

The following article was found in the January/February 2010 edition of Splash Magazine. Swimmers and Parents please take time to read the article...

PARENT PRESSURE by DR. ALAN GOLDBERG (Sports Psychologist)

"I'm so nervous. Oh my God, I can't wait for this event to be over! If I don't get a good time, I'm going to hear about it all the way home! Every time I swim slow, I have to go through the ringer with my dad (or mom) and listen to everything I did wrong. According to them I don't work hard enough, my turns suck, and I fool around too much. They always make me feel awful after bad races, like they're disappointed in me. It makes me hate swimming."

A lot of swimmers get a bad case of performance anxiety pre race which saps their confidence, tightens their muscles and drains the fun right out of the sport. Often times, underlying these pre race jitters is the powerful worry that unless they produce, mom and dad will be very angry and disappointed.

When a parent responds to your bad swims with their anger, disapproval and criticism, we can assume that most of the time, their heart is in the right place. They're simply trying to be helpful and want you to do well. Unfortunately, this is not their role on the team, and they need to know that their trying to be helpful in this way may actually be causing you to swim slower.

Why?

In order to swim your best, you must be loose, relaxed, excited and having fun pre race. If you're worried about disappointing your parents, then you'll be too nervous, distracted and physically tight to swim well. Your parents need to understand that if they really want you to go fast, then their role on the team must be to help you stay calm and have fun.

They can do this in two ways:

First, by being your "best fan"; parents need to be emotionally supportive and positive with you, to pick you up when you're down, to help you feel happier and better about yourself, especially after a bad swim.

Second, by not coaching, coaching is the one parent mistake that will cause serious unhappiness in your house and performance problems in the pool. Coaching involves critiquing your practices and races, pushing you to work harder, trying to motivate you, focusing you on beating other swimmers or achieving certain times, offering pre race strategy and technique advice, etc.

Have a conversation with your parents today and tell them that when they act like your coach and get angry and frustrated when you go slowly, they aren't being supportive, and this will never help you relax, have fun and swim faster. Instead, coach them as to exactly what you need from them before and after your races. Help them understand what, if anything, they could say pre meet that would help you relax and have fun. Tell them what you most need from them after a disappointing swim or meet. Remind them that they have to play their right role on the team for you to be successful!