

10 Things We Learned As 10-And-Under Swim Parents

The following is a guest article written by Ernie and Mary Anne Ortiz for Swimming World Magazine.

Swimmers don't have birthdays; they "age up." That's what happened to our little swimmer when she had her 11th August birthday. It was a bittersweet moment for her, and for us in a number of ways.

Her perspective was that just as she was finally fast enough in her events to be truly competitive, her birthday put her into an age group where the times appeared to resemble the speed of light. As parents we were a little bit sad to leave the relative safety of her coach's care; where as long as we were having fun and enjoying the process, that was really enough. There is time enough to be competitive later on, right?

Well, just like Paul Simon sang, "Time, Time, Time see what's become of me." We are You, maybe a little older. It seems like a good time to think a bit about what we've learned in the process of becoming swim parents and pass on a bit of this hard-won wisdom, keeping in mind, of course, that hindsight is 20/20. Here's our list of what we wish we had known from the beginning.

1. It's stroke technique, stroke technique, stroke technique.

Swimming is an elegant sport, and as coach Barbara told us repeatedly, it is one where the swimmer cannot muscle his or her way into first place very often. And this is true in our swimmer's experience. Until she refined her freestyle, she did not begin winning events or even placing consistently. This brings us to point number...

2. Let your swimmer know that in practice, unless the coach is telling the swimmer to race, it is not a race.

It's time to make certain that the stroke technique is correct. In practice, the swimmers will get the opportunity to pick up speed according to the coach's timetable for doing so...I'm not even going to touch the hot topic of which child should be first in any given lane, but there must be a better way than the law of the jungle, which seems to be how it's decided now...remember that it's the competitive spirit, even with teammates, that will inspire these swimmers to excel...onto point number...

3. Yes, there really is a plan at practice.

The swimmers don't just do what the coach feels like working on that day. Not unlike teachers with lesson plans, the age-group coaches, under the direction of the head coach, have the entire season planned...building skill upon skill, day after day and week after week. This doesn't always look obvious to the parent who has never swam competitively...which brings us to point number...

4. This is what we call, "El Lippo, Zippo" in practice.

It's hard...so very hard...when you see your little swimmer, or not so little swimmer, giving less than what you consider his or her best effort. It's crucial that your swimmer develop a working relationship, and a relationship of trust with the coach. If mom or dad are yelling at their kids, correcting them or otherwise communicating with them while they are in the pool, you are interfering with the development of that relationship. If your swimmer leaves the pool for any reason other than genuine illness, send them back immediately! Talk to the coaches after practice...even if you have to follow them around and insist! We think that there should be a mechanism similar to parent/teacher conferences if needed, but we've had pretty good luck getting feedback by approaching the coach between practices. Speaking of coaching...point number...

5. Teach your swimmer how to accept coaching.

While the coach is talking, the swimmer is not talking. Eyes should be on the coach's face while instruction is being given. This way the coach knows that she is being heard, and the swimmer is actually learning to pay attention. This will pay dividends in school as well. Teachers have told us that swimmers are the best

students because they pay attention to instruction, have the ability to focus and are goal oriented. As far as turning that instruction into a finished product in practice or a meet...point number...

6. There's a process of development that I'm sure a neurologist or good pediatrician could explain to us.

It occurs between the ages of six or seven, when most kids start to swim, and ten or eleven, when they really start getting fast and you know that you could no longer keep up with them, even in a 25 yard race. The younger kids can hear an instruction regarding stroke technique, but don't have enough mastery over their bodies to implement it consistently.

This is a crucial point for parents of the younger swimmers to understand. It's not a matter of not trying or not understanding. It's a matter of developmental maturity, and WE are not in charge of that timetable. Our swimmer used to drag one arm in her butterfly. It was such a relief when her coach told us it was developmental and that it would change with time. She was right! Even at ten years, it requires a lot of over and over, which is why they drill, drill, drill. I know, it's boring, boring, boring...when do we get to race!!! It's crucial that parents implement point number 4 (see above) at this time.

This is the time to look at the big picture of the entire season. Even though it doesn't look like it on a day-to-day basis, if you compare your swimmer's level of expertise in February to their expertise the previous October, you're going to see a big difference. On to the next point...

7. Play dumb...not so hard for us non-swimmers!

This is the technique we used to reinforce what the coach had taught in a practice session. We would ask our swimmer to explain to us the purpose of a particular drill, or what was meant by swimming an interval at a certain time or even what is an interval...the list could go on and on. We approached these conversations as the uninitiated requesting information from someone who was certainly more in the know than us about this particular subject. This served two purposes. As previously stated, it reinforced the coach's instructions by having the swimmer think about the purpose of the instruction. It also gave our swimmer a chance to be our coach, giving us the benefit of her knowledge about the sport.

8. Private Lessons. This is a point that causes some controversy, so we can only offer testimony to what has been true in the case of our swimmer.

Swimming is an individual sport, but the training takes place in a large group situation. Our swimmer let us know, with her enthusiasm and hard work at practice as well as verbally, that she had big plans for herself in the future as a swimmer. Okay, we'll admit to the fantasy...in lane four, swimming for The United States of America...and now we return to reality. In order to help her reach her goals, we elected to have a series of private lessons to refine her strokes.

The direct, and we do mean direct, result of this was three Texas Age Group Swimming times as a ten and under. She went out of that age group with a thrill that was beyond words, not only for her, but for the parents and sister who love her. In addition, this served the purpose of enhancing the working relationship between swimmer and coach. We plan to continue this successful strategy on a periodic basis as an investment in our swimmer's future. An addendum to this is that none of the coaches ever solicited students for private lessons, but were available when we inquired.

9. Enjoy the practices and use them as a time to bond with other parents.

The aspect of swimming that our family enjoys the most, other than watching our swimmer swim fast, is that it's a sport for the whole family...even those of us that rarely venture into the deep end of a pool. The team is a family of like-minded individuals that want the sport of swimming to add to their child's joy and provide a venue for achievement. Some of our best friends are other swim parents!!!

10. Last but not least, lighten up!!

Ten and under is a time for developing stroke technique to be sure, but almost as important, this is the time where a love of the sport is developed. If it becomes a time for argument or judgment, they may get fast and win races as a young swimmer, but they will surely leave the sport as soon as they're old enough to figure out that they can. That, however, is a column that a 13-14 parent needs to write!

