

## **For Swim Parents**

Following is some advice to parents on each phase of the developmental process—or at least those phases in which the parent is largely involved.

### **Swimming Lessons (Ages 3 to 7)**

- Select a quality learn-to-swim program for your child.
- Focus on who will teach your child to swim rather than on who offers swimming lessons.
- Ask “In your program, how long does it take the average child to go from being scared and terrified to swimming 25 yards freestyle with rotational breathing?”
- Ask for references from satisfied clients.
- Generally, you will get what you pay for. Many places offer inexpensive swimming lessons. You want your child learn to swim to be safer around the water. You can pay for lessons for many months and your child never learns to swim. This changes inexpensive swimming lessons into a very expensive waste of time and effort, and your child will pick up bad habits.
- Expect lessons to cost between \$80 and \$120 for a set of 10 lessons. Expect that it will take 40 to 80 lessons to achieve the milestone listed in the third bullet point.
- Let the teacher teach. If your child has special needs, the instructor needs to know. Otherwise, stay out of it.
- Look for attention to detail in the teacher. Swimming is a technique-limited sport. If the child is not taught proper technique, it will be damaging for a lifetime. You may not know what proper technique is, but you know when someone is paying attention to detail.
- Your child will not always be happy during lessons. Most people aren’t happy when they are asked to do something new. Console yourself that you are giving your child a life-saving and life-enriching skill and that eventually they will be very happy that you did make them go to lessons and stick with it.
- Thank the instructor daily. Very few, if any, earn much money giving swimming lessons. It’s a labor of love and passing on the skills of something that they themselves love. Appreciation in the form of a simple “thank you” is a great reward for most of these dedicated teachers.

### **Age-Group Swimming (Ages 8 to 12)**

- Select an age-group program for your child.
- Interview a number of teams and coaches about what they do and what they can do for your child.
- Ask about what the team emphasizes in the early years. The answer you want to hear is technique, technique, technique. The answers you don’t want to hear are speed, speed, speed or winning.
- Ask about the practice schedule. When first coming from a learn-to-swim program, expect three to four practices per week. In a year or two, perhaps four to five practices per week. By ages 11 to 12, perhaps five to seven practices per week. Each practice should last for 45 to 60 minutes (some very talented and advanced swimmers may be invited to do more) and gradually increase.
- Understand the purpose of swim meets. They are there to test what the child learns in practice. Coaches who are on the right track teach calm, cool, collected behavior at meets and the ability to both have fun when racing and analyze the results of the

techniques used in the race. Coaches who emphasize winning do your child no service.

- Expect your coach to ask your child to swim all the events. Focusing on a few things they do well early in their career is shortsighted. The breaststroker at age 10 may well be the best distance swimmer by age 17. You cannot tell what can develop, so the child should keep developing all strokes as long as possible.
- Be a parent. Take care of the parental things and let the coach coach. This is equally true in practice and at swim meets. If you have questions or comments, talk to the coach and listen to the coach's response. Talking to your child about it sets up a destructive conflict for your child. Talking to other parents about it is similar to asking your neighbor how to pull your decayed tooth: not wise. Ask the coach.
- Support the total success of the team. This is not an individual sport. Eventually, your child will be deeply affected by the degree of success or lack thereof of their teammates. It takes a team to succeed in this sport. You cannot do it with a selfish "me first" approach.
- Do ask the parents of teenagers what they went through in the sport. You can learn from their experience. The longer you are in the sport, the more you learn to relax, have a sense of humor, and enjoy it! Your child may sometimes try to impress you with how hard it is. They are truly not complaining; they are usually bragging. Learn to discern the difference. The relevant question is not whether they are having fun every day (no one ever does) but whether it is a satisfying experience. If they want to go to practice, all is well. Sometimes in the earliest years, parents have to enforce the commitment the child has made in joining the team by taking them away from the computer or TV, putting them in the car, and saying "We're going to practice." Eventually, the swimmer should be eager to go.

### **Late Junior High School and Early High School (Ages 13 to 15)**

- Junior high or middle school are typically the feather gatherer years. Many schools offer an endless variety of opportunities for children to be involved after school. Many swimmers can become distracted by these opportunities in the short term and lose focus on their sport. As a parent, the temptation is to discourage these activities, but it's best to let them try other activities and find out for themselves what they're most passionate about.
- High school swimming is both the greatest boon to a swimming career and a very dangerous phase. We hope that every child will try high school swimming. The in-school recognition is spectacular, and the identity this provides the swimmer in school is irreplaceable. On the other hand, the coaching may or may not be consistent with their year-round coaching, and in some states the rules are quite restrictive. In addition, in some cases, competition can be less strong for much of the year. This gives the weaker year-round swimmer a chance to shine, but it can lead the stronger year-round swimmer to develop poor habits as they dominate their events without as much challenge.
- Encourage the high school coach and the club coach to communicate and collaborate for the benefit of the athlete. In some communities, this is a big challenge. Parents can help here.
- Understand that every athlete develops at a unique pace on an individual maturation cycle. Patience is needed to allow that to happen. Some swimmers attain success at a young age and some develop their potential in high school and even in their college years. Every swimmer should focus on great technique and consistent and persistent

training through the extended developmental years. This approach will reward the swimmer with the best results in the long run.

- Understand that in the teen years and beyond, the swimmer will not be doing best times on almost every swim as they may have done at an earlier age. With age it gets harder to get faster, and improvement takes hard, quality practice. Improvement will be slow and best times may be seen only once or twice a season. This is entirely natural; do not fret. It teaches the great life lesson that big rewards require concentrated, persistent effort.
- In these years, a shift will occur. The coach, rather than the parent, will become the primary focus and feedback unit in the athlete's team. Likely, the child wants to put some distance between child and parent; this is okay. Let the sport become their sport rather than "our sport." They're doing the swimming; let them own it.
- You have now been involved in swimming for a while and have had some experiences. Use those experiences to help parents who are new to the sport.

### **Late High School (Ages 16 to 18)**

- Recognize that both the coach and the athlete's peers supplant the parent as the primary other for the swimmer; again, this is natural. The most important feedback at this stage may come from peers. If the athlete has been well coached, it's entirely possible that even the coach is reduced to a resource person at this stage.
- The wise parent stays in the background at this stage. Attend practices rarely, if ever, and attend meets when asked by your child. If they would prefer you not be there, accept this graciously. It is entirely possible that your presence puts unwanted pressure on your child.
- They will need tremendous help with college selection. This needs to be done in conjunction with professional help from the school guidance counselor and from the year-round and high school coach serving as the experts in which college program your athlete will fit into well.
- Sit back and enjoy the results of all your hard work as a parent. These can be enjoyable years!

### **College (Ages 19 to 24)**

- Once the swimmer has left home for college, your role is reduced to a support function. Interestingly, every college swimmer seems to want their parents to be at a fair number of swim meets. It is very enjoyable to take a road trip and watch your child compete. They may not have wanted you there in high school, but once away at college, having Mom and Dad in the stands is much more important. Odd but true.
- Recognize that best times at this mature physical stage will be the hard-won result of a great deal of effort and concentration and are likely to happen once or twice a year when shaved and tapered. However, it is likely that racing skills are finely tuned and are a focus, and even small technical improvements will be celebrated with enthusiasm by athlete and coach.

**Congratulations, Mom and Dad! Great job!**

Hannula, Dick; Thornton, Nort (2012-04-20). The Swim Coaching Bible: Volume II (Kindle Locations 502-507). Human Kinetics. Kindle Edition.