

How to Parent an Athlete: Lessons from a Swim Meet

From the blog "Cheaper Than Therapy"

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This is an excellent article giving matter-of-fact advice to parents of athletes. Hope you enjoy and heed the insights this person provides.

"I've spent the past three weekends at the pool for four different kids. If you've been to a swim meet, you know they can be torture. When they get to the higher levels, they are three to five days long and if you have kids in more than one age group, you could be spending up to 12 hours at the pool. It's taken me a LONG time to be able to put all this in perspective and gain some valuable insight. I've observed so many good and bad things, and there are certain things you just shouldn't do:

Don't be a scorekeeper: Whenever you're new to a sport, you always look at fellow parents for clues as to how the whole process works. My first swim meets, I sat by moms that were well-armed. They brought their binders, highlighters, pens and endless lists of time standards. They not only wrote down their own child's times and splits, but they followed other kids. It's not a bad thing to know some of your kid's times, but good grief, don't micro-manage the process. That's the coach's job. You just need to be a parent.

Don't analyze their performance: I was saddened to see so many parents waiting outside the locker rooms only to meet their child with: "You should have dropped your hips sooner.... your streamline was terrible.... how did you let so-and-so beat you..." For the most part, your kid did the best they could. Unless you are an expert and could possibly analyze films later on, don't tell them everything they're doing wrong. That's the coach's job. You just need to be a parent.

Choose your words wisely: This past weekend, my second daughter didn't perform well for two of her races at the biggest meet of the year. Since my oldest daughter has been in that position, I asked if she had any advice. Here's our text exchange:

"It didn't go well for your sister, any words of wisdom?"

"Tell her it doesn't matter. Only think positive. If you both think bad, the rest of her races will go bad. Tell her to go have fun between this race and tomorrow's race. Hang with her swim friends, flirt with a boy...whatever. It doesn't matter."

"She's completely freaked out"

"She just wants to beat my times when I was her age. She's psyching herself out. Just don't get mad at her. She's going to be hard enough on herself."

"I never get mad at you guys for poor performance – I get disappointed, because I know how hard you worked to get there."

"sorry, but when you're in the moment, all you see is that your parents are mad at you."

"I'm never mad at you. I feel bad sometimes, but never anger."

"I know. Just don't forget to tell her you're proud of her."

Until that moment, I never realized that I came across as being angry. That's the last thing I want my kids to hear -- I thought I was the one absorbing the pain, but I must be projecting that as anger. I need to choose my words and actions more carefully. When things don't go well, give them support, not disappointment. It's their coach's job to be disappointed and let them know where they need to improve. You just need to be the parent.

Don't put them on a pedestal: Some parents are so excited that they have an "elite" athlete, that they let them rule the roost. I've seen parents turn into doormats when their athlete wants something. "Oh, you're not warm enough, then take my shirt." "Your water isn't cold enough? Let me buy you a new one." "You're not sleeping well in our king-sized bed? I'll go on the floor, you'll sleep better by yourself." These kids are milking it people. They know you'll do anything to enhance their performance. You can definitely be helpful, but don't stop being their parent just because you want them to do better.

Don't be a dork: If you've been ringing cowbells, wearing bedazzled jean jackets that say SWIM, printing your kid's picture on your t-shirt, holding huge banners with your child's name on them or there's an empty four-foot radius around you because no one wants to sit by you during athletic events, then you may just be a dork. Kids want their parents to be supportive, but not an embarrassing laughing stock. Sometimes outbursts are funny, but crazy antics are only appreciated in small doses. Let their coach be the insane one you can laugh about later. You just need to be the supportive (but not stupid-crazy) parent.

The bottom line is during the major sporting events, they have their teammates, coaches and officials telling them what they're doing right and wrong. They get enough instruction. As much as you want to tell them how to perform better... zip it. If they want to talk about it in a day or two, then that's a great time to analyze, but in the moment, just be a parent. You're the only one that can perform that task, so don't blow it. "