

Early Swimmer Development

We see so many young athletes joining our sport these days, but so many don't stick with the sport because they end up hating the environment that surrounds them. These kids often feel like training is more similar to doing chores than to playing with their friends. At ASL, our goal is to create a culture where young kids want to show up to practices and competitions because they get to see their friends and they have fun swimming. As coaches we want to develop our athletes into the best that they can be, but **no kid is ready to be an Olympian at ten years old**. We aim for long term development and to prime them for the highest levels of competition when their bodies' can handle the physiological stress.

After a survey of the top 10 Men's and Women's programs in the country we've come up with the following information.

On average for 10&under programs, athletes swim 2-3 times a week for 70 minutes. Athletes begin by building great foundations in the freestyle and backstroke disciplines. Backstroke can be particularly difficult for young athletes as it throws off their understanding of balance in the water. Most teams ask their first-year athletes to begin competing at in house meets that focus on short swims. As athletes progress past their first year, they begin to compete at USA Swimming sanctioned meets. New athletes prioritize the freestyle and backstroke 25s/50s, while seasoned athletes race in all four strokes. At this age, swimmers should learn the basics of a pace clock (the "top" and "bottom") and learn how to leave 5 seconds apart. Understanding the terminology of distances, up to 100 yards, is also taught.

As athletes age up (11-14yrs) and continue their development, they start to dive deeper into the competitive path. They begin by making sure that they are legal in all four racing disciplines and achieve this by obtaining an IMR or IMX score. An IMX score is obtained by successfully finishing 5 racing events - one in each stroke and an IM - specific to their age group. (For more information on IMR/IMX, visit our information page [here](#)). They also increase their training days, averaging around 4 days a week. On the competitive side, athletes may begin to train 5 days a week with some programs. This is very rare and typically only for a small, select group of athletes. At this age, athletes are asked to start running sets with less help from the coach. This includes knowing how to read a clock correctly, how to properly follow intervals, and be able to run through a full round of a set without stopping.

What we found is that the programs who develop the best athletes focus on building culture and excitement about the sport at a young age. Doing less "hard" work but allowing the athletes to build friendships and enjoy the experiences they have at practice is more beneficial to their long-term development. The best teams believe that their athletes should love swimming because they are having fun and not only because they are super fast (although getting faster is always a great goal).