

The Top Ten Questions Every Swimming Parent Wants to Know

By Wayne Goldsmith and Helen Morris

You see them every day. They are everywhere. At every pool. Every swim meet. Every school swimming practice.

There they are. Sitting at the side of the pool. Watching every lap. Counting every breath. Analyzing every stroke. Studying every move you make.

Coaches? No.

Swimming media? Uh-uh.

Officials? No way.

Who are these people who go to the pool and watch you swim laps day after day after day? Who are these folk sitting there in the wind and rain for hours and hours watching you practice? Who are these strange humans who love nothing more than getting out of bed at 4 a.m. just to sit in the cold and watch you train?

Your Parents!

Ever wondered what they are thinking sitting there at the side of the pool studying every stroke and counting every kick?

They are desperate to find out the answers to these important questions.....

1.How many training sessions should my child do each week?

There is no magic number of training sessions for every swimmer. Even at elite level, some swimmers swim 7 sessions a week, some do nine, others 11...there is no magic number.

It all comes down to the FLAG principle:

Fatigue – if a swimmer is swimming 3 sessions a week and as a result is always tired, irritable and their grades are falling, then doing more swimming does not make sense. So the optimal number of sessions for any individual swimmer is largely based on their ability to adapt to and recover from their training load.

Level of performance – training sessions should also be based on the level of performance being targeted. Chances are swimming two sessions a week will not get you selected on the next Olympic team and similarly 14 sessions a week is a little too much just to achieve a PB time at the under 9 state championships meet. As a broad benchmark, world class swimmers spend one day per week, i.e. 24 hours per week training and the rest of the time eating and sleeping so the higher you want to go, the harder you have to work.

Available time – if your child is in junior high, playing basketball, learning piano, doing special projects on weekends for extra credits, playing tennis and in the school choir...and.....swimming five sessions each week, then it is safe to say, adding more swimming sessions is not going to do anything other than make them tired and fatigued. Keep in mind your child's total commitments across all areas of their life before adding more training time. And – never, ever forget that some days they need to just hang out with their friends, play and enjoy life. They are only kids once!

Goals – if your child sets high swimming goals, then naturally the time, effort and energy to achieve them must also be high. As a general rule, as kids progress through each level of swimming they need to add an extra pool session or gym

workout to learn the skills, develop the fitness and build the technical abilities to be successful at the next level. For example (Note: this is a guide only):

Swimmer level/ Sessions per week

Water safety / Learn to swim - 1-2

Mini squads / School swimming programs - 2-3

District / Country Swimming Championships level - 3-4

State Swimming Championships level - 4-6

National Swimming Championships level - 6-8

International Swimming level - 8 plus

2. My child is 10 and is a great freestyler. What does she have to do to make it to the top?

The first thing to accept is that there is no such thing as a champion ten year old freestyler. Swimmers who experience success pre-teenage years generally do so because of accelerated growth, i.e. they are bigger and stronger than the other kids!

Another common situation is that as kids grow, change and develop, their ability to swim the competitive swimming strokes also changes – this year's backstroker could be next year's freestyler and then the following year they are great at swimming fly.

In the long term, the factors which determine success as a senior swimmer are the 5 Ps:

Perseverance – the ability to try and try and try and try – and to never give up;

Patience – it takes time to become a great swimmer – about ten years of consistent hard work;

Physical training – great swimmers are usually the best prepared. It takes a high level of physical fitness, technical development and skills refinement to make it to the top;

Personality – world class swimmers demonstrate some common personality traits – none the least being determination, commitment, the ability to overcome adversity and the capacity for accelerated learning;

Passion – Swimming is like anything else in life: you have to love it to do it well!

3. When should my child specialize in a stroke?

Kids need to grow into their specialist stroke! That is, when swimmers grow and develop physically and mentally, they will be naturally drawn to a particular stroke. It is common for a child's best stroke to change from year to year but once they hit middle to late teens, the nature of specific events will become more appealing. Real talent in any one stroke is harder to hide than it is to find! There is no need to encourage kids into one stroke or another – it will just happen!

4. Do swimmers need a special diet?

No. Not unless they have a medical problem or diet related condition that has been diagnosed by a nutrition professional.

As a general rule, top swimmers follow a "4 MORE 4 LESS, 4 ME" diet:

More – complex carbohydrates like rice, bread, pasta.

More – lean quality protein like chicken, meat, fish.

More – water, fresh juices.

More – fresh fruit, nuts and vegetables.

Less – take away food.

Less – saturated fats and oils.

Less – processed and pre packaged foods.

Less – sodas.

Lots of parents want to know about supplements like vitamins, minerals and special substances like Creatine, Glucose and so on.

The five golden rules about these products are:

- 1.They may be of some use to some swimmers in some situations and on some occasions but consult a sports nutrition professional to help determine what might work for your child;
- 2.Nothing takes the place of consistent hard work, good technique and a great attitude;
- 3.If something sounds too good to be true, "Miracle Sports Performance Powder – Improves Endurance by up to 60 percent..." it probably is too good to be true!
- 4.Never introduce a new product – no matter what it is promising – within 7 days of an important meet. Many parents have fallen for the trap of giving kids a "special" breakfast or all new "miracle" supplement on the morning of a big meet only to find their kids spend more time in the toilet than in the pool.
- 5.Read rule 2 again – no supplement can turn mediocrity into magnificence. Teach kids to believe in themselves and to take responsibility for their own swimming performances rather than to rely on the promises of a supplement advertising campaign. *(editor's note: As swimmers progress into the drug-testing parts of the sport, they are 100 percent liable for anything that goes into their bodies. Supplements, at least in the United States, are not regulated and can contain banned substances.*

5.How do I find the best coach for my child?

