

Mike Gustafson: Lighten Up, Swim Parents!



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Sara reaches for the wall, exhausted, straining, and gets 3rd place. She gets out of the water and checks her time. Almost a best time. Almost a win.

Sara is happy. Or at least content. She knows what she has to fix – that second turn was a little off – and is excited to get back to practice on Monday. Sara warms down and smiles to herself. Sure, it wasn't a best time, but she loves to race. It's the one time of the week she doesn't have to worry about tests, homework, that school dance next week...

"You missed your turn," Sara's mother says.

"Yeah, I know, but I think I can get better," says Sara.

"You almost won. You should have won," her father chimes in. "Maybe you should work on your finishes. Do you work on your finishes in practice?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe I'll talk to the coach."

End scene.

I'm not a fan of cliché stereotypes that begin with, "There are two types of parents in the world..." but there are definitely two types of parents in the swimming world: The parent that builds, and the parent that breaks.

The above interaction – fictional, though I'm sure happens every day on every pool deck everywhere – didn't involve screaming, red-faced swim parents with insulting comments. It wasn't too harsh. It didn't involve profanity or threats or tirades.

But it wasn't supportive, either. It wasn't, "Hey, good race!" with an offer for a hug. Instead, the interaction involved two parents, obviously supportive of their swimmer, showing up to the race, giving advice, letting their swimmer know what happened, offering critiques.

The thing is: Critiquing is not a parent's job -- at least when it comes to swimming. Critiquing is the coach's job.

That's why coaches exist.

The other day, I was talking about all the emails I get from swimmers around the country and how a majority of them talk about how hard their own parents are on them. Mostly after races. I get emails from swimmers as young as 10 years old who tell me things I'm sure their parents would be horrified me finding out about. They tell me about parents who break down instead of build up. Parents who are critics and let swimmers know what they need to do to improve. Parents who yell after the race is over. Parents who threaten to force their swimmer to quit the sport if victories are in the soon-to-come horizon.

"I bet a lot of these parents, if I read back to them their letters from their swimmers, would be horrified," I told my friend. "I bet many of these parents don't even know how much pressure they put on their swimmers."

No one of us wants to be that bad villain from the Disney movie. You know the kind of villain: The parent who yells at their kid and the kid goes into the bedroom and cries and music grows and we feel appropriately bad for the kid. No parent wants that to be that "villain." And yet, I think many parents place an incredible amount of pressure on kids without even knowing it.

Many parents don't even realize it.

Take the scenario I wrote above: It wasn't necessarily a bad interaction. But it wasn't good. Sara, like many young swimmers, uses the sport as a way to escape and have fun and race. Swimming, to Sara, is just a way to get away from real-world pressures, of which, at any age, are numerous.

Tests, homework, social pressures, that whole “figuring out what you want to do with the rest of your life” thing... Sara, like millions of other athletes around the country, just uses sports as a secondary activity, one that is fun and healthy and vigorous and enjoyable.

Many times, though, parental expectations and pressures get in the way of that enjoyment. Let's face it: Many kids want to impress their parents. They want good feedback. And I understand we live in a society that perhaps praises too often. There's a joke in one of my favorite sitcoms when the student receives happy clouds and sunshine cartoon icons instead of actual grades. Too much unearned praise can, sometimes, be detrimental.

But again: There are two types of parents.

The kind that build. And the kind that break.

To borrow a line from one of my favorite movies, *Stripes*: Lighten up, swim parents.

This sport, while teaching many lessons to swimmers, is like climbing a mountain. You learn most lessons on your own. How to climb. How to fall. How to get back up. Swim parents: Let the rest of the world break down your child, because the world out there will gladly do so. Let it be your job to build your child up, to just say, “Great job!” and offer a hug and nothing else. Let the coaches coach. Let the swimmers swim. Let the races be raced. And while everyone needs a good push once in a while and everyone needs encouragement once in a while, this is just swimming. This is just a sport.

A friend of mine recently told me his parents finally told him towards the end of his swimming career, “We know we have been putting too much pressure on you. So now with your last season, just have fun.” And he told me just hearing that from his parents made all the difference. Just hearing those words was like a blessing -- a freeing act, like now he had permission to enjoy the sport again.

And guess what?

In his last meet, he swam lifetime bests.

He sat and reflected. He then smiled and said, “If only they had told me that sooner.”