

One of the greatest benefits of your child participating in organized youth sport is it provides numerous opportunities for you to talk with your child about meaningful things. Sometimes these conversations may involve teachable moments about important life lessons, and sometimes they are simply an opportunity to enjoy shared experiences. The goal of this column is to provide tips for Iowa Flyers Swim Club families to fully utilize the power of strong communication.

“Bloom Where You Are Planted”

As athletes progress through our program, it is likely that one of the conversations that will come up is your child’s placement within the training group structure. How these conversations are handled will have a significant effect on, not only your child’s overall experience with the sport of swimming, but also has an important influence on the development of their mindset to many other life experiences.

Although there is not nearly enough room in this column to cover all the possible questions that may arise, the majority of these questions will boil down to your child wondering why they are in one group and someone else is in another. This heavy emphasis on social comparison is typical for children from age 5 up to about 17. You may have noticed how your child uses only those in the closest proximity to determine if they did well or not at meets. Sometimes they are ecstatic if they win their heat despite getting 60th place overall and disappointed taking 8th in their heat despite being 8th out of 70 *and* improving a best time. One sign of increased maturity is a growing balance between peer-referenced comparisons (I got 3rd) and self-referenced comparisons (I did my best time; I did all flip turns for the first time; I executed my race plan; I gave my best effort). Social scientists refer to this as the Integrated Stage. So, it is not unusual for children to only use peer-referenced comparisons to make judgments about their own ability. It is not unusual, but it is not mandatory nor helpful, to individual development.

When new group placements are announced, it will provide a great opportunity to help your child move toward integration. All families can go over requirements for each group. In this discussion, emphasize Mastery of the various technical skills. Help them to see that they are totally in control of this aspect. Also, emphasize *progression*. The structure is designed to place swimmers in the optimal environment for their experience and skill level at this moment, but also provide for a seamless transition from one group to the next. When children have a sense of

being in control, and can visualize the path forward, they are more likely to make progress and enjoy the journey.

If you suspect that your child has equated being in a particular group with them being “good” or “bad” swimmers, there are some keys to helping them have a more integrated perspective:

- 1) **Reinforce All Groups are Good Groups:** Iowa Flyers Swim Club (IFLY) is blessed with a highly experienced, competent, and caring staff at all levels. Membership in a particular group does not make you a good or bad swimmer. Although there are swimmers with more experience or more developed skill sets at this moment in time, everyone is trying to get better and your child has been placed in the group that will most likely facilitate their continued progress. Your group is not what you are, but just where you are now.
- 2) **Avoid ‘Close Enough’ Syndrome:** Especially if we focus on social comparisons, there is a real temptation for swimmers (and, let’s face it, we parents can get caught up in this, as well) for us to want to argue for being “close enough”. You may hear your child mention that they are “just as good as” someone who is in a different group and therefore, they should be in that group as well, or they can do most of the technical skills and that should be close enough. *A core philosophical component of the training structure is to move swimmers only when they will thrive in the new setting rather than just merely survive.* This is a great opportunity to remind our children that they are in control of improving their technical skills and practice behaviors. A continued focus on what they can control is what will result in the necessary performance outcomes, and no longer being ‘close enough,’ but actually there.
- 3) **Bloom Where You Are Planted:** Sometimes, athletes feel if they just had a different coach or if they got to do longer practices or more dryland, *then* they could really improve. However, by placing the emphasis on the group or the coach, or the practice itself, it takes the focus off the things the child can control. Every group provides an opportunity to each swimmer to grow and to develop. The long history of highly accomplished swimmers who have come through each and every group is a testament, not only to IFLY’s dedication to long-term athletic development, but especially to those swimmers who chose to bloom where they were planted and take full advantage of the coaching and of the leadership opportunities in whichever group they find themselves.

The coaching staff stands ready to help with these conversations and to answer any questions. Please contact your child's lead group coach, if needed. Hopefully, it has also been apparent that these keys are appropriate outside the pool. This conversation might come up in terms of other sports teams, music, drama, and especially in the classroom. Helping our children to see that they are in charge of more than they may think and that they don't need to wait or wish for that other teacher, or to be on the other team, or to turn 12, etc. They can give full effort, improve, and grow wherever they are planted.