USA Swimming Parents Handbook

Dear Parents,

The Parents’ Handbook includes important information on how to

be a supportive swimming parent, as well as general information

about the sport and how you can get involved as a volunteer to

support your child and the entire team.

This publication has been created to help educate you on how to

support your child throughout his or her swimming career. USA

Swimming has conducted research about why kids choose to

participate in swimming and what makes it fun. Supportive

parents play a very significant role in why kids swim, as well as why

kids quit. We suggest you take the time to talk to your child

about your role as a needed supoort system for him or her. This is

the best way to communicate your interest in making your child’s

swimming experience the best one possible.

FOREWORD

There are many benefits to participating in the sport of swimming,

including meeting terrific people. The camaraderie among

swimmers is unique; many swimming buddies become lifelong

friends. In addition to being around fine people, swimming

provides one of the most beneficial forms of exercise for

cardiovascular and overall fitness. Possibly the greatest benefits

of participating in an organized swimming program are the life

skills your child will develop. These skills include time

management, self-discipline and sportsmanship.

Research has shown that the main motivation for children to

choose sports is their desire to have fun. Age group swimming can

be fun, exciting and rewarding. Many children improve rapidly

during the developmental stages due to growth and improved

technique and it is difficult to resist the tendency to push young

athletes. At this stage, however, the emphasis should be placed

on technique and not intense training. We also recommend that

the training schedule for developmental swimmers be flexible

enough to provide them with time to participate in other

activities. Since swimming careers can extend well into adulthood,

swimming at the youngest levels needs to be fun, pressure free,

and filled with learning experiences. This will ensure that

swimming remains enjoyable throughout their lives.

Once a child reaches puberty, scientists and coaches feel more

serious training can begin. This can be a particularly frustrating

time for swimmers. During this transition from age group to

senior swimming and from childhood to young adulthood, an athlete

may experience a plateau in performance while skills and physical

abilities struggle to become equal with each other. Best times can

be few and far between while training time are increasing and can

require more time and dedication. While the coaches have

prepared swimmers for this change, many parents may begin to

question whether a child’s swimming career is over at this point.

These factors, coupled with the other normal difficulties of

puberty, can sometimes lead a swimmer to leave the sport

prematurely It is critical that parents and coaches be cooperative

and very supportive during this period of adjustment, realizing

that it will likely pass and the rewards will be even better.

This handbook is designed to help you help your child succeed in

swimming. Remember that not every swimmer becomes a world

record holder, but everyone gains from their swimming

experience. Supporting your child in any of their activities can be

one of the most rewarding experiences of your life. This booklet

will also give you an overview of the many ways in which volunteers

contribute to the overall swimming program and will provide

suggestions on how to manage and retain volunteers in your

program.

Please ask questions of your coaches and officials, as well as the

experienced parents on your team. They all have the same goal: to

provide your child with the best possible experience in swimming.

Keep in mind that the swimming program only works because of

dedicated people like you !

THE 10 COMMANDMENTS

1. Thou shalt not impose your ambitions on thy child.

Remember that swimming is your child’s activity.

Improvements and progress occur at different rates for each

individual. Don’t judge your child’s progress based on the

performance of other athletes and don’t push them based on what

you think they should be doing. The nice thing about swimming is

that every person can strive to do their personal best and benefit

from the process of competitive swimming.

2. Thou shalt be supportive no matter what.

There is only one question to ask your child after a practice

or a competition - “Did you have fun ?” If meets and practices are

not fun, your child should not be forced to participate.

3. Thou shalt not coach they child.

You are involved in one of the few youth sports programs

that offer professional coaching. Do not undermine the

professional coach by trying to coach your child on the side. Your

job is to provide love and support and a safe place to return to at

the end of the day. Love and hug your child no matter what. The

coach is responsible for the technical part of the job.

You should not offer advice on technique or race strategy or any

other area that is not yours. And above all, never pay your child

for a performance. This will only serve to confuse your child

concerning the reasons to strive for excellence and weaken the

swimmer/coach bond.

