

Abstract

Children gain great benefits from participating in any sport. They get more than just physical development; they learn values and skills that they can transfer to many other areas of life. According to John Leonard, President of the American Swimming Coaches Association, there are sixteen values children gain from swimming: fitness, self-confidence, discipline, teamwork, sportsmanship, work ethic, delayed gratification, time management, dedication, skill improvement, friendship and respect, goal setting, gender equity, appreciation of your support team, courage, and compassion.

For some parents, it may not be easy to realize the fact that they play a large part in the success of their child's swimming career. It doesn't matter if their children are in the sport for recreation, or because they want to become one of the best swimmers in the world. Parents play a very important part in setting their child's personal goals in the sport, and in helping their kids to achieve them.

Swimming 101: Swimming Parent Education is a guide designed to assist age-group swimming parents who want to ensure their child has the most positive experience possible with swimming. This guide will be helpful to parents on getting tips and information to create a positive environment for their child, and to get, from this sport, a great life-long experience for their children.

The best way to use this guide is as a workshop for the swimming parents at the beginning of the season, specifically in the first parents' meeting, but it can also be used as a resource at any time during the season.

Swimming 101: Swimming Parent Education

Parent and Athlete

Competitive swimming programs provide many benefits to young athletes. Competition allows the swimmer to experience both success and failure, and to learn how to treat both as possible outcomes in any situation, while also becoming healthy and physically fit. As a parent, your major responsibility is to provide a stable, loving, and supportive environment, which will encourage your child to continue in the sport.

Parents contribute to the success experienced by the child and the team. Parents serve as role models and their children emulate their attitudes. Parents need to be aware of this and strive to be positive role models. Most importantly, parents need to show good sportsmanship at all times toward coaches, officials, opponents and teammates. Remember that your child is learning from you at all times.

There are two major things that you can do as a parent to contribute to your child's success in swimming: a) be enthusiastic and supportive, and b) keep things balanced (Goldberg, 1999). Remember that your child is the swimmer, and that children need to establish their own goals, and make progress towards them. Be careful not to impose your own standards and goals. Do not overburden your child with winning or achieving best times. Let them know that first they are the child you love, and second, a swimmer. Tell them you will love them whether they swim well or not, and ask only that they give their best effort. Learning about oneself while enjoying the sport is the most important part of the swimming experience. The swimming environment encourages learning and fun, which will help your child develop a positive self-image (Burgess, 2000).

Some children become so involved in athletics that they neglect studies, family, and social responsibilities. Both you and your child need to remember that swimming is only one part of life. Sometimes children overemphasize swimming because their parents do. Ask yourself if you are giving unbalanced attention to your child's "swimming career". If so, show increased interest in other areas of your child's life.

Parents Role (Goldberg 1999)

- (1) Don't coach: Leave coaching to coaches. This include pre-race psyching, motivation, after race critiquing, setting goals, enforcing additional cross training, etc.
- (2) Support the coach: Your coaches are the experts.
- (3) Support the program: Get involved. Volunteer. Help out at meets, fundraisers, etc.
- (4) Be your child's best fan: Support your child unconditionally. Do not withdraw love when your child performs poorly. Your child should not have to perform to win your love.
- (5) Support and cheer for all swimmers on the team: Your child's teammates are not the enemy. When they go faster than your child, your child has a wonderful opportunity to improve.
- (6) Do not bribe or offer incentives: Your job is not to motivate. Leave this to the coaching staff. Bribes will distract your child from proper race concentration.
- (7) Take your concerns and problems directly to the coach.
- (8) Understand and display appropriate meet behavior: Remember your child's self-esteem and race performance is at stake. Be supportive and cheer, but always be appropriate.
- (9) Monitor your child's stress level at home: Keep an eye on your swimmer to make sure he is handling stress effectively from the various activities in his life.
- (10) Monitor eating and sleeping habits.
- (11) Help your child keep his/her priorities straight
- (12) "Reality Test" for your child: If a swimmer comes out of the pool with a personal best time and a last place finish, help him understand that this is a "win". Help him keep things in their proper perspective including losses, disappointments, and failures.
- (13) Keep swimming in perspective: Swimming should not be larger than life for you. If your child's performances elicit strong emotions, keep this away from him. Remember your relationship will continue with your children long after their swimming days are over. Keep your goals and needs out of the pool.

