

## **PARENT GUIDELINE**

The following parent suggestions are written by and borrowed from Michael Brooks, Head Coach of the York YMCA Swim Team, located in York, Pennsylvania. A veteran of more than 20 years of USA club, high school, and summer league swim coaching, Mr. Brooks has worked with all levels of athlete, from novice to Olympians. Today, despite the York YMCA's small size (80 year round swimmers) he has led them to be considered, consistently, among the top-40 USA swimming club teams. Recently, Brooks authored a book, *Developing Swimmers*, which is highly regarded by most elite USA swimming coaches to be one of the most comprehensive swim coaching manuals available.

A large part of YORK's success has been due to the positive and supportive parenting culture, per the direction of Mr. Brooks. In fostering this culture, he has been diligent in educating team parents about the necessity for valuing the long-term outlook of each swimmer. Recognizing the value in his suggestions and agreeing wholeheartedly with his approach, the Rocklin Mavericks coaching staff decided to share his mode. We believe it is the best fit for our budding team culture. We reached out to Michael Brooks to request his approval for the use of his work. Not only did he oblige, but he graciously forwarded us his most recent edition. Michael Brooks illustrates a thoughtful and detailed guide for training swimmers at all ages and abilities, along with the critical, yet specific role in which parents must play throughout their children's development. His work presents a mindful approach to guide us coaches and parents in a direction that will serve the best long-term interest for our swimmers on their journey.

### **"A FEW SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO BE A BETTER SWIMMING PARENT" BY MICHAEL BROOKS**

The longer I have coached, the more important I have understood the parents' role to be. The following suggestions are based on twenty-odd years of watching parents and swimmers, on seeing hundreds of mistakes made, and on thinking afterwards about how we could have avoided the problems. They are based on the adage that forewarned is forearmed. Some things work – they ensure that kids stay in the sport and develop their talents. And some things do not – they send kids running for the door with a bad taste in their mouths about swimming, and even about sports in general.

#### **A. TEACHING VALUES**

Traits of discipline, respect, high expectations, and commitment taught at home directly relate to the child's characteristics at practices and meets. Family support is crucial to the success of the swimmer. Parents should review, carefully, the formative memos about the values the team espouses. If the current at home is flowing in the opposite direction from the current at the pool, there will be big problems. If a family does not live the program's philosophy, they will be very unhappy and will eventually leave the team. Home and pool values must dovetail: your fit with the team is about more than just swimming fast.

**You are key to your child's swimming.** A parent's attitude toward swimming, the program, the coach, and his child's participation, is key towards the child's attitude and success. The young swimmer takes cues from his parent. If the parent shows by word, deed, facial expression, etc., that he does not value swimming, that he doesn't appreciate having to drive to practice or sit in the stands during meets, that "it's not going to matter" if the child skips practice, that morning practices are just "optional" and that the child would be better off with the extra sleep, then the chances are very good that the child will lack commitment, have little success, then lose interest in swimming. Support your child's interest in swimming by being positively interested.

**Allow your swimmer to be resilient.** Failure, and facing that failure, doesn't cause kids to melt. Failure isn't such an evil thing that parents should try to shield their kids from it. Allow them to fail, then teach them to get up off the canvas and try harder to succeed the next time. If parents are continually sheltering their swimmers from the storm, cushioning every fall, making excuses for them, finding someone else to blame, the children never learn anything. Even worse, they never learn that they are responsible both for their failures and for their successes. Allow them to stand on their own, and you will be helping them immeasurably down the road.

**Cut the umbilical cord.** Just as failure is often a valuable and beneficial thing that enables learning, so also is it a good thing for you to allow your swimmer to fend for himself at swimming meets. If you and your swimmer are connected by cell phone and you are phoning him every five minutes to remind him to drink his Gatorade, to warmup after heat three of the girls' 50 fly, to put his jacket on so he doesn't catch cold, to drink again (it's been seven minutes since his last sip), to go out very strong in his upcoming 200 free, to go to the bathroom now and not wait until the last minute before his race, to remember to eat his powerbar after he swims, to help his little sister put her cap on because she's having problems, to remind his sister to answer her cell phone because she seems to be ignoring her calls, to kick really hard in his race, to remember he's only half a second from the AA time in this 200 free, etc., etc., etc. – if you do all this, and many parents do, routinely, at every meet – then you have effectively shielded your swimmer from ever having to think for himself, from being responsible for his actions, and from facing the consequences of his choices. If you remind him of all these crucial points in real time, he may indeed swim a little better this afternoon, because he probably would have forgotten about some of them. But if you are hovering, electronically or otherwise, he never learns anything. Give him a chance to make mistakes and to learn from them. You will not be joining him on the block to race. The swimmer alone on the block needs as much mental and physiological and technical 'armor' as he can get.

