

When the Younger Sibling is Faster

By

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Swimming families often have more than one young swimmer and sometimes have more than two. This is one of the great things about swimming--siblings can go to practices and meets together rather than having practices on different days and games at different locations. But there can be challenges associated with having siblings involved in the same sport, especially when the sport is individual and is judged or measured objectively, in this case, by time. Because swimming is measured by time, it is easy to compare events between family members. Kids will do this without any prompting. When siblings are close together in age, it can happen that a younger child may swim faster than an older child. Look across the results sheet at any major meet and you will find this is not rare. Unfortunately, such a thing can lead to an uncomfortable situation at home and/or self-esteem problems in children.

Is it really likely for a younger, smaller sibling to swim faster than an older, bigger perhaps more experienced one? Here are some reasons why this can happen. A younger sibling may be advanced for their age because they have had an example to follow. They've had to grow up quicker in order to be able to play with their older sibling. They are conditioned to trying new things and having to get good at them quickly in order to fit in. This transfers to their swimming.

Another possibility has to do with growth spurts. We often think about growth spurts *helping* a swimmer because swimming speed and size are associated with each other (a poor association). But times of growth can actually hinder swimming. In *The Parents' Guide to Swimming*, I talk about how swimming is, "a mixture of complex movement patterns. The body movements for freestyle alone require bilateral arm movement (using both arms) synchronized to opposing bilateral leg movement. Additionally, each breath must be coordinated in this sequence so that the swimmer inhales air, not water. And beyond these obvious things lie intricate and technical movements like hand pattern and pitch to produce the most propulsion and reduce drag." In essence, this process of swimming is difficult enough without adding the 'adaptation to growth' factor to it. When an older child is going through a growth spurt, they may have trouble swimming well until they get comfortable with their new, bigger body.

I indicated above that the older child might have more experience. Often this is not, in fact, the case. Families may start swim programs all at once, meaning one child may be eight and the other six. We assume after a year of swimming, that the older one, being older, has more experience, forgetting that we started them at the same time. And, this brings up another factor. What is the best biological age to learn the skills of swimming? It may be that the younger sibling is at a better biological age to adapt to swimming than the older (this can work both ways, just as often the older siblings are more trainable because they better understand the concepts the coach is trying to get across). In general, humans adapt better the younger they are and the younger sibling in your family may have hit it just right.

Another reason could be a prolonged injury or illness. Perhaps the older sibling had to be out of practice for a while with a broken bone. The younger sibling took advantage of this time and got better, while the older likely digressed due to the injury or illness.

There are several other possibilities why a younger sibling might out swim an older. But, no matter what the causes, the question for a parent becomes, "What do I do about it?"

Older siblings who have slower times than their younger brothers or sisters first and foremost need encouragement. They may or may not *ever* get faster than their younger sibling, but they *do* have a lot to look forward to in swimming. First, they have more time to drop and less time to maturity, meaning that they *can* be dropping time at a faster rate in the future than their younger sibling. Swimming faster is a very motivating thing. So long as the swimmer is only compared to himself/herself, they will be motivated by their faster performances. If comparisons are made to the younger, faster sibling, the older child may continue to feel they are not measuring up until they swim faster than that sibling causing low self-esteem and confidence. This can then lessen their effort and can start a downward spiraling cycle.

As a parent, the way you speak, act or react to your children and their performances makes a great deal of difference in how they perceive their performances and themselves. Words like, “If you could just swim more like your little sister,” are likely to make an older sister cringe (and I won’t mention what they might do to an older brother). The best thing to do is never compare your children to each other either in front of them or where they can hear you. Don’t try to set your older child up to beat the younger, even though you might think this would be good for your older child. If you, as a parent, talk about swimming, you should discuss technical aspects of a stroke, which will reinforce things the coach is teaching, like streamlining off turns. (Ask the coach--often they like others to reinforce what they tell their swimmers.) By talking technique rather than times or overall performance (I know it’s hard), you will help teach your kids a more effective focus.

One might think that in a ‘faster younger sibling’ situation, any problems would concern only the older sibling. On the contrary, young, fast swimmers are in a high-risk group. There can be a lot of pressure on swimmers who are fast early on: They are going to be the next “Michael Phelps” or “Janet Evans.” They may be moved into lanes with older faster kids who are not in their social group. They may be forced to swim long yardage beyond their body’s development. They will certainly meet with a long period of time when they don’t improve at a very fast rate, if at all. This last ‘stagnation’ may lead to burnout. People who have been around swimming for years know that young, very fast swimmers rarely make it all the way to *college* swimming.

So what does a parent do when the younger out-swims the older? The first thing to do, or don’t do, is make a big deal about it. Secondly, talk with your coach for help. It is very possible the coach has experienced this before, and may know good ways to handle such situations. Thirdly, encourage the older swimmer without pressuring them. You may have the older swimmer practice more than the younger one. Older children’s bodies can handle more practice anyway, and generally, practice makes one better/faster. Also, having sibling swimmers in different practice *groups* may be a good thing, so they are not constantly (every day, every set in practice) comparing themselves to each other. Finally, other team parents might be able to provide some guidance.

To wrap up, it is not uncommon for a younger sibling to out-swim an older brother or sister. As a parent, don’t make a big deal about it and avoid comparative comments. Encourage both siblings; the older will, with perseverance, experience success. The younger may need watching for signs of burnout. Talk with your team’s coach, because they are the best resource. Tell the coach any/all concerns you have, and together you will likely come up with a good course of action. Swimming can provide countless life lessons, only *one* of which is how to win/swim fastest. I don’t think when one arrives at Heaven’s Gate, that it’s their 100 freestyle time that opens the door.