4. Thou shalt only have positive things to say at a swimming meet.

If you are going to show up at a swimming meet, you should

be encouraging and never criticize your child or the coach. Both

of them know when mistakes have been made. Please remember

that “yelling at” is not the same as “cheering for.”

5. Thou shalt acknowledge they child’s fears.

Your child’s first swimming meet, 500 free or 200 I.M. can

be a stressful situation. It is totally appropriate for your

child to be scared. Don’t yell or belittle, just assure your

child that the coach would not have suggested the event if

your child was not ready to compete in it. Remember your

job is to love and support your child through their entire

swimming experience.

6. Thou shalt not criticize the officials.

If you do not care to devote the time or do not have the

desire to volunteer as an official, please don’t criticize those who

are doing the best they can.

7. Honor they child’s coach.

The bond between coach and swimmer is a special one, and

one that contributes to your child’s success as well as fun. Do not

criticize the coach in the presence of your child, as it will only

serve to hurt your child’s swimming.

8. Thou shalt be loyal and supportive of thy team.

It is not wise for parents to take their swimmers and jump

from team to team. The water isn’t necessarily bluer in another

team’s pool. Every team has its own internal problems - even

teams that build champions. Children who switch from team to

team are often ostracized for a long time by the teammates they

leave behind and are slowly received by new team mates. Often

swimmers find that switching teams does not improve their

performance.

9. Thy child shalt have goals besides winning.

Most successful swimmers are those who have learned to

focus on the process and not the outcome. Giving an honest

effort regardless of the outcome is much more important than

winning. One Olympian said, ”My goal was to set a world record.

Well, I did that, but someone else did it too, just a little faster

than I did. I achieved my goal and I lost. Does this make me a

failure ? No, in fact I am very proud of that swim.” What a

tremendous outlook to carry on through life !

10. Thou shalt not expect they child to become an Olympian.

There are 250,000 athletes in USA Swimming and we keep a

record of the Top 100 all time swimming performances by age

group. Only 2 of the swimmers listed inthe10 & Under age group

made it to the Top 100 in the 17-18 age group. There are only 52

spots available for the Olympic Team every four years. Your

child’s odds of becoming an Olympian are about .0002 %.

Swimming is much more than just the Olympics. Ask your coaches

why they coach. Chances, are they were not Olympians, but still

got so much out of swimming that they wanted to pass the love for

the sport onto others. Swimming teaches self-discipline and

sportsmanship; it builds self-esteem and fitness; it provides

lifelong friendships and much more. Most Olympians will tell you

that these intangibles far out weigh any medal they may have won.

Swimming builds good people, like you want your child to be, and

you should be happy your child wants to participate.

YOUR ROLE AS A PARENT

Competitive swimming programs provide many benefits to young

athletes including self-discipline, good sportsmanship, and time

management skills. Competition allows the swimmer to experience

success and to learn how to treat success and failure as two sides

of the same coin, while becoming healthy and physically fit. As a

parent, your major responsibility is to provide a stable, loving and

supportive environment. This positive environment will encourage

your child to continue. Show your interest by ensuring your child’s

attendance at practices, coming to swimming meets, volunteering

for your club at swim meets, participating in fund raising, etc.

Parents contribute to the success experienced by the child and

the team. Parents serve as role models and their children emulate

their attitudes. Be aware of this and strive to be positive role

models. Most importantly, show good sportsmanship at all times

toward coaches, officials, opponents and teammates. Remember

that you are teaching your child at all times.

Be Enthusiastic and Supportive !

Remember that your child is the swimmer. Children need to

establish their own goals and make their own progress towards

them. Be careful not to impose your own standards and goals. Do

not over burden your child with winning or achieving best times.

Let them know that first they are the child you love, and second, a

swimmer. Tell them you will love them whether they swim well or

not and ask only that they give their best effort. Learning about

oneself while enjoying the sport is the most important part of the

swimming experience. The swimming environment encourages

learning and fun, which will help your child develop a positive self image.

