

Ten Ways For the Swim Parent to Sabotage Their Child's Swimming Career

Written with tongue firmly in cheek by John Leonard (Executive Director of the American Swimming Coaches Association)

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After thirty-three full years of observation, it has occurred to me that some parents must internally delight in the idea of sabotaging their child's swim career. They must for some perverse reason WANT to do this, since they work so incredibly hard at it and are so remarkably successful. Hereafter, my top ten list of means and methods. (And more seriously, some clear examples on positive alternatives.)

10. Start out making sure the child will get a material reward for good performance.... at age 8, a stop at McDonalds for a 100 IM done without disqualification. At age 10, a five-dollar bill for a new "A" time. At age 12, a trip to Disney World for a high point trophy in the JO's. At age 14, a party for child and friends at an amusement park, complete with LIMO ride, for qualifying for state high school champs as a freshman. And, if still around in the sport, a new Mercedes or Jaguar for a state high school championship as a senior. If you can't see what's wrong with this, you're the problem.

The approach that works best? Let the rewards become internal. Let the sport "belong" to the child, not something that "Mommy wants me to do." Get them to understand the value of working hard to improve themselves EVERY DAY, and allow them opportunities to "prove themselves" through THEIR sport.

9. Demand that the child keep up with Fred's kid, from work, who always wins at least one event in any meet they go to. Fred's kid is 8, stands 5 feet, 5 inches tall and had his first shave last Friday. Face shave, not swimming shave. Demand that your child stays close to, or "Right with" those early developers in your club.

Reality? Children develop at different rates, in terms of size, strength, coordination, emotional and intellectual maturity and just about everything else. Allow your child to compete ONLY against itself, and measure them against only their own best efforts.

8. Coach your child part time, "when you're available". If you're rarely available, show up after practice with a stopwatch and "help" Susie by timing her for 50 meters "to see if she's getting any better". Encourage her with "kick, Susie, Kick!" screams from the side of the pool. This will nicely balance out the fact that all your 10 and under age group coach does is ask them to swim correctly and SLOOOOWLY so they learn their strokes. You're just encouraging them to swim Faster, right???
Right? Right? Huh?

What should you do? Just about ANYTHING except coach. Parents are for unconditional love and support. Coaches are for critical analysis of performance and developing skills physical, emotional and tactical. STAY AWAY from any coaching. If you doubt your coaches' ability to coach, talk to them about it, at last resort, go somewhere you have enough faith in the coaching to stay out of it. No mistake is worse than trying to be both parent and coach to your child. It's guaranteed long-term relationship disaster.

7. Insist that your child swim the race the way YOU want it swum...."like I saw them do in the Olympics" or "like I did, when I was in college in 1975." When you're at the meet on Saturday, after not having seen your child swim in practice for 6 months. After all, swimming's swimming right? It doesn't change. Does it? Does it? Huh?

Reality? Techniques and thinking on how to swim races change all the time. Swimming for a ten year old is not what it might be for a 20 year old, or an Olympic Swimmer. Allow your coach to select the race strategy that they deem age appropriate and developmentally proper for your child. If you doubt the coaches ability to do this, talk to them about it, until you are reassured.

6. Go get them a nice candy bar, mom and dad, just before they swim, so they'll have some "quick energy" just before they dive in. Or, bring in some nice fresh Crispy Crème donuts just after the warm-up and before the big meet. That'll give them a lift and cheer them up. Psych them up. Yeah. Good. Ugh.

Well, for those who don't know, Sugar is the Great Satan of physical performance. It creates an immediate "sugar high" in the bloodstream and then immediately thereafter, a HUGE dip in the blood sugar, so just about the time your child gets up to swim, they'll feel like they are wilting and just want to go lie down and rest. Not exactly "race ready". And don't try to figure out how to "time it" for the sugar high, either ... it won't work, its not that predictable in timing... except exertion will immediately trigger the sugar low. What instead? If they must eat between races and meals, have a bagel or non-sugar carbohydrate snack.

5. Tell your early developed 15 year old, "But you were SOOOOO good, when you were eight!"

Wow. Nothing heavier than a great potential, according to Charlie Brown. If you have an early developing child, stay away from past results comparisons. Just look at your own child's best times, and encourage improvement. And if the times aren't improving as they get older, and thankfully, they still enjoy swimming, just keep your mouth shut and be pleased that they enjoy the exercise and training. Great friends to be around, great role models. If you have trouble keeping your mouth shut, go look around at the mall to see whom your child COULD be hanging out with. It should inspire you to keep bringing them to the pool.

4. Go to the side of the pool each time the child swims, to "support them", with wild cheering, screaming, trembling and generally demonstrating your emotional involvement in your child's swim. The child will swim REEEAALLY fast the first time you do this, (which will encourage you to do it ALL the time...) since all they want to do is get out of the water so you'll stop embarrassing them. Then they'd prefer to NEVER race again rather than see you like that.

Reality? Sit down. Smile. Cheer internally. When your child comes back, ask the child what they thought of their swim. Listen. Be quiet. Learn. Then cheer wildly for your child's best friend. That'll make your child happy, not embarrassed. (And hope your child's friend's parent is cheering for YOUR child!)

3. Spend your time in the car pool dissecting the workout your child just did. You can dissect the work given (critiquing the coach), or the child's performance (critiquing the child) or best of all, OTHER people's children's performance. The more critical you can be, the more knowledgeable you will appear. The door you hear slamming is your child leaving swimming.

What to do after you watch practice? Go Home. Feed your child. DO NOT TALK ABOUT PRACTICE UNLESS YOUR CHILD WANTS TO DO SO. This is all about letting the sport belong to the child and not to you. Critical.

2. When your child has an improved swim, faster than ever before, jump up and down, demonstrate your enthusiasm with words like **WONDERFUL! FANTASTIC! INCREDIBLE! UNBELIEVABLE!** And generally behave as if you can't believe that a child with your pitiful athletic genes could actually do something worthwhile. This will ensure that your child will believe that they have accomplished something akin to finding the Holy Grail and will ensure that they cannot even REPEAT that performance, much less improve on it, for another two years when they finally forget your performance.

Reality? We all get excited when our child performs well in any way. Try your best to be restrained around your child. Making a big deal of a best time makes it seem like you are SURPRISED that they could do so. Like you lack confidence that they could actually do anything worthwhile. Instead, play it cool. Express your confidence that the wonderful thing you just saw is an everyday event for a child as dedicated, hardworking and talented as yours. In the words of the football coach trying to diminish the "celebration factor" - "ACT LIKE YOU HAVE BEEN IN THE END ZONE BEFORE." (And expect to be again.)

1. Tell your child that they "HAVE TO/MUST" make this "time, time standard, place, final, or medal "Right Now". That should be crushing enough pressure to debilitate most anyone...except you of course, who can sit in the stands or at poolside, with a cup of coffee and a bun while you emote, rather than swim, the race.

What's the right language? Each swim is an opportunity to go fast. Just another opportunity. If you miss on this one, you'll get another chance shortly. The more important we make something, the more the pressure load to perform under. Everything is "just another swim meet". Everything. Even the Olympic Games. Our Olympic Coaches tell our Olympic Athletes regularly ..."what do you do in a regular meet? You try to go a best time. This is the same. Go a best time here, and you'll be fine." No one swim meet is "make it or break it" for an athletes career. Don't artificially try to make it so.