

LET SWIMMING BELONG TO THE CHILD

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After 44 years of coaching swimming, there are very few things of which I am that most dangerous of all words, "CERTAIN".

Many of the things I learned and was taught in the 70's and 80's and 90's first went 180 degrees opposite in the decade to follow and many even have now gone 360 degrees from what I was originally taught/learned. What one learns from this is to not "KNOW" anything but to amass a large and diverse toolbox and pull out the appropriate tool at the appropriate time and do the job.

But here is one that I am certain about.... when the mommy of the 10-year-old is following her daughter to the blocks for every event, she's on the wrong course!

When the daddy of the 14-year-old boy is engaged with teenage "boy talk" with his son and his friends, he's on the wrong course!

When the mommy of the 12-year-old girl wants to sit and "socialize" with her daughter's friends during down time at the swim meet, she's on the wrong course!

When the daddy of the 11-year-old boy is busy "psyching up" his son before the 100 breaststroke, he's on the wrong course!

In each of the cases above, if that behavior continues, the child will have left the sport of swimming within a couple of years, cynical, disappointed and in real WANT AND NEED of some independence.

Sports are one of the ways that children establish an independent identity and person. It's one of the most common ways that they become "themselves". One of the safest and one of the best.

When the parent hovers (helicopter parent) or "paves the way" (curling parent) for the child, it deprives the child of exactly what they seek and need MOST in their teen years...separation from their parents and an identity of their own.

Worst of all is the parent who tells other parents..."We swam a best time in the 100 fly last weekend!" Really? Mom or Dad? How many strokes did you take and how many did Mary take and didn't it get crowded inside that one size 18 suit?

Know what the most popular of youth activities is for teenagers, especially boys?

It's skateboarding. What are the characteristics of Skateboarding?

No Parents.

No Rules.

No Coaches.

Peer teaching.

Peer evaluation.

Peer recognition.

Strong group identity.

Psychologists say that internal motivation is the most powerful force there is.

Internal motivation comes (in part) from a sense of personal control.

Read that again. Personal control.

Children will leave the sport that "belongs" to their parents, for something their parents abhor. (use your imagination). This, knowing that the parents will STAY AWAY from anything they abhor.

One can go so far as to say that the goal of the teenage years IS and SHOULD BE separation and independent personal identification. If you, as a parent, don't allow SWIMMING to be a place where your child can 'be themselves" without parental domination, your child won't be swimming long.

Chronologically...

At age 8 and under, the parent is the most important person in the child's "swimming life"...as it should be.

Around age 10-11, the COACH becomes the most important person in the equation. The child listens intently and has an attachment to the person they view as taking them "seriously" as people.

Somewhere around ages 11-14, their PEERS become the driving and most important "other" in their swimming lives. Coaches are second and parents a distant third. If you violate this as a parent, the child will leave the sport and "go elsewhere".

It stays that way until time for college. Then, for a variety of reasons, some of them very practical in nature, You as parents once again, become profoundly important in the swimming process. It will be Oh So Nice, to hear..."Mom, Dad, are you coming to my swim meet?"

Do your son or daughter the honor of understanding the above. And let them "own their sport".

All the Best, John Leonard ■

