



The \$120 Swim Lesson

Should you push children to go to lessons they hate or let them drop out?

This was the summer my son was going to learn how to swim! He was seven years old and old enough to agree to the lessons when I asked him in March. I signed him up and paid the \$120. Come July, he was feeling more anxious about it and resisted going the first day. Once again, I'm faced with the age-old parenting question: "Should I make him go, or let him stay home?"

As a parent, we want to provide our children with a taste of the many wonderful experiences that life can offer. We flip through pages of booklets of the many offerings of classes, daycamps, preschools and envision our child loving the sports, art, music, science lessons, camps and activities. We take time to sign him up, write checks, arrange transportation and prepare him for the first day. The first day arrives, and he doesn't want to go. What to do now? Should we drag him to the activity kicking and screaming, or give in and let him miss?

It depends on your child and your goals for the activity. Does your child usually complain until he gets there and then loves it? Or does your child complain loudly the whole time he is there and all the way home? Did you sign up your child to acquire skills, socialize a bit more or for a little downtime for you?

I would suggest the 'nudge, but don't force' approach. Encourage him to go the first day and try it out. One day, that's it. This is giving the child informed consent. He needs to experience what he is going to make a decision about and if he goes the first day and hates it, then let him drop the activity. Most venues will give you the majority of your fees back, if you drop it immediately after the first day. If he loves it, then he will be glad you nudged him. Like getting kids to try new foods, one bite is enough to know if it will work for them or not at that time. If you can't get a refund, don't worry about wasting the money. It's better to build trust with your child in that he will try new things if you don't force him to attend the whole way through in the name of 'committing to the agenda.'

Many adults get second chances and can drop out of things they don't like. As children get older, you can teach the importance of commitment with chores, friends and homework, rather than with activities. If you force them to attend the activity the whole course, you risk teaching them to hate the very activity you were hoping they would love. If it's skills, socialization or time to yourself that is the goal, is there another way to achieve it? Is it the right time to work on that now?

If you have a quiet, shy or anxious child, promise to stay with him and leave in baby steps as per his comfort level. Again, building trust is important. Ignore complaints from staff that will recite their 'no parents allowed' policy. You know your child best and need to act in his best interests.

Research supports a gradual leaving of your child and building trust in your relationship that you will fulfill your promises of staying until he no longer needs you. Child program professionals should understand the importance of your child's comfort level and it should supercede any perceived concerns that 'it will show favoritism to one child' if their parents are allowed to stay.

If the venue or staff will not let you stay, consider a more parent-friendly program or venue and also consider if your child is really ready. Sometimes a few months or weeks of further emotional or social development is all your child needs to push his independence further.

In the end, my son didn't go back after the first day of swimming lessons. However, he trusts that if he tries something new, he has the power to trust his instincts about whether the choice is right for him or not and have those instincts respected by his parents. That is worth more than \$120.

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