

## **Is your child ready for swim team??**

**By: Coach Lisa**

I get this question every summer, especially from parents with 5 and 6 year old children. Since I lived through this myself as a child (with vivid memories still today), have coached hundreds of 5/6 year old children, and currently *HAVE* both a 5 & 6 year old child, I've got a clear perspective on this that has become my policy as a coach.

When children are truly "ready" for swim team, it is a beautiful thing to watch them grow and develop into noticeably better swimmers in just weeks. The improvements never cease to amaze me - this is why I coach! On the flip side, there is almost nothing worse than watching a child that is not "ready" for swim team struggle all summer, frequently latched to lane ropes while crying, and feeling inadequate around his peers. This child is set up to have a horrible experience, and likely will never return to swimming having unfairly judged it as "a bad sport for me". What a shame to lose that child to the best sport on the planet (yes, I'm biased). Sometimes waiting a year is the best decision.

### ***How do you know when your child is ready?***

There are three components that need to be in place for a young child to have a positive, productive, and beneficial experience on swim team:

**STRENGTH:** Can your child get all the way across the length of a 25 yard or meter pool doing the crawl (freestyle stroke)? Their stroke does not have to be perfect, but just mostly in tact. That means, their face *HAS* to be in the water at all times (except when breathing - no dog paddling), their arms should be able to reach in large circles out of the water and in front of them, and their feet are kicking somehow. All other fine-tuning about their stroke can be learned on swim team if they can do the above *ALL* the way across, without stopping. This minimum amount of strength is critical since they will do multiple laps in every practice. It becomes a water safety issue! This component is a *MUST*, and children will not be allowed to continue on swim team without it.

**MATURITY:** Is your child capable of following instruction, abiding by rules, and paying attention within a large group setting? They don't have to be perfect on all fronts at all times, but in general do they pay attention and respect authority? I recognize that young children have short attention spans, so I keep a playful, fun atmosphere with clear rules so that children can thrive; but, minding is essential. Secondly, is your child mentally "sturdy" enough to withstand rigorous exercise for one hour? Do they have a perseverant personality? You may not know the answer to that until they are tested, but if they have been exposed to a similar situation that requires mental stamina, it is helpful!

**DESIRE:** Does your child really want to be here? I realize kids need to be gently pushed to get started at times - this can work well with some kids. But, does it get easier as they are exposed, and quickly become their idea to do swim team? (especially if the other 2 components are in place). You have to monitor this closely to ensure "buy-in" from the child, or it will backfire on us all.

My own children are great examples of highly different 5 year olds. My middle daughter, now 6, would never have been ready for swim team last summer (when she was 5), both in strength and maturity to sit through a 1 hour practice. She is perfectly ready this summer with one more year of growth and kindergarten behind her (which has taught her a lot of maturity). On the other hand, my youngest (now 5) is perfectly ready for swim team this summer, both in strength and personality. Her stroke is not perfect, but she can last and is totally water safe! Their first year of swim team will be together this summer.

What about the "fearless" child? There are many of those out there - I love them! This is a great trait, **IF** the child has the strength to do back and forth laps. Otherwise, it can be dangerous on a swim team.

***My advice to parents to evaluate and prepare their child:***

**START NOW** - early in the spring BEFORE summer gets here.

- Get your child in a pool, whether that be swim lessons, or recreational play on the weekends at your gym. Don't let June 1<sup>st</sup> be their first time in the water since last summer.
- Watch your child swim across a 25-yd pool before swim team starts. Can they make it across without stopping? You can judge this as well as a coach.
- Talk to your child now - start planting the seeds of swim team. Discuss the routine, the other kids that will be there, the fun! Does this appeal to them?

The "ready" child will have a magical experience their first year on swim team - maybe that is this year, maybe next year. I hope to see your shining star on swim team when they are "ready"!

*Coach Lisa can be contacted for further questions at [lisa@coachlisa.org](mailto:lisa@coachlisa.org)*