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News for Swim Parents

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13 Steps to Being a Winning Parent, Part 1

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[SPN Editor's Note: This is part 1, which includes steps 1 – 6. Steps 7-13 will appear in the next issue of Swim Parents Newsletter.]

INTRODUCTION: If you want your child to come out of his youth sports experience a winner (feeling good about himself and having a healthy attitude towards sports), then he needs your help! You are a vital and important part of the coach-athlete-parent team. If you do your job correctly and play your position well, then your child will learn the sport faster, perform better, really have fun and have his self-esteem enhanced as a result. His sport experience will serve as a positive model for him to follow as he approaches other challenges and obstacles throughout life. If you "drop the ball" or run the wrong way with it, your child will stop learning, experience performance difficulties and blocks, and begin to really hate the sport. And that's the good news! Further, your relationship with him will probably suffer significantly. As a result, he will come out of this experience burdened with feelings of failure, inadequacy and low self-esteem, feelings that will generalize to other areas in his life. Your child and his coach need you on the team. They can't win without you! The following are a list of useful facts, guidelines and strategies for you to use to make you more skilled in the youth sport game. Remember, no wins unless everyone wins. We need you on the team!

STEP ONE: When defined the right way, competition in youth sports is both good and healthy and teaches children a variety of important life skills. The word "compete" comes from the Latin words "com" and "petere" which mean together and seeking respectively. The true definition of competition is a seeking together where your opponent is your partner, not the enemy! The better he performs, the more chance you have of having a peak performance. Sports is about learning to deal with challenges and obstacles. Without a worthy opponent, without any challenges sports is not so much fun. The more the challenge the better the opportunity you have to go beyond your limits. World records are consistently broken and set at the Olympics because the best athletes in the world are "seeking together", challenging each other to enhanced performance. Your child should never be taught to view his opponent as the "bad guy", the enemy or someone to be hated and "destroyed". Do not model this attitude! Instead, talk to/make friends with parents of your child's opponent. Root for great performances, good plays, not just for the winner!

STEP TWO: ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO COMPETE AGAINST HIMSELF. The ultimate goal of the sport experience is to challenge oneself and continually improve. Unfortunately, judging improvement by winning and losing is both an unfair and inaccurate measure. Winning in sports is about doing the best you can do, separate from the outcome or the play of your opponent. Children should be encouraged to compete against their own potential (i.e., Peter and Patty Potential). That is, the boys should focus on beating "Peter", competing against themselves, while the girls challenge "Patty". When your child has this focus and plays to better himself instead of beating someone else, he will be more relaxed, have more fun and therefore perform better.

STEP THREE: DO NOT DEFINE SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN TERMS OF WINNING AND LOSING. A corollary to TWO, one of the main purposes of the youth sports experience is skill acquisition and mastery. When a child performs to his potential and loses it is criminal to focus on the outcome and become critical. If a child plays his very best and loses, you need to help him feel like a winner! Similarly, when a child or team performs far below their potential but wins, this is not cause to feel like a winner. Help your child make this important separation between success and failure and winning and losing. Remember, if you define success and failure in terms of winning and losing, you're playing a losing game with your child!

STEP FOUR: BE SUPPORTIVE, DO NOT COACH! Your role on the parent-coach-athlete team is as a Support player with a capital S! You need to be your child's best fan, unconditionally! Leave the coaching and instruction to the coach. Provide encouragement, support, empathy, transportation, money, help with fund-raisers, etc., but... do not coach! Most parents that get into trouble with their children do so because they forget to remember the important position that they play. Coaching interferes with your role as supporter and fan. The last thing your child needs and wants to hear from you after a disappointing performance or loss is what they did technically or strategically wrong. Keep your role as a parent on the team separate from that as coach, and, if by necessity you actually get stuck in the almost no-win position of having to coach your child, try to maintain this separation of roles (i.e. on the deck, field or court say, "Now I'm talking to you as a coach", at home say, "Now I'm talking to you as a parent"). Don't parent when you coach and don't coach at home when you're supposed to be parenting.

STEP FIVE. HELP MAKE THE SPORT FUN FOR YOUR CHILD. It's a time proven principle of peak performance that the more fun an athlete is having, the more they will learn and the better they will perform. Fun must be present for peak performance to happen at every level of sports from youth to world class competitor! When a child stops having fun and begins to dread practice or competition, it's time for you as a parent to become concerned! When the sport or game becomes too serious, athletes have a tendency to burn out and become susceptible to repetitive performance problems. An easy rule of thumb: If your child is not enjoying what they are doing, nor loving the heck out of it, investigate! What is going on that's preventing them from having fun? Is it the coaching? The pressure? Is it you?! Keep in mind that being in a highly competitive program does not mean that there is no room for fun. The child that continues to play long after the fun is going will soon become a drop out statistic.

STEP SIX: WHOSE GOAL IS IT? Step 5 leads us to a very important question! Why is your child participating in the sport? Are they doing it because they want to, for them, or because of you. When they have problems in their sport do you talk about them as "our" problems, "our jump isn't high enough", "we're having trouble with our flip turn", etc. Are they playing because they don't want to disappoint you, because they know how important the sport is to you? Are they playing for rewards and "bonuses" that you give out? Are their goals and aspirations yours or theirs? How invested are you in their success and failure? If they are competing to please you or for your vicarious glory they are in it for the wrong reasons! Further, if they stay involved for you, ultimately everyone will lose. It is quite normal and healthy to want your child to excel and be as successful as possible. But, you cannot make this happen by pressuring them with your expectations or by using guilt or bribery to keep them involved. If they have their own reasons and own goals for participating, they will be far more motivated to excel and therefore far more successful.

[In the next issue: Steps 7 – 13]

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