

Swimming Culture: A (Really Useful) Parents' Guide to Swim Meets by Mary Dowling, Head Age Group Coach at Nations Capital Swim Club

Recently I asked my swimmers what they wanted their parents to do at a swim meet. Although they said it in many different ways, here is the consensus of their simple but honest responses:

1. I want my parents to cheer for me and my friends, but not too loud.
2. I don't want my parents to ask me if I am nervous because that makes me nervous.
3. I want my parents to time (volunteer).
4. I want my parents to pack good snacks.

What struck me about this list was that your kids think your job as a parent at a swim meet is easy. Help out on deck, pack good snacks and just enjoy watching him/her do something he/she loves.

- None of the kids asked to be videotaped or timed by their parents.
- No swimmer asked for their parents to check in on them before or after their swims.
- No kids asked for their parents to give them tips or instructions for their races.

These kids were sending a message loud and clear: "Love me and support me and my teammates – and that is it."

As a coach, I know that parents want the best for their swimmer. They want to provide the shoulder when things don't go well and the loudest applause when things do. But the truth is, most parents go overboard and forget that when a bad swim happens, and it will happen, many times, all they need to do is say: "Too bad, what did your coach say for next time?"

Parents can be disappointed for their swimmer but should never be disappointed in their swimmer.

Trust me as a former swimmer and longtime coach, your swimmer is disappointed enough for the both of you. Let the coach handle the, "what next?" Let them talk to your swimmer about what they could do differently next time and/or every day in practice. You just always respond with, "Great job", "Too bad" or "I'm sorry"... but always follow that with: "What did your coach say?"

I know that this message is a tough one because every parent wants to shield their child from disappointment but it is one that will allow your swimmer to take ownership of his/her swimming and leave the disappointments at the pool each day.

I once heard John Leonard (just-retired Executive Director of the American Swim Coaches Association) talk about asking his swim parents what made them who they are. His point was that most people would admit that they are who they are because of some disappointment or hardship along the way. He asks his swimmer's parents: "Why would a parent take those "lessons" away from their child?"

Disappointments happen in sports and in life and our job as parents and as coaches is to help kids to grow up strong enough and with the right armor to get through those times.

When parents mix parenting with coaching they often walk a fine line because the two jobs require a different eye.

- A parent must love and support their children while guiding them to make good decisions and develop strong values.
- A coach must teach children the skills they will need to reach their highest potential as an athlete and to handle the ups and downs of the sport.
- As a team, the parent and the coach can work together to help the child to grow up to be a confident, capable, curious, kind and productive person.

Coaches and their parents can be important people in a child's life and in the end isn't that what kids need, people they can count on unconditionally as well as people they can look up to for guidance and support?

As a coach when I talk about a swimmer who is "the total package" I consider that package as:

1. Talent
2. Work ethic/Commitment
3. Leadership ability – either through words and/or actions
4. Family dynamics – are the parents supportive but not interfering

I feel that if a swimmer is missing a part of the package then his/her chances of surviving what can be a grueling, sometimes solitary and always time-consuming sport is hampered.

So parents, show up, make sure your child knows that you are proud of him/her, let him/her hear you brag about his/her accomplishments or hard work, be there for him/her in good times and in bad as a cheer leader.

We, coaches will be grateful to you. We will use you as an example of what we look for in a swim team parent.

Your child will be grateful too and most likely, he/she will thrive.