**Molehills really are molehills.** At times coaches may appear unsympathetic or even harsh because we won't let kids stop for "emergencies": for leaking goggles, for kids passing them, for

side-aches, for stretching, for repeated bathroom breaks, etc. Many kids think that the slightest obstacle is an overwhelming reason to stop and should be listened to and followed as the voice of God. Coaches think otherwise. We are trying to teach focus. When a swimmer is in the middle of a set, the only thing in life that matters or is worthy of attention is doing the set well. Little "bothers" are to be overcome or ignored. And once a swimmer gets in the habit of overcoming these little bothers, he finds that they aren't so overwhelmingly important after all. If we are continually stopping for "emergencies," we will never get anything done. If a study session is continually interrupted for sharpening pencils, then getting a better notepad, then getting a drink of water, then taking a little break when a favorite song comes on the radio, then answering the telephone – then almost miraculously the math assignment doesn't get completed.

**Don't worry, be happy???** We do not want a swimmer doing cartwheels after an awful performance. It's okay for them to be upset about, disappointed with, even angry about having done poorly. Feeling lousy for a few minutes won't kill them, it won't forever damage their self-esteem, and if they are thinking correctly it will motivate them to try harder and do better the next time. We want to teach them standards of good and bad performance, so that when they really do well, they will feel appropriately pleased. If they are simply showered with praise willy-nilly, they never know the difference. And a coach is not 'mean' when he tells the kids the truth about their performances; he is helping them to get better by analyzing: what am I doing well? What am I doing poorly? What can I do to fix my problems?

**Teach them to dream big** – a world of infinite possibilities. If you try to temper your child's dreams, if you teach her to settle for the ordinary, you may indeed save her from many a heartache and many a failure. But you also rob her of the opportunity of achieving great things, and the opportunity to plumb her depths and realize her potential. Winning big means failing many times along the way. Each failure hurts, but these temporary setbacks create the strength for the final push. Instead of having children avoid failure by never taking risks, teach them how to think correctly about failing: risk-taking and failure are necessary for improvement, development, motivation, feedback, and long-term success.

**What success is.** Only one swimmer can win the race. Often in the younger age groups, the winner will be the one who is biggest and who has bloomed early, not necessarily the swimmer with the most talent or with the most potential to succeed in senior swimming. It is expected that every parent wants his child to succeed, wants his child to have a good and valuable experience with swimming. Every child can succeed – only make sure you define success correctly: being the very best you can be, striving for improvement in every aspect of swimming, getting better every day. That leads to lasting success. And lasting enjoyment.

**I love you... if you swim fast.** "Bribing" your swimmer by promising presents, money, special meals, etc. for performing well is highly discouraged. While bribery may work in the short run – the swimmer may indeed swim fast this afternoon – the long term consequences are never good.

Bribery leads to inconsistency and twisted motivation: swimmers only care, swim hard, and do their best when they are being paid for it, and the rest of the time they just float and save up for the races that ‘matter.’ Coaches want kids trying their best on every race, not because they are on salary, but because they want to get better and to see how fast they can be, and because they love racing their friends. Take your child to dinner after a meet because you love him and he’s a good kid, not because he swam fast in the 50 backstroke.

**Fun, fun, fun.** If “fun” means mindless entertainment and sensory bombardment, then wasting hours playing Nintendo is loads of fun, and swimming is by definition “not fun.” If “fun” means working hard and challenging yourself, taking pride in accomplishing difficult goals, and discovering talents you didn’t know you had, then swimming is fun and Nintendo is by definition “not fun.” The meaning of fun is very much an open question for children, and one where parents and coaches have much influence over their charges. To be good at something is more fun than to be mediocre. Are we creating a world of energized achievers or lifeless couch potatoes?

**Work, work, work.** Persistence and work ethic are the most important qualities leading to success in swimming and everything else. And if a work ethic is not created and cultivated when a swimmer is young, it very likely will never appear. It is so rare as not to be an option that a kid who is a slacker from ages seven to fourteen will suddenly change his spots and become a hard worker. Love for and pride in hard work MUST be inculcated early on, and again parents and coaches have much influence in creating this attitude.

**No little league parents.** Kids sometimes make mistakes at meets. If your child is disqualified at a meet, don’t complain, don’t whine, and don’t make excuses. Your child’s DQ is not a reflection of the quality of your parenting. The official is not blind, he does not have a vendetta against your child or your family or your team, and he is not incompetent. In fact, he has a much better vantage on your child’s race than you do, and he is looking on dispassionately. You are sitting up in the stands where you can’t see precisely, and you are paying attention to everything except the exact angle of your child’s left foot as he kicks in breaststroke. If a DQ is questionable, as sometimes is the case, the coach – and not the parent – will take the proper steps. And even then, DQ’s are almost never overturned, so don’t get your hopes up. By the by, most DQ’s aren’t surprises to the coach. If a swimmer rehearses an illegal turn forty thousand times in training despite a coach’s remonstrances, then that illegal habit will likely show up under the stress of a race. (And the legions of swimmers who daily defend their sloppiness with “it’s only practice; I’ll do it right when it matters,” are deluding themselves about how life works. Repeat the adage: “Practice good to play good.”

