

Questions Parents Ask

(From USA Swimming)

1. Sometimes my child doesn't want to go to practice. He wants to play with his friends. Should I force him to go?

You should not force your child; you want his participation to be his decision. Reinforce the choices and decisions he has made to start his sport. For example, your son chose to go to practice on Tuesday and Thursdays, on other days he has the freedom to do other activities. As a parent, explain your expectation that he fulfill the commitment he made by joining the team. You don't want to force your child into a sport that he does not enjoy, yet you want your child to be involved in a 'lifetime sport', to learn about making and keeping a commitment and to interact with peers So, what are you to do?

Instead of allowing your child to make a daily decision about going to practice, allow him to decide whether or not he wants to participate for the season. Once the decision is made to participate, he is making a commitment to the team and needs to follow through on it by attending practice on a regular basis. A haphazard schedule is detrimental to the athlete's overall development.

Interestingly, when asked to reflect on the role of their parents in their swimming, athletes from a recent USA Swimming World Championship team talked about being pushed to swim by their parents on a weekly basis but knowing they could quit if they stopped having fun with swimming.

2. My child has a lot of interests and activities so he only attends about half of his practices. What will happen to his competition results?

Children involved in other activities can benefit in the areas of coordination and balance, as well as improved social and intellectual development. Specialized training in one activity does not necessarily need to take place at this stage of development. Will your son's teammate who makes all practices have better results? Probably he will because his teammate is working solely on developing one sport skills. It is up to you to explain to your child that making the choice to participate in other activities can have its consequences. Tell your son that he should not compare his results to that of his teammate, but to focus on the fact that he is benefiting from and enjoying other sports.

3. It looks like my child is having a lot of fun at practice. Shouldn't she be working harder?

Be happy that your child is having fun! According to a recent study conducted by USA Swimming children who experience fun while participating stay in sports longer (Tuffey, Gould, & Medbery, 1998). At this stage of the game, the most important aspect of development is the mastery of skills, which means learning the proper technique. Fundamentals must be established prior to true "training" taking place. And, if she is having fun in the process of learning, she is more likely to continue to the sport.

4. It looks like all they do at practice is drills. Shouldn't they be training more?

Your child needs to develop a solid foundation in mechanics. Drills and drill sets serve the specific purpose of teaching skills and fundamentals. Drills develop motor coordination, motor skills, and balance. In fact, your child's coach may prescribe a particular drill, just for your child, in order to improve an aspect of her technique. In addition, she may actually be experiencing a "training" benefit from drills. Drills require concentration and aerobic energy to do them correctly.

5. My daughter's coach sometimes makes her "sit out" for disciplinary reasons. Isn't that a waste of her time?

The coach has set up expectations of proper behavior. Hopefully, your child is aware of the consequences of testing these boundaries. Obviously the coach is reinforcing what is expected of the children at practice. We encourage you to reinforce the coach's practice expectations by discussing your child's behavior and the consequences of that behavior. Hopefully, this "time out" begins to reinforce self-discipline, accountability and respect for others.

6. My son complains that some of the kids cheat in practice. What should I tell him?

Praise him first for completing the workout the coach offers. Remind him that he is there to improve himself and he can't control what his teammates do. Tell him however, that his best course of action is to continue to do things right and others may actually be influenced by his good example. By committing to do his best at all times, over the long haul he will reap the benefits of his hard work.

7. My daughter just moved up to the Senior Group. Now the coach wants her to train twice a day. Is this really necessary?

Your child has established proper technique and fundamentals by progressing through the levels of the team. It is appropriate at this stage of your daughter's career development to increase the training loads. This includes adding the two mornings per week. Although morning practices come extra early, most coaches feel that this level of commitment is necessary for your daughter to reach the next level of her career.

Training for competitive sports is demanding on young athletes. As athletes develop, they need to understand the upcoming time demands. One specific principle of training that applies is the progressive overload principle. A person must be stressed slightly more each day over time to continue to improve. In order to do that, the coach must plan additional time. The addition of morning workouts often becomes necessary for the coach to develop young athletes to their maximum potential.

8. What type of commitment is needed for higher levels of competition?

While an athlete's performance is influenced by numerous factors, there are three that exert the greatest influence: physical, technical and mental. As athletes progress, a greater commitment, of both time and energy, is needed to enable an athlete to address all of these factors.

Additionally, the athlete is asked to take more responsibility for and ownership of his practice and competition performance. One way of doing this is by accepting responsibility for leading a lifestyle conducive to performance, i.e., proper nutrition, adequate sleep, time management and managing extra-curricular activities.

9. Is my teenager sacrificing too much to train?

What you may consider a sacrifice, such as missing a school dance, football game or simply going out with friends, your child may not consider a sacrifice at all! Instead, your child has chosen to commit to his sport. By doing so, he realizes that a certain level of training is necessary for him to achieve greater goals and does not look at these activities as missed opportunities. Keep in mind that your child realizes missing a workout is like missing sleep, it cannot be made up. If, however, your child is expressing sentiments that he is missing these chances, then it is time to re-evaluate the balance in his activities.

10. What does the coach mean when she says that my teenaged daughter controls 80% of her own training?

At this stage it is important for the athlete to take full responsibility for her sport. Your coach is just reinforcing this concept. Having a good attitude, developing proper time management, and demonstrating a strong work ethic are important both in and out of the practice and competition. What your child's coach is referring to is what we call "hidden training factors." She is in control of what she eats, how much sleep she gets, her practice attendance, and even her effort on practice sets. This may really add up to even more than 80%.

11. My child used to compete in all of the events, but now her coach has her focusing on only a few.

Prior to now, your child needed to acquire a wide range of skills and the aerobic development necessary to allow for this specialization. At this point in her career, her physical development allows her to train for specific events. Children at this stage have reached the physical maturity necessary to specialize in particular events for which they are best suited.

12. I notice the coach having meetings with the older athletes at the beginning of the season. What are they talking about? Is he asking for input?

Typically the coach likes to share his seasonal plan with the group prior to the start of the season, as well as reviewing the previous season's strengths and weaknesses. This plan highlights the major competition, tapering and the overall training plan. By presenting the athletes with information, the coach is making the athlete part of the process. This meeting may also be a prelude to individual goal setting sessions and an opportunity to begin to build team unity.

13. My child was very successful as very young child. How can I help her reach the next level?

When your daughter is making the transition, she needs to realize that she is participating at a higher level. Improvements are in tenths and hundredths, rather than seconds, due to biological and physiological factors.

Throughout her career, you have been very supportive. This support is still needed but it may have to be a little different than in the past. It is a good time to discuss with your daughter what she needs from you. Do not be afraid to ask her "How can I support you in your sport?" While you are an important part of her support network, realize your daughter, at this level, should be taking on more ownership of her athletic career.

14. I want my son to qualify for Nationals so badly, but he keeps just missing. What can I do to help?

It is important for you to acknowledge that this is your child's goal, not yours. Your expectations may actually be putting undue pressure on his performances. There are two types of goals that athletes can set. Outcome Goals focus on the end result of performance such as "win" or "make finals." Process Goals relate to the process of performance. Examples are "great technique" or "strong finish."

Athletes have much more control over Process Goals. Outcome Goals are uncontrollable since they also involve the performance of other competitors. Athletes and coaches should concentrate on Process Goals since they involve aspects an athlete can control. Focusing on a time is outcome driven. Although you want what's best for your son, encourage him to talk to his coach to clearly identify Process Goals to achieve improvement.