

Planning and Choosing Drills for Young Age Group Swimmers

By: Greg Cronauer

“Drills don’t teach. Coaches teach.” Expecting a drill, or even the right drill, to be the magic elixir that will fix a swimmers stroke is the wrong way to look at their use. And selecting the drills to use with your swimmers is critical. Simply searching for “swimming drills” on the internet will overwhelm you hundreds and hundreds of them. The phrase **“Can’t see the forest for the trees”** is appropriate.

The most effective way to select and use drills is to take a step back and note what common errors are most prevalent within your team or group. If you have a Pre-Team or a Swim America program that teaches good streamlining or proper breast kick, you may not need as many drills for those skills when they move onto the team.

You can start by looking objectively at the results from the previous season, using coaches input (eye test) and VCC scores. Make an honest and accurate assessment. Finding out where your team is weakest in comparison can tell you if it’s a “coaching technique” problem or a “leadership/guidance” problem.

Following is a hypothetical summary given by a Head AG Coach at a 10-under pre-season coaches meeting:

“We greatly improved at Short/Long Free and Backstroke last season. The emphasis we put on streamlining, body position and underwater kicking really paid off. Breaststroke seemed to be OK but we have a lot of natural kickers there so it might be a false positive. We should be having more qualify for LSC Championships so let’s see if we can improve the Breast pulls and streamlines.

Fly and IM are the weakest, with Fly being the worst by far. They seemed sloppy and struggling. Our focus will be on shorter (25’s or 12 ½’s) swims of Fly for 10-under groups, but in near-perfect form. Let’s reevaluate our Fly drills and pick those that work on our weaker technique areas. On Fly days, I don’t care if practice yardage is cut in half, if they look good and feel good for the swimmers. In meets it’s OK if the second 25 of the 50 gets “tired” as long as the first 25 is in great form. Focus on technique before endurance.

Our IM’s could be better but that should be fixed with the work we will do on the short axis strokes (Fly and Breast). Nevertheless, we will work on IM transition turns more than we did last year. Most of our DQ’s last season were from the IM.

The 8-unders are still having problems with their dives. Once a week we will pull the older swimmers to the deep end to work on turns and the 8-U will have all 6 blocks to practice dives. We will have Jr. coaches come in 15 min. early to help with them.”

Evaluation such as this gives critical guidance for selecting drills and teaching points for the season.

10 DRILL TIPS:

1. Select the problem you want to correct before picking the drill! Below is a list of twelve Freestyle problem areas our coaches selected at the pre-season meeting for the age 10-12 groups. That list drove our season’s plan and focus for the drills we picked. (For younger kids the list could be shorter.) Each coach gave input as to the ones they found most effective and explained WHY. That is important for both coach and swimmer to know.

Free	Head: Neutral position. Imagine head+body on skewer	Kick: Small, fast kicks with 6-beat rhythm	Kick: Initiates from butt and core, not knee. ("Big toes touch")	Entry: Hand in front of shoulder + extend 12" deep	Pull: Press down+out while pulling elbow forward	Pull: Sweep in under chest w/ elbow pointing to side	Pull: Finish stroke fast! Thumb close to thigh	Breathing: Keep chin out of shoulder. Breathe EARLY.	Breathing: Eyes look forward but neck doesn't break "skewer"	Timing: No break in kick or tempo when breathing	Timing: Kick and pull joined together by the "twisting hips"	HANDS FLAT, WRISTS FIRM, FINGERS TOGETHER
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2. Some drills are meant to focus on one very specific thing and others, like one-arm-freestyle, can be used (with additional instruction) for many things, like entry, breathing, catch, high elbow, finish, DPS, etc. A timing drill to improve the second Fly kick might not do anything for a higher, softer, hand entry and catch. Using a list like the one above will help you do this. With coaches in agreement, and all on the same page, swimmers won’t be confused.

3. **Try to pick drills that isolate a specific thing.** Select one for each technique you want to “hone” and make sure all coaches are coaching it correctly. If you search the internet, be specific about what you are looking for. Search “*Breaststroke kick drills to correct wide knees*” or “*Drills for timing the breath in Butterfly*”. This should narrow down your options and make it easier to pick one. But the best drills usually come from coaches who have experienced many through trial-and-error. ASCA has some helpful material as well.
4. As individual swimmers learn the drills in practice and find which are most effective (with coach’s help), they should pick two or three to use as “personal drills”. When they know a couple good drills for each stroke they can use them in warmups at practice and meets. I explain to the kids it’s like a Honing Rod used to sharpen the blade of the turkey cutting knife. A few strokes of the blade and the knife is sharper and ready to do the job. They will then be coaching themselves when doing warmups, not swimming sloppy. If they come up behind a swimmer going slower, they won’t pop their head up and stop, they can switch to a slower drill and keep swimming. Any coach could ask any swimmer before warm-ups, “What are your personal drills for Breaststroke?” and they should be able to answer, along with the proper technique it stresses.
5. Teach the drills to the swimmers but keep their ages and ability in mind. An 8-under can learn a few simple drills but giving them a “**Double Tap, Opposite Roll, 3-3, 3-2, 3-1, Full, but only on Tuesdays**” might be a bit much.
6. I particularly like simple overcorrection drills with “**half-and-half**” 25 swims, where they do the drill for 12 yards then switch to regular stroke to feel the difference. Examples would be:
 - “Crab (or Sider) Swim” Freestyle where they keep their elbows pointed to the side of the pool. Swimmers who drop their opposite elbow (by rolling too much) when breathing will feel the difference and correct themselves.
 - Backstroke with a wide entry (10 o’clock and 2 o’clock) to correct crossing-behind-head entry.
 - “Fist Swim” Free where they open their hands halfway down the pool. Concentrate on high elbow and proper finger/wrist position.
7. The first month or two of each season we do hundreds of 25’s on 1:00 with half-and-halves. The benefit of these is the easy interval so swimmers can keep going while the coach can turn their attention to individual swimmers. A set of 20 x 25 on 1:00 will allow you to help each swimmer once, and maybe twice. The other swimmers will keep going and practice their streamlined pushoffs and “groove” their technique by doing the drills.
8. Praise for correct drills! Fix the incorrect ones. Drills don’t teach. Coaches teach. If you are picky about swimmers doing them right, there will be less correcting when they perform the whole stroke.
9. Try making an underwater video of a specific drill (or finding one on the internet), show it to your swimmers (with slow-motion) and distribute it via e-mail or on your web site.
10. Very young swimmers might not have the ability/memory to learn numerous drills, no matter how effective they may be. Start out with the old standbys’, the tried and true ones, such as Freestyle “catchup drill” to lengthen out the stroke, or KKKP to stretch out and streamline a Breaststroke.

SUMMARY:

- Pick drills by isolating what you want to work on. Weaker areas for young kids, blanket approach.
- Always teach **WHAT** the drill is for. Understanding what it does and how it does it! Swimmers should be able to tell you **WHY** they are doing it.
- Teach **HOW** to do it correctly. Just like stroke technique. Drills don’t teach coaches teach.
- Expect perfection! Insist on proper technique for every drill. Don’t let bad habits slide or get worse. Two drills done to perfection is better than ten drills done carelessly or unevenly.
- Insist they have “personal drills” for each of their strokes.