

HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD BECOME A CONFIDENT SWIMMER

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This article deals with a particularly important aspect of psychological development in sport, the development of self-confidence. It is aimed at the parents of 8-12 year old age group swimmers, children who are in the critical periods of psychological development. Here are my views of how parents can help contribute to the **success** of their children in swimming.

1. HELP YOUR CHILD FOCUS ON PROCESS GOALS

The idea of goal setting in sport is hardly new. Most often goals are set only in **outcome** terms. “*I want to win the 50,*” or “*I’m going to get a 1:09 for my 100 free,*” are a common type of goal statement focused on outcome. You should encourage your child to set goals which will focus on the process, rather than the product, of their performance. Learning is the process; performance is the product. By establishing their intention to learn a new turn, or improve their kick, your child will begin to understand the link between preparation and performance. This link may seem intuitively obvious to you, but young children often do not understand the relationship between preparation and performance. To improve themselves and their ability will, in the future, lead to more successful performances. In the meantime remember the old adage, “*those who fail to prepare, prepare to fail.*”

2. HAVE YOUR CHILD MAKE A COMMITMENT

One of the keys to the development of confidence is the establishment of competence. In order to become a competent swimmer, your child must commit to a learning process that may at times seem long and tedious. Sit them down at the beginning of the season and make it clear to them what they are committing to.

(Note: Agree on a certain number of practices per week, and attend at least that amount – or more – every week. Make up missed practices due to illness or school obligations.)

Do not allow them the option of withdrawing mid-season. They don’t have to commit to a lifelong career as a competitive swimmer, but you can make it clear to them early that the decision to participate, or to withdraw, is only made once a year – in August. By enduring the learning process through an entire season, a more accurate self-comparison of their developed competence can be made. By comparing their personal, technical, and performance gains from August through August they will likely feel more confident with their developing abilities in the sport.

3. MAKE SURE YOUR CHILD EXPERIENCES SUCCESS

A little success goes a long way. It is important for your child to experience success in swimming and develop the belief that they are good at it. The trick here is to carefully frame the success experience to allow your child that feeling. As a parent you must understand that it is easy for your child to forget just how good they have become. As a sport swimming allows for little reflective satisfaction. Your child is always trying to get a little bit better, and is rarely happy with where they are. Every practice they work to swim better, yet believe their stroke is never quite good enough. Every meet they press to swim faster, yet never believe they are fast enough. Whether it is butterfly, breaststroke, kicking, turns, or reading the clock, every child will have something they are good at. Talk to your team coach and find out what it is, and then let your child bask in the glory of their ability.

4. LET YOUR CHILD EXPERIENCE FAILURE

A little failure goes a long way. Don't be afraid to let your child experience a little failure. Do avoid placing your child in a situation where they are experiencing constant and repeated failure. Swimming is sure to provide your child with more than his or her share of failure experience. That is not necessarily a bad thing. Confronting failure and learning to overcome problems are crucial steps in the development of confidence. Failure can be a great instructor. Teach your child to learn from it. Once your child has learned not to fear failure, but to increase their efforts and use effective coping mechanisms, they have taken a giant stride toward being a truly confident swimmer. Always seek situations and set challenges that allow your child to experience a balance between success and failure.

5. AVOID CONSTANT COMPARISON WITH OTHERS

"If Jimmy can do it, you can too."

A confident swimmer will be able to successfully make these comparative deductions themselves. You don't need to remind them of how they are doing. If you spend too much time using such comparisons, your child will become fixated on the outcome and will concern themselves more with comparative rankings than with personal improvement. The obvious result of this orientation is that when given the choice, your child will select a less than challenging situation in order to gain a favorable comparison rating. Your child will feel threatened by anyone of higher skill, ability or experience and will seek a smaller pond for him or her to become the **big fish**. In the process of doing so they will have lost considerable opportunity for personal improvement. One of the toughest tasks faced by parents is the balancing of achievement of siblings involved in sport. Try to motivate your children by constantly comparing their performances with each other and you will find yourself driving one child to the pool and the other to the gym. Measuring each child on his or her own merits will lead to a happier coexistence ... and perhaps less wear on your car.

6. REWARD THEIR EFFORTS AS WELL AS THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Go out of your way to reward your child's efforts in swimming. Don't restrict yourself to rewarding only their accomplishments. What you wish to establish is a focus on the process of improvement –diligent work, a positive attitude, and an enthusiastic approach to the challenges the sport provides. Remember, these are character traits you probably wished to develop when you placed your child in swimming to begin with. Make sure the rewards are dependent upon their efforts. Don't reward them for a job well done when it really wasn't. Children are quick to pick up on noncontingent rewards and their effect is quickly lost. At the same time make sure that your affection and attention are not contingent on their behavior – the unconditional love of a parent is a solid foundation of a child's self-esteem. And don't be afraid to reward the **little things**, or you may end up waiting a whole career for the ultimate expression of excellence.

7. KEEP REWARDING THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Rewards are great if they provide your child with information regarding their ability, and if you keep their use and intent in perspective. It gives your child some tangible evidence that they have produced a worthwhile effort or result. **But...** rewards can be destructive if you use them to bribe or control your child, or if the size of the accomplishment doesn't justify the value of the reward. While it's fine to take the family out for dinner to acknowledge a great week of training, problems may arise if you offer to buy them a new CD when they go to an extra practice, or achieve a time standard. **Children lose sight of the inherent value of participation if they become interested in swimming for the material rewards which they obtain as a result of their performances.** Trying to **bribe** your child to perform or participate almost invariably produces results contrary to your initial intent. You must remember that swimming can be inherently challenging and rewarding, and strive to clarify that point in your child's mind.

8. ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO MAKE INDEPENDENT DECISIONS

Swimming is a great laboratory of life, one that allows your child to develop into an independent, freestanding individual. Confident swimmers are those who believe in their own abilities, not individuals who are dependent on others to produce desired results. A good measure of this confidence comes from making correct decisions, thus allowing your child some measure of self-control. Empower your child with the opportunity to evaluate situations and make decisions. Start out small in the decision-making process, allowing them to work through the antecedents and consequences of each decision. Don't give them free rein in all decision making until they have matured and earned it. Your ten year old may have sufficient information at their disposal to make an informed decision on what type of goggles they need to purchase, but may lack the ability to make a quality decision about the amount of training they need this week. Define the boundaries of decision-making and try to widen the range of effective self-control as your child grows within the sport.

9. ENSURE THAT YOUR CHILD ACCEPTS RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR DECISIONS

Assuming your child understands that they have your love and support in their ventures, make sure they realize that when the mud hits the wall, the back splash hits the one who threw it. In the development of personal empowerment children are struggling to become competent and confident in their own abilities. The decision-making process is an important step toward confident self-sufficiency, but it cannot occur in a vacuum. If your child elects to miss swim training for a coinciding school activity, it is important for them to consider, understand and accept the possible consequences of their decision. Little will be gained if you are constantly **making things right** for your child.

10. ABOVE ALL BE CONSISTENT AND HAVE FUN

Be consistent. You are your child's primary role model during this age span. Make sure you are consistent in your behavior and a great deal of emotional stability will **trickle down** to your child. Above all have fun! The sport of swimming is meant to be a pleasurable activity. After your child's athletic career is over the things they will remember the most are the friendships they made and the experiences they gained. If you are having fun, your child will have fun. Fun is a great contributor to confidence. It helps reduce stress and reduces the fear of failure. Fun is the internal motivator, which will continually draw your child back to lifelong involvement with athletics and a healthy life.

PRACTICE LIKE A CHAMPION

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