

HANDLING DIFFICULT SITUATIONS WITH PARENTS

Guy Edson

American Swimming Coaches Association



THE GOAL OF THIS PRESENTATION

- ◉ TO... Give you strategies for dealing with some common difficult situations with parents
- ◉ NOT... To make your difficult situations go away

WHAT IS A DIFFICULT SITUATION?

- ⦿ It's one that tightens up your stomach and gets your adrenaline flowing
- ⦿ Let's be honest... it's about...
 - -
 - -
- ⦿ It's also about Fear. Fear of:
 - -
 - -

THE FOUR SCENARIOS - OVERVIEW

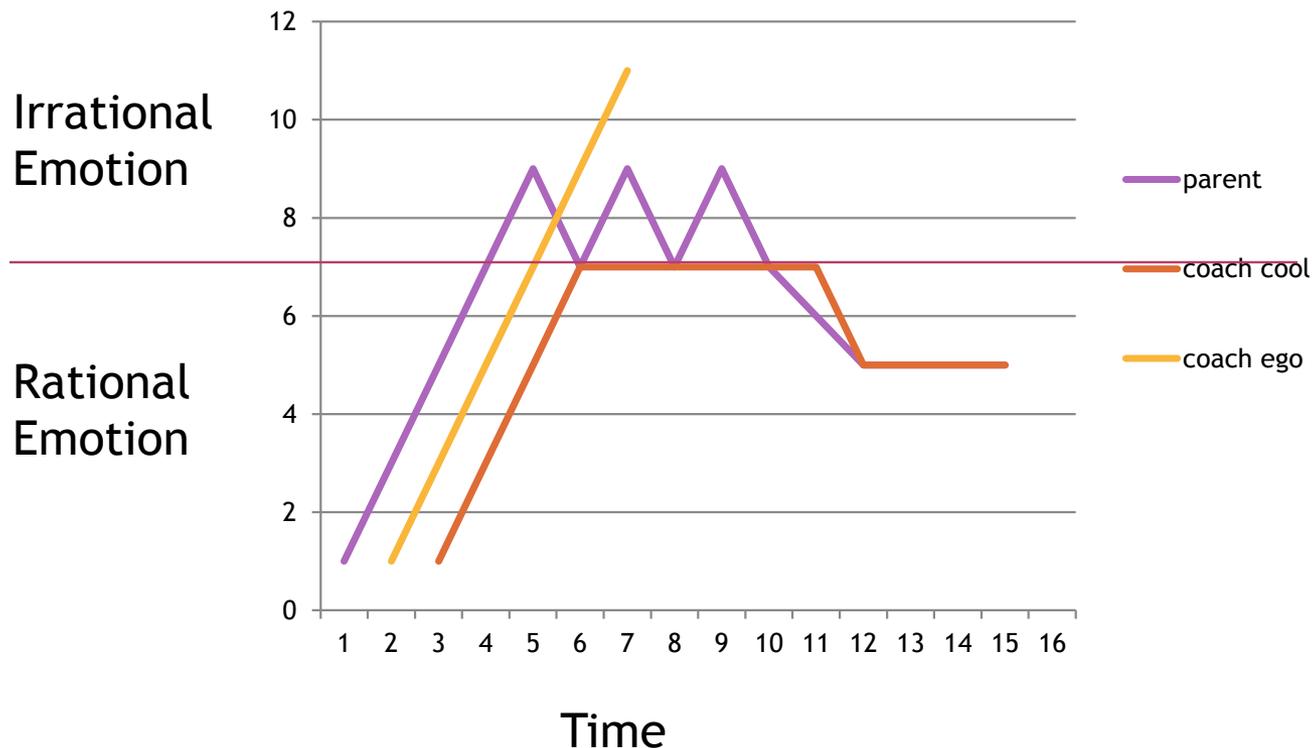
- The interfering parent on deck
 - 3 common situations
- The undermining BOD member
- The micro-managing BOD president
- The impossible to please parent