- (14) Be an appropriate liaison to the coach: Keep the coach informed as to how your child is responding to the experience (when appropriate).

Ten and Unders

Ten and Unders are very inconsistent swimmers and this can be frustrating for parents, coaches, and swimmers alike (Slear, 1997). Parents and coaches must be patient and permit youngsters to learn to love the sport. When a young swimmer joins a swimming program, there may be a brief period in which he/she appears to “slow down”. This is a result of the added concentration on stroke technique, but this will soon lead to much faster swims for the child. Even the very best swimmers will have meets where they do not get their best times. These “plateaus” are a normal part of swimming. Times should improve over the course of a season. Please be supportive of these “poor” meets. As swimmers get older they may have only two or three meets a year in which they will be rested, tapered, and swimming their fastest times.

Parent and Coach

To have a successful swimming program there must be an understanding and cooperation among parents, swimmers, and coaches. The progress your child makes depends to a great extent on this triangular relationship (Slear, 1997). You have already done a great deal to raise your child. You create the environment in which they are growing up. Your child is a product of your values, the structure you have provided, and the model you have been. Human nature, however, is such that a parent loses some of his/her ability to remain detached and objective in matters concerning his/her children’s athletics. The following guidelines will help you keep your child’s development in the proper perspective and help your child reach his/her full potential as an athlete.

The coach is the coach

Concerning swimming matters, you want your swimmer to relate to his or her coach as soon as possible. This relationship between coach and swimmer produces the best results. When parents interfere with opinions as to how a swimmer should swim or train, it causes considerable, and oftentimes insurmountable, confusion as to whom the swimmer should listen to (Maglischo, 2000). If you have a problem, concern, or complaint, please contact the coach. Best kind of parent: The coach’s job is to motivate and constructively criticize the swimmer’s performance. It is the parent’s job to supply the love, recognition, and encouragement necessary to make the child work harder in practice, which in turn gives him/her the confidence to perform well in competition.

Let the coach coach

The best way to help your child achieve their goals and reduce the natural fear of failure is through positive reinforcement (Goldberg, 1999). No one likes to make a mistake. If your child does make one, remember that this is a learning experience. You and your child should learn to treat success and failure as learning experiences and not life changing situations. Encourage your child’s efforts and point out the positives. The coach is the one you have assigned to judge your swimmer’s performance and technique. Your role is to provide love and support regardless of outcome.

Problems with the coach?

One of the traditional swim team communication gaps is that some parents seem to feel more comfortable discussing their disagreements over coaching philosophy with other parents rather than taking them directly to the coach. Not only does this not resolve the problem, but in fact this approach often results in more problems being created. Terry Laughlin (1998), creator of the program Total Immersion, describes four guidelines for parents bringing problems to the coach: a) Try to keep foremost in your mind that you and the coach have the best interests of your child at heart. If you trust that the coach’s goals match yours, even though his/her approach may be different, you are more likely to enjoy good rapport and a constructive dialogue; b) Keep in mind that the coach must balance your perspective of what is best for your child with the needs of the team or a training group that can range in size from 10-50 members. On occasion, an individual child’s interest may need to be subordinate to the interests of the group, but in the long run the benefits of membership in the group compensate for occasional short term inconvenience; c) If your child swims for an assistant coach, always discuss the matter first with that coach, following the same guidelines and preconceptions noted above. If the assistant coach cannot satisfactorily resolve your concern, then ask that the head age group coach or head coach join the dialogue as a third party; and, d) If another parent uses you as a sounding board for complaints about the coach’s performances or policies, listen empathetically, but encourage the other parent to speak directly to the coach. He/she is the only one who can resolve the problem.

