

ARE YOU A WINNING SWIM PARENT?

BY ALAN GOLDBERG

If you learn and practice the following seven keys to becoming a successful swim parent, your child should have a successful and rewarding relationship with swimming.

Do you really want your children to have a rewarding and enjoyable experience with their swimming? Would you like your son or daughter to feel good about himself/herself and perform like a champion? Do you know what it takes to be a winning swim parent?

Whether you know it or not, much of your child's success in the pool rests squarely in your lap. That's right!

- You are the most influential and important member of the coach-swimmer-parent team.
- You have the power and ability to shape your child's relationship with this sport so that it brings him/her lasting joy, enduring self-confidence and self-esteem-building success.
- In fact, if you play your role on the team the right way, then you can help ensure that your child will go into the world feeling well-adjusted, confident and happy long after he/she has hung up his/her competitive suit.

It's an unfortunate fact of this sport that well-meaning parents all too often say and do the wrong things with their child-swimmer under the guise of trying to be "helpful."

Attempting to motivate their children to go faster, these parents instead inadvertently set them up for failure and unhappiness. They do this by unknowingly breaking all the rules of peak performance and, as a result, stress their child, distract him/her from the task at hand and ensure that their son or daughter always swims far slower than his/her abilities.

If you truly want your child to have a successful and rewarding relationship with swimming, then it's up to you to do

your part. Learn and practice the following seven keys to becoming a winning swim parent:

1. DON'T COACH

Trying to "coach" your children behind the scenes when the team already has a professional staff will ultimately hurt your kids far more than it will help. As a parent, it is *not* your job to coach either at swim practices or meets.

This means that you don't want to push your children to train harder or do extra workouts so that they can get better, quicker. You don't want to discuss stroke technique or race strategy with them before or after practice, on the way to the meet or right before their races. You don't want to subject them to last-minute motivational talks. You should never offer helpful hints and criticism after their races even if you think you know exactly what went wrong.

This is the coach's job, not yours!

Your "helpful" hints in these situations are *never* helpful and will ultimately backfire! Coaching is the very last thing that your children need from you

when it comes to their swimming.

Winning swim parents don't coach. Instead, they leave the coaching to the coaches.

2. BE UNCONDITIONALLY LOVING AND SUPPORTIVE

Your primary role on the "team" is to be your children's "best fan."

You want to support their efforts and love them unconditionally regardless of how fast they swim or in what place they finish. Whether they win or lose, swim slow or fast, your love and respect for your children should never change.

What you can do in your support role is to arrange for extra lessons for them if they ask, endlessly drive them to practices, cheer for them at their meets, make sure that they have nourishing, healthy food to eat and do everything else that loving, supportive parents are supposed to do.

And you should do every bit of this without ever expecting or demanding any "return," performance-wise, on your "investment" of all this time, money and energy.

[PHOTO BY CHRIS CROWALLER]



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3. DON'T PRESSURE YOUR CHILD TO FOCUS ON OUTCOME

Perhaps one of the more destructive things that you can do as a parent is to get your children worrying about how fast they swim or the times that they need to achieve. When you do this, you will guarantee that they feel too pressured and distracted before their races to swim to their potential.

Going fast, achieving cuts and winning are always a paradox in swimming—that is, these goals can only happen if the swimmer focuses more on himself/herself and the process of the swim, one stroke at a time, and less on the race's outcome or their times.

Pressuring your kids to go fast is a great way to get them consistently to go slower!

4. HELP YOUR CHILDREN FOCUS ON THEMSELVES

Parents who continually emphasize to their children the importance of beating certain teammates or opponents inadvertently add to their children's stress and actually contribute to their children underachieving.

Swimmers can only go fast when they focus on what they are doing and not on what everyone else is doing.

Comparing your children with others on the team or in the league is a great strategy if you'd like them to fail. Instead, encourage your swimmers to stay in their own lane, focusing on their stroke technique, their race strategy and what they are doing.

5. KEEP THE SPORT IN PERSPECTIVE

Help your children understand that swimming is just a sport and is not larger than life. Teach them that the main purposes of their sport are to master new skills, feel good about themselves and *have fun*.

Help them understand that if they have a bad race or meet, this does not mean that they are a bad person or a failure. Help them view their losses and setbacks as a normal and healthy part of the learning process and a necessary prerequisite to ultimate success.

Remember, your children can only learn these lessons if you, as the adult,

keep their swimming in the proper perspective.

6. DON'T BRIBE YOUR CHILDREN TO SWIM

Swimming should be something that your children do because *they* want to do it.

It's not your job to try and motivate them to go harder and reach for certain goals. The goals and dreams that your children have in the pool should be *their* goals and dreams, not *yours*!

Bribing your children to swim with money and incentive gifts gives them the wrong message about the purpose of their sport, and will ultimately serve as a de-motivator for them.

Instead, encourage your children to take ownership of the sport and to swim for themselves—because they like it, because it makes them feel good and because they have goals that they'd like to achieve.

7. BE A GOOD ROLE MODEL FOR YOUR CHILD

Keep in mind that how you conduct yourself in relation to your children's swimming provides them with very compelling and powerful on-going life lessons.

This education starts with the com-

ments that you make to them about their coach. It includes your treatment of their teammates and opponents before and after races. It's strongly shaped by how you behave at meets, how you handle their setbacks and failures, and whether you're a good sport or not.

Remember, your actions always speak much louder than your words, and your children are constantly listening to every "word" that you say. Do you know exactly what life lessons you are modeling for your children?

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Remember, winning swim parents understand what's really at stake whenever their children get up on the blocks to race.

It's not the race's outcome, high-point trophies or pool records that are important. It's not the qualifying times or a chance for a college scholarship that matters.

What's really at stake here is your son's or daughter's long-term happiness and psychological well-being, not to mention the health of your parent-child relationship. A winning swim parent always keeps this in mind. ♦

Dr. Alan Goldberg is a sports psychology consultant who works with swimmers at every level. To read more articles and to sign up for his free Mental Toughness Newsletter, go to www.competitivedge.com.

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