

The Nature of a Judgment Call

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For nearly every decision regarding age group swimming development there is little or no scientific evidence for making a decision one way or another. How then can a decision be made and who is best suited to make that decision? In most cases, the coach is best suited to make decisions about age group swimming development. That is why a club hires a coach -- to coach and make decisions. Additionally, most clubs, through the Board of Directors, give the coach the authority to make decisions. This authority is usually expressed in a contract or in a written job description. Unfortunately, it is sometimes given only verbally and as Boards of Directors change unwritten authorities also change placing the coach in a difficult situation. It also needs to be pointed out that a coach needs the freedom to make an error in judgment on an occasion without fear that he will lose his job. People learn from making errors. John Kennedy said, "An error doesn't become a mistake unless you fail to correct it." Judgment errors rarely result in a long term effect of preventing an athlete from reaching their ultimate athletic goals.

Situation: A parent of a 10 year old wants their child to swim with the 12 year olds (who are doing 2000 - 3000 meters a day more than the 10 year olds). The parent points out that their 10 year old is faster than some of the 12 year olds? The coach disagrees. Although there is no evidence he is aware of that says it is bad for a 10 year old to do 5000 meters a day he still does not want a 10 year old doing 5000 meters a day. Why? Based upon his experience of coaching of age group swimmers, he feels that young swimmers need new challenges from season to season in order to stay motivated and need a steady progression of increased work load. He has seen young swimmers who do too much too soon drop out of the sport before they have a chance to reach their full potential. He has even seen it happen to swimmers in his programs early in his career when he gave up trying to educate a parent and allowed a swimmer into a group they should not have been in. He says it doesn't matter that they are capable of doing more work, what matters is they are given tomorrow at the expense of losing today and they lose the chance to be the leader of 10 year olds and all the fun of being with children their own age.

Why would a parent disagree? Each of you may have your own reasons but the reasons I hear most often are "My child wants to be with the older swimmers to do more work...my child wants to be a state champion...my child is bored in the 10 and under group." Two comments: I am always suspect of whether or not the child truly wants it or if they are just reflecting what Mom and Dad really want. Young swimmer's try so hard to please their parents. The second comment is, there is a difference between want and need.

How does a parent decide when a 9 year old should go to bed? Is there conclusive scientific evidence that says a 9 year old should go to bed at a specific time or sleep for a specific number of hours? There are probably guidelines written down somewhere but no definitive answers. The child WANTS to stay up until 10:00 but you, as the adult, make your judgment based upon what you feel are the child's NEEDS and your

experience. Quite simply, this is a judgment call and the parent is best suited to make this decision.

Dr. Ken Low, director of Action Studies Institute, a think tank focused on adaptive intelligence, says that one of the most disturbing trends of the 80's was the stripping away of people's freedom within institutions to make judgments. People are given rules and not allowed to use their own powers of reasoning to make exceptions when exceptions are due. We need coaches in this country to have the freedom and the Board-given authority to make judgment calls on age group development issues. This is how new ideas are formed. This is how programs progress into the future.