

Moving Up to the Next Training Group

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Spring is here and baseball season is upon us. Parents are attending Little League games. They are yelling at umpires, pressuring coaches to play their kids in certain positions and making spectacles out of their children during the game. While this is a generalization of the Little League experience, it is the perception that is often expressed when pointing out poor examples of parental behavior during a youth sporting event. Such examples have made national and local newscasts in the past. While these may be extreme examples, the impression has stuck and spawned a term in the coaching profession known as “Little League Parenting”.

Why would a swim coach be writing about baseball? The spring serves as a time for move-ups within our program. It is at this time that swimming parents most frequently mimic the “Little League Parent” mentality. If you are a parent who politely requested a conversation about your child’s situation revolving around move-up’s, then this article is not about you. If you are a parent who demands your child move-up, creates added anxiety to your child by discussing move-ups, commonly gossips in the stands at practice and/or meets about move-ups or treats move-ups as an absolute necessity to your swimmer’s career, then this article is for you.

The structure of our program is different from other organizations with which your child may be involved. In these other programs, a child who does not move by a certain time is listed as a “failure” and held back to retry. Conversely, schools and other activities may move children strictly by age or by performance level, with little else influencing the decision. In the Dynamo Swimming program, many factors go into the decision to move a swimmer to another group. These factors vary at different levels of the program.

1. Attendance. Attendance is one factor. At the early stages, it is important to attend regularly but not imperative for move-ups. Being at practice frequently enough to learn new skills is often good enough. During the later stages, it is a very important factor.

2. Work ethic and attitude. Attendance is coupled with work ethic and attitude. A swimmer who attends every practice but fails to push beyond a certain level is less likely to move than a person with slightly less attendance who does not hesitate to work at a consistently high level. Attendance, attitude and work ethic usually combine to produce faster times as swimmers progress through the program. But even speed cannot be a single determining factor when it comes to move-up’s.

3. Performance and skill development. At an early stage in the age group program, a faster swimmer may not move-up if she cannot master basic skills that are being taught. “Fast swimming” at this level commonly is a result of early physical maturity or natural ability. Failure to learn how to better propel oneself through the water may result in a very short career. Perception of success will diminish as other kids physically catch-up and then surpass the early achiever in skill development.

4. Other factors. Other factors include, but are not limited to, time management skills (the ability to juggle schoolwork and a training regimen without compromising either), confidence level and emotional maturity. Because so many factors are involved with a move-up, it is rare for a specific group of athletes to move up at the same rate. Each individual is “graded” on his or her own attributes. Consideration is given to what conditions will best serve the athlete’s swimming future.

It is this individual consideration that usually causes the most confusion among parents. While they often can discern some of the factors, they may not recognize all of them. Sometimes this leads to questions. These questions are welcomed by the coaches. Sometimes, however, it leads to “Little League parenting”, and this is abhorred by the coaches.

Many “Little League parents” see themselves as simply looking out for the best interest for their children. Just how destructive can “Little League parenting” be? Let’s go back to the examples. A parent who demands that his child be moved-up has overstepped his position. As mentioned above, he cannot know all of the factors involved in the decision. In addition, the parent displays a lack of confidence in the program. This can have a variety of effects on both the program and the child. The child has worked in an effort to progress through the program. When a parent demands a move, the child will never truly know if she earned it. Since success in swimming is attained primarily through hard work and dedication, it is essential that the swimmer learns this lesson at an early age.

If a parent creates added anxiety to his child by frequently discussing move-ups or treating move-ups as an absolute necessity, then the parent places value on group placement above the swimmer’s personal development. Simply put, he learns that he can only achieve success if he is in a certain group. Instead the lesson should be that he is always in a position to succeed if he applies himself to his potential.

If a parent commonly gossips in the stands at practice and/or meets about move-ups, then both of the above factors come into play, as well as setting a bad example to new parents and outsiders. Each of these examples displays a lack of confidence in the program and the coach. An essential element in coach/swimmer relationships is the support of the parent. Without this support, it is more difficult for a swimmer to attain the level of trust with the coach necessary to foster a good learning environment.

The long term development of the swimmer is the most important aspect of coaching. Within the staffs at each facility, the coaches have witnessed the development of a great number of swimmers. They have seen what happens to kids who move-up too early seeking the prestige of a certain group. These athletes often leave the sport prematurely. The coaches have also seen that swimmers who move in a timely manner or even “late” still have ample opportunity to succeed.

The next time move-ups come around, be a good “Swimming Parent” and discuss your swimmer’s development in an appointment with the coach. Ask questions and express your concerns, but in the end, trust in the coach’s decision to do what is best for your swimmer.