**American Swimming Coaches Association Swim Parents Newsletter**

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On Holding Children Accountable, Guy Edson

A recent article, “Self-Esteem Lie” by Laura Caler, elicited a number of replies from coaches. To sum them up: “holding children accountable would be a lot easier if parents would take a step back and allow them to succeed and fail on their own.” Coaches love to coach accountability and responsibility. They know it leads to better performances. But more importantly, and every coach will tell you, coaching life skills is every bit as important as all the swimming stuff.

One former coach writes, “I am now in management and I can see that the younger people entering the workforce who have not been allowed to fail on their own, who have not received negative corrections, or who have been otherwise protected from negativity to their self-esteem are difficult to manage. Unfortunately, a coach’s ability to teach accountability is often interfered with by the parent.

A coach told me about the time he gave a warning to a swimmer who was late getting in the water for practice even though he observed him at the pool 30 minutes early. His warning was that on the next occurrence he would dismiss the swimmer from practice for the day. That evening he received a phone call from the irate parent telling the coach how difficult it was to arrange the transportation for getting the child to the workout and if he ever dismissed the swimmer from practice for ANY reason he would have to answer to the Board of Directors.

Another coach related to me the time at a swim meet when a swimmer was upset over her performance and asked “What can I do to get better?” The coach replied that coming to practice on a consistent basis would be the most important thing she could do. The father cornered the coach during a rare break time for the coach at the meet and demanded he apologize to his daughter for making her feel badly. She was “involved in many activities and was making as many workouts as she could” and her lack of improvement was the responsibility of the coach. These are extreme (but not uncommon) denials of a swimmer’s personal responsibility.

What is a coach to do? Here is an answer most parents do not want to hear: The coach will learn to coach those who are responsible differently from those who hide from responsibility. One coach writes, “We have to pick and choose who we are honest with these days. It isn't a matter of style but more a matter of who the parents are and *their* style. I have basically identified the swimmers I can be more honest and direct with and the ones I can't, because of their parents. In my group of Juniors I have one swimmer I can't be honest with. I just say, "Good job" and that's it. For others, however, they want me to push their kids and be up front and honest with them. So, I am. And they respond. And as these kids get older, they will be more and more handicapped because their parents will advocate for them, bail them out, and protect them so that when they get to college or out in the working world, they will have no experience with any criticism or any failure.

What’s a parent to do? Parenting expert Susan Brown of the Commonwealth Parenting Center in Richmond Virginia says to let your child fail. Learning to deal with failure, according to Brown, is part of becoming more responsible and accountable.