Let the Coach Coach!

The best way to help your child achieve goals and reduce the

natural fear of failure is through positive reinforcement. No one

likes to make a mistake. If your child does make one, remember

that this is a learning experience. You and your child should learn

to treat success and failure as learning experiences and not life

changing situations. Encourage your child’s efforts and point out

the positive things. The coach is the one you have assigned to

judge a swimmer’s performance and technique. Your role is to

provide love and support regardless of the outcome.

KEEP THE FUN IN SWIMMING

A few years ago, USA Swimming conducted a survey to try to

understand why kids participate in swimming and why kids drop out

of swimming. (Results from this survey were printed in the

December1996 issue of USA Swimming’s Splash). Probably the

most important finding from this survey was that fun played a

huge a role in participation. Kids stay in the sport because it is no

longer fun.

Based on this finding, USA Swimming decided to conduct a followup

research project to try to identify exactly what is fun and

what is not fun about swimming. In the first phase of this

project, we held focus group interviews with a total of 48 agegroup

swimmers (ages 8-18) from three USA Swimming clubs. The

athletes were asked a variety of questions to uncover their

perception of these two aspects of swimming. Two of the

questions asked focused on how parents influence kids’ swimming

enjoyment - “What do parents do that makes swimming fun ?” and

“What do parents do that takes away from the fun of swimming ?”

The question was not whether parents have an influence on kids’

swimming enjoyment (because we know they do) but on the

specific things parents do and say which influences the fun in

swimming, both positively and negatively.

Through these focus group interviews, the kids were able to help

us better understand the influence parents can have on their

enjoyment of swimming. From a review of the athletes’ responses,

several themes become evident. As you read on, keep in mind that

this is coming directly from age group swimmers and reflects

their swimming experiences.

What do parents do that make swimming fun ? What do

parents do that takes away from the fun of swimming ?

Provide support

One resounding thing coming from the kids was that parents

increased the fun in swimming by providing unconditional

encouragement and support. For the most part, it seems that a

physical presence at meets and interests in what their child is

doing goes a long way towards enhancing swimming enjoyment. The

kids seem to enjoy swimming when they feel their parents support

them regardless of their performance. This theme is illustrated

by the following:

“My parents are very supportive....I know my parents will be happy

for me whatever I do. I mean, if I do bad, they’ll still be

comforting and if I do good they’ll be happy for me. I think the

people whose parents are pushy are going to have the most

potential to quit because they have so much pressure on them.”

(Age group 15-18)

“She (mom) doesn’t expect any more from me then I expect from

myself which I think is important because when parents start

placing expectations on their kids, it just makes the kids more

stressed. I just think parents should be very supportive.” (Age

group 15-18)

“You need reassurance (after swimming poorly) that they still love

you. They’re still going to give you a ride home. “ (age group 13-14)

“I always want my mom to be there. I always want someone to be

there watching me, cheering and stuff like that and I don’t feel

like I want to do as well when they’re not there. I kind of feel like

I need to show them even though they tell me I don’t need to

show them. “ (age group 13-14)

Don’t Push Too Much

A theme that was identified by the kids as detracting from the

fun of swimming related to parents’ pushing too much. Some of

the kids felt that excessive pushing by their parents to practice,

compete and perform well made swimming less fun, as exemplified

below:

“I don’t like it sometimes because they push me so hard that it

makes me feel bad and I just don’t like to swim sometimes because

they push me so much. “ (Age group 10 and under)

“I saw this one mom who was yelling at her kid, and saying things

like, ‘ I spend so much money on you. I can’t believe you did so bad

today.’ The kid was already crying and her mom was still yelling at

her. Then her mom throws her stuff down and leaves. If my mom

ever did that, I’d just want to quit because you need

encouragement from everyone around you if you want to win.”

