

Swim Parent Survival Guide

The Thinking Parent's Guide to Not Just Surviving Age Group Swimming - But Thriving in It !

- ◆ Your Responsibilities as a Swim Parent
 - ◆ Helping Your Child Enjoy Sports
 - ◆ Understanding Your Child's Coach

Why Kids Participate

More than 20 million kids between the ages of 6 and 16 play organized sports. According to numerous studies, they play because they want

- ◆ to have fun,
- ◆ to improve skills and learn new ones,
- ◆ to be with friends and make new ones,
- ◆ to feel the excitement of competition,
- ◆ to succeed or win, and
- ◆ to exercise or become fit.

As you encourage your child's endeavors in swimming, keep in mind that if the reasons your child has chosen to participate aren't being fulfilled, your child may drop out of swimming.

Your Responsibilities as a Swim Parent

The 19th century humorist Mark Twain, at learning of a report of his death, cabled the Associated Press this message: "The report of my death was an exaggeration." Similarly, we have exaggerated a bit with the use of "survival" in this guide's title. Sure, some critics have sounded a death knell for youth sport because of negative happenings. But youth sport is still very much alive- and its wellness depends largely on the actions and attitudes of *parents*.

This guide should help you do much more than survive age group

swimming. It should equip you to enjoy it to the fullest - and help you make it fun and valuable for your child.

To do that, you need to first understand your responsibilities as a Swim Parent:

1. Encourage your child to swim, but don't pressure. Let your child choose to swim - and to quit - if he or she wants.
2. Understand what your child wants from swimming, and provide a supportive atmosphere for achieving these goals.
3. Put your child's participation in perspective. Don't make swimming everything in your child's life; make it a part of life.
4. Make sure the coach is qualified to guide your child through the swimming experience (see "Understanding Your Child's Coach").
5. Keep winning in perspective, and help your child do the same.
6. Help your child set challenging but realistic *performance* goals, rather than focusing only on "winning or getting best times."
7. Help your child understand the valuable lessons sports can teach (see "Values Kids Learn Through Sports").
8. Your child meet responsibilities to the team and to the coach.
9. Discipline your child when necessary.
10. Turn your child over to the coach at practices and meets - don't meddle or coach from the deck.
11. Supply the coach with information on any allergies or special health conditions your child has. Make sure your child brings any necessary medications to practices and meets.

Why Kids Drop Out of Swimming

A study conducted in 1996 by Suzie Tuffey, PhD, USOC sport psychologist, shows that these are the main reasons kids drop out of United States Swimming:

- ◆ Takes too much time
- ◆ Coach was negative

- ◆ Enjoy non-swimming activities more than swimming
- ◆ Swimming was boring
- ◆ Lack of fun
- ◆ Parents' emphasis on winning

Values Kids Learn Through Sports

Your child can benefit greatly by participating in sport - but those benefits aren't guaranteed. They're the result of a cooperative effort among club and LSC administrators, coaches, officials, and parents. Those benefits come more readily when adults put the interest of the children first and leave their own egos and desires about winning at home.

Through sports, your child can

- ◆ acquire an appreciation for an active lifestyle,
- ◆ develop a positive self-concept by mastering sport skills,
- ◆ learn how to work as part of a team,
- ◆ develop social skills with other children and adults,
- ◆ learn about managing success and disappointment,
- ◆ learn about fair play and being a good sport, and
- ◆ learn respect for others.

Being a Role Model

Children can learn behavior from many different people - coaches, teachers, other adults, and peers. But the people they learn the most from are their parents.

Your child not only soaks up what you say; she soaks up what you *don't* say. Non-verbal messages - like a look of disgust or disappointment, often speak louder than words. Your attitudes toward your child and other people are not as easily hidden as you might believe. "Do as I

say, not as I do" is an unnatural maxim for children to carry out, because their bent is to follow your *example*, not your instructions.

If you tell your child he must respect others, that's great. But the message is lost if you don't *model* that respect. You'll have many opportunities as your child plays sports to model good behavior and attitudes. But putting your child's development and welfare ahead of winning, you'll be better able to display a healthy attitude toward sports and life - so will your child.

