News For

SWIM PARENTS

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Helping Your Young Child Set Goals

Goal setting for young swimmers is an important process that requires interaction of the parent, coach, and athlete. It is important to remember that for young swimmers the goal of goal setting is to learn how to set goals. The progression for learning how to set goals is based upon the age and competitive experience of the swimmer. In this issue we will look at one approach for introducing goals to 8 through 10 year olds.

There are many approaches to goal setting for younger swimmers. The following approach is presented because it is a little different from the "normal" routine of coach-swimmer interaction and one that I personally find more rewarding for the parent-coach-athlete relationship.

With younger, inexperienced swimmers, generally ages 8 - 10, goal setting needs to be carefully guided by adults. The purpose of goal setting with this age is for the young swimmer to learn what a goal is, that to achieve a goal a series of steps toward the goal must be taken, and that some amount of preparation and work is required to meet the goal. These are very powerful lifelong skills.

I think it is very important that children are successful in achieving goals at this stage. For this reason, the coach, who best knows the ability of the swimmer, should suggest goals to the parents who, in turn, guide their young swimmer to set goals well within the possibilities described by the coach. Goals should be objective and based upon time standards or performance standards. In addition, goals need to be short term goals aiming at completion in 4 to 6 weeks. A long term goal is a difficult concept for 8 - 10 year olds.

Billy is a 9 year old who has been on the swim team for 18 months. He has all "B" times except for the 100 IM which he has an unofficial "C" time. He has been disqualified in his three 100 IM races because he has an illegal breaststroke kick. His best friend, neighbor, and swimming rival, John, began swimming at the same time as Billy but has achieved "A" times in the breaststroke and freestyle, several "B" times, and was recently moved to a more advanced group. Billy's ambition is to swim in the same workout group with John. Billy's dad and John's dad are friends and weekend golf rivals. Coincidentally, John's dad regularly beats Billy's dad. Billy's dad's goal is to see Billy beat John.

What should Billy's goals be and who should set them? Billy's goals must not be based upon John. At this point in time John is a more accomplished swimmer. Perhaps he will always be more accomplished for a variety of reasons which will frustrate Billy if Billy's goal is always to beat John. On the other hand, maybe John is temporarily bigger and stronger than Billy. As the boys reach and pass puberty Billy may become the bigger and stronger and more skilled of the two and beating John may not present an adequate challenge.

The coach should suggest several goals for Billy to Billy's parents. These goals are based upon the coaches' assessment of Billy's ability to improve in the next two months. One suggested goal might be for Billy to make an "A" time in the 50 free. Currently, Billy is only 4 tenths of a second from an "A" time. A second goal might be to swim a legal 100 yard IM. The coach has been working on Billy's breaststroke kick several times each week and is confident that Billy will have a legal kick in time for the next swim meet.

Why suggest these goals to the parents? Two reasons: 1) It is a good way for the parents and coach to communicate on the progress and future expectations for the young swimmer, and 2) the most important and most influential people in the young swimmer's life are Mom and Dad. What better source is there in guiding the young swimmer towards setting goals?

How should parents discuss goals with young swimmers? I think the best way is to ask the young swimmer a series of questions designed to bring him to the goals suggested by the coach. A conversation may go something like this:

Parent: "Billy, our team is hosting a meet in six weeks. Do you have any goals for our meet?"

Billy: "What's a goal?"

Parent: "A goal is something you want to do that you have never done before."

Billy: [without hesitation] "I want to swim in John's group!"

Parent: "Someday I think you will. What does it take to move up to that group?"

Billy: "Coach says I need an A time."

Parent: "Do you know what your best time is?"

Billy: "No"

Parent: "Coach says you have 32.2 and that's only 4 tenths of a second from an "A" time which is a 31.8. Would you like to make an "A" time?

Billy: "YEA!"

Parent: "Do you know how short 4 tenths of a second is?" [Demonstrates with stop watch.] "Coach says you can knock off those 4 tenths of a second just by streamlining better off the start and turn and by finishing with a long arm and strong kick. What are you going to work on in practice to help you make your goal?"

Billy: "I'm going to work on streamlining and finishing with a long arm and strong kick."

Parent: "Great! I KNOW you're going to make your goal! There is a dual meet with Fairport in three weeks. What do you think you would like to do in the 50 free in that meet?"

Billy: "An "A" time?"

Parent: "Right! Now let's write down your goal."

The next step is for Billy to write down his goal(s) on two pieces of paper. He should write his current best time, his goal, target date, and things he needs to work on in order to accomplish his goal.

His goal statement may look like this:

My Goal: 31.8 "A" time in the 50 free

When: February 17 home meet

Best Time: 32.2

Every day in practice: streamlining and good finishes

Billy should keep one at home in his room where he can look at it every day. Mom and Dad should ask Billy once every week or so how he is doing on his goal. The second copy he takes to swim practice to review with the coach. Then he can keep it in his locker or swim bag and look at it every day before practice.

Of course, it's a wonderful thing if a young swimmer is aware enough of times, both his own and qualifying times, to set his own valid goals in addition to those suggested by the coach. If a swimmer sets a reachable goal it should be accepted by coach and parents. Most young swimmers however need the expert guidance of coach and parents to set obtainable goals. Remember, at this age it is vitally important that swimmers are able to accomplish their goals.