BASIC PRINCIPLES

- ◉ Calm the emotion, yours' first
- ◉ Delay the confrontation and take it out of sight or sometimes, arrange a meeting later.
- ◉ A smile, politeness, respect, a good question, and great listening skills go a long way
- ◉ Before the meeting:
 - Seek advice and support.
 - Be clear on your position.
 - Be prepared to offer solutions, sometimes compromises.
- ◉ At the meeting: Clear description of issue. Ask questions first, seek to understand.
- ◉ Move on

UNDERSTANDING THE EMOTIONAL CURVE

- Learn how to calm emotion and diffuse anger
 - Deal with the emotion first, facts 2nd



REALITY

- ◉ Different personalities handle situations differently.
- ◉ Different experience levels (age) handle situations differently
- ◉ It is possible to be too confrontational and it is possible to be too non-confrontational.
- ◉ No absolute rights and wrongs
- ◉ The “closest right” is professionalism, respect, and a calming presence.
- ◉ The “nearly always wrong” is adding to the emotion.
- ◉ In the middle is sticking to principles respectfully.

THE INTERFERING PARENT ON THE DECK - 1ST STUDY

- You're running practice for a group of 9 through 12 year olds. One of the swimmers is unusually unfocused. Her dad steps on to the deck, ignoring you, and pointing his finger at his daughter yells at her to get going. And then, he just stands there at pool side, arms folded, watching his daughter.

STRATEGIES

- You feel like you want to kick his butt off the deck. You don't have time for a discussion. You need to focus on the swimmers. If you let him stay there, others will want to do the same.
 - He's emotional to begin with, don't add to it. Take a breath.
- Ask this question: "I can see you are upset with your daughter's difficulties today." Let him vent.
- "Would you let me handle it and then we can talk about it after practice?"
- "If she doesn't see me standing here she will start goofing off again."
- "Her focus needs to be on me. If you continue to stand here I will need to stop practice."

IF YOU GET TO A MEETING

- Your goal is to seek a partnership with the parent.
- To do that you need to know what his concerns are.
 - Why does she (his daughter) come to practice?
 - What are HER goals?
 - How much has she improved over the last year?
- Tell him what you are going to do
 - Give her the best coaching you can
- Ask him how he can best support your coaching of her.
- Resolve that he is not going to interfere on the deck again.

THE INTERFERING PARENT ON THE DECK - 2ND STUDY

- At a swim meet you are watching one of your swimmers in an event when the mom of another child who was disqualified in an earlier heat steps in front of you and demands to know what you are going to do about the disqualification. You were not aware that the child was disqualified.

STRATEGIES

- ◉ Do not add to the emotion. Acknowledge her concern. Ask her for a moment so that you can watch the swimmer in the water.
- ◉ Then, do your best to move the conversation out of view of others.
- ◉ Ask her if she knows why her son was disqualified. Tell her you will check with the official and get back to her.
- ◉ You find out that he did two dolphin kicks off the wall on breaststroke and you explain that to the mom who then insists her son never does that.
- ◉ Do you really want to get into a “life discussion” with the parent at this time? (victim versus victor, fairness versus unfairness, defeat versus resiliency, etc.) She doesn’t want to schedule a meeting, she wants a resolution now.
- ◉ The resolution is: “The officials followed procedure and the disqualification is final. I will look at his turns during warm-up tomorrow to be sure he is doing it correctly. There is nothing more that can be done.”

THE INTERFERING PARENT ON THE DECK - 3TH STUDY

- At an important swim meet you go through a final preview of the 400 meter free with one of your 12 year old swimmers where you review workout swims and pacing, reminding the swimmer to swim smooth and steady on the first 200, then pick up the 3rd hundred, and come off the wall into the 4th hundred like gangbusters. On the way to the blocks however, the father pulls his boy to the side and tells him to “eliminate his competition” in the first 200. The swimmer goes out too fast, fades badly, and misses qualifying for the JO’s by less than a second.