**“Burn-out” is over-rated.** So many times parents will say, “I don’t want my son to commit to swimming because I don’t want him to get burned out.” But for every one case of “burnout” caused by a swimmer’s spending too much time in the water and working too hard, we will see a hundred cases of “pre-emptive burnout”: in order not to be burned out, the swimmer only

comes to practice when he feels like it, doesn't train hard, skips team meets with regularity, and generally makes no commitment to the program or to the sport. Not surprisingly, the swimmer swims slow, makes little to no improvement, does not advance to higher training groups with his peers, and sees his formerly slower teammates and competitors rush right by him. Then we wonder why he "just can't get jazzed about swimming."

Sitting on the fence and remaining lukewarm on principle has nothing to recommend it. Discipline and commitment are good things, not things we should downplay, hide, apologize for, or (worst of all) stop demanding because it may be unpopular. If you want to enjoy swimming even more, commit more of yourself and swim fast! You do not become excited about an activity you don't do well at.

**Chasing many rabbits, catching none.** You get what you pay for. If the majority of kids in a program or training group are fairly committed to their swimming, and if your child is playing five sports and three instruments and is involved in seven school clubs and committees and only comes to practice two or three times a week, then he is not going to progress, despite protestations that swimming is his "number one thing." He won't progress through the training groups with his peers, he will find himself unable to stay with the kids he used to, he will not qualify for the championship meets that his peers do. If you swim much less than those around you, you will not do as well. It is not just to complain about the obvious and expected consequences of one's choices. And for every 'wonderful opportunity' and 'chance of a lifetime' that he misses multiple practices for, he will be missing thousands of opportunities and chances to improve himself in the pool. You cannot have everything. If you choose to do many activities, your swimming will suffer; the older you are and the higher your goals, the more it will suffer. It is important to remember that the term "Renaissance man" was used to denote someone very accomplished in many different fields (see Leonardo da Vinci), not someone who dabbled in many and was mediocre at them all.

## ***B. A JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES***

**The patience of Job.** Your swimmer's career in the program is a long journey, with many peaks and valleys. Usually, the new parent and swimmer come to the sport with little experience, so the first sign of a problem looks like the Grand Canyon, impossible to get across, and the first sign of success looks like Mount Everest – we're on top of the world. It's best not to get too worked up. You will see this again, over and over. The process of becoming very good at something is long, arduous, trying, and exhilarating. The patience of Job is required.

**Even keel.** When coaches see a parent TOO happy about their child's race, we get nervous. Sometimes kids have breakout swims, far surpassing their previous best efforts in an event. This is good, and it is fine for you as a parent to be pleased. But it is not fine to be irrationally exuberant. The reason is, everything that goes up must come down (this is called 'regression to the mean'), and the parent irrationally exuberant after a great swim is the parent wallowing in

irrational despair after a terrible swim. These two emotional states go together, and the child becomes an unwilling partner in the parent's emotional swings.

**And no matter how good your swimmer, there will be terrible races.** It is much better and emotionally healthy, both for you and your child, if you keep your emotional states in a fairly narrow band. If a swim was wonderful, "That was really well done, honey, good job." If a swim was terrible, "Oh, well, try to do better next time; did you talk with your coach about how to fix your mistakes?" Remember that a swimmer competes in over a thousand races over a reasonable length career. This swim was one in a thousand. There will be many many more. Don't make more out of this one swim – good or bad – than it deserves. Don't lose perspective.

**Taking the long view.** The training that will make an eight year old the area's fastest 25 freestyler is not the training that will benefit that swimmer most in the long run. Making decisions now that will benefit the swimmer over the long haul of a swimming career calls for prudence, and it means sacrificing some speed now for huge gains later. Now we make kids beautiful in the water, now we make them fit, now we teach them to expect great things, and gradually they become superfast. Our destination is not two weeks down the road, but several years.

**McDonalds v. Michelin Three-Star.** The fast food mentality, the attitude that "I want it NOW!" (even if it tastes like cardboard) is anathema to what we are about. Think of the swimming program, and your swimmer's career in the program, as a fine meal in the very best French restaurant: more courses than you can count (phases and seasons), served in a very particular order (developmentally determined), each patiently savored (the cumulative effects of years' worth of daily training), completed by dessert and coffee (Nationals). We are not in search of a quick Big Mac. We want the best, and we are willing to wait.

### **C. HOW KIDS WORK**

Unfortunately, no child is the perfect swimmer: listening to everything the coach tells her, doing everything right the first time and every time thereafter, getting best times in every race at every meet, swimming with beautiful strokes both in practice and in races, etc. Novice parents need an instruction manual, and veteran parents sometimes need a reminder.

