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Six No-No Phrases for the Swimming Parent

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Parents often ask what to say to their swimmers to help them succeed. The conversations that happen between a parent and child can have a dramatic impact in shaping a swimmer's attitudes toward swimming. The phrases below are all things coaches have heard before, and we just cringe when we hear them. Each is an example of what not to say to your swimmer.

1. Introducing your child to someone as "the swimmer." "This is Johnny, the swimmer." Swimming is something your child does, not who she is. Help your child cultivate his identity as a person, and encourage him to be the best he can be at swimming. Ultimately, he will better be able to weather the storms of failure and enjoy the fruits of success in swimming if his identity is not wrapped around it.
2. "We came all this way/spent all this money/took all this time... and you swam slow/didn't try/performed poorly." Your kid is probably already disappointed in her own performance, without adding the weight of your parental sacrifices. Understand that it is the nature of human performance that your child will not perform at his or her best at every meet or in every race. The effect of making this comment is that the next time you make a sacrifice to go to a meet, your child will feel the added pressure - possibly to the detriment of his performance.
3. "Good job" (When your child doesn't perform well) She knows when it was a good swim and when it was a bad one. False praise does nothing but cheapen the praise when it is actually deserved. Try "good effort" or "you'll get 'em next time" or "I love you anyway."
4. "WE need to get this cut, WE need to win this event, etc." How many lengths of the pool are you swimming, mom? It is your child's swim, not yours, and you should try to promote his ownership of his performance. Be his biggest fan--there to support him through good and bad--not his teammate.
5. "It's probably your training" (reason why you swam slow). As a parent, it is important that you buttress your child's confidence in his coach. If you have concerns about your swimmer's progress, address them with the coach. Passing your concern on to your swimmer is likely to weaken the coach-swimmer partnership.

6. "It's okay, you don't have to go to practice today." This one comes up when your child is tired, cranky, or is just not wanting to go to practice. It is going to happen at some point that your age grouper will have one of these days. But rather than act as enabler by caving to your swimmer's desire not to attend practice, remind him that it his swimming and his results at the end of the season that will be affected. Remind him of the commitment he has made to his team and to his own swimming. The key is to get your child to make the decision, rather than having you the parent act as the passive enabler. It's tough -- you may not want to take him to practice either, but taking this approach consistently will help your child take ownership of his performance.