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Swim Parents Can Learn About the Developmental Process in Sports...And Respect It.

By John Leonard

One of the most frequently asked questions in swimming is "how come I'm not as fast as "those guys?" Sometimes this can come from child to parent, or child to coach. Occasionally, and unfortunately, it can come from Parent to child (pretty destructive, though unintentionally so.)

Living in the USA, there are as many ways of training young athletes as there are coaching devising the training. Most are based on sound developmental principles that result in long term appropriate development and physical progress. Occasionally, someone drifts off into some inappropriate training for a particular age. Quite often, since all children develop differently, some children are under-served by a particular type of training.

But the most common correct response to the question is "they are physically developed earlier than you are." "They" may be bigger, taller, more coordinated, and most importantly, STRONGER than another swimmer. Children develop at different rates, hence the concept of chronological age and biological age. You can be 12 with the "look" of a 10 year old boy, or you can be twelve with a need to shave every other day and the build of a late teenager. And the difference in girls of the same chronological age is even more pronounced. The point being, children can be "spot on" in terms of age and development, they can be "early developers" and they can be "late developers". As a vast generalization, those children whose genetic heritage comes from closer to the equator, tend towards early development. Those near the northern latitudes for their heritage, tend to be late developers.

One is not "better" than the other". They are simply, different. And of course, whatever developmental "advantage" or "disadvantage" they are at early in life, tends to even out quite dramatically in the later teen years. Humans all wind up looking very similar.

The danger is that the slower developing child may become discouraged by their lack of competitive success, despite great practice attendance, great skill development and hard work. Size and strength DO matter in the sprint events. One solution that is highly long term satisfactory, is for the late developer to focus on the event distances that especially reward diligence in training and diligence in learning...the 200's of the strokes, the 400 IM, and the distance free events. IF our slow developer eventually has a growth spurt and shows promise in the sprint events, they will have the best possible background preparation by having spent time in the 200-400-1500 range earlier in their career.

A second issue is that parents of fast -developing children may become incorrectly focused on "winning races" since that is what their child may do...rather than on the real business of age

group swimming...the perfection of technique and solid aerobic training background. It's easy for any of us as parents to dream dreams of the Olympic Games when our 10 year old is dominating his local opposition, or even national competition.....but they are biologically advanced, which, by definition, will later "even out".

Very important for parents to recognize that your child will develop at their own time and rate.....and comparing them (favorably or unfavorably) with others does them (and the others) a serious dis-service.

The only valid comparison that is also meaningful, is the child swimming against their own best times. And may they make steady progress in that measurement!

All the Best for Good Swimming! JL