**Kids are inconsistent.** There is nothing that any coach or parent can do to change this. A ten year old swimmer who knows better will in the pressure of a meet do a flip-turn on breaststroke. Another young swimmer will take twenty seconds off her best time in a race this week, and next week add it all back, with interest. One week it will seem that the butterfly is mastered, and the next week that we've never even been introduced to the stroke. A senior swimmer will take ten seconds off her best time one race, then an hour later add ten seconds in her next race. It's enough to make your hair turn grey. Take a few deep breaths. Learn to expect it and even to enjoy it, or at least to remain calm when it happens.

So, you thought she was a back-stroker. Age groupers change favorite or “best” strokes approximately every other day. A stroke will “click” suddenly, and then later just as suddenly un-click. A stroke the child hated becomes her favorite by virtue of her having done well at yesterday’s meet. These are implicit arguments for having kids swim all four strokes in practice and meets, and for not allowing early specialization.

**Beware invidious comparisons.** Kids grow and develop at different rates. Kids are more or less committed and interested in an activity. Kids learn at different rates and in different ways. Kids have different abilities. One swimmer picks up the breaststroke kick in a day; it takes another swimmer a year to master the same skill. Two swimmers the same age on adjacent blocks resemble a giant and a pygmy. If you pay close attention, you could probably write a treatise on motor learning after watching just one practice of young swimmers. Be careful of comparing your swimmer to others, and especially be careful of comparing your swimmer to others in her hearing. Never, never, never measure the continuing success of your child by his performance against a particular competitor, whom, is likely to be on a completely different biological timetable from your child. Doing so makes you either despondent or arrogant. Why doesn’t he look like Michael Phelps? Little kids are not strong enough or coordinated enough for their strokes to look like the elite senior swimmers, no matter how much stroke work they do or how hard they try. And parents shouldn’t stress about a little thing that a swimmer struggles with for a time, such as a proper breaststroke kick, or the timing of the breath in butterfly. Kids seem to get these things when they are ready, and not until: “on God’s time, not Mom’s.” We are winning the game if they steadily improve their motor control and stroke efficiency, steadily improve their aerobic conditioning, and steadily improve their attitudes. Michael Phelps didn’t always look like Michael Phelps, either.

**How they do versus what they do.** Especially at younger ages, how fast a child swims and how well he places in a meet have little significance for how that swimmer will do as a senior. Many national caliber athletes were not at all noteworthy as ten year olds. Competition times and places often tell you not about the amount of athletic potential a child has, but about how early a developer he is. What is truly important in determining future swimming success is what happens every day in practice: Is he developing skills and technique? Is he internalizing the attitudes of a champion? Is he gradually building an aerobic base and building for the future? The work done is cumulative, with every practice adding a stone to what will eventually become Chartres Cathedral.

**Times are the least of our worries.** Many young swimmers spaz out when they race. They simply cannot control their strokes at maximum effort and maximum excitement. For the little ones I am much more interested in how beautifully they get down the pool than in how fast they do. Technique and tactics are more important than the numbers on the watch; if the technique and tactics are improving steadily, the time on the watch will improve steadily, too, and without our obsessing over it.

**But he swam faster in practice!?!?** Younger kids routinely swim as fast in practice as they do in meets. From one perspective, this makes no sense. Why should a swimmer do better on the last repeat of 10 x 200 on short rest, after having swum 1800 meters at descending pace, than she does when all she has to do is get up and race one rested 200? How can she swim faster tired than fresh??? Here's how. In training she is well warmed up, her body has run through the spectrum and swum faster and faster, so her aerobic systems are working at full steam and her stroke rhythm is perfect and grooved, and she is energized from racing her teammates and shooting after concrete goals without the pressure she often feels in meets. Practice is much less threatening than meets are.

**Not even Ted Williams batted a thousand.** No one improves every time out. Don't expect best times every swim; if you do, you will frustrate yourself to death in less than a season, and you will put so much pressure on your swimmer that she will quit the sport early. You would think that if a swimmer goes to practice, works hard, and has good coaching and a good program, then constant improvement would be inevitable. Wrong. So much more goes into swimming than just swimming.

**The Rubber band effect.** It would be easier for the swimmer, his parents, and his coach if improvements were made slowly and gradually, if all involved could count on hard work in practice producing corresponding improvements in competition every month. This "ideal", however, is so rare as to be nonexistent. Often improvements are made in leaps, not baby steps. They happen by fits and starts, mostly because they result as much from psychology as from physiology. It is harder this way, because less predictable. Further, swimmers and their parents tend to become a bit discouraged during the short "plateaus" when the improvements that the child is making are not obvious. Then, when the rubber band has snapped and the swimmer makes a long-awaited breakthrough, they expect the nearly vertical improvement curve to continue indefinitely, which it will not do.

