

TIPS FOR CORRECTING STROKE TECHNIQUE WITH YOUNG AGE GROUPERS

Teaching so it sticks !

Greig Cronauer - swimcoaching.com - 2011

Stroke technique is critical for swimmers at any level but especially for 10-unders. The key is a constant stream of instruction, critique and feedback of every swimmer's stroke. There is group instruction and individual instruction. You start with group instruction when introducing new skills, but reminders and correction is done individually. One way is to break down the individual instruction into three categories:

1. "Snippet" : This is a quick verbal or visual cue given to individuals between repeats of a set or while they are swimming. E.g.: "**Julie, fingers together!**" "**Tommy, keep that head still!**" "**Sarah, shoot that right hand deeper.**" A visual "snippet" might be pointing your finger at your high elbow as the swimmer turns to breathe on freestyle, or pushing your hips up as they do backstroke. (We always put the younger swimmers in the outside lanes so the coach and swimmer can see each other clearly. The coach walks up and down the deck constantly giving them the opportunity for verbal snippets at either end of the pool and visual snippets in between.)

2. "One-on-one": The swimmer is brought over to the edge (or out) of the pool, eye contact is made, and the coach gives a tip or correction more detailed than a snippet. The swimmer may miss the next repeat of whatever set they are doing but this is more important. Example: (leaning over and putting your hand on his shoulder for his full attention...) "*Timmy, improving your Breaststroke kick could get that "B" time you want. Your kick is OK right now but could be better if you made your body more streamlined by lifting your heels more and dropping your knees less. Let's work on that for the rest of this set so we can make it a habit, OK ? Practice lifting your heels so much that they break the surface just slightly. (overcorrection) Then, after a few repeats of those you can lower your heels just a couple inches. A streamlined kick will help you get your goal time at the next meet,O.K.?*" After this verbal encouragement, watch them for the first repeat, giving them a thumbs up if it's what you want or stopping them for a re-explanation if they don't seem to get it. A one-on-one averages about 60 seconds, even if you have to pull them out to manipulate their limbs on deck.

3. "Super focus": This would be more for older swimmers in higher groups but there are occasions for it with younger swimmers if you have the time and space. A "super focus" is a 2 to 5 minute "one-on-one" where the skill is done repeatedly over short distances with feedback after each one. E.g.: "*Did you feel that second fly kick happen close to when your hands came out? It looked better! Now let's try a few strokes without breathing to see if those arms come out even easier! Round out your finish a little too, instead of pushing all the way backward*" The swimmer gives feedback to the coach and the coach tweaks their instruction to the swimmer (with praise) to get the desired result. Usually, you can get the swimmer to do the skill correctly at least once. Once this happens, tell the swimmer that what they are feeling, however strange, is the right way. If they can do it right even once, then half the battle is won.

When coaching any group of 10-unders, try not to go more than a minute without a "snippet" or more than 3 minutes without a "one-on-one". That is a lot of feedback and it may be hard to do for an entire practice. How much you use the "Super-focus" depends on the ability of the group to complete their task without your supervision and on how much practice time you have.

If you have done a good job teaching the use of the pace clock these will be much easier to do. If you aren't playing traffic cop all the time it leaves you free to do more teaching and correction. After a group explanation or chalk-talk, do a set of 20x25's on 1:00. This gives you the opportunity to give a snippets or "one-on-one" to 20 swimmers or fix 20 stroke faults.

If your brain feels like a wet dishrag at the end of an age group practice, you have probably done a great job with follow-through.

There are a few keys to doing this effectively.

1. Giving a blanket reminder to the group before a set, like **“Keep streamlined when we push off every wall.”** is good but much less effective unless you follow through with individual swimmers. Since they know what you are emphasizing on that set, and a swimmer neglects it, it's a perfect time for an immediate one-on-one.
2. Make sure they can hear instruction or critique. If they don't hear you, it's not doing any good. (The pool may be loud and they may not all be looking at you during instruction.) They might not hear half of what you're saying even when they are looking at you. And how often have you shouted "STREAMLINE" at a swimmer who did a poor push off **after** they've started stroking, or even worse, when they're still underwater. They don't hear you! It may scratch your frustration “itch” by verbalizing it but it is not effective at all.
3. Create eye contact. Gain their full attention. No eye glances to the side. If they are younger and don't seem to “get it”, have them repeat it back to you or explain why _____ is important. If they do, smile, pat them on the back and say “excellent”!
4. Follow through and don't accept anything that is not a change in behavior. Stop the swimmer if you have to and let them know what you saw. Proper streamlining with underwater kicking is a critical skill and if you let them get away with it, they are reinforcing a bad habit. They are not doing it on purpose. Perhaps they didn't see, hear, or understand you. But if you don't, make them do it over ... use different words ... use a demonstration pull them out and move their limbs through the motion if you must. Be persistent and tenacious.
5. When you see any form of progress, praise them like crazy! Zero in on individuals... on specifics! Use their name, especially in front of the group. Shouting, **“Sarah, your second fly kicks were awesome on those 25's!”** You have motivated not just Sarah, but every swimmer in earshot that second kicks are good and they will want to get the same praise that Sarah got.
6. Avoid “blanket praise” where you see a few good things and tell the entire group at the end “Great job everyone!” You think you have reached and motivated everyone in your group but maybe only 50% of them actually worked hard or thought about their strokes. That type of “blanket” praise is not as impactful. Praise **individuals** in front of the entire group, as in #5, not everyone ... if they all didn't deserve it.

Follow-through is what makes a good AG coach a great AG coach !!

Don't fall into this trap:

You may sometimes think you're saying the same thing over and over and over again. (**“Kick fast when you turn your head to breathe.”**,**“Seven underwater kicks off every wall”** **“Squeeze the top of your head before you push off”**...etc.) **And you are!!**

But these are young age group swimmers and you are teaching them basics. Repetition is one of the primary teaching techniques. You may have to give well over 100 of these “snippets” every hour **but you are not giving them all to the same swimmer!** You may get tired of saying the same things over and over but with a larger group, each swimmer only hears it once or twice because you individualize it. If you stop repeating (coaching) basic skill correction because you think you are saying it too much,... you aren't. Be tenacious! If they don't “get it” with one method, try another and another.

Under the “Practice Planning” section I have posted a **Practice Outline Template** that I use every day. It has the swimmers' names (for attendance) on the back and is used as a checklist when you chat with a swimmer about something. The great thing about this tool is being able to quickly jot down what was effective with an individual swimmer. Meaning, what technique caused them to “get it”.

Quickly reviewing these notes before each practice reminds you what worked well with each swimmer so you can reinforce it again. It also reminds you to do things like take attendance, note what parts of practice were effective (or not), what could be changed, praise overlooked swimmers, give reviews or teasers about past or future practices, and many other things that coaches sometimes forget.

Reviewing these daily sheets can be the best follow-through for YOU as a coach!