

PRACTICE ATTENDANCE

Parents and swimmers often have questions about the number of practices that should be attended each week. First and foremost, let us say that we offer different numbers of practices and different lengths of practices in each age group for a reason. Obviously, swimmers who are 7 have different abilities and needs than swimmers who are 16. Our practice schedule for each group has been developed with the needs of the swimmers in each group in mind. It should be evident to everyone that to gain the most benefit, each swimmer should attend the maximum number of practices offered. Now, having said that your swimmer should come to every practice offered in their group, let me expand a little bit more, realizing that kids and families have other commitments besides the swimming pool.

Kids are all different and there is no set in stone rule that will work for every personality, but there is a fine line between encouraging a young swimmer to come to practice and forcing them. If your 8 year old wants to go to the circus on Friday night and you say, "No, then you will be cranky for Saturday morning practice," you might want to rethink your perspective. Let the 8 year old go to the circus and sleep in on Saturday morning! Swimming at an early age should be about friends and fun. At Delta we take attendance in the young groups for our records only. The older swimmers, whose responsibilities and commitment affect their entire group, we strive towards 100% attendance. We have a minimum attendance suggestion and it is just that - the bare minimum to stay successful in the group - NOT the objective target, but the MINIMUM. If an older swimmer is only making the minimum number of practices required, they may need to re-evaluate their commitment and their goals and we will certainly be speaking to them about these issues.

Age Group swimmers have 5 practices offered each week. Swimmers who are 9 should probably only come to 3 of the practices and by 10, they should be coming to 4. Those looking to move up to Advanced Age Group should be talking to their coaches and preparing to meet the challenges of that group. If they are close to moving to Advanced Age Group, they should be excited about practices, excited about working hard, excited about swimming DAILY. The kids in the Age Group comprise a broad range of maturity and desire, and parents should use common sense when judging how to encourage their Age Group swimmer. Sometimes a parent might need to say, "You have a meet this weekend so you really need to go to practice." These swimmers should have time to enjoy school friends, other activities, the occasional slumber party. We encourage attendance based on age, maturity, and the swimmer's commitment, but if it becomes a battle, you may lose the war.

Advanced Age Group swimmers have 6 practices a week and they are encouraged to attend all practices. The majority of these swimmers should be looking to move to the Pre-Senior Group and when they are meeting 100% of Advanced Age Group challenges consistently, then we will look to increase their challenge by moving them up. No one should expect to move up if they aren't making the maximum number of practices (6) when that number is usually smaller than the minimum offered to be in the other groups.

Attendance is not just a matter of discipline that we as coaches are trying to force on to kids. In fact, the season's training for each group is designed based on 100% attendance for each group.

Remember, we have set a schedule that we believe is in the best interest of the swimmers in each group. Then we base our training on that schedule. Monthly and weekly outlines ensure that we are covering the necessary categories of training for each group. Workout categories are based on the season plan. Daily workouts are based on what the swimmers have been doing the past few practices and meet performances. If a swimmer is missing days of training, then they are missing important aspects of a training schedule designed to improve their swimming. This is true for all swimmers. Every practice that is missed impacts the outcome of an entire season of training. There is no such thing as a make-up practice. Once you miss, you have thrown off the cycle for the week and it cannot be made up. All you can do is continue to prepare for next week's cycle.

To highlight the problem of missing practices, let's say that we are emphasizing Category A over a four week cycle. We will still continue to train Category B and Category C, but the emphasis of the cycle will be Category A. On the first week we may work on Category A on Monday and Wednesday. If you miss those two days, then you have missed 25% of the training emphasis of this particular cycle. The following week Category A may fall on Tuesday and Friday. Categories are setting each other up and are impacted by meets, practice performances, and other variables. We will not be able to tell you which practices each week you should attend. You should attend ALL the practices offered for your group. Every practice impacts the next. (As an aside, any swimmer who goes to their coach and asks which days they should attend each week should consider moving back to a group with a less demanding practice schedule.)

As coaches, it is our job to provide the best opportunity for our swimmers to improve their competitive swimming. It is up to the swimmers to take advantage of the opportunity that we provide. Decisions of attendance begin with parental encouragement for younger swimmers and should ultimately become the responsibility of the committed swimmer. Remember that no one gets ahead by doing the minimum, whether it is at school, in the workforce, or at the pool. The optimum performance is preceded by the maximum preparation.

Consistent Training for Long Term Development

I've noticed that our practice attendance is usually highest the week before a meet. This phenomenon may be attributable, in part, to misconceptions regarding the nature of swim training. While there are certain skill-oriented tasks that can be polished the day before competition, most of the benefits attendant to swim training require more than a few days to develop.

Improvements in strength and endurance, for example, can be attained only by stressing the body beyond what it is accustomed to. The immediate result of such a workout or series of workouts is to diminish, not enhance, the body's physical capacity. With proper recuperation, of course, the swimmer comes back stronger than before. Depending on a variety of factors including the rigor of the workouts, other stresses in the child's life, and dietary and sleep habits, this rebound effect of training may not be evident for several days.

Thus, workouts leading into an important meet are designed to maintain the conditioning improvements obtained from the previous weeks and months of training. Those swimmers who

have not been attending practice regularly and then come the week before a meet may actually be overstressed by a practice that is structured only to consolidate gains already made.

The importance of a progressive training program cannot be overstated. In order to induce the necessary fatigue, each application of stress must be slightly greater than the previous one. Too little stress (*e.g.*, infrequent attendance or insufficient effort) and the swimmer will stagnate or even lose conditioning; too much stress and the swimmer will not be able to recuperate. Because the effectiveness of a given workout depends, in large part, on the foundation built from preceding workouts (detraining occurs rapidly with certain facets of conditioning beginning to disappear within only one to two weeks), consistent practice attendance is vital to the development of strength and endurance in your swimmer.

As with the development of physical capacity, the development of effective swimming skills occurs most rapidly with regular practice attendance. This is true, in part, because physical condition and stroke technique are closely linked: without the requisite strength and endurance to perform a stroke properly over a given distance, "knowing" the skill itself is meaningless. It is also true in the very nature of learning, and is especially true in swimming, which is not a natural activity for most of us. When we attempt a new skill or modify an old one, the movement feels awkward, even foreign. It is only after weeks and months of focused practice that the movement begins to become part of us.

Unfortunately, the necessity of a long-term perspective in age group swimming is often obscured by short-term gains attributable to the nature of learning itself (improvement in a new task is almost immediate because one begins with few skills and minimal fitness) and the size/strength increases (resulting from normal growth and maturation). Once these "inherent" gains have been realized, however, further progress will be made only through hard work and careful attention to detail.

While it is true that some aspects of conditioning vanish quickly with disuse, the investment your child makes in swimming will have more than transient benefits. The generally stronger heart, lungs and muscles developed over years of regular training are retained long after, while the swimming skills themselves are largely permanent. Such "residual" physical effects of training have allowed masters swimmers to return to training and competition well after their collegiate careers and equal or surpass their best performances. But for most adults who were age group swimmers, performance measured in hundredths of a second is less important than other benefits deriving from their swimming careers. The development of strong bodies and sound swimming skills and an appreciation for the hard work necessary to obtain them are the greatest rewards available to the diligent swimmer.