

For Parents: Talking to Your Child at a Swim Meet

By John Leonard

Talk honestly with any coach in the world and they will tell you that the impact of a parent on a child at a swim meet is substantial. Depending on what you do and what you say, that impact will either be helpful or destructive. Since we know ALL parents want to be helpful, consider the following as tips on how to be helpful from a coach who has seen 44 years of swimming parents in action.

The Laundry List of *concepts* to keep in mind:

1. **Be a PARENT.** You are not a secondary coach. Leave the coaching to the coach.
2. If the coach is not doing what you expect, **ASK** the coach about it first. (not at the meet!)
3. If you don't like the way your child is being coached, don't be "negative" around your child.
4. If the long term effects of the coaching you have is not what you want, "go shopping" for what you want.
5. **Be a PARENT.** Make sure the child is *ON TIME* to warm-up. (Warm-up is important.)
6. **Be a PARENT.** Make sure the child talks to the coach before and after the swim.
7. *BEFORE* – reminds the child what they are supposed to be doing in that race. *AFTER* – analyzes the results (in technical terms) to help the child improve.

AS A PARENT – ask the child "what did the coach say?" (To see if they absorbed the info.) If they didn't, let the coach know that it went in one ear and out the other. **OR** maybe,

your child doesn't want to tell you, because you previously had a habit of trying to coach and the child is smart enough to know they only want and need **ONE** coach. **Or**, if they are a teenager, they simply don't want their parents involved. This is normal. Learn to like it.

In conversation realize that most coaches give swimmers **ONE** thing to focus on in a race; it is not, "Do a Best Time **AND** win the race." It is more likely: "Keep your butt up for the whole 100 fly." **PROCESS**, not **OUTCOME**.

8. **Outcome thinking will hurt most performers.** It is nice to have goals, **BETTER** to know the process you need to complete to reach your goals. Your child probably knows this better than you do, resort to #1.

9. **Be a PARENT.** Food and water is important for performance. Talk with the coach, have a nutrition plan for the meet. **DO NOT BE THE PARENT BRINGING THE DONUTS.** This will get dirty looks from more "with it" parents and **UGLY** looks from the coach. Food to feed the competition was eaten two days ago, not today. But *today's* food fuels the recovery of the next few days. Don't put in garbage unless you want garbage out. Eating the wrong thing at a swim meet can ruin a performance, but it can't *help* a performance. (You gave them that fuel two days earlier.)

10. Resist the temptation to "offer your thoughts" on the child's swim (the coaches already did that). That includes those of us who are coaches, coaching their

own children. Be one or the other, you **TRULY CANNOT BE BOTH**, very well. They need their **PARENTS** more as **PARENTS**. Love 'em for the life skills they are learning. The meet results will be shortly forgotten. The lessons they learn, can last a lifetime.

11. Extravagant praise is more dangerous than *criticism*. When you say, "Oh honey, that was **GREAT!** It was **UNBELIEVABLE!** It was **Fantastic!**" What is the effect on your child? Do they believe those words? Maybe, and if they do... it will be *really* hard to reproduce that swim, won't it? Better to be: "Nice job! What did coach say to help you go even faster next time?"

Contrary to the public media, self-image is not enhanced by **WORDS**, it is built on the much more stable foundation of actual achievement. Help support that which builds achievement.

12. Last of the dozen. Remember that the way to keep the child/grownup motivated, is to have faith and believe in an even better future. The last thing most coaches will say is some version of "here is what you do to get better next time!"

I once had a parent say to me (as the coach) **'AREN'T YOU EVER HAPPY? CAN'T YOU JUST TELL HER THE GOOD STUFF AND NOT WHAT ELSE SHE SHOULD BE DOING?'**

My response was simple. "Sure I can. If you want her to believe that's the best swim she'll **EVER** have."

Our job is tell 'em how to get better. More importantly, that we believe they **CAN** get Better. ■