming. Specific to this article, two questions focused on the influence of parents on kids' swimming enjoyment: "What do parents do that makes swimming fun?" "What do parents do that takes away from the fun of swimming?" The question was not whether parents have an influence on kids' swimming enjoyment (because we know they do) but on the specific things parents do and say which influences the fun in swimming, both positively and negatively.

Through these focus group interviews, the kids were able to help us better understand the influence parents can have on their enjoyment of swimming. From a review of the athletes' responses, several 'themes' seem evident regarding the things parents do and say to their swimmers that have a positive and a detrimental influence on swimming enjoyment. It is important to be aware of these things that impact enjoyment because, as we have found, enjoyment influences participation in swimming . . . and we all want the kids to stay involved in swimming and enjoy the experience. As you read on, keep in mind that this is coming directly from age group swimmers; the words are taken directly from athletes and reflect their experiences in swimming.

What do parents do that makes swimming fun? And what do parents do that takes away from the fun of swimming?

Provide Support

One resounding theme coming from the kids was that parents increase the fun in swimming by providing unconditional encouragement and support. For the most part, it seems that a physical presence at meets and interest in what their child is doing goes a long way toward enhancing swimming enjoyment. The kids seem to enjoy swimming when they feel their parents support them regardless of the performance outcome. This theme is illustrated by the following:

"My parents are very supportive. . . . I know, like, my parents will be happy for me whatever I do. I mean, if I do bad, they'll still be comforting and if I do good they'll be happy for me, you know. It's just, I think the people that their parents are so pushy, I think that they're gonna, um, they have the most potential to quit because they have so much pressure on them." (Age 15-18)



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

"She (mom) doesn't expect anymore from me than I expect from myself which I think that's important because when parents start placing expectations on their kids, like, it just makes the kids more stressed. I just think parents should be very supportive." (Age 15-18)

"Just knowing that he (dad) is there, you know. I can go up and ask for 50 cents for some food or something. It has actually given me that support feeling that my parent, one parent, is there." (Age 15-18)

"You need reassurance (after swimming poorly), like, they still love you. They're still going to give you a ride home." (age 13-14)

"I always want my mom to be there. I always want someone to be there watching me, cheering me and stuff like that and I kind of don't feel like I want to do as well when they're not there. I kind of feel like I need to show them even though they tell me I don't need to show them." (Age 13-14)

Don't Push Too Much

A theme that was identified by the kids as detracting from the experience of fun in swimming related to parents' pushing too much. Some of the kids felt that excessive pushing by their parents to practice, compete and perform well detracted from the fun of swimming, as exemplified below:

"Well, I don't exactly like it sometimes because they push me too hard that it makes me feel bad and I just don't like to swim sometimes because they push me so much." (Age 10 and under)

"I saw this one mom who was yelling at her kid, like, 'I spend so much money on you. I can't believe you did so bad today.' And the kid was already crying and her mom's like yelling at her . . . and her mom throws her stuff down and leaves. If my mom ever did that, I'd just want to quit because you need encouragement from everyone around you if you want to win." (Age 13-14)

"On the day you don't want to go to practice and you're not feeling well, they force you."

"Oh, I hate that!"

"And is that good?" (interviewer)

"Oh, no, that's bad"

"No, it makes you get worse." (Ages 11-12)

Learn Optimal 'Push'

Interestingly, there was a positive side to this idea of 'parental pushing'. Kids talked about the role of parents in enhancing fun in swimming by providing a push. However, caution is warranted, as there is a fine line between pushing in a positive way and pushing to the detriment of kids' enjoyment. As evidenced below, it seems a slight push from parents can enhance subsequent enjoyment and, as kids point out, is often needed.

" I think your parents sort of want you to do things and I think you kind of grow to like it . . . you're sort of pushed firmly by them." (Age 15-18)

"I think that parents need to push their kids a little more when they're younger because I know when I was like 11 or 12, there would be days where I didn't want to go to practice." (Age 15-18)

"They kind of push us to go to swimming . . . and it makes us, like, feel better that we swam." (Age 11-12)



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

"I like it when my parents push me because I was out for a year and I became a C swimmer because I aged up and just this last meet, in all of my things, I became a B swimmer instead because my parents were cheering me on and they pushed me." (Age 8-10)

It's kind of good for them to kind of maybe push you now or make you go to practice now." (Age 10 and under)

Resist Assuming the Role of Coach

A last theme evident from kids' responses tied to the idea that when parents take on the roles and responsibility of the coach it takes away from the fun in swimming. Critiquing races, offering suggestions on what went wrong or how to improve, and placing expectations on performance are examples of things parents do that tend to decrease the kids' enjoyment. An exception to this seems to be that when parents have credibility as swimmers, advice is sometimes welcome as it is viewed as coming from an 'expert' as opposed to a parent. To be sure, however, parents may want to ask their kids if they want advice or suggestions regardless of the parent's swimming background. Kids talk about this detrimental influence:

"My mom, I mean, my parents are supportive of me and they're like, fine, but sometimes my mom is just like . . . she keeps asking me everything about what do I think I did wrong if it's a bad race and I want to just forget about it. It is really annoying when she keeps asking me." (Age 13-14)

"They don't know as much as a coach. Like my mom, she tries to tell me what to do and I don't listen to her, but it is annoying." (Age 11-12)

"Well. Sometimes they annoy me because they . . . like I don't keep my head down enough and they are like 'you've got to keep that head down'. They keep annoying me about that." (Age 8-10)

"If I've had a bad race and my mom is telling me what I did wrong, I won't really listen to her. But if I did pretty well and she's still pointing some things wrong that can make me faster, then I'll take it to my coach and let him help me so I can do better." (Age 13-14)

"I like it whenever my dad gives me goals 'cuz he's a master swimmer. But my mom, whenever she's in the pool, all she does is like float and she doesn't like to get her hair wet unless she's in the shower so when she says 'you gotta keep on doing this', I'm having a hard time believing it because she doesn't really swim that much. She just likes playing around with it." (Age 10 and under)

"My dad used to be a swimmer and he, like, almost made it to the Olympics so him just being there is like a real big motivation and he gives me advice and stuff." (Age 13-14)

What does all this mean?

1) Taken in conjunction, it seems that kids want parents to be a presence in their swimming. But, they want this presence to be one of unconditional support with little advice. In essence, the kids seem to be saying, 'Mom and Dad, support my efforts but don't try to help me swim faster'.

2) Parental 'push' was mentioned by the kids in both a positive and negative vein. Because of individual differences in needs and preferences, it is probably very difficult for parents to define and identify an "optimal push"; a push that is strong enough to be beneficial but not so strong that it is perceived as overpowering by



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

the kids. However, for the benefit of the kids, every effort should be made to walk this fine line and try to achieve an 'optimal push'.