

Parenting Your Young Swimmer – by: Joe Weber, M.Ed

Forty-million kids are playing organized sports. The pressure from parents to be better at a younger age is pushing 70 percent of the kids to give up sports by age 13 (Snyderman, 2010). According to Hoyle and Leff, parental pressure is associated with discontent in sport participation, performance and practice anxiety, and negative self-worth. In my private practice, more than 70% of children confess to feeling excessive pressure from a parent that adversely affects their competitive performance.

Tom Slear, correspondent for Splash magazine describes the relationship between Cristina Teuscher, a 1996 and 2000 Olympian, and her mother, Monica. Monica never owned a stopwatch and rarely bought a meet program. She didn't track her daughter's times, yell during her races, or seek out her coach after practices for private chats. During swim meets, she went off by herself to read or knit, only to be amused when other parents gave her a rundown on Cristina's swims, complete with split times. "I thought it was important that I was there, but for support, not for coaching or to add pressure," Teuscher explains. "My job was to take my daughters (older daughter Carolina also swam) out for a good meal after they raced. The last thing we talked about was swimming."

There is a misconception that if a swimmer is among the Top 16 when they are 10, they will become a national champion when they turn 18. Not only is this not true, more often than not, the opposite is the case. A study by USA Swimming using the All-Time Top 100 swims in each age group through 1996 found that only 10 percent of the Top 100 10-and-Unders maintained their status through age 18. Coaches understand the long-term nature of the sport and plan, prepare and development the swimmer with an eye toward the future, whereas parents are often more short-sighted, focused on the immediate. There is a fine line between enthusiastic encouragement of your child's participation in sport (pushing them to excel) and parental pressure.

In general, parental pressure probably exists when kids get very upset over their parent's advice, lose the enthusiasm for their sport, complain about phantom injuries/illnesses, or question if it is worth participating in the sport anymore. Often a child may rebel by performing subconsciously at a lower level in order to rebel in a safe manner. Remember, most children would not feel comfortable telling their parents they are pushing too much for fear that the parent may withdraw approval, acceptance, love (basic needs that all children require).

The following are ways in which parental pressure is often applied (Perconte, 2010):

1. Threatening Statements - "You have to practice more" or "Why don't you think when you practice/race" or "When I was your age I could, etc..." or "We are not going to join the swim team next year if you are going to waste your time" or "Why do you let so-and-so beat you." These comments are so loud to a child that they damage their self-confidence, self-esteem and self-concept. The message is "YOU ARE NOT GOOD ENOUGH!"

2. Unnecessary gestures - head shakes, roll of eyes, look away, kicking the ground - and, maybe the worst scenario, by ignoring kids after competition when they did not swim up their parent's expectations. Another is standing over your child with arms crossed over your chest, which is a power stance and very threatening to a child.

3. Criticism – commenting negatively on child's effort or results often and immediately after meets or comparing them negatively to others. Occasionally showing disappointment is normal but never seeming satisfied with kids' performance builds pressure, often to the breaking point.

4. Expectations – parents often have unreachable or unreasonable expectations that put pressure on their kids.

5. Physical abuse or Verbal Abuse – some parents go beyond threatening statements into the abuse area. Obviously this is most damaging because these parents tear down kids' self-esteem with phrases like, "You will never be any good," or "Why can't you play like so and so," or "You are embarrassing me." Parents who use any physical actions that are meant to show their displeasure are placing such pressure on their kids that long-term behavioral problems may surface in the youth's life. There are ways to keep parental pressure to a minimum, with the understanding that, as mentioned, some pressure is natural and fine.

Here are some tips that can help parents minimize the pressure they inevitably place on their kids:

1. Let your child own their own sports career instead of you (the parent) vicariously living through their experience. Sport is meant as a means of self-exploration and development... mistakes can provide meaning feedback for future improvement. If a child fears making mistakes, they will never fully develop and take the necessary risks to achieve their potential.

2. Remember sports are a part of what a child does, not who they are... do not let kids feel like your day revolves around their sport.

3. Do not grill kids about their play immediately after a meet unless the child offers their own thoughts first... then be supportive and help them bounce back. Remember, there is always tomorrow. Let the car rides to and from meets and practices be a "NO-SWIM ZONE" where you share thoughts outside the sport.

4. After dinner or the next day is a good time to discuss the player's performance and ask the swimmer "what was the coaches' advice?" Support the efforts of the coach. Always lead off conversations with a positive statement about the child's performance, understand their egos are fragile at that age (Children need love, acceptance and support... not pressure and negativity.)

5. Learn to evaluate a player's effort level and not results in an encouraging manner. Ask the proper questions after meets: "Did you have fun?" or "Who did you hang out with?" etc. Let them KNOW they are LOVED despite the results.

6. The practice of offering rewards (i.e. ice cream stop, money, etc.) for good play is not recommended... Reward participation! It is important for children to know they are loved for who they are not their achievements.

7. Remaining positive and encouraging is the key to allowing kids time to have some athletic success. Success often comes to swimmers who have supportive, patient, understanding, and realistic parents.

8. Do not hesitate to apologize after showing any occasional frustration over a child's performance - "I'm sorry, but I want you to do so well, that I got caught up in the moment" - or, something to that effect, is positive parenting. After all, parents are not perfect and this will express that to your kids.

In conclusion, nobody is perfect but realize the goal of youth sports is for the development of a child as a person and to provide a positive, successful youth experience. As parents, we should continually strive to be more positive and maintain the proper youth sports perspective in order to maximize the benefits of our child's development.

References:

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