The Nine Commandments for the Parent-Coach-Athlete Relationship (Reiser, 2003)

- (1) Try your best to be completely honest about your child’s athletic ability, his/hers competitive attitude, their sportsmanship, and their actual skill level.
- (2) Be helpful, but don’t coach your child on the way to the pool or on the way back, or at breakfast, and so on. It is tough not to, but it’s a lot tougher for the child to be inundated with advice, pep talks and often critical instruction.
- (3) Teach them to enjoy the thrill of competition, to be “out there trying”, to be working to improve his/her swimming skills and attitudes. Help him/her to develop the feel for competing, for trying hard, for having fun.
- (4) Try not to relive your athletic life through your child in a way that creates pressure. If he/she is comfortable with you -win or lose- he/she is on their way to maximum achievement and enjoyment.
- (5) Don’t compete with the coach. If the coach becomes an authority figure, it will run from enchantment to disenchantment, etc., with your athlete.
- (6) Don’t compare the skill, courage, or attitudes of your child with other members of the team, at least within his/her hearing.
- (7) Get to know the coach so that you can be assured that his/her philosophy, attitudes, ethics, and knowledge are such that you are happy to have your child under his/her leadership.
- (8) Always remember that children tend to exaggerate, both when praised and when criticized. Temper your reaction and investigate before over-reacting.

- (9) Make a point of understanding courage, and the fact that it is relative. Some of us can climb mountains, and yet are afraid to fight. Everyone is frightened in certain areas.
Explain that courage is not the absence of fear, but a means of doing something in spite of fear of discomfort.

Parent and Club

Parental involvement is crucial to every club. Regardless of the organizational model of the club, parents play key support roles. In parent owned clubs, parents are needed in leadership roles as board members and committee leaders (Goldsmith & Sweetenham, 1999). Regardless of the structure, clubs are always looking for volunteers to help with swim meets, coordinate social events and organize fundraising. Volunteering to help your club is a great way to get involved, meet other parents and be a positive role model for your child. Contact the coach or an involved parent to find out more about what you can do and how you can be a positive force in your club.

Children benefit greatly from a swimming program, and that is the best reason to get involved and help the club. Another good reason is that most clubs cannot function without substantial volunteer help. The economics are not there for a full professional staff to do all the things that need doing (Goldsmith & Sweetenham, 1999). The simple goal of most swimming organizations is to devise a system where the coach is left free to do what they do best: coach. This means parents take responsibility for fundraising, club communication, and similar items. Having coach involvement in those tasks is great, if they have time. If they don't, the idea is to use volunteer talent available, in the areas where it can be most effectively deployed, such as: a) fundraising, b) publicity, c) membership, and d) swim meets.

Remember that a parent organization in its best role, is a watchdog of philosophy; that same philosophy that you joined the team for. Stability is what builds the organization, and your support for that stability is the key thing you can contribute (Leonard, 2002). As your child progresses in swimming, stay with your club, and help it progress, and remember, it is all for fun, and all for your child.

Reality Check-Up

The following survey has been taken from the Amateur Swimming Association of Great Britain. If you answer yes to one or more of these questions, you may be in danger of pressuring your child. It is important to remember that the parents' role is critical and should be supportive at all times to ensure a positive experience for your child.

- (1) Is winning more important to you than it is to your child?
- (2) When your child has a poor swim, is your disappointment obvious?
- (3) Do you feel that you have to "psyche" your child up before competition?
- (4) Do you feel that winning is the only way your child can enjoy the sport?
- (5) Do you conduct "post mortems" immediately after competition or practice?
- (6) Do you feel that you have to force your child to go to practice?
- (7) Do you find yourself wanting to interfere during practice or competition thinking that you could do better?
- (8) Do you find yourself disliking your child's opponents?
- (9) Are your child's goals more important to you than they are to your child?
- (10) Do you provide material rewards for performance?

Remember to keep your child's swimming in perspective! Below is a list written by the former director of club services-USA swimming, Rose Snyder, with some things for swimming parents to remember.

Ten Commandments for Swimming Parents (Snyder, 1996)

- I. Thou shall not impose thy ambitions on thy child
- II. Thou shall be supportive no matter what
- III. Thou shall not coach thy child
- IV. Thou shall only have positive things to say at a swimming meet
- V. Thou shall acknowledge your child's fears
- VI. Thou shall not criticize the officials
- VII. Honor thy child's coach
- VIII. Thou shall be loyal and supportive of thy team
- IX. Thy child shall have goals besides winning
- X. Thou shall not expect thy child to become an Olympian

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