

## Readiness for Competition and the Young Swimmer

Across sports, kids seem to be competing at younger and younger ages. Children as young as three, four, and five are competing in sports such as gymnastics, swimming, and baseball. As an extreme example, there is a competitive event called a "baby decathlon" in which infants compete against each other. Young children used to "play" with friends after school and on weekends, for a variety of reasons they now are enrolled in organized, competitive athletic programs. Should we be concerned? Can a child be too young for athletic competition?

### **When is a young swimmer ready to compete?**

While this is a seemingly simple question, it is actually quite complex with no easy answer. In addressing this question about readiness, first, we need to define what we mean by "competition". Then, we need to assess readiness across disciplines -- from a biological, sociological, psychological, and physiological perspective -- because, for example, a young athlete may be physiologically ready for the demands of competition but not psychologically ready. Only after readiness across disciplines has been examined can we try to answer this question with each of our young athletes.

### **What do we mean by competition? Restructuring competition to make it developmentally appropriate.**

When assessing readiness for competition, we tend to define competition strictly as organized swim meets where the participants compete against each other in specific events according to specific rules; a so called "adult model" of competition. A more fitting way of looking at competition involves broadening our definition of competition to include models that are developmentally appropriate. A young athlete may not be socially, psychologically, technicality, or physiologically ready for the "adult model" of competition but would be ready for and benefit from more developmentally appropriate types of competition. So, we need to think not so much about whether the young athlete is ready for competition and instead think about what type of competition the young athlete is ready for. In the following section, a few ideas or suggestions of competitions more appropriate for developmental athletes are presented.

Keep in mind that at the developmental level, the important element is skill; it therefore makes sense to structure events that emphasize skill. In addition, evaluating performance based strictly on time is an injustice to our late maturing athletes that are at a biological disadvantage relative to their early maturing peers. Be creative in using different evaluation criteria or rewards that recognize areas we want to emphasize i.e., stroke, technique, individual improvement. Following are varied examples of appropriate competitions for developmental athletes:

- Technique meets
- Skill recitals
- Do-overs instead of DQs
- Alter events based on physical abilities, i.e., allow 5 butterfly strokes then 5 butterfly kicks

- Race strategy competitions
- Intra-squad and inter-squad meets
- Relay only meets
- Single age events
- Compete by height
- Buddy meets: pair younger swimmers with older swimmers
- Fewest stroke / stroke rate competitions
- Swim and score: kids score teammates stroke

By creating developmental progressions for competition that are not part of our traditional rules and competitions, we are setting up a more sound and appropriate program for entry level swimmers to develop a firm foundation; a foundation that includes proper skill development and the development of self-esteem. Finally, creating a sound developmental program will instill in children a love of swimming.

### **Understanding Readiness**

As previously mentioned, because the question of readiness for competition is complex, the answer is also going to be complex. While we can not provide definitive answers regarding when precisely a child is ready for competition, we can 1) identify criteria or specific aspects of development that need to be met for the young athlete to be "ready" for swim competition (of the adult model); 2) discuss reasons why all young athletes are not developmentally ready for competition.

Readiness issues regarding the areas of psychological and social development are discussed below. However, coaches must rely on their best judgement and knowledge of the swimmer to determine physical readiness for appropriate levels of competition.

- As discussed in the psychological development section, the young athlete's perspective-taking ability develops sequentially and is important to understand because it impacts the young athlete's behavior in sport. In regards to this perspective-taking ability, in order to "compete" athletes need to be able to see the world from perspectives that go beyond their own personal perspective and see relationships that don't involve them directly. That is, they need to possess the cognitive abilities to take multiple perspectives or multiple roles. For the competition to be meaningful, the young athlete must be able to conceptualize the competition from an opponent's perspective and engage in social comparison. It would not necessarily be harmful for the young athlete to compete without this perspective taking ability but the athlete's motivation and satisfaction would have to be derived elsewhere. "Imposing a competitive reward structure on the sport activities of children who do not possess these social-cognitive skills is at best senseless and futile" (J. Coakley). Furthermore, as discussed earlier, research has identified sequential stages of development in terms of role taking abilities (Selman, 1976). And, it is not until around age twelve that individuals develop the ability to engage in formal reasoning and to put oneself in numerous roles. In sum, it seems that prior to age twelve (roughly) young children do not possess the social cognitive abilities to understand and experience the competitive process.

- Another cognitive skill that impacts an athlete's readiness for competition involves how she explains performance outcomes, also termed "causal attributions". This cognitive skill is important not only because it illuminates aspects of performance that can be addressed in training but also because it impacts the athlete's perceptions of competence (a developmental skill discussed earlier). For example, an athlete can attribute a loss to an unstable factor, such as lack of effort, and still feel competent in her abilities. Conversely, an athlete may attribute a loss to lack of ability, a stable factor, which will negatively impact his perceptions of self-competence. It has been found that prior to around age twelve, children are not able to distinguish between effort and ability in explaining successes and failures. These young athletes, therefore, do not have the attributional abilities to accurately assess competence based on competitive performances. "These developmental shifts in causal reasoning influence not only how children of different ages will assess their competence based on performance outcomes but also how they will respond emotionally to those outcomes, what their future performance aspirations and success expectancies will be, and how they will approve or disapprove of other children based on those children's outcomes." (Passer, 1987).

- In trying to determine a young athlete's readiness for competition, we also need to assess if the athlete has the coping skills to deal with the demands and challenges inherent in the competitive environment. Some of these demands and challenges may include dealing with success and failure, managing time and energy at the competition, getting DQ'd, and performing in front of others. A young athlete who is found in tears after a race may not have the coping skills to deal with competition and is therefore not "ready" for competition. Coaches need to monitor how the young athlete copes with various situations in practice to determine if she has the coping skills to deal with the increased demands and challenges of competition. Use "teachable moments" in practice to help the athlete acquire coping skills.

- There is a developmental need for social comparison beginning around five-six years of age. Yet, the above comments suggest that young athletes may not be ready for competition (adult model) until eleven-twelve years. We need to think about how we can fulfill this need for social comparison without adding additional stress/pressure that the athletes may not be ready for. We need to be creative in structuring opportunities for "healthy comparison".

Now, back to our original question "can a child be too young for competition?" The answer would be "yes" if we are strictly referring to competition as competition of the adult model (i.e., organized swim meet) because, as has been discussed, young athletes often do not have the psychological, social, and physical skills necessary for the competitive environment.

However, if we structure competition to make it developmentally appropriate for these young athletes, they can benefit from the experience and develop the skills to prepare themselves for competition.