

3 Rules for Being a Positive Swimming Parent

Being the parent of a swimmer is a thankless combination of roles, from financier to taxi driver and many things in between. At the same time as making huge sacrifices yourself, there's every chance that your teenage child will probably reward you by finding you intolerably embarrassing and tell you on a frequent basis that you're ruining their lives. Brilliant!

As a parent and psychologist, I'll start by declaring my own lack of perfection. This cobbler's children quite often have no shoes, as the saying goes. However, I can offer three simple rules for being a swimming parent that my psychological training provides, and hope that as my own kids develop I follow them too!

First of all, your child needs your unconditional love. I cringe at some of the things that I've said to my kids in anger, but if they do something wrong I try to focus on the behavior and not on them.

One of the things that can cause difficulty for sporting children, is when they feel that their parents' love is conditional on their sporting success. For most of you it might sound ridiculous that this could happen, but it does, and you don't even have to be a 'pushy parent' living out your needs through your child for it to.

Do you reward your children for their sporting success? If so, how? If you must reward them, do so for their effort or attitude.

Rule #1: Never reward your child for winning (- they get medals for that -) and preferably not for doing a personal best either.

A good time or performance should be rewarding in itself. Bear in mind that as young swimmers they'll do a lot of PBs over the years. Not only might you be making a rod for your own back by setting an expectation of reward, but you may also erode the intrinsic feeling of reward that your child experiences for doing well.

When your child does well, of course praise is due, but try to praise them for what they did well, not the outcome that they achieved. Try to reinforce the good habits that will lead to success.

If your child needs a new suit, resist the temptation to offer it as a reward for performance. Either they need it or they don't, and either you can afford it or you can't.

The subject of money can be enormously difficult for sporting parents. Swimming can cost a fortune. You have to make the decisions about what does and does not get spent. They might not always be popular, but if you are honest your child will usually accept it and move on.

Rule #2: Never remind your child how much it costs you for them to swim.

This can be about time, money, or both. It can be done in subtle and accidental, or obvious and cruel ways. I worked with a young footballer who struggled with anxiety and felt sick before and during every game. His parents didn't remind him of the time and money that they had invested in him. As a bright child, he knew, and just knowing was a source of guilt.

If you make a difficult decision, for example to send your child to an expensive training camp, to let them have the new and expensive tech suit, or even just to forego a social occasion to take them swimming, make the decision and draw a line under it. Don't remind them. Even if you feel like they've thrown it back in your face. Point out the unacceptability of their behavior, and leave it at that.

Finally, an uncomfortable truth is that although your relationship (as either one or two parents) with them is likely to be the most important in their lives, there is another significant relationship that you should try not to interfere with.

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Rule #3: Be the parent, and let the coach be the coach.

I'm assuming in this case that you are not actually the coach! You might be a swimmer yourself, and worse, you might have coaching experience. You might be screaming inside how much you disagree with what or how your child is being taught. If you find yourself in this position, talk to the coach in private. Not through your child. Even technical instruction can cause confusion, and confusion can cause conflict in all of the relationships involved.

If your child is unhappy, listen to them. Support them, as far as possible, to make their own decisions by asking questions. Obviously there's a line at which you must intervene, but that's more of a question of your morals, ethics or perhaps a child safety issue, in which case there are correct routes to take.

As I write this, I still find myself realising that I break some of my own parenting rules. As parents, we can never be perfect. We can only try to do the right thing.

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