

Successful Coaches for Ten and Under Athletes.

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The coach is the most important single element in the successful careers of athletes. "Career" means start to finish. Our expectation is that an athlete will begin their "career" somewhere between 6-8 years of age and continue "forever" in their Masters Swimming years.

"Successful" can have two meanings (at least). The first is continuance. (staying in the sport.) The second meaning is competitive success measured either in places won or improving times achieved in competition.

"Continuance" is based on quality of life experience in the sport. The primary and perhaps 2nd, 3rd, 4th etc. most important element in this is the relationship developed between the athlete and the coach. Where this relationship is strong, the athlete continues and DAILY benefits from the relationship with an adult not their parent. Where the relationship is weak the athlete leaves the sport, typically seeking (consciously or not) a more rewarding relationship. Hence, retention of athletes as a goal of USA Swimming and its clubs, is a direct result of the quality of its coaching, particularly and especially at the introductory levels of the sport.

Which bring us to the question, what constitutes a rewarding relationship?

I will attempt to answer that with "characteristics" of the coach of ten and unders which has been a successful profile over the 65 years of age group swimming. Each and any can be "argued with" and exceptions can be pointed to that violate each of these. That is granted. But the general success of each is unquestioned. (later, we will discuss some of the "negative qualities" that coaches of ten and unders should avoid, in general.)

So here we go. The List follows:

1. The Coach LOVES small children. No other way to put this. Love shines through to them.
2. The Coach ENJOYS small children. They will reflect EXACTLY, their coach.
3. The Coach RESPECTS small children. Respects them enough to know they are strong, resilient, tough, and capable. Being soft or easy on them IS NOT Respect, it's condescending. And "yes," you do have to explain that to them (and their parents, REPEATEDLY to the parents).
4. The Coach knows that children today are very largely VISUAL learners. The more you talk about something you trying to teach, the less you teach. 'SHOW/DO", repeat. Talk as little as possible.
5. The Coach DOES talk to them about life skills, daily. Enrich their lives. Take them seriously and talk about serious things. You need a list? Make one.
6. The Coach knows that "Building Capacity" to learn and then "Building capacity to train" are two different things and BOTH must be done in the successful program. Volume is ONE piece of this puzzle.
7. The Coach understands the concept of the Myelin Sheath and its effects on physical learning. Repetition makes habit. Only GOOD repetitions make good strokes. The Science behind "Practice Correctly."
8. The Coach knows that FUN comes in multiple forms from "laughs and giggles" to the pleasure of learning a new skill, to the joy of meeting a challenge and employs ALL the forms during a week of practice.
9. The Coach takes the time before and after practice to relate (talk with) to the athletes outside of swimming conversation. (Coach the person, train the athlete.) The relationship between Coach and Athlete is EVERYTHING.
10. The Coach knows that coaching the child without coaching the parent at the same time frame, is counterproductive.

WHAT NOT TO DO: (a very partial list.)

1. Don't treat ten and unders as mini-seniors in any way. They are not.
2. Be cold.

3. Be harsh. (95% of the time) Occasionally raising your voice is NECESSARY and demonstrates that this is IMPORTANT to you and then it will be IMPORTANT to them.)
4. Belittle them. Exactly the opposite. Catch them doing something right!
5. Compare them. Everyone learns/gains at their own rate.
6. Develop a “training plan.” DO develop a “Teaching Plan”. (Some training will be involved...but the point is not training, it’s teaching.)
7. Don’t focus on results. Focus first on effort. Once you get effort regularly, focus on PROCESS of learning technique and how to train. Goal setting has very limited use for ten and unders. Process thinking will be good for the rest of their life.
8. Don’t treat them like ATHLETES. Treat them like PEOPLE who have chosen to have athletics be a PART of their life. (Those who will BE athletes will sort themselves out later in the year to year process.)
9. Don’t ignore the parents. If you do, you’ll be redoing everything you teach all the time. You need the parents ON YOUR SIDE.
10. BEHAVE ALWAYS LIKE A LADY OR GENTLEMAN. AND EXPECT THE SAME OF THE ATHLETES. IF you fail this, you fail everything in coaching.

All the Best, John Leonard