

On Holding Children Accountable

By Guy Edson, Technical Director of ASCA

A recent article, “Self-Esteem Lie” by Laura Caler, elicited a number of replies from coaches. To sum them up: “holding children accountable would be a lot easier if parents would take a step back and allow them to succeed and fail on their own.”

Coaches love to coach accountability and responsibility. They know it leads to better performances. But more importantly, and every coach will tell you, coaching life skills is every bit as important as all the swimming stuff.

One former coach writes, “I am now in management and I can see that the younger people entering the workforce who have not been allowed to fail on their own, who have not received negative corrections, or who have been otherwise protected from negativity to their self-esteem are difficult to manage. I don’t have the time or the budget to coddle them. I would rather work with people who are able to take the corrections and develop into better employees.”

Unfortunately, a coach’s ability to teach accountability is often interfered with by the parent.

A school psychologist writes, “I get all sorts of parents who are in denial about the problems of their children. I have parents calling me asking to have their children retake ADHD testing so that their child can be treated differently and not have to follow the same rules – even though their children are perfectly normal.”

A coach told me about the time he gave a warning to a swimmer who was late getting in the water for practice even though he observed him at the pool 30 minutes early. His warning was that on the next occurrence he would dismiss the swimmer from practice for the day. That evening he received a phone call from the irate parent telling the coach how difficult it was to arrange the transportation for getting the child to the workout and if he ever dismissed the swimmer from practice for ANY reason he would have to answer to the Board of Directors.

Another coach related to me the time at a swim meet when a swimmer was upset over her performance and asked “What can I do to get better?” The coach replied that coming to practice on a consistent basis would be the most important thing she could do. The father cornered the coach during a rare break time for the coach at the meet and demanded he apologize to his daughter for making her feel badly. She was “involved in many activities and was making as many workouts as she could” and her lack of improvement was the responsibility of the coach.

These are extreme (but not uncommon) denials of a swimmer’s personal responsibility.

What is a coach to do? Here is an answer most parents do not want to hear: The coach will learn to coach those who are responsible differently from those who hide from responsibility. One coach writes:

“We have to pick and choose who we are honest with these days. It isn't a matter of style but more a matter of who the parents are and their style. I have basically identified the swimmers I can be more honest and direct with and the ones I can't be that way because of their parents.

In my group of Juniors I have one swimmer I can't be honest with. I just say, "Good job" and that's it. When he swims poorly and the parent wants to know why he is swimming poorly, I tell will tell her my opinion but I know it is not something I can say to the swimmer without catching her wrath. So, at practice, I don't give him the full benefit of my coaching. For some others, however, they are all for me pushing their kids and being up front and honest with them. So, I am. And they respond. Some of the kids get a lot out practice because they get the full benefit of my coaching. Others do not because I have to hold back and only tell them what their parents allow them to hear. And when the kids who are getting all of the coaching do well, which they are, the other kids say, "Why are they doing better than I am?", the answer is pretty clear but I don't get to give them that honest answer either. And as these kids get older, they will be more and more handicapped because their parents will advocate for them, bail them out more, protect them more so that when they get to college or out in the working world, they will have no experience with any criticism or any failure because they have been protected or excuses have been made for them. In our case, or my case, because I can't be honest in my criticism on deck with some of them, they are not getting the complete coach. In fact, they are getting a very diluted dose of my coaching. So, how effective can that really be?"

What's a parent to do?

Parenting expert Susan Brown of the Commonwealth Parenting Center in Richmond Virginia says to let your child fail. Brown wants parents to hold children more accountable for their mistakes and face the consequences. Learning to deal with failure, according to Brown, is part of becoming more responsible and accountable.