**There is a lot more to swimming than just swimming.** This will become especially apparent as the swimmer gets older, say around puberty. But even for the young kids, inconsistency is the rule. What's going on in a swimmer's head can either dovetail with the training or completely counteract the hours and hours in the pool. Again, if a swimmer has been staying up late, not allowing her body to recover from training, or if she has been forsaking her mother's nutritious meals for Big Macs, fries, and shakes, then that swimmer's "hidden training" will counteract the gains she makes in the water. Or, if a swimmer is in the dumps and can't see straight after breaking up with his girlfriend, the best coach and the best program in the world will not save today's race.

**Raging bulls and "coachability".** Often young swimmers, especially "successful" younger swimmers who are very strong for their age, have terminal strokes – i.e., inefficient strokes that consist of bulling through the water and not getting much for the huge outpouring of effort, and that will not allow for much if any improvement. For kids with terminal strokes, we need to throw away the stopwatch, slow down, and learn to swim all over again. Often this adjustment period

is characterized by slower times, which is difficult for the swimmer and for the parents. Difficult, but necessary, because this one step backwards will allow for ten steps forward soon enough. Note that for the stroke improvement to be made, the swimmer must be coachable: he must trust that the coach is knowledgeable and thinking of the swimmer's best interests, and he must trust that the changes that may feel awful at first will help him be a better swimmer. Unfortunately, coachable athletes are rare; most kids choose not to change horses in midstream, and both the horse and rider drown. Terminal stokers are soon caught by swimmers who are smaller but more efficient.

**Bigger is better??** The subject of early and late bloomers is a sensitive one, but nonetheless very important for parents to understand. Early and late bloomers each have "virtues" and "challenges."

**To begin with early developers.** They get bigger and stronger earlier than the other kids, which means they are more likely to win their races or place well. That early success is the virtue. However, because they can often win without having to work on their technique or train very hard, often they do not develop a solid work ethic, and often their technique is poor as they bull through the water. Note that from the child's immediate perspective, NOT working hard and NOT working on technique is a rational choice. After all, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it": what he has done has obviously been working, so why should he listen to the coach telling him that he needs to work harder or change his stroke? He beats all the other kids who do listen to the coach, work harder, and change their strokes!

So our pragmatist turns fifteen or sixteen, and suddenly the other kids whom he used to thrash in meets are catching up to him and even passing him. The size and strength advantage that he had relied on has deserted him, and he has no technique or work ethic to fall back on. He is not long for the sport: many early bloomers quit when their easy successes dry up. It's not 'fun' when he isn't winning. We avoid this future problem by not allowing the early bloomers to bask in the temporary limelight, but training them for their long run benefit, and educating them and their parents about how they should judge their own performances both in meets and in practices.

**Next come the late bloomers.** They are smaller and weaker than the others, so they get crushed in swimming meets. If the coach, swimmer, and parent emphasize place standings and winning, then there is little chance that this late bloomer will stay in the sport. This, too, is rational: "Why should I keep swimming? I'm obviously lousy, even though I'm working my guts out and doing everything the coach asks. I'm still getting crushed! I'm just not meant to be a swimmer."

That is the obvious downside. However, if the coach and parents can help the swimmer find enough rewards from swimming, for instance improvement, meeting personal challenges, friendships, etc., to stick it out through the lean years, and if she relies on technique and hard work to overcome the temporary physical deficit, then she is in the driver's seat in a few years. It is usually the case that the late bloomers end up bigger and stronger than the others – it just

takes them longer to get there. And the qualities in the water and in their heads serve them well in senior swimming.

**Note well:** it is almost impossible to tell how much potential your swimmer has for swimming, by looking at 10 & Under meet results. Races will often just tell you who is bigger and stronger, and that probably won't last.

**Puberty complicates everything.** You would think that because with maturation kids are getting bigger and presumably stronger, they would be necessarily be getting faster in the process. Yes, and no. Whether fair or not, in the end puberty is highly beneficial to almost all boys, but with girls can be more ambiguous. Boys lose fat and gain muscle, getting bigger and stronger; girls, too, gain in height and strength, but they also add fat deposits. With proper nutrition (that does not mean starvation diets or eating disorders) and proper training (lots and lots of aerobic work, consistently), these questionable changes can be kept to a minimum, with no long-term harmful effects. [Please note that these remarks are made from the perspective of current swimming performance, which I understand is not the sole or the only important marker. But when you and your swimmer are at a meet trying to swim fast, it is important.]

In the short run, during puberty kids are growing, but they are growing unevenly. Arms and legs and torsos don't have the same proportions as they did last week, either of strength or length, so coordination can go haywire. Bones and tendons and muscles do not grow at the same rate, so ranges of motion change. Strokes may fall apart, or come and go. Also, various psychological changes are affecting swimming and everything else. Interests change and priorities are reordered. All these changes can cause the child's athletic performances to stagnate or to swing wildly. It can be a highly frustrating time for all involved. Fortunately, it doesn't last long, and the swimmer emerges from a chrysalis a beautiful (and fast and strong and mature) butterfly.

