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Resolving Conflicts With the Coach

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It's part of the nature of our sport that conflicts sometimes arise between parents and coaches. Conflicts are often the result of a difference of opinion between parent and coach over the career development of the parent's child. Additionally, lack of, or inadequate, or improper communication on the part of the coach or parent compound the situation. While ASCA continually stresses the importance of good communication skills with coaches and makes it a regular topic in clinics and in coach's publications, today I would like to address parents on this issue.

As a parent of a swimmer many years ago, I know the feeling of despair when things were not going as well as I would have liked. I know the feeling of wanting to challenge the coach on one issue or another. What's a parent to do when you think the program isn't meeting the needs of your child?

Time out. Let's review that last sentence again: "What's a parent to do when **YOU** think the program isn't meeting the needs of your child?" Perhaps the child is fine! If the child is happy and improving, then "Life is Good." Let it go. It's not about YOUR goals for the child – it is about their feeling of happiness and their own individual pace of progress. However, if the child is not happy then see below.

Time in. Here are some strategies for resolving conflicts with the coach:

1. Don't use email to discuss an issue. Tone is often misread in email. Even using the telephone is problematic when it comes to solving issues. The old fashioned method of face to face communication is still the best.
2. Don't take your issue to other parents or the Board first. Take your concerns direct to the coach.
3. Don't "bushwack" the coach with a sudden and emotional approach. Calm the emotion first, let rational thinking prevail. Ask the coach for an opportunity to discuss your child's progress. Set an appointment.
4. Consider the setting for a meeting. On the deck during practice is definitely out. Before practice can be difficult for the coach as he or she prepares for the workout. After practice is better but there may be too many people around and too many distractions. It would be better to use after practice time to approach the coach to set up an appointment time. A quiet setting apart from others is best.
5. When meeting with the coach first state your concern succinctly and unemotionally. Then immediately ask an open-ended question rather than simply demanding a certain action. An open ended question invites a discussion and paves the way to understanding rather than challenging. For example, "I am concerned that John isn't getting enough work in the group he is in. How do you feel about that?"
6. As Steven Covey emphasized in his Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, "seek first to understand." Make it your goal to fully understand the coach's reasoning for doing something the way he or she is doing it before you make a demand. The coach has a lot of experience and a good long term view of the child's needs. It is fair, appropriate, and recommended that you ask the coach for his plans for your child. It is also fair, appropriate, and recommended that you ask the coach for his critical evaluation of your child's progress.
7. If you are not happy with the coach's initial responses, ask "what if" or "would you consider" questions, for example, "Would you consider having John come to one workout a week with the higher group to see how he handles the work?"

8. If you are not happy with the responses from the coach then more difficult choices come into play. If it is a technical issue having to do with technique or training or the career development of the athlete then most likely the coach has contractually been given the authority by the Board of Directors to make those decisions. If the program is not meeting your perceived needs for your child then there is a mismatch between your expectations and what is being offered and it is time to look for another program. Sorry, but sometimes it's best to go somewhere else that matches up with your expectations.
9. If it is not a technical issue, but something having to do with the coach's style or relationship with your athlete, or some other behavior you are displeased with, and if you are not able to resolve the issue with the coach directly, then the appropriate action is to approach the president of the Board. Follow the chain of command. Let the BOD manage it. If the BOD does not recognize it as an issue, see number 7 above.

Hopefully, a direct meeting with the coach with the attitude of "forming a partnership for the benefit of the child" will lead to a resolution and a long term relationship.