

# 10 Things Swimming Parents Do That Coaches Can't Stand

By Wayne Goldsmith

A close friend and one of the giants of world swimming coaching has a saying:

*“My idea of coaching heaven is to have a ten lane, world-class swimming facility, with a fully equipped, professional quality gymnasium and a state of the art recovery centre built right alongside the world's biggest orphanage.”*

Why would someone with Olympic Gold medal, world record and world championship level coaching credentials feel so strongly about the challenges of working with swimming parents?

It *should* be relatively straight forward: **coaches coach; swimmers swim, parents parent**. Not that all that complicated really. This is not a thesis on thermodynamics – it's just three groups of people working together to achieve a common goal – to help a swimmer realise their full potential.

So why is it that so many coaches will tell you that their biggest problem – the greatest challenge they face – is not finding pool space or identifying talented swimmers or battling bad weather or being able to buy the latest and greatest swimming training equipment: it's working with difficult and sometimes destructive swimming parents?

Maybe this might explain it:

## 10 Things Swimming Parents Do That Coaches Can't Stand

### 1. Doing it all for their kids.

Confidence is the essential ingredient in all great swimming success stories. Confidence comes from knowing: i.e. knowing you can **do** it. Swimming parents think they're helping by doing all the little things for their kids but the parents who pack their child's swimming bag, empty it for them, make their breakfast, carry their swim gear, fill their water bottles etc. are doing the exact opposite. They are creating *dependent* swimmers – instead of *independent* young people and that's not going to result in developing teenagers who possess a strong sense of confidence, self-belief, resilience and self-reliance.

### 2. Insist on coaching their kids in technical areas.

Coaches coach. Parents parent. That's it. It's that simple. Coaches help swimmers develop things like physical skills, technical skills, turns, dives, starts, finishes, kicking, pulling – all that stuff. Swimming parents help their children learn values and virtues and help their children to develop

the positive character traits that will sustain them throughout their lives. If everyone stays focused on doing their job well – everyone wins – *particularly* the swimmer.

### **3. Listen to other parents talk about technical issues.**

Swimming parents listening to other swimming parents about technical issues really annoys coaches. For example: “*My friend, Susie, whose child swims at another program told me that they do a lot more breaststroke than we do. Can we start doing a lot more breaststroke?*” Coaches spend years learning how to write programs, how to enhance swimming skills, how to improve stroke technique and how to build an effective training environment. Unless “**Susie**” has the same skills, experience, knowledge and commitment to coaching, it is unlikely her opinions on technical matters are as valid as the coach’s. Sitting on the side of another pool, watching training from a distance (and let’s face it – parents only really watch their own child anyway), then making assumptions to apply to all swimmers at all pools is so ludicrous it is incredible that it happens at all. Yet – for some reason – some swimming parents find it necessary to listen to the views of people who have no idea what they’re talking about rather than have faith and trust in their child’s highly trained and experienced professional coach.

### **4. Gossip.**

Want to know why swimming parents are banned from so many pools around the world – **Gossip**. Coaches hate those little groups of swimming parents who sit together comparing “*John’s freestyle technique*” to “*Mary’s freestyle technique*” and then criticise the coach because neither child swims as fast as Michael Phelps, even though they’re only six years old and train once a month. Got a problem with the coach – **go to the source and talk to the coach** – not to other swimming parents.

### **5. Talk swimming all the time to their kids.**

We all love this sport. But it’s just a sport. There are movies, art, music, politics, literature, theatre, other sports, rest time, going to the beach, hiking, learning another language.....the world is full of millions of wonderful experiences and children need the opportunity to be exposed to as many of them as possible. There is no need to talk swimming all the time. All it will do it increase the likelihood that the child will walk away from the sport in their mid teens and frankly – this “teenage retirement” syndrome is a worldwide swimming epidemic that we all have to work together and try to stop.

### **6. Expect PRs every time their child swims.**

No one swims PRs every time they swim. No one. Re-read this line ten times. **No one**. Coaches cringe when swimming parents approach them saying “*Steve didn’t do a PR in his butterfly today – what’s wrong? What’s the problem?*” The child might have done a PR in seven other events, have done five football practices through the week and sat for four school exams but because they didn’t do a PR in one event, there’s a problem?! Trust in the coach to do his or her job.

## **7. Demand accelerated development.**

Coaches design and develop their program structures with a lot of thought, research and experience behind it. This long-term development pathway concept has its roots in mainstream education. For example, children aged 5 are introduced to basic mathematics at school. When they turn 8 years of age, they are exposed to long division. When they're 15 they can do trigonometry, calculus and advanced geometry. Similarly, there's a logical, purposeful process of developing athletes from learning to swim their first stroke to being able to win a national swimming title. Swimming parents who try to force coaches to push their kids ahead to the next level of development before they're ready, are not helping the child (or the coach).

## **8. Give race instructions to their kids.**

Just don't do it. No need to comment further on this – just don't.

## **9. Treat their children according to their child's swimming performances.**

This happens everywhere in the world and for some reason some swimming parents just don't get it. Child **wins** – love them with all your heart. Child **loses** – love them with all your heart. Child does ten PRs – **love and support them unconditionally**. Child doesn't do a PR for six months – **love and support them unconditionally**. How fast a child swims should have no bearing on how they are treated, spoken to or loved. When it comes to loving and supporting your child – *particularly in public* – winning and losing make no difference.

## **10. Try to talk to the coach on deck during workouts.**

There's a really good reason why coaches don't like this. **Safety**. If a coach turns their head to talk to a swimming parent about “*Billy's backstroke turns*” or “*Jenny's butterfly splits*” and there's a safety issue in the pool, the coach is legally responsible and liable. Put it another way, if another swimming parent was talking with the coach on deck during workout and that meant your own child's safety was compromised, how would **you** feel?

When coaches, swimmers and swimming parents work together as partners in performance – 100% committed and focused on helping the swimmer to realise their full potential, amazing – incredible things are not only possible – but inevitable.

A positive, constructive, successful swimming program is very possible when swimmers, coaches and swimming parents work together honestly, respectfully and with integrity.

## **Wayne Goldsmith**

Wayne Goldsmith has been an influential figure in world swimming for more than 20 years. He has written more than 500 articles on swimming, swimming coaching, swimming science, triathlon and swimming performance which have been published in books, magazines and online all over the world. Wayne has been a staff writer for *Swimming World* for the past ten years. Wayne lives, writes and coaches on the Gold Coast, Australia.