**The perils of getting older.** Aging up is sometimes traumatic. Overnight, formerly very good ten year olds become mediocre 11 & 12's. And often, the better they were in the younger age group and the higher their expectations of success, the more traumatic the change is for them. Their "perceived competence" suddenly nose-dives as they race against bigger and stronger and faster competitors. They are bonsais competing with sequoia trees, and the standards of judgement have ratcheted up dramatically. The fastest kids are much faster than they are, to the point that they think they cannot compete, so they figure, "Why try? Working hard isn't going to get me far, anyway. I may as well wait until my 'good year.'" Often we see a tremendous increase in practice intensity as swimmers approach their last meet in an age group, since they want to go out with a bang. Then after their birthday, their intensity plummets as they become just one of the pack. This is in despite of the coach's discussing the matter with the swimmer. Unless we want to lose a year of improvement, swimmers must be made to understand that there is no "good year" or "bad year" for getting better.

A Special Note about Swimmers New to the York YMCA Program. When they first join our program, no kids are hard workers. This sounds harsh, but it is true nonetheless. Compared with

other local swimming programs, we swim longer and harder and have much higher expectations. Swimmers have never really had to work very hard before, relatively, so they don't know what it's like. What used to be strenuous is now defined as easy swimming. Swimmers have never really had high goals before, relatively, so they don't know how to make them or how to bring them about. What used to be fast isn't any longer, and their new teammates are talking about strange things called "national cuts" and "Quad A's".

Often when they come to us, parents will assume their kids are on a path of immediate and continuous success, as if simply wearing the cap makes you fast. No. Our swimmers have accomplished what they have because of the amount and kind of work they have done, often over years. (Remember, we take the long view.) It takes a while for a swimmer's body and mind to adapt to the new demands and new expectations. Often the initial "culture shock" is difficult, and I tell swimmers and parents up front that they will struggle that first month. But the struggle is made superable by extra support and encouragement from parent and coach. And then they bloom. Many parents have remarked to me on the changes that the program has wrought in their children: we have a new child who is ready to take on the world, who is confident in his abilities, and who has new and much higher expectations of himself.

#### ***D. SUPPORT, NOT PRESSURE***

**The Rock of Gibraltar.** As they succeed then fail then succeed again, kids will ride emotional roller-coasters. One of your most important functions as a swimming parent is to provide emotional support during the tough times, of which there will be many. Let them know that they are still loved, no matter how poorly they think they swam. And don't let them get cocky when they win. Be the Rock of Gibraltar for your child.

**Don't coach your kids.** If the swimmer is hearing one story from his coach and another from his parent, we have one confused swimmer. A swimmer must have trust in his coach and in the program; he will not do this, if his parents are implicitly telling him that the coach is incompetent or misguided. If you have concerns about the coaching or the coaching advice, talk to the coach directly. If in the end you feel that you cannot support the coach or the program, your best course is to find a team whose coach you trust. Your swimmer has a coach; she needs you to be a parent.

**The next Michael Phelps??** No matter how good your swimmer seems to be as a ten year old, don't get your hopes too high. Don't expect an Olympian (you are allowed to hope for an Olympian), and don't judge his every move (or swim) by Olympian standards. In order to make it to the Olympics so many things over such a comparatively long time have to go right, so many decisions have to be made "correctly" (and can only be seen to be correct with hindsight), and so much plain good luck is required, that the odds are heavily against it. Further, many kids are physically talented, but few have the mental talent: the poise, drive, and persistence to develop the gifts they are given. How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice.

**In praise of famous kids?** Don't puff up a 10-year old, or we will end up with a monster on our hands. Don't get too impressed, don't praise too highly – leave room for when they get a lot better. No matter how fast a child swims, it is still a child swimming, and the level of accomplishment is very low compared to how high she will reach five or ten years from now. Don't treat her like a superstar, because the more you treat her like a superstar, the less likely she is to become one. Pampered kids aren't tough. Similarly, be careful not to brag about your swimmer to other parents. No one likes to hear continuous talk about someone else's kid, and if your swimmer is really good, it will be apparent to everyone else without your having to tell them. Dale Carnegie said, "Talk about them, not about me." Translate this into: "Talk about their child, not about mine." Your forbearance will be respected and appreciated.

**Every Soviet victory a victory for Soviet socialist ideology?** How your child swam in the 50 fly ten minutes ago is no reflection of your value as a person or as a parent. A first place ribbon does not validate your parenting techniques, or the quality of your genes. Alternatively, a bad race should not bring into question a family's commitment, financial or otherwise, to a child's swimming. Swimming is hard enough for a child without having to carry around her parents' self-esteem on her shoulders when she races.