The best swimming coaches demonstrate the FIVE Cs:

Calm – they remain calm and composed on and off deck and set a great example for the kids they coach;

Confident – they display a "humble confidence" – they believe in themselves and coach because they love coaching – not for any ego stroking reason;

Close – the pool where they coach is close to home or at least on the after school "route" – e.g. Pick up the kids from school, drop them to basketball practice, pick them up and take them to swimming, pick them up and drop them to music lessons.....

Caring – they are interested in kids becoming great human beings – not just fast swimmers.

Credible – they have the appropriate experience, qualifications and understanding of swimming.

There is an old saying in coaching..."kids don't care how much you know, they want to know how much you care!"

In swimming, this means asking the coach four questions:

Will you inspire a lifelong passion for the sport of swimming in my child?

Will you engage my child's heart and mind and respect them as an individual?

Will you teach my child the importance of swimming skills and technique?

Will you encourage my child to learn, be patient with them when they fail and above all help them to develop a real sense of self confidence and self belief?

Think about your own sporting career. Remember that coach who took a real interest in you as a human being and changed your life – whose lessons you still remember even now 20 years later? That's the type of coach you want to find for your kids!

6.School, swimming, social life.....what's the right balance for my child?

Your child is not a swimmer....they are a child first and foremost: a child who just happens to swim. But they are also a student, a brother or sister, a son or daughter, a member of a youth group, maybe someone who plays another sport – they are a young person who has the potential to be anything they choose to be.

Kids are drawn to the things that:

- 1.They enjoy;
- 2.They have friends;
- 3.They are learning by because their hearts and minds are engaged in the activity.

So if your kids are having fun with their friends and love what they are doing, chances are the balance is right. If your kids start finding excuses not to train, don't want to get out of bed to go to the pool, show poor training habits and want to avoid going to meets, they are telling you, "mom and dad – the balance is not right and I want to change it". Listen to your kids.

7.What should I expect in terms of results at Meets?

You should expect to see:

Your child enjoying swimming with his / her friends;

Your child learning to love challenging him / herself and taking pleasure in competition;

Your child demonstrating all they have learned in terms of swimming technique, dives, starts, turns, finishes, underwater kicking.

Your child showing some self responsibility in their warm up, recovery, meet day nutrition and personal management.

Your child showing a sense of "team" by cheering for team mates and supporting other members of the squad.

In terms of results...expect nothing. Where kids are concerned....Medals are meaningless and times are tedious unless they are accompanied by LLL – a love of the sport, learning new skills and life lessons.

8.Does my child need to be doing strength training in the gym?

No. Not unless they have an injury or weakness or imbalance or other physical condition that has been identified by a professional sports physical therapist / medical practitioner.

The three key areas – what we call the "ABILITIES" of non-pool training to focus on are:

FLEX - ability: Improving their flexibility in important swimming muscles and muscle groups;

MOB – ability (mobility): Improving their mobility around joints;

STAR - ability (stability): Developing a strong stable "core" – abs, back muscles and important stabilizing muscles in their shoulders and hips.

Kids don't need to lift heavy weights – work on the "abilities", technique, skills, attitude and self confidence and leave the lifting to the Governor of California!

9.What can I do to be the best swimming parent I can be?

Give your child that which only you can give! Unconditional love, total support, compassion and unwavering belief in them as human beings. In the long term, whether your kids become world record holders in swimming, lawyers, doctors, teachers...it is not their talent that defines them or makes them successful – it is who they are. And no one helps kids to develop values, virtues and characteristics like their family. 6 feet tall 12 year old kids with large feet and strong muscles are great, but give me intelligent, honest, hard working kids with a real sense of self belief, courage and integrity any day! Develop the person first – then the swimming power!

10.My son is 11 years old and wants to play basketball two afternoons a week? Is playing other sports ok?

Yep! Pre-teen kids should be out enjoying life, being fit, learning skills and being active. Sure – once they get to mid – late teens and make the commitment to be a great swimmer, then some of their other activities will need to be cut back but at 11 the "more the merrier". A lot of sports have several cross over effects on swimming including:

Basketball – leg power, co-ordination, speed, endurance.

Gymnastics – balance, timing, flexibility, power, co-ordination.

Martial arts – balance, timing, flexibility, power, co-ordination, self confidence.

Running – aerobic fitness, leg strength.

Soccer – aerobic fitness, leg strength, co-ordination, speed.

Look at the obesity epidemic in kids in all developed nations. It would be great to have every kid in the world swimming laps, but just having them outside playing sport and moving their bodies instead of seeing them inside eating junk food while watching television has got to be good!

About Wayne and Helen:

Wayne is one of the world's leading experts in elite level swimming and high performance sport. Helen, is a former world class swimmer and a passionate campaigner for kids and adults learning to swim. To read more about Wayne and Helen visit their web site www.sportscoachingbrain.com and their new swim site www.swimcoachingbrain.com