(Age group 13-14)

Learn Optimal Push

Interestingly, there was a positive side to this idea of ‘parental

pushing’. Kids talked about the role of parents in enhancing fun in

swimming by providing a push. However, caution is warranted as

there is a fine line between pushing in a positive way and pushing

to the detriment of kids’ enjoyment. As evidence below, it seems

a slight push from parents can enhance enjoyment and, as kids

point out, is often needed.

“I think your parents sort of want you to do things and I think you

kind of grow to like it...... You are sort of pushed firmly by them.”

(Age group 15-18)

“They kind of push us to go to swimming.... And it makes us feel

better that we swam.” (Age group 11-12)

“I like it when my parents push me because I was out for a year

and I became a C swimmer because I aged up and just this last

week I became a B swimmer instead because my parents were

cheering me on and they pushed me.” (Age group 8-10)

“It’s kind of good for them to push you or make you go to

practice.” (Age group 10 and under)

Resist Assuming the Role of Coach

A last theme evident from the kids responses is tied to the idea

that when parents take on the roles and responsibility of the

coach it takes away from the fun in swimming. Critiquing races,

offering suggestions on what went wrong or how to improve, and

placing expectations on performance are examples of things

parents do that tend to decrease the kids enjoyment. An

exception to this seems to be when parents have credibility as

swimmers, advice is sometimes welcome as it is viewed as coming

from an expert as opposed to a parent. To be sure, however,

parents may want to ask their kids if they want advice or

suggestions regardless of the parents swimming background. Kids

talk about this detrimental influence:

“My parents are supportive of me but sometimes my mom keeps

asking me about what I think I did wrong if it’s a bad race and I

want to just forget about it. It is really annoying when she keeps

asking me.” (Age group 13-14)

“I like it whenever my dad gives me goals because he’s a masters

swimmer. But my mom, whenever she’s in the pool, all she does is

float and she doesn’t like to get her hair wet unless she’s in the

shower so when she says ‘You gotta keep on doing this’, I’m having

a hard time believing it because she doesn’t really swim that much.

She just likes playing around with it.” (Age group 10 and under)

“My dad used to be a swimmer and he almost made it to the

Olympics so his just being there is a real big motivation and he

gives me advice and stuff.” (Age group 13-14)

What Does all This Mean?

1) Taking in conjunction, it seems that kids want parents to be a

presence in their swimming but they want this presence to be one

of unconditional support with little advice. In essence, the kids

seem to be saying, ‘Mom and dad, support my efforts but don’t try

to help me swim faster.’

2) Parental ‘push’ was mentioned by the kids in both a positive and

negative vein. Because of individual differences in needs and

preferences, it is probably very difficult for parents to define

and identify an optimal ‘push’; a push that is strong enough to be

beneficial but not so strong that it is perceived as overpowering

by the kids. However, for the benefit of the kids, every effort

should be made to walk this fine line and try to achieve an optimal

‘push.’

POSITIVE PARENTING TIPS

1) Your child needs your emotional, physical, and financial support.

Be liberal in providing this support.

2) Provide optimal ‘push’.

3) Understand development - long-term development as an athlete,

and growth and development as it impacts performance.

4) Be realistic in terms of expectations; factor in age and skill

level; be aware of your child’s perception of your expectations.

5) Emphasize performance and effort, not just outcome. The

athlete only has control over his/her performance. Define and

measure success as giving maximal effort and as personal

improvement.

6) Keep winning in perspective.

7) Focus on the power of rewards -

· Give plenty of encouraging and rewarding statements.

· Give rewards sincerely and when warranted.

· Catch your kids doing something right.

8) View swimming as an arena in which to teach your child about

commitment, hard work, coping with adversity, etc.

9) Work to form an effective Coach-Athlete-Parent Triangle.

ARE YOU A PRESSURE PARENT?

The following survey has been taken from the Amateur Swimming

Association of Great Britain. If you answer yes to one or more of

these questions, you may be in danger of pressuring your child. It

is important to remember that the parents’ role is critical and

should be supportive at all times to ensure a positive experience

for your child.