**We are all adults here.** It is often easier for children who are intense competitors to remain friends despite the fact that they want to beat each other, than it is for the parents of those kids to remain friends. I have seen raging envy in the stands between parents of competitors, with metaphorical shots fired back and forth after each race. I have seen parents resent and ill-treat their child's competitors when their own kids swam poorly. I have heard parents accuse coaches of 'favoritism' when their kids were beaten by teammates. – Parents must be mature enough to separate their relationships from their kids' momentary performance levels. We are badly missing the point if we interpret a meet as a competition among parents for status based on their children's accomplishments.

**Jekyll & Hyde.** I have watched an interesting transformation a number of times. At the beginning of their swimming journey, when it looks like their kids won't amount to much, parents are grateful to the coach who develops their kid and pays attention to him. They listen to the coach, they trust his coaching, and they support his program. They seem like model swim parents. Then their child gets fast. Suddenly nothing is good enough. They aren't willing to accept the downs with the ups. They expect that, for their superstar, every swim should be a breakthrough, and negatives are no longer to be tolerated (and would not occur if the coach knew what he was doing). So they stop trusting the coach, they stop supporting the program, and they start pressuring their child. They stop doing all the things that helped the child reach the high performance that they are now busily destroying. Often we complete the circle: after a promising beginning, their swimmers end up not amounting to much.

**Fair weather friends?** It is always interesting to watch parents' changing attitudes and behavior towards the coach when their children are "succeeding" or "failing." When the child swims well, the coach is a good chap and everyone's happy. When the child bombs, the coach is an

Untouchable who should not be looked in the eye. But if you survey the big picture, you will see that at any moment, some swimmers are on an upswing and others are on a downswing. This happens not because I am doing a great job of coaching with some and awful with others. And not because I am giving the chosen few special coaching that I am withholding from others. (I am trying to coach everyone to succeed.) More often than not, disparities in meet performance stem from temporary disparities in practice performance. When you are doing great things in practice, great things happen in meets; when you are sleepwalking through practice, meets are brutal.

Precious few parents treat me the same no matter how their children perform. Both coaches and parents need to see beyond the moment. We are all involved in a very long process of excellence. Take a few steps, stumble, pick ourselves up, take a few more steps...

#### ***E. PROBLEMS, POTENTIAL AND KINETIC***

We all want what is best for the child. That is sometimes hard for coaches to understand. That is also sometimes hard for parents to understand. Much of the historical tension between coaches and parents can be avoided if both parties agree to two golden rules: first, cut each other some slack and do not jump on and over-react to the first unsubstantiated third-hand rumor that comes down the pike. And second, communicate often, and not just at crisis time.

**Unequal Justice for all?** Sometimes parents ask, “Why don’t you treat the kids equally, with one standard for all?” For the same reason that most parents don’t treat their own children exactly the same: because kids have different capabilities, personalities, needs, goals, commitments, and motivations, and what works for one child doesn’t work for all. Second, because with speed comes responsibility. When a very fast swimmer, whom the others look up to and follow, messes around in practice, he drags the whole group down with him. This will not be tolerated. Higher expectations accompanying higher performance should be taken as a compliment.

**The Wisdom of Solomon.** Coaches make many decisions. You won’t agree with them all. For instance, relays. As a general rule, every parent thinks his child should be on the “A” relay, and he will adjust his argument to make that case. But only four swimmers can be on the relay team. The coaches will choose the four kids whom they think will do the best job today. That is not always the four with the top four official “best times.” Sometimes the relay will include a theoretically slower swimmer who has been very impressive in practices, or who is on fire at this meet, or who hasn’t swum the event in a long time but who has let the coaches know by practice performance and otherwise that he deserves to be in the relay, or who has great relay starts, or who always comes through under pressure. Trust the coaches to act in what they consider the best interests of the team as a whole, and understand that this sometimes conflicts with what you see as the best interests of your child at this moment. When those two things do conflict, how you handle your child’s disappointment often determines how your child handles it.

Further, if in the end your child is not chosen for the relay and the relay falls short of its goal, that does not mean that your child was robbed or that the coach was dunderheaded in his pick. Second-guessing is not just, and you can have no idea how your child would have done had he raced. (See football: just because a play doesn't work, doesn't mean the call was wrong or that the coach is a fool. And it's a lot easier and more comfortable for a fan to make the call from the stands when he has no responsibility for the outcome.)

**Meddling isn't coaching.** A lot of coaches, especially younger ones, will "overcoach" as a rule, especially at meets. Over coaches are in the kids' faces all the time, giving them twenty thousand instructions before they race, timing them incessantly during the warm-ups of a championship meet, controlling every little thing. Many parents are impressed by this show of active coaching. However, over coaching is destructive, at practice and at meets. At practice, swimmers need instruction -- that is agreed. But they also need to be allowed to try things, to find out what works and what doesn't, to watch other swimmers, with perhaps a few leading questions from the coach. You don't teach an infant how to walk; he watches you, he tries it, he falls, he falls again and again, and in no time he is charging around the house making mischief.