STRATEGIES

- ◉ Is this an evil, wacko, dad? No. Does he know he screwed up. Probably not.
- ◉ This is a clear need for a meeting away from the pool at a quieter time.
- ◉ Ask permission to meet. Tell him the purpose of the meeting - “To discuss his son’s performance in the swim meet.” No bushwhacking.
- ◉ Seek a personal meeting, not a phone meeting. (Don’t even think about email.)
- ◉ Ask the dad for his view of his son’s performance.
- ◉ Continued...

STRATEGIES CONTINUED

- ◉ Ask specifically about the 400.
- ◉ Ask how he thinks his son should swim the 400.
 - (Do you really have the patience to do this? Do you have the time? Can you afford not to?)
- ◉ Ask him if he knows how the best swimmers in the world swim the 400.
 - Not to scold him, but in a caring and informative way.
- ◉ Tell him how you train his son to swim the 400.
- ◉ Ask him if he thinks it is good for his son to have conflicting advice from him and the coach.
- ◉ Resolve to let you coach, and he gets to be his son's biggest cheerleader.
- ◉ And what if he doesn't agree on how to swim the 400?

THE COVERT, UNDERMINING BOARD MEMBER

- Mrs. Jones, a popular and personable board member, regularly asks you simple questions about just about everything including meet schedule, selection of events, and long term development strategies but rarely enters into a full discussion about any of these matters. One day you hear from another Board member that Mrs. Jones has been talking to “everyone” about how you have “too much control” and she thinks the Board should limit your authority.

STRATEGIES

1. Your primary contact with the BOD is the board president. Make sure you have daily communication with the president and all matters are discussed. KNOW that you are good with the board president.
2. Do not address Mrs. Jones about what you have heard she is doing. You could be the victim of gossip. There could be gross misunderstandings.
3. When you hear a rumor that so-and-so has said something that is damaging at worst, or simply incorrect at best assume that it is “out there” and address it generically in your weekly parent education e-newsletter.
4. Meanwhile, see number 1.

THE AGGRESSIVE OVERT BOARD PRESIDENT WITH HIS OWN AGENDA

- After a year of cooperative smooth sailing with the previous BOD president, the newly elected BOD president has a philosophy and a program plan that upsets everything you have worked for over the past three years. He is the father of two very good swimmers, one is 8 and the other is 10. He wants his children to swim in a special workout with a select group of swimmers aged 8 to 18 and coached by your assistant coach whom he has been quietly preparing for the role and wants to relegate you to “co-coach” status with the second level of swimmers.

STRATEGIES

- ◉ RUN!
- ◉ 3 choices
 - Run
 - Comply
 - Create a revolution
- ◉ Revolution
 - Support, allies, meetings, strategies
- ◉ Wait, this presentation is about dealing with tough parents
 - Sometimes you need to work around them

THE DIFFICULT TO REASON WITH PARENT

- After practice a parent tells you that her 8 year old is not getting enough work and that she should be swimming with the 11-12 year olds. You believe you handle the situation well by explaining your progression for the child and that the best place for the child is where she is right now. You think the issue has been answered until you see the parent put the child back in the water in a recreation lane after regular workout is over and coaches the child herself for another 30 minutes. As a workout guide, she follows the workouts you had posted for the senior swimmers earlier in the day.

STRATEGIES

- Take down your senior workouts!
- Why is this troublesome?
 - Too much pressure on the child?
 - Wrong coaching from the parent?
 - The parent needs a life?
- Bottom line:
 - If a parent wants to do something “stupid” with their own child, they have a right to!
- Second bottom line:
 - Keep talking to the mom.
 - Maintain your base of support in case she goes viral with your refusal to allow her daughter to be all she can be.

FINAL REMARKS

- ◉ Age really helps!
- ◉ In the meantime, humility, respect, good questioning, good listening skills are your best strategies.

THANKS FOR LISTENING IN!

Guy Edson
American Swimming Coaches Association
gedson@swimmingcoach.org
800-356-2722