1) Is winning more important to you than it is to your child ?

2) When your child has a poor swim, is your disappointment, such

as through body language or vocal tones, obvious ?

3) Do you feel that you are the one to have to ‘psych’ your child up

before competition ?

4) Do you feel that winning is the only way your child can enjoy the

sport ?

5) Do you conduct ‘post mortems’ immediately after competition or

practice ?

6) Do you feel that you have to force your child to go to practice?

7) Do you find yourself wanting to interfere with coaching and

instructions during practice or competition, thinking that you

could do better ?

8) Do you find yourself disliking your child’s opponents ?

9) Are your child’s goals more important to you than they are to

your child ?

10) Do you provide material rewards for performance ?

GLOSSARY OF SWIMMING TERMS

Age Group Swimming

The program through which USA Swimming provides fair and open

competition for its younger members. It is designed to encourage

maximum participation, provide an educational experience, enhance

physical and mental conditioning, and develop a rich base of

swimming talent. Nationally recognized age groups are 10 and

under, 11-12, 13-14, 15-16, and 17-18. Local meets may also include

events for 8 and under and single age categories.

Block

The starting platform.

Bulkhead

A moveable wall, constructed to divide a pool into different

courses, such as a 50 meter pool into two 25 yard courses.

Circle Swimming

Performed by staying to the right of the black line when swimming

in a lane to enable more swimmers to safely swim in each lane.

Coach

A person who teaches and trains athletes in the sport of

swimming.

Coach-Athlete-Parent Triangle

It has been shown that a balanced positive relationship between

the coach and athlete, the coach and parent, and the parent and

swimmer offers the swimmer the best opportunity for both high

swimming performance and positive life experience.

Code of Conduct

An agreement signed by swimmers, coaches and parents stating

that they will abide by certain behavioral guidelines.

Cut

Slang for qualifying time. A time standard necessary to attend a

particular meet or event.

Distance Events

Term used to refer to events over 400 meters/500 yards.

DQ

Disqualification. This occurs when a swimmer has committed an

infraction of some kind (e.g. freestyle kick in butterfly.) A

disqualified swimmer is not eligible to receive awards, nor can the

time be used as an official time.

Drill

A teaching exercise involving a portion of a stroke which is used to

improve technique.

Dryland Training

Training done out of the water that aids and enhances swimming

performance; usually includes stretching and calisthenics (also see

weight training).

Entry Form

Form on which a swimmer enters a competition. Usually includes

club and swimmer name, USA Swimming number, age sex, event

numbers, event names and entry times.

False Start

Occurs when a swimmer ismoving before the start is sounded. In

USA Swimming, one false start will result in disqualification.

Final

The championship heat of an event in which the top swimmers

from the preliminaries compete.

Finish

The final phase of the race; the touch at the end of the race.

Flags

Backstroke flags placed 5 yards (short course yards) or 5 meters

(long and short course meters), from the end of the pool. The

flags enable backstrokers to execute a backstroke turn safely and

more efficiently.

Goal

A specific skill or time achievement a swimmer sets and strives

for. Can be short or long term.

Gutter

The area along the edge of the pool in which water overflows

during a race and is circulated through the filtration system.

I.M.

Short for Individual Medley. An event in which the swimmer uses

all four strokes in the following order: butterfly, backstroke,

breaststroke, freestyle.

Lap Counter

A set of display numbers used to keep track of laps during a

distance race longer than 500 yards. (Also, the title given to the

person who counts for the swimmer, stationed at the opposite end

from the start.)

Long Course

A pool 50 meters in length. USA Swimming conducts most of its

summer competition in long course pools.

Long Distance

Term used to refer to events of 800 meters. 1000 yards, to 1500

meters/1650 yards.

LSC

Local Swimming Committee. The governing body for swimming at

the local level. There are 59 LSC’s in the United States.

LSC Camps

The LSC Camps provide local age group athletes with camp

experiences that focus on skill development and athlete education

and motivation.

