

Parent vs. Coach Goals for Swimmers

For the longest time as a single guy, I grappled with why parents were so devoted to the achievements of their children. Now as a parent I understand this devotion.

As parents, we watch our children grow, we watch them learn, we watch them excel, we watch them fail, and through all this we love them no matter what. Through all our children's endeavors we try to help our children become better individuals. As coaches we watch our athletes develop, we watch them learn skills, we watch them improve, and many times we watch them fail. As coaches we don't like to see them fail but we try to help them learn from failures to be better swimmers.

Based on those comments you would think that coaches and parents would always be on the same page when it comes to the achievements of a child/athlete. Quite frequently though it is the opposite and the goals we have for our ATHLETES are quite different from the goals the parents have for their CHILDREN.

As coaches working with young athletes we try to help our athletes learn to look at the big picture and establish goals that will help them take the next step forward in that athletic endeavor. Some athletes are able to take those steps more quickly than others, but the result is the same in the end. We try to enable an athlete to maximize their potential whatever that potential is.

In order for coaches to help an athlete reach their potential we have to establish goals, steps, or building blocks that will allow an athlete to reach that potential. As parents we look for opportunities that will help our children develop too. Often times we find those opportunities in athletics. When it comes to athletics we trust our children's success to another individual; the coach. This is not always the easiest thing to do...relinquishing control of the success of our children to another person. How hard is that as a parent to do???

However, that is exactly what we as coaches ask of the parents when you trust us with the development of your child in our program. When a parents trusts a coaching staff with the development of an athlete one of four things happens. First, a parent does not want to get involved at all and the child wants nothing to do with the sport. Two, a parent steps back, lets the coaching staff do their job, but at the signs of trouble steps in and begins to coach the child because the parent does not see the success they think their child should have. Third, a parent puts a child in a program and interferes with a coach by trying to be the coach of their child. The child may see success in the short term, but when it comes to who is in charge they are confused by who is in charge and in the long-run do not see the success they might have achieved otherwise. Finally, a parent steps back and lets their child and coach develop the relationship necessary for a swimmer to maximize their potential.

For the casual observer the final scenario is the best situation for everyone. This scenario is the best because the relationship between the coach and athlete can be developed. Both

the coach and athlete can develop goals that will help them achieve long-term success. This does not mean that a parent does not get involved because they need to, but the parent's role is that of supporter and not coach. In this scenario the coach – coach's, swimmer – swims, and parents – parent. The coach helps the athlete set goals, and the athlete gets in the pool and tries to achieve those goals. A parent in this situation is in a supporting role that helps support the coach, and supports the athlete in achieving those goals.

What happens quite frequently in this sport (and others) is that the coach helps set the goals for the athlete. The athlete either accepts or rejects those goals and we get in the pool and practice. Sometimes the athlete has a purpose and really pursues the goals that have been established with the coach. Sometimes they just get in and do laps with no purpose. In this scenario whether a swimmer has a purpose or not this is what typically happens; when training does not appear to be going in the direction that the parent thinks it should be going the parent steps in and begins to offer their goals/advice to the child. This is where a conflict often begins. These conflicts are not always as nasty as some might think, but this situation puts the child in a position of making a decision on whom to trust and listen too with their swimming career...the coach or parent.

When this type of conflict arises the child is the one who suffers the most. They do not know who to trust, who to believe, or even worse become discouraged and do not want to swim. Most of the time parents who find themselves in this situation do so unintentionally, but the ramifications can be costly. What parent does not want the best for their child? The solution is quite obvious but for many very difficult to do; let the coach do his/her job.

There have been times over my coaching career when a swimmer has gone to their parent for advice, told me that they needed to see their parents first after a swim, have gone to their parents before their swim, or have never come and talked to a staff member about a swim before or after it has happened. When asked why they did not talk to their coach the answer is usually the same. My parents said this is what I should do during my swim; work on during my swim, or the time I should shoot for. As mentioned earlier this happens unintentionally, but puts the directions of the coach behind the directions of the parent. Here is a question to ponder. Do you question the directions your child's teacher gives them on an assignment?

In a pervious article it was mentioned how long our staff has been coaching in the sport of swimming. Our staff has over 50 years of coaching experience and as the head coach I have witnessed just about everything that can happen in this sport. Very little surprises me anymore just because it has happened a dozen times before. The same can be said about most of our staff too. The point is that as coaches we know what the swimmer needs to be doing in practice and meets.

We have several families on our club who attend meets or sit at the pool during practice. I know it is because you want to watch them excel, succeed, improve, or learn. There is

absolutely nothing wrong with that either. If you are doing that you are acting in the supporting role and you should be congratulated for that.

However, how many times have you been at a meet or practice and watched your child swim and made a comment on how to improve a stroke, swim a race, kick harder, or got up to tell your child to listen to the coach? Probably all of us at one time or another and believe me it is usually unintentional! Think back to the comments that you have made to your children before, during, or after a practice or meet. Like I said earlier we love our children and want them to excel and as a coach I am not different with my own children, but are our comments hurting the relationship of athlete/coach?

Trusting someone else with your child's success is the hardest thing in the world to do and it also applies to a coach too! If you are fortunate enough to have a child who makes a Zone meet time standard and that child goes to the Zone meet, who typically is the coach? Every year at this meet it is another assistant coach from Ohio Swimming. It also happens at the international level too. As coaches we have to let someone else do the coaching for our swimmers and it is just as hard for a coach to step back and let that coach do their job as it is for a parent to let the coach do their job.

It makes us all sound like control freaks! The simple truth is we are, not because we are controlling (most of the time), but because we want what is best for our children. It is in our nature to want a child to succeed. As a parent I often wonder what kind of parent I am going to be when my children start to participate in other activities. Am I going to be the parent who ignores my child in an activity, am I going to be the parent who interferes, am I going to be the parent who sits in the stands and coaches my child, or am I going to be the parent who says to my child listen to your coach...he or she knows best.

My challenge to you today is ask yourself those questions. Be honest with yourself and if you answer anything but the parent who says listen to your coach, talk to your coach on how to get past the other scenarios. It is not easy and trusting a child's life to someone else is equally challenging, but here is a simple analogy you can go by. If you trust your child to the teachers of their school system, why not trust them to the coaches who only want what is best for them in the pool?