Modeling Good Sportsmanship

It's especially critical that you model good sportsmanship for your child. "Being a good sport" is much easier said than done - just look at the examples of certain professional and collegiate coaches and athletes who do the opposite. It's crucial that you maintain a cool head and a healthy attitude toward sport if you expect your child to.

Here are ways to model appropriate attitudes and behaviors when you're at your daughter's or son's meets:

- ◆ Encourage all the swimmers.
- ◆ Control your emotions in frustrating situations.
- ◆ Abide by referees' or officials' decisions. Most swimming officials are volunteers who have received special training.
- ◆ Congratulate the opponents when they win.

A Swim Parent's Do's and Don'ts

1. Remain in the spectator area during competitions.
2. Don't advise the coach on how to do the job.
3. Don't coach your child during the meet.
4. Don't make insulting comments to swimmers, parents, officials, or coaches of other teams.
5. Don't drink alcohol at meets or come to one having drunk too much.

6. Cheer for your team.
7. Show interest, enthusiasm, and support for your child.
8. Be in control of your emotions.
9. Help when you're asked to by a coach or an official.
10. Thank the coaches, officials, and other volunteers who conducted the event.

Helping Your Child Choose a Sport

Expose your child to a variety of sports. Don't force her or him to play a particular sport- it's the child's decision. If the choice is difficult for your child, consider these questions:

- ◆ What types of things interest him ?
- ◆ What is she most talented at ?
- ◆ Does she like taking risks ?
- ◆ Is he physically and emotionally suited for contact or collision sports ?
- ◆ Does she like a lot of guidance, or does she prefer doing things on her own ?
- ◆ Would he prefer an individual or a team sport ?
- ◆ How important to her is the camaraderie of being a team member?
- ◆ What sports does he seem most interested in ?
- ◆ Are there leagues and facilities available for the sport she's interested in ?
- ◆ Is he ready to make a commitment to being part of a team ?

Helping Your Child Enjoy Sports

You can help your child enjoy sports by doing the following:

- ◆ Developing a winning perspective
- ◆ Building your child's self-esteem
- ◆ Emphasizing fun, skill development, and striving to win

◆ Helping your child set performance goals

Developing a Winning Perspective

Every decision parents make in guiding their children should be based first on what's best for the child, and second on what may help the child win. Stated another way, this perspective places

Athletes First, Winning Second

We're not saying winning is unimportant. Winning - or striving to win - is essential to enjoyable competition. Pursuing victory and achieving goals are sweet rewards of sport. But they can turn sour if, through losing, your or your child's proper perspective is also lost.

Maintaining this proper perspective can help some children achieve even more than they would if they were consumed with the idea of winning. An obsession with winning often produces a fear of failure, resulting in below average performances and upset children.

Building Your Child's Self-Esteem]

Building self-esteem in your child is one of your most important parenting duties. It's not easy - and it's made even more difficult in sport by the prevailing attitude of "winning is everything." Athletes who find their self-worth through winning will go through tough times when they lose.

An athlete can be successful *without* winning. Success is a measure of an athlete's competency; winning reflects the outcome of a contest. Your child won't be able to control all the factors that go into winning a race, but he or she can find success in developing and improving skills.

Building self-esteem in your child takes more than encouragement. You need to show your child encouragement. You need to show your child

unconditional approval and love. It's easy to show that approval and love when a child succeeds; you might be challenged to do the same when your child *fails*. Don't praise dishonestly; children can see through that. If your child has a poor meet, don't tell her she swam well. Just show the same amount of love and approval for her - not for her performance - that you showed before the meet.

Questions to Ask Your Child After Practice or Competition

- ◆ Did you swim better this week ?
- ◆ What did you learn in practice ?
- ◆ What do you feel you need to work on ?
- ◆ What did the coach emphasize after the event ?
- ◆ Did you have fun swimming today ?
- ◆ Was your opponent a good sport ? Were you ?
- ◆ Are you getting in better shape ?
- ◆ What was your favorite part of the event ?
- ◆ What's the best part of being on the team ?
- ◆ What do you like most about your coach ?
- ◆ Were you nervous competing today? If you were, why ?
- ◆ How can your coach help you improve ?

