

A GUIDE TO BEING THE PARENT OF A COMPETITIVE SWIMMER

"The primary role of swimming parents is to be supportive, interested, encouraging and caring"

Today more children than ever before are taking part in competitive swimming. Some do so just for fun, others take the sport more seriously and spend many hours, every week, training to perfect skills and increase fitness. Whatever the level of participation parents play an important role. They are naturally interested and want to help out as much as possible. Indeed in many cases the support and interest of one or more parent is crucial to a child's participation.

Some mums and dads help by taking their child to and from training or competition, others by coping with the extra washing, irregular mealtimes and so on. Sometimes though a mother or father can become over involved and inadvertently put pressure on the child to train harder than they may want to, or to win at the expense of enjoying taking part in races.

Watching your child compete can be an emotionally draining experience. You may however be taking your child's sport more seriously than he or she is. Most parents of course are only trying to help, but it is important that the young athlete learns to see training and competition not as a threat, but as a healthy enjoyable CHALLENGE. It is very important the child knows that EFFORT as well as success will be rewarded. An over-emphasis on winning by one or both parents can result in fear and failure - with your love and respect being seen by your child as contingent upon winning. It seems that much of the problem may be that parents are not sure how they can best help their child. This guide is aimed at the swimming parents who want to learn to maximise their contribution while ensuring that they as well as their child enjoy their involvement in swimming.

Some Questions

Before reading on think for a moment about how much your child's sports means to you. Now gauge your involvement in your son or daughter's sport by reading through the questions listed below:

- Do you want your child to win races and do personal best times more than he or she does?
- Do you show your disappointment if he or she has a poor result.
- Do you feel that you have to "Psyche" your child up before a gala?
- Do you feel that your child can only enjoy sport if he or she performs well?
- Do you conduct "Post Mortems" immediately after competition or training?
- Do you feel that you have to force your child to go training?
- Do you find yourself frequently wanting to interfere during training or competition thinking that you could do better?
- Do you find yourself disliking your son or daughter's rivals?

If you have answered "yes" to any of these questions you may be putting unnecessary pressure on your child, which in turn could very well lead to his or her eventual rejection of the sport or even lasting damage to your parent/child relationship. The Do's and Don'ts, which follow, will help to maximise your contribution to your child's sport whilst minimising any adverse effects.

How Can You Help

Some Do's

- Get to know your child's swimming coach - after all he or she can play an important role in your child's general development.
- Respect the coach's opinion - he or she should be more knowledgeable than you - both about swimming and the development of young swimmers.
- Assess your child's progress - don't be afraid to ask the coach what plans or objectives he or she may have for your child. Ask the coach to explain to you the reasons for decisions you don't understand or agree with. It is important that you find out what objectives the coach has for your child so that you can assess progress (perhaps after a few months).
- Talk to other parents - It is often a good idea to get to know other parents so that you can share problems or car taking duties.
- Establish clear lines of communication - in case you need to speak to the coach regarding training or a gala, find out when it is convenient and appropriate to contact him or her and the best way of doing so. Don't ever address a criticism to or of your child or coach in front of other parents or swimmers.
- Encourage effort as well as results - don't assess your child's progress solely on how often they get personal best times or win races. It is important to recognise and reward effort.
- Be Generous in your applause - it is important during a race that you applaud all swimmers' efforts. Not only does this set a good example, but it will also reduce the pressure on the swimmers.

Some Don'ts

- **DON'T** respond to a bad result or mistake with punishment or criticism - give your child time to work out for him or herself why things went wrong. If they ask your advice first compliment them for something he or she did right then give advice, emphasising the positive results if the instruction is followed rather than the negative consequences of a mistake. It is **VITAL** for a parent to avoid giving an impression that they do not still value a child after a poor swim.
- **DON'T turn a blind eye to any bad behaviour, cheating or bad manners by your child** - in such instances reasonably prompt action is appropriate. To do otherwise will infer that you condone such behaviour or at least do not consider personal standards and respect of people and rules important in sport.
- **Don't forget that your child is still growing** - training which may be appropriate for an adult (e.g prolonged repetitive activities and work with heavy weights) can have adverse and long term effects on growth and development of a young child.

- **DON'T COACH FROM THE SIDELINES** - try to encourage your child to think for him or herself. A constant stream of signals and instructions from the sidelines is distracting and will be viewed as unnecessary and unwanted intervention by the coach.
- **DON'T IGNORE ACHES AND PAINS** - Children are often reticent to describe sports related injuries, especially if it means missing training or competition, so keep an eye on persistent grumbles about health. It is important to take injuries seriously. If your child does get injured get professional medical advice as soon as possible.
- **DON'T IGNORE OTHER CHILDREN IN THE FAMILY** - sometimes brothers and sisters may feel left out or bored if the whole household revolves around the needs of the young athlete. It is important to keep a balance between swimming and the interests of other members of your family.
- **DON'T ALLOW THE SITUATION TO DEVELOP WHERE YOUR CHILD IS FRIGHTENED OF FAILING BECAUSE OF THE WAY YOU RESPOND** - fear of failure can often result in children feigning injury or avoiding certain rivals.
- **DON'T FORCE A YOUNG CHILD TO SPECIALISE ENTIRELY ON ONE STROKE** - pre-pubescent children should be encouraged to develop skills in all four competitive strokes. Early specialisation can lead to physical injury and in the long term a declining enthusiasm for that stroke.
- **DON'T ALWAYS GREET YOUR CHILD WITH "DID YOU WIN?"** - why not start with "Did you enjoy it?"
- **DON'T ATTEND EVERY TRAINING SESSION AND EVERY GALA** - it is important for your child's future development in sport that he or she is trusted to make the correct decisions during either training or competition. This is the first stage in the development of self-motivation and self-reliance. Constant supervision by the parent can easily result in the young swimmer becoming emotionally and otherwise over dependent on your presence and advice.
- **DON'T SAY "WE WON" OR "WE LOST"** - it is important that you don't become so involved in your child's swimming that you find yourself saying, "we won" or "we lost". Remember it is your child that is competing not you.

Providing the child is faced with realistic challenges, swimming should be fun at whatever level it is done. With the right parental support not only will your child be able to develop his or her athletic potential in an enjoyable rather than a stressful sports environment but you will also be providing him or her with the opportunity to obtain a sense of achievement, competence and self worth.

Parental example is so important, after all if you cannot cope with the ups and downs of your child's swimming life - how can you expect them to?