

The Coach Seems Harsh

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“My child feels the coach is being excessively harsh on him. What can I, as a parent, do to help?”

Answered by: Coach Maureen Sheehan and Coach Mike Lawrence of the Lake Forest Swim Club, Lake Forest, Illinois.

Three very important relationships influence the success of any young swimmer’s career: The coach-athlete relationship, athlete-parent relationship. In any problem situation, it is crucial to maintain the integrity of all aspects of the parent-coach-athlete relationship. Often it is a breakdown in communication that leads to a problem. Striving to reestablish clear lines of communication is the key to maintaining good relationships and providing opportunities for successful swimming careers.

Parents are the most important role models in a child’s life. The way that a parent handles a difficult situation will serve as a role model for the child. Problems provide opportunities for parents to teach children how to work through difficulties. It is important for a parent not to over react to a situation. If the child sees a lack of respect or support for the coach from his/her most important role model, the child will probably act in a similar fashion. Non-support of a coach as an initial reaction may irreparably damage the coach-athlete relationship.

How do parents show support for both the coach and their child at the same time? Take the role of a listener; the child needs to clearly describe the situation. This description is how the child feels he/she is being treated but is not necessarily a reflection of the coach’s intent.

Ask your child questions to help him/her think clearly about what actually is the problem. It is important for you to help the child achieve an objective view of the situation. Ask the child why the conflict is a problem and how it can be solved. Give suggestions and guidance but try to let the child solve the problem or conflict without interference.

Parents cannot solve their children’s problems, but they do need to make a limited assessment of the situation that assures the child that mom/dad cares about them. Some very important but difficult learning experience takes place in youth athletic activities. Teaching a child about the relationship with the coach can go a long way towards easing problems in the future. Is the coach trying to encourage or motivate the child rather than pick on him/her? Is there something the child can do differently to encourage the coach to treat him/her in a specific way? What kind of treatment would be viewed as support?

Children need to learn to communicate with their coach at an early age. Encourage the child to ask questions and seek answers. This allows a child to learn about building strong relationships, in this case between the swimmer and the coach. A special meeting between the coach and the swimmer to discuss goals is an excellent step for the swimmer to initiate with the coach. This gives the coach an opportunity to let the athlete know what is expected of him/her and allows him/her to ask the coach for specific forms of support and encouragement. It is a chance for the coach and the athlete to determine a path they are going to take together.

If necessary a parents-coach meeting may be in order. These are best approached as discussions of how the child feels, which helps avoid possible conflicts over what was or was not said or done. Such discussions allow the parents and the coach to work together on a mutual goal!

Some dos and don’ts:

Do's:

- Listen; pay attention to your child's feelings
- Ask questions
- Make a limited assessment
- Try to help your child to work through this problem
- Work to see this problem solved in a positive manner for all involved
- Encourage your child to find his/her own answers
- Relate this to another area in life to help it be a growing experience
- Try to help build a positive image of the coach in the child's mind
- Support the coach
- Support the child
- Follow-up with your child

Don't's:

- Overreact
- Make this a family crisis or team issue
- Create a situation that undermines your child's respect for the coach.
- Deal in comparisons with other swimmers
- Limit the coach-athlete relationship for the future