Be Involved

Every youth sport program needs enthusiastic involvement from parents to be successful. Volunteering your time not only helps your child's program; it's also an enjoyable way to meet other adults and make new friends. Here are just a few ways to become involved:

- ◆ Be an official
- ◆ Be a timer
- ◆ Be a team representative to the LSC
- ◆ Maintain equipment or facilities
- ◆ Coordinate registrations

- ◆ Be an announcer
- ◆ Raise money
- ◆ Act as business manager
- ◆ Be a meet marshall
- ◆ Coordinate refreshments
- ◆ Be a publicity director
- ◆ Drive car pools
- ◆ Work concessions
- ◆ Sell programs

A healthy involvement will unusually be welcomed by both the coach and your child. What's an *unhealthy* involvement? See... "But Not Too Involved".

Emphasizing Fun, Skill Development, and Striving to Win

The reason you should emphasize fun is quite simple: Without it, your child may not want to keep swimming. Children don't have fun when they stand around in practice or don't get to swim in meets, when they feel pressure to win and don't improve or learn new skills. Conversely, they *do* have fun when practices are well organized, they get to swim in meets, they develop new skills, and the focus is on *striving* to win.

A focus on developing skills and striving to win takes the pressure off winning - which, as we say, no one child is in control of. But all children can improve their swimming skills. And when they see that improvement, they are usually motivated to improve more. Developing skills is one of the most satisfying aspects of playing a sport.

Helping Your Child Set Performance Goals

Performance goals - which emphasize individual skill improvement - are much better than the outcome goal of winning, for two reasons:

1. Performance goals are in the athlete's control.

2. Performance goals help the athlete improve.

Performance goals should be specific, and they should be challenging but not too difficult to achieve. For example, you might help her set the goals of completing each swim legally; applying the race strategy her coach taught her; and finishing aggressively.

Your child's coach and you should help your young athlete set such goals. And help your child focus on performance goals before a race; this focus will help swimming be an enjoyable learning experience for your child.

If you can't attend one of your child's meets, don't just ask "Did you win?" afterward. Ask *performance related* questions: You could ask, "How did your stroke feel?" "Were you able to visualize the race before you swam?" and "Did you talk with the coach after your swim?"

...But Not Too Involved

No swimming coach wants to be- or should be - second guessed by parents on coaching decisions. Signs of parents being too closely involved include these:

- ◆ You are overly concerned with the outcome of an event
- ◆ You spend a lot of time talking with the coach about race strategy, swimmer's skill levels, and the way she or he conducts practices and coaches at meets
- ◆ Your child has stopped enjoying swimming or has asked you to stop coming to meets or practices
- ◆ You *require* your child to take extra practice

Be involved, show interest, help the coach where he or she needs help, encourage your child - and enjoy the sport yourself !

Talking With Your Child After a Poor Performance

Sometimes it's hard to know what to say to your child after a disappointing performance. When children know they did not swim well, they don't want to hear "You swam great !" And when they have had a poor race they don't want to be told "It's really not important." At the moment, it is important to them, and they should be permitted the dignity of their unhappiness.

Although parents mean well, remarks like these sound superficial and lack sincerity. Children can detect phony comments, and they resent them. When parents are insincere or provide false praise, children learn to place less value on their words and later may be unable to get full satisfaction from deserved praise. In short, praise generously and criticize sparingly, but don't be a phony.

SportParent's Checklist For Success

Consider these questions before your child begins to swim. If you can honestly answer yes to each one, you'll find little trouble ahead.

◆ *Can you share your son or daughter ?*

This means trusting the coach to guide your child's sport experiences. You must be able to accept the coach's authority and the fact that she or he may gain some of the admiration that once was directed solely toward you.

