

# News For

# SWIM PARENTS

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## The Praise Gap

**Bringing Praising Strategies Used by Coaches and Parents Closer Together.**  
From Guy Edson, ASCA

From the point of view of many parents, coaches tend to under-praise their swimmers. One parent complained to me that their child would never rise above the level of “adequate” under my standards. This is the same parent I earlier saw heaping loads of praise on the child (a 12 year old) for having giving it a “great effort” when in fact the child had just completed a swim that was technically lacking, far off of a best time, and showed no interest in racing. Clearly there is a difference here.

Many articles cite studies that in the ideal learning environment there is a “magic ratio” of 5 praises to 1 criticism. Anecdotally I can tell you that most coaches are the complete opposite: 5 criticisms to one praise.

In good coaching those 5 “criticisms” are better labeled “critical feedback.” The role of the coach is to give critical technical feedback to the athlete – specific and objective information that helps the athlete perform better the next time. Praise is often given in levels from a simple OK (adequate) to “nice job.” Coaches are careful NOT to use words that leave little room for improvement like “awesome,” “excellent,” and “perfect.” A coach wants the athlete to feel that there is always work to do, always room for improvement. As long as feedback and praise are consistent, coaches can use the 1:5 ratio very effectively.

One of the difficulties for coaches is that we feel we are fighting against a larger cultural push of standardless self-esteem building. This is the mentality that “All efforts are good.” An article in the New York Magazine by Po Bronson cites research that says that self-esteem building by over praising can actually create underachievers. ([How Not to Talk to Your Kids -- The inverse power of praise. By Po Bronson in the New York Magazine, February 2007.](#))

*Since the 1969 publication of *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*, in which Nathaniel Branden opined that self-esteem was the single most important facet of a person, the belief that one must do whatever he can to achieve positive self-esteem has become a movement with broad societal effects. Anything potentially damaging to kids’ self-esteem was axed. Competitions were frowned upon. Soccer coaches stopped counting goals and handed out trophies to everyone. Teachers threw out their red pencils. Criticism was replaced with ubiquitous, even undeserved, praise.*

*Dweck and Blackwell’s work is part of a larger academic challenge to one of the self-esteem movement’s key tenets: that praise, self-esteem, and performance rise and fall together. From 1970 to 2000, there were over 15,000 scholarly articles written on self-esteem and its relationship to everything—from sex to career advancement. But results were often contradictory or inconclusive. So in 2003 the Association for Psychological Science asked Dr. Roy Baumeister, then a leading proponent of self-esteem, to review this literature. His team concluded that self-esteem was polluted with flawed science. Only 200 of those 15,000 studies met their rigorous standards.*

*After reviewing those 200 studies, Baumeister concluded that having high self-esteem didn’t improve grades or career achievement. It didn’t even reduce alcohol usage. And it especially did not lower violence of any sort. (Highly aggressive, violent people happen to think very highly of themselves, debunking the theory that people are aggressive to make up for*

low self-esteem.) At the time, Baumeister was quoted as saying that his findings were “the biggest disappointment of my career.”

So, what might be good advice for parents seeking to praise and build up their children? From Bronson’s article we read:

*To be effective, researchers have found, praise needs to be specific.*

*Sincerity of praise is also crucial.*

*New York University professor of psychiatry Judith Brook explains that the issue for parents is one of credibility. “Praise is important, but not vacuous praise,” she says. “It has to be based on a real thing—some skill or talent they have.” Once children hear praise they interpret as meritless, they discount not just the insincere praise, but sincere praise as well.*

With so much overflowing love for our children (I am a parent also) why not praise all efforts, even not-so-good efforts, as a way of boosting spirits? Why must the coach bluntly say that the performance did not match up with expectations – in short, tell the swimmer it was a failure? In the article, Bronson refers to a study that helps explain the importance of recognizing failures.

*But it turns out that the ability to repeatedly respond to failure by exerting more effort—instead of simply giving up—is a trait well studied in psychology. People with this trait, persistence, rebound well and can sustain their motivation through long periods of delayed gratification. Delving into this research, I learned that persistence turns out to be more than a conscious act of will; it’s also an unconscious response, governed by a circuit in the brain.*

*“The key is intermittent reinforcement,” says [researcher Dr. Robert] Cloninger [of Washington University in St. Louis.] The brain has to learn that frustrating spells can be worked through. “A person who grows up getting too frequent rewards will not have persistence, because they’ll quit when the rewards disappear.”*

Bronson concludes:

*Jumping in with praise is like jumping in too soon with the answer to a homework problem—it robs him of the chance to make the deduction himself.*

I think it is appropriate to simply ask the child how they think they did, listen to their analysis, then add a ton of love and a big hug, and let it go at that.