

The Biggest Question

By John Leonard

In all of age group sports, the biggest question for every parent is..."How much to be involved."

In every sport from tennis to golf, to gymnastics and swimming, there are horror stories of absolutely awful parental interference, with tragic consequences for the career of the young age group athlete. Yet every one of us loves our children like nothing else in the world. So, how does this happen?

I think it's because as parents, we're all looking for a singular rule that will make our role as parents "successful". And it does not exist. In fact, exactly the opposite is the truth...the rules change all the time, as the child matures, and only experience can tell the parent that.

Here's a classic example. Jill is 8 and very enthusiastic about her new swim team....most of the time....but on a given Friday, her friend is having a sleepover party and Jill wants to go and skip practice. Perfect role of her mom? "Jill, get in the car, you made a commitment to swim team and you will keep that commitment. I'll take you to Sally's for the party right after practice."

Mom reminds Jill of her commitment. No if's, and's or but's. And enforces it, without depriving the child of the fun party. Perfect.

Now Jill is sixteen...another friend is having another Friday evening party and once again, Jill is debating where she "should be". She discusses it with her Mom. This time, Mom simply raises an eyebrow and says "your choice, you know what you should do." Again, perfect.

But totally different.

And that, I believe, is the point. When our children are young, we are really and truly "herding them through the process" and making decisions for them, as we should be.....And the goal, is to gradually and systematically, based on successful demonstration of competence, to hand over to them, the decision making power.

Athletes who have been in a sport for years, invariably have the same comments..."my parents let it be "my sport", not theirs," "they were interested in what I did, but it was mine," "they didn't interfere at all in my teens, it was up to me to get out of bed to go get them to take me to morning practice. If I chose to sleep in, oh well, my loss."

The hard part is judging that "letting go process" and deciding when it's "right" to let go of what. Like most things in life, it's never completely straight-forward. Instead, it's two steps forward, one step back, etc. In the case of most children though, by the early to middle teens years, it should be parents just sitting back and enjoying watching their teenagers make decisions and experience the consequences.

I have a friend named Lynn Offerdahl. Lynn is a former collegiate All-American diver and her husband John, a former All-Pro linebacker for the Miami Dolphins. Lynn has two children who swim and two who play football. Lynn says "Every time you do something for your children that they can do for themselves, you make them weaker. Every time you chose to "let them do it," you are choosing to make them stronger. I want strong kids."

It doesn't get any wiser or better than that.