

Sticking With Swimming.... What Can a Parent Do?

The Unfortunate Path that Many Swimmers Follow:

The swimmer's career often starts with 8/under success and high parental enthusiasm. The child is encouraged by parents and others to excel and a big deal is made out of every accomplishment. As the child changes age groups and moves into the 9/10 group, even the most successful child may struggle because he or she has a harder time finding success against 10 year olds. What successes are achieved may not be as noticeable. Unfortunately, as many as one-third of the young swimmers and their families do not make it past this point.

By the time swimmers are 10 or 11 years old they (or their parents) may realize that twice a week practices or summer only swimming is not enough to compete with others who are practicing more frequently. Physical ability and natural coordination can still help the athlete to stay competitive and have success but it is getting harder to stay on top. More big changes and rude awakenings are lurking in the future.

The first Big Change: From 10/under to 11 & 12

- Events become longer going from 25's and 50's to 50's and 100's and even some 200's and distance freestyle events.
- Competition changes from sprint competition to race/pace/competition.
- In some programs, one half of the athletes and their families do not make this change. They never give the coaches or the program a chance to help the athlete adapt to the changing nature of swimming competition.

The second Big Change: From age 12 to 13&14/Senior swimming.

- Events change again. Now it is all 100's & 200's along with 400/500 and 1000/1650.
- The athlete must develop a work ethic and intensify the training aspect of swimming.
- Physical changes affect both male and female athletes. Athletes get bigger and stronger, but many, especially the girls, may struggle to cope with their "new bodies."
- This can one of the most rewarding phases of an athlete's career, yet many will give up.

The third Big Change: A focus on college swimming

- Swimmers who remain in the sport start to look at the possibility of swimming in college.
- Questions arise concerning the choice of colleges, the level of swimming, the possibilities of scholarships and the willingness to compete and train for another four years.

Let's put these changes into "real" numbers:

Suppose a team has 12 Novice swimmers.

- Only 8 will remain in swimming past the first Big Change
- Only 4 will remain in swimming past the second Big Change.
- Only 2 will remain in swimming past the third Big Change.

The Role of the Parent in Navigating the Big Changes:

Sometimes, unfortunately, it is the parents who are responsible for their child leaving the sport. For example:

- Parents who are former athletes, especially former swimmers, may have unreasonably high expectations.
- Parents believe that they are in charge of the athlete's happiness and that only "winning" can bring happiness.
- Parents believe that early success equates with long term success. The 8/under star will, of course, become an Olympian.
- Parents may not understand the need for technical and skill development before "swimming fast."

Parents must examine their own motives. Form a philosophy that emphasizes the process, not the outcome. Be the guides on the "fun path" not the "victory path."

When parents use these words, their emphasis is misplaced:

We - Beat - Win - Fast - Lost - Try - Only - My

What Can Parents Do to Reverse the Trend?

Parents must develop, progress and grow just as athletes do. Experience is the key and communication is the mode. Swimmers already have coaches, friends and teammates. They need a parent to fill the parental role. "Coaches coach children, parents raise children. "

Here are some of the benefits your child will garner if he or she sticks with swimming:

Life Lessons: Only one swimmer can win the race. Does this mean everyone else is a loser? Of course not! Swimmers need to constantly be reminded that a top-notch effort on their part will result in personal satisfaction and a contribution to their team. Most USA Swimming clubs design a program of competitive training and competition for our younger swimmers based on long term development. Therefore, we may not stress early competitive success with a great deal of fanfare. Remember that swimmers under the age of 12 are very inconsistent which can be frustrating to a parent or to the swimmers themselves. Fun and patience are the keys here.

Leadership: In many cases, our team leaders and successful Senior swimmers were not outstanding age group swimmers. Those who "stick with it" often develop into outstanding leaders, having learned patience, dedication and commitment. Steady progress and understanding the meaning of various accomplishments will make a motivated, well adjusted Senior swimmer.

USA Swimming clubs go to great lengths to provide opportunities for all swimmers equally, although sometimes it may seem that more emphasis and time is spent on Senior swimming. An 8/under will swim no more than 45 minutes two or three times a week, while a Senior swimmer may be in the water 18 hours per week! Both swimmers are having their needs met as part of a long term progression. Understanding the long term benefits and the long term progression will help parents navigate the waters of a swimmer's career. If you associate "time" with "attention", the longer a swimmer stays with swimming the more attention he or she will receive.