Meet

Competition designed to be a learning experience. By

implementing what has been learned in practice, the swimmer

races against the clock to determine improvement.

Middle Distance

Term used to refer to events of 200 yards/meters to 400

meter/500 yards.

National Reportable Time/Top 16

Time standards set for both short and long course to give national

recognition to the fastest 16 swimmers in each stroke, distance,

gender, and age group. Achieving these standards allows a

swimmer’s time to be submitted for consideration each year. They

do not guarantee achieving a Top 16 ranking.

National Team

The “A” team comprises those American swimmers who are ranked

inthe Top 8 in the world. The “B” team includes those ranked inthe

Top 16 in the world.

Negative Split

Swimming the second half of the race equal to or faster than the

first half.

NGB

National Governing Body.

Official

A judge on the deck of the pool at a sanctioned competition who

enforces USA Swimming rules. There are stroke and turn judges,

administrative officials, starters, timers and referees.

Open Water Swims

A freestyle event from 5000 meters to 25,000 meters,

conducted in a natural body of water, such as a lake, river or

ocean.

Optimal ‘Push’

That combination of encouragement and restraint that gives the

swimmer the most parental support with the least interference.

Pace Clock

Large clock with a large second hand and a smaller minute hand,

used to check pace or maintain intervals in practice; may also be

digital.

Prelims

Short for preliminaries. Also called Heats or Trials. Those races

in which swimmers qualify for the championship, consolation finals

or semi-finals.

Q-Time

Qualifying time necessary to compete in a particular event and/or

competition. Also known as a cut.

Relay

An event in which four swimmers compete together as a team to

achieve one time.

Safety

The condition of being safe. Safety procedures are designed to

prevent accidents.

Scratch

To withdraw from an event prior to itbeing held in a competition.

Shave

Prior to major competitions, older, more experienced swimmers

sometimes shave their entire bodies to reduce resistance and

heightens sensation in the water.

Short Course

A pool 25 yards or 25meters in length. USA Swimming conducts

most of its winter competition in short course yards.

Split

A time recorded from the official start to the completion of an

intermediate distance within a longer event. Also the time for one

of the four individuals in a relay. Under certain conditions, splits

may also be used as official times, for example, the lead off swim

in a relay, or the lead off portion of an event.

Sprint

Describes the shorter events (50 and 100). In training, to swim as

fast as possible for a short distance.

Streamline

The position used by swimmers when starting or pushing off the

walls designed to reduce water resistance.

Taper

The final preparation phase, sometimes referred to as ‘rest’. The

slow gradual reduction of work loads and intensities in preparation

for season ending competition.

Time Standards

Performance requirement to enter a swimming competition.

Standards are determined for local swim meets by the LSC.

Time Trial

A time only swim, which is not part of a regular meet.

Touch Pad

A large touch sensitive board at the end of each lane where a

swimmer’s finish is registered and sent electronically to the timing

system.

USAS

United States Aquatic Sports.

USA Swimming

USA Swimming, Inc. is the national governing body for competitive

swimming in the United States.

USA Swimming Registration Number

A number assigned to a swimmer upon joining USA Swimming. The

membership card with this number may be required at any given

competition.

Warm Down

Low intensity swimming used by swimmers after a race or main

practice set to rid the body of excess lactic acid and to gradually

reduce heart rate and respiration.

Warm Up

Low intensity swimming used by swimmers prior to a main practice

set or race to get muscles loose and warm. Warm up gradually

increases heart rate, respiration and helps to prevent injury.

Watches

Stop watches used to time swimmers during a competition. When

totally automatic timing equipment is used, watches serve as a

back-up method.

Weigh Training

A form of dryland training that is suggested only for older

swimmers. Excessive weight training in younger swimmers can

injure the growth plates and cause bone and joint problems later

in life.

Zones

USA Swimming is divided into the Eastern, Southern, Central and

Western Zones. The Zone meets are the highest level of age

group competition available to USA Swimming age group

swimmers.