**And when you get to a meet, the general rule should be,** "the less that need be said, the better." In a stressful environment, the more information you try to force into a kid's head at the last minute, the more likely you are to jam his circuits entirely. He will head to the blocks not knowing which way is up. (Note that this is one more reason parents should not coach their kids at meets.) If a coach has been doing his job in practice and if the swimmer has been paying attention and improving his skills, then the swimmer will be prepared to race before he gets to the meet. A couple of cues or reminders, and only a couple, and the swimmer can step on the blocks with a focused and uncluttered mind.

**Talk to the coach.** Communicate your concerns about the program or your child's progress within it with the coach, not with your child. Never complain about a coach to a child. The last thing a ten year-old needs is to be caught in the middle between two adult authority figures. Further, when you have a problem or concern, please do not head to other parents to complain, but rather to the coach to discuss. Nothing destroys a program faster, and sends good (even great) coaches running for the door quicker, than a group of parents sitting together every evening in the stands comparing notes about the things they don't like, and asserting how much better things are across town.

Also, please note that a coach is not "mean" just because he doesn't give you the answer you want. My job as a coach is to tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear. What I say will be based on my experience and my plan for your child's long-term development, not on what is convenient for you at this moment.

**Semper fidelis.** Do not criticize the team to outsiders. Do not criticize the coach to outsiders. Do not criticize other parents to outsiders. Do not criticize your own swimmer to outsiders. Do

not criticize others' swimmers to outsiders. If you cannot find anything good to say, don't say anything at all.

**Leave this campsite cleaner than you found it.** Before you complain about any component of the program, ask yourself: what am I doing, positively and actively, to help the team function better?

**Don't try to be a swimming expert.** With the internet rage, the amount of really bad information available at the click of a mouse is overwhelming. And not being coaches, not being immersed in the sport twenty-four hours a day, not having historical perspective on technique and training, and generally not knowing where the website they just stumbled onto fits in the jigsaw puzzle of the sport, parents are rarely in position to judge what they find critically.

**There should be no “age group parents” or “senior parents.”** There are only swimming parents. Once a portion of the team's parents begins to think of itself as having a different interest from that of the group as a whole, the team has begun to rip itself apart. The rose bud is not distinct from the rose in full flowering; they are the same things at different stages of development, with identical interests.

**The view from the top. And the middle. And even the bottom.** Swimmers at all levels of the sport have similar problems and challenges: qualifying for the next higher meet, making the finals at that meet, performing under pressure out of their comfort zone, etc. Swimmers (and parents) at the top need to realize this is about the kids currently below them; swimmers (and parents) at the top need to realize this about the kids currently above them. Too much of the time we exaggerate our own concerns and problems while downplaying or defining out of existence the concerns of others; this is a mistake. Swimming is a very demanding sport, seemingly designed to test everything we've got and then some – no matter how fast we are right now. Keep me in the loop. It happens quite frequently that coaches cannot understand why a swimmer is responding to the training as he is. It seems to make no sense, if we assume that the only variables are the ones that the coach controls in training. Why is he so tired? Why is he so inconsistent? It is easy to forget that everything happening in the swimmer's life during the twenty-one hours a day when he is away from the pool affects his swimming as much or more than the three hours of training. Let the coach know if there are problems at home or at school that will affect your swimmer's training and racing performance. You don't need to give all the details, but in order to coach your swimmer individually; the coach has to know what is happening individually.

#### ***F. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS***

**Swimming is a mystery.** Most of the time only God really knows why a swimmer did so well or so poorly. Coaches can point to the easy answers, superficial indices (stroke count, stroke rate, splits, etc.), which are probably more often effects than they are causes. Who can explain why a

swimmer whose workouts have been horrid and who hasn't gotten much sleep, will come alive at a meet and set the water on fire? Why a swimmer whose workouts have been wonderful and who has been doing everything right, will come to a meet and look like death warmed over? Or why a swimmer who has been a rock for years will come mentally unglued at the big meet? Sometimes hard work isn't rewarded with good performances. Sometimes lazing around and skipping practices is. This is hard for coaches, swimmers, and parents to accept. Not everything in life makes sense, and not everything in life is fair. It doesn't take a reflective coach very long to figure out that he isn't in total control here. Ponder the Greek tragedies.

**A work in progress.** Lastly, these suggestions may sound set in stone. But my thinking on most of these subjects is evolving, because these subjects are complicated and because kids are, too. These are topics that we should all consider as open to discussion. Being a good coach is just as difficult as being a good parent, and it involves thinking through and judging correctly about many of the same issues. Most parents are confused at least part of the time about whether or not they are doing the right things with their kids. And most coaches are equally uncertain about whether the methods that worked for one swimmer will work with another.

Michael Brooks York, PA 6th edition, revised May 2016.

#### RECOMMENDED BOOKS FOR PARENTS

- 1.) *Beyond Winning: Smart Parenting in a Toxic Environment*, Kim John Payne, Scott Lancaster
- 2.) *Simplicity Parenting*, Kim John Payne