

Watching Your Child at Swim Lessons or Swim Practice

By Guy Edson, ACSA Staff

For many years I watched my daughter swim under the direction of other coaches. I have also watched her at basketball practice and games, and dance, and figure skating. I know the joy of watching her in these activities. I also know and understand the overwhelming desire to direct, correct, encourage, and sometimes scold her at practice. But these are not proper parental behaviors once I have released her into the care of a coach or teacher. As a parent, I am not to interfere with the practice or attempt to talk to my child during the practice session.

At swim practice coaches want the children's attention focused on the coach and the tasks at hand. Occasionally children miss an instruction, or have a goggle problem, or are involved in some other distraction, or are simply playing and having fun – which are all normal behaviors for young children. Coaches view these little difficulties as opportunities for the children to develop good listening skills, ability to reason, and self discipline. Sometimes we allow failure on purpose -- a missed instruction leaving the child confused often results in the child learning to pay better attention the next time. We endeavor to provide an environment for the children to develop these skills. A well-intentioned and over-enthusiastic mom or dad sometimes has difficulty allowing their child to miss something and wants to interfere. It's understandable.

We know it is common in many other youth sports for parents to stand at the sidelines and shout instructions or encouragements and sometimes admonishments to their children. However, at swim practice coaches ask parents not to signal them to swim faster, or to tell them to try a certain technique, or to offer to fix a goggle problem, or to move away from some other “menacing” swimmer, or even to remind them to listen to the coach. In fact, just as you would never interrupt a school classroom to talk your child, you should not interrupt a swim practice by attempting to communicate directly with your child.

What's wrong with encouraging your child during practice? There are two issues. First we want your child to focus on the coach and to learn the skill for their personal satisfaction rather than learning it to please their parents. Secondly, parental encouragement often gets translated into a command to swim faster and swimming faster may be the exact opposite of what the coach is trying to accomplish. In most stroke skill development practices we first slow the swimmers down so that they can think through the stroke motions. Save encouragements and praise for after the practice session! This is the time when you have your child's full attention to tell them how proud you are of them.

What's wrong with shouting or signaling instructions to your children? When I watched my old daughter play in a basketball league I felt an overwhelming desire to shout instructions to my child and so I understand the feelings that most parents have. But those instructions might be different from the coach's instructions and then you end up with a confused child. Sometimes you might think the child did not hear the coach's

instruction and you want to help. Most of us do not want to see our own kids make a mistake. The fact is that children miss instructions all the time. Part of the learning process is learning how to listen to instructions. When children learn to rely on a backup they will have more difficulty learning how to listen better the first time.

As parents, many of us want our children protected from discomfort and adversity and we will attempt to create or place them in an environment free from distress. So, what's wrong with helping your child fix their goggles during practice time? Quite simply, we want to encourage the children to become self-reliant and learn to take care of and be responsible for themselves and their own equipment. Swimming practice is a terrific place to learn these life skills. Yes, even beginning at age 6 or 7.

If you need to speak to your child regarding a family issue or a transportation issue or to take your child from practice early you are certainly welcome to do so but please approach the coach directly with your request and we will immediately get your child out of the water. If you need to speak to the coach for other reasons please wait until the end of practice.

Thanks for bringing your children to swim practice. Every swim coach I know coaches each child with care for their safety and concern for their social, physical, learning skills, and life skills development.

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