

Swim Parents Are Beautiful People

In fact, I believe that swimming people in general are the greatest folks you'll ever meet. The nature of the sport itself attracts wonderful human beings. Many lifetime friendships have begun from swimming, both among athletes, and among their families, who often keep close contact long after their children are done competing. Expect to meet terrific people in swimming.

The relationship between swim parents and swim coaches has been a continuing story in the years that age group swimming has existed in the USA. Age Group swimming began in the USA and has now been in full operation about 40 years. The experience over that time has shown parents and coaches that each is a vital contributor to the sport. Age group programs cannot do without either. As increasing numbers of coaches have become professionally prepared with the concept that they will work with athletes from ages 5 to 95, the coaches' appreciation for the age group parent has increased significantly. Many swimming coaches are also swimming parents. That role is one with a very challenging perspective. My own children have swum, and I have personally never coached them, specifically to avoid confusing the role of parent and coach. The parent supports, and the coach evaluates and critiques. Mixing the two is a terribly destructive result for the athlete and their swimming career (*I disagree with this opinion as many parents have done great work with their children swimming for them – Coach Tim*)

Coaches see a great number of parents, and athletes. The average club coach with a 15-year career will already have worked with over 3000 different families and have seen a variety of parenting styles and approaches, as well as the resulting effects on the athlete. This perspective is important. You "hire" your coach when you join the team. Like any professional you employ, pay attention to their advice on how to work with your child as it relates to swimming.

Coaches see parents at swim meets, at practices at Club functions, and sometimes even socially. Athletes also watch parents, both their own, and those of their friends. This gives the athlete a lot of clues on how to react to situations that occur. The athlete is thus affected by your actions, and by your words. It is instructive to listen to the older teenager with their parents, and their involvement with the sport. We shall do so shortly. Young swimming parents can learn a great deal about how to help their child by watching and listening to the parents of athletes who have stayed in the sport for years. Experience is a great teacher in this sport.

Coaches live for the development of their swimmers. Coaches watch for minute signs of improvement in ability, attitude, and skills, and they are trained to see these things in their young athletes. Coaches also get to watch corresponding changes in the parent. Parents primarily have the perspective of watching only their children, and perhaps a few of their young friends. The swimmer has an even more limited view on what they see of swimming careers (a 12 month swim year to a 12 year old is 1/12 of their life). This puts a whole new look on the phrase, "we ALWAYS do it this way!?", doesn't it?

Parents learn the same lessons about swimming that the athlete does, but they learn them second hand. What the coach hopes for is that the parent will pick up on the important aspects of the sport and become the critical ally in helping guide the child through the sport. Parents need to realize that coaches want, expect, and need parents to grow themselves during the swimming experience. Sadly, many coaches do not have the time, and/or inclination, to do a thorough job of parent education. The state of parental swim education runs the full gamut from poor to excellent. Most coaches will tell you that they recognize the importance of the parent in the success equation, but not all have time or ability to help develop the swimming parent.

What should you do if your coach is not regularly providing education for the parent? ASK. Ask the club Board if it would be possible for the coach to do so. Ask the Y Director... better yet, ask the coach directly. Parental education is one of those items that is so easy to forget, because the benefits are long term, and coaching by its nature is a sort of list of things that need to be done “right now.” Ask, and usually, you shall receive.

Meanwhile, let me give you a short list of ideas of what swim coaches love to see in swimming parents.

Swim Parents, you are Beautiful when...

- ~ you work a full day at a swim meet, then want to know where the team party is!
- ~ you cheer for athletes who are not your own children.
- ~ you drive carpools that would make a NY city cab driver dizzy in order to get people to practice or meets on time!
- ~ you ask your swimmer after the race, “what did your coach say?”
- ~ you say, “what did you learn?” to your ten-year-old who just got disqualified for an illegal turn.
- ~ you understand that only the four fastest children can be on the “A” relay.
- ~ you play up the importance of “team” things like relays and cheering for teammates.
- ~ you help new parents “learn the ropes” in a positive way.
- ~ you fundraise for a team out-of-town trip that your child isn’t even going on this year (Next year, it’s their turn!).
- ~ you organize the effort to get team suits to help promote team unity.
- ~ you applaud everyone’s efforts, and comfort those that need it.
- ~ you realize that coaches are human, and just like you, and already feel terrible when they make a mistake (Just like you).
- ~ you know that, as Linus says in Peanuts, “There is nothing is heavier than a great potential,” and don’t put your athlete under that burden.
- ~ you officiate a swim meet and have to DQ your own child.
- ~ you realize that no one swim is all that important. It’s the process that counts.
- ~ you make a bigger “to-do” about your son’s friend getting a best time than you do about your son’s (recognition by an adult not your own parents is sooooo important!)
- ~ you realize that every swimmer is a winner as long as they try.
- ~ you appreciate your coach with a cup of coffee at 5:30 AM workout!
- ~ you support your child’s swimming by helping the organization that brings your child the opportunity.

On the other hand, there are some things that are not so beautiful. They are offered here to give you a contrast between the types of attitudes expressed on the “beautiful” list, and those below, on the “ugly attitude” list.

Ugly is...

- ~ when you think every swim should be a best time, and a first place.
- ~ when you say, “you didn’t try.”
- ~ when you say, “it’s only a relay.”
- ~ when you can only talk about your own swimmer with other swimming parents.
- ~ when you expect people to cheer for your child, when you only cheer for your own.
- ~ when you expect the coach to see every mistake that is made, in and out of the water, by every swimmer, all the time.
- ~ when you bring a stopwatch with you to watch practice.
- ~ when you talk to your child during practice.
- ~ when you get to warm-ups late, because, “who cares if you miss part of warm-up?”

- ~ when you offer advice on how to swim a race to your child.
- ~ when you begin to think you know enough about swimming to dissect the coaches' workouts from the stands.
- ~ when you decide not to work on a club project because "the Smiths didn't work last month."
- ~ when you use the swim team as a gossip machine.
- ~ when you live or relive your own athletic desires through your child's efforts.
- ~ when you are a bigger "show" at the swim meet than the athletes.
- ~ when you demand as much of the coach's attention as the swimmers.
- ~ when you call the coach at home in the evening... when they have office hours during the day.
- ~ when you interrupt the coach for a conversation while they are working with a group of swimmers.
- ~ when you worry that your eight-year-old isn't working hard enough.

Now all of us swimming parents exhibit at least a few of the traits from each list. That's OK. Like coaches, you are at your most beautiful when you are learning what to do and what to avoid, and make an effort to always do a better job of supporting your swimmer. Trying to learn, trying to grow, trying to get better. That's the swimming journey, and it's a great experience for all three... swimmer, parent, and coach.

*Taken from the book *Parent Coach and Athlete: A Hand-book for Age Group Swimming Parents*
Written by John Leonard