◆ *Can you admit your shortcoming ?*

Sometimes we slip up as parents, our emotions causing us to speak before we think. We judge our children too hastily, perhaps only to learn later that their actions were justified. It takes character for parents to admit when they make a mistake and to discuss it with their children.

- ◆ *Can you accept your child's disappointments ?*
Sometimes being a parents means being a target for your child's anger and frustration. Accepting your child's disappointment also means watching your child swim poorly during a meet and not being embarrassed into anger when your 10 year old breaks into tears after a failure. Keeping your frustration in check will help guide your daughter or son through disappointments.

- ◆ *Can you accept your child's triumphs ?*
This sounds much easier than it often is. Some parents, not realizing it, may become competitive with their son or daughter, especially if the youngster receives considerable recognition. When a child swims well in an event, parents may dwell on minor mistakes., describe how an older sister or brother did even better, or boast about how they swam better many years ago.

- ◆ *Can you give your child sometime ?*
Some parents are very busy, even though they are interested in their child's participation and want to encourage it. Probably the best solution is never to promise more than you can deliver. Ask about your child's swimming experiences, and make every effort to watch most meets during the season.

- ◆ *Can you let your child make her or his own decisions ?*
Decision making is an essential part of any young person's development, and it is a real challenge to parents. It mean offering suggestions and guidance but finally, within reasonable limits, letting the child go his or her own way. All parents have ambitions for their children, but parents must accept the fact that they cannot mold their children's lives. Youth sport offers parents a minor initiation into the major process of letting go.

- ◆ *Can you say honestly that you are modeling and providing*

consistent, positive messages ?

Take a step back before the season begins and evaluate your own motives for your son's or daughter's participation. If you are truly putting your child's desires and development ahead of your own ego, then it will be easier for you to model appropriate behavior.

Keeping Things Balanced

With the great emphasis on sports in our society, some children become so involved in athletics that they neglect studies, family, and social responsibilities. If you feel your child is too involved in swimming, remind her or him that swimming is only part of life.

Sometimes children over emphasize sport because their parents do. Ask yourself if you're giving unbalanced attention to your child's participation in swimming. If so, slack off and show interest in other areas of your child's life. Otherwise your child, getting the wrong perception about the role swimming plays in life, may feel too much pressure to succeed and eventually burn out and quit.

Warning Signs of Poor Coaching

- ◆ The coach physically or verbally abuses athletes.
- ◆ The coach criticizes swimmers rather than their behaviors.
- ◆ The coach uses profanity.
- ◆ The coach won't listen to parents.
- ◆ The coach argues with referees or officials.
- ◆ The coach allows cheating.
- ◆ The coach ignores less skilled athletes.
- ◆ The coach makes winning the only goal.
- ◆ The coach makes the kids feel important only when they win.

What Makes a Good Coach ?

Many people think that if you've participated in a sport, you're qualified to coach it. Wrong! If this were true, all actors would make good directors, and all students would make good teachers.

A good coach

- ◆ Knows the sport - *and* kids. He or she must know about the physical development of boys and girls - what children are and are not capable of doing.
- ◆ Knows about differences in personality - that what is right for one child isn't necessarily right for another.
- ◆ Understands each child's motivation for being on the team. Some kids are very serious about competing; others are there because a best friend is participating.
- ◆ Understands, and can deal with, differences in children's physical and emotional maturity and appreciates each child for her or his individuality.
- ◆ Is sensitive to children from various social, economic, and racial backgrounds. The coach must give attention and instruction to all the athletes and attempt to make them all feel a part of the team.
- ◆ Is a skilled teacher, a clever psychologist, a practical philosopher, and a sensible negotiator.
- ◆ Has more than just winning in sight. Long term goals of helping young people develop physically, psychologically, and socially should take precedence over the goal of winning.
- ◆ Is skilled at teaching the fundamentals of the sport. Skill development is a major reason kids play - most want to improve their abilities. Improvement is a primary source of enjoyment for athletes.
- ◆ Teaches young athletes to enjoy success and to respond to failure with renewed determination.
- ◆ Emphasizes improvement, competence, and striving for excellence.

- ◆ Helps children develop positive self images and learn standards or conduct that are acceptable to society.
- ◆ Teaches and models behavior that reflects desirable basic values.

"The Ten Commandments for Swimming Parents" by Rose Snyder

1. Thou shalt not impose your ambitions on thy child.
2. Thou shalt be supportive no matter what.
3. Thou shalt not coach your child.
4. Thou shalt only have positive things to say at a swimming meet.
5. Thou shalt acknowledge they child's fears.
6. Thou shalt not criticize the officials.
7. Honor they child's coach.
8. Thou shalt not jump from team to team.
9. Thou shalt have goals besides winning.
10. Thou shalt not expect thy child to become an Olympian.

Questions to Ask You Child's Coach

- ◆ What are your goals for the season ?
- ◆ What are your expectations for the team - and for my child ?
- ◆ What is your coaching philosophy ?
- ◆ Is my child required to have a physical exam ?
- ◆ Are you holding a pre seasons meeting for parents ?
- ◆ What are the risks of swimming ?
- ◆ When and how often does the team practice ?
- ◆ Are players penalized for being late or missing practice ?
- ◆ What type of training rules do you have ?
- ◆ Have you coached before ?
- ◆ Are you a USS - registered coach ?
- ◆ What is your emergency plan for serious injuries ?
- ◆ Do you have general safety procedures ? What do you do to ensure safe practices and meets ?

Understanding Your Child's Coach

Establishing the bond between coach and swimmer is an integral part of your child's participation and enjoyment. Although there are several different coaching styles, learning the answers to these questions will help you to determine if your child and her coach are a good match.

Coaching Philosophy

- ◆ Does the coach keep winning and losing in perspective, or is this person a win-at-all-costs coach ?
- ◆ Does the coach emphasize fun and skill development and give support as children strive to achieve goals ?

Motives

- ◆ What are the coach's motives for coaching ?
- ◆ Does the coach seek personal recognition at the expense of the athletes ?

Knowledge

- ◆ Does the coach know the rules and skills of the sport ?
- ◆ Does the coach know how to teach those skills to young people ?

Leadership

- ◆ Does the coach model positive leadership ?
- ◆ Is the coach's leadership built on intimidation or on mutual respect ?

Self-Control

- ◆ Does the coach display the self-control expected of athletes, or does she or he fly off the handle frequently ?
- ◆ When kids make mistakes, does the coach build them up or put them down ?

Understanding

- ◆ Is the coach sensitive to the emotions of the athletes or so wrapped up in personal emotions that the kids' feelings are forgotten ?
- ◆ Does the coach understand the unique make-up of each child, treating children as individuals ?

Communication

- ◆ Do the coach's words and actions communicate positive or negative feelings ?
- ◆ Does the coach know when to talk and when to listen ?

Consistency

- ◆ Does the coach punish one youngster but not another for the same misbehavior ?
- ◆ Is the coach hypocritical, saying one thing and then doing another ?

Respect

- ◆ Do the athletes respect and listen to what the coach says ?
- ◆ Do the athletes look up to the coach as a person to emulate ?

Enthusiasm

- ◆ Is the coach enthusiastic about coaching ?
- ◆ Does the coach know how to build enthusiasm among swimmers ?

Helping Your Child's Coach

You can make the coach's job a bit easier - and help your child enjoy the sport experience more - by doing the following things:

1. Let your child know you support participation in sport. Get involved- volunteer your time with the club or in the LSC, attend meets, and

show that you care.

2. Provide your child with proper equipment and encourage its correct use.
3. Monitor participation so that you know how your child is developing.
4. Do not interfere with the coach unless she or he is abusive or unethical.
5. Keep the coach informed if your child is injured or ill.
6. Make certain your child is sleeping and eating properly.
7. Help the coach when asked to do so. You might be needed to raise money, drive kids to meets, or help host meets.
8. Keep control of yourself - show by example how you want your child to behave in and out of competition.