



THE PLAY STANDARD | SPORT ADAPTATIONS

Self-Referenced Sports

Swimming, Running, and Track



The safety standard, the progressions, and all thirty-six lessons

Document 8 of 12 | Version 1.0

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About This Document

Swimming and running are one family because in both the opponent is the clock and the child themselves. Nobody can carry you. No teammate covers your mistake. Nothing that happens in the middle of a set is witnessed by anyone but you.

That makes this family the strongest teacher of four values in the curriculum — consistency, integrity, honesty, and finishing — and the weakest teacher of the values that require other people. It also makes it the family with the highest safety burden, which is why this document opens with a standard rather than with lessons.

In a team sport a child can hide inside the group. Here there is nowhere to stand. That is the difficulty of these sports and it is also the entire reason they are worth teaching.

Structure of This Document

1. Part One: the Swimming Safety Standard. Binding. Swimming does not launch in a community until it is met there.
2. Part Two: the swimming progression and its crosswalk to the PLAY bands.
3. Part Three: running and track — age bands, the load-progression rule, and heat.
4. Part Four: all thirty-six lessons with self-referenced moments.
5. Coach notes for the family.

Part One: The Swimming Safety Standard

This section is not guidance. It is the condition on which Play Academy Foundation offers swimming in a community at all. A community that cannot meet it does not receive swim programming, and no coach, community manager, or board member may waive any part of it.

Drowning is the leading cause of death for children aged one to four. That is the reason swimming is in the portfolio. It is also the reason the standard below is stricter than the minimum any single authority requires.

Standard One: Instructor-to-Child Ratio

Cohort	Maximum ratio
Ages 3 to 5, non-swimmer, no caregiver in the water	1 to 4
Ages 3 to 5, caregiver in the water	1 to 6
Ages 6 to 12, beginner	1 to 4, never worse than 1 to 6
Ages 6 to 12, intermediate	1 to 6
Ages 13 to 17, competent swimmers	1 to 8

This schedule is defensible against every authority simultaneously. Water Safety USA — the thirteen-organization consortium that includes the American Red Cross, the YMCA, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the CDC — states that best practice for young or beginner swimmers without a caregiver in the water is one instructor to four students and no more than one to six. The World Health Organization sets a ceiling of one to five. The USA Swimming Foundation requires a maximum of six to one for its Learn-to-Swim Provider Network.

Anything looser than one to six for a beginner places the program outside the Water Safety USA consensus, the WHO ceiling, and USA Swimming Foundation eligibility at the same time. There is no version of that which is defensible after an incident.

Standard Two: The Instructor Is Never the Lifeguard

A certified lifeguard whose only task is patron surveillance is present during every session, in addition to the instructor. The instructor does not guard. The guard does not instruct. There is no session size small enough to combine the roles.

- Water Safety USA specifies certified lifeguards assigned to patron surveillance during swim lessons in addition to the swim instructors.
- The USA Swimming Foundation requires certified learn-to-swim instructors and on-deck lifeguards as two separate roles.
- The CDC Model Aquatic Health Code observes that if the instructor is focused on an individual, the risk of a different person drowning unnoticed is higher.
- The Red Cross lifeguarding text has stated since 1983 that one person cannot safely perform the duties of a lifeguard and instructor simultaneously. Multiple child drowning deaths are documented in which a coach was serving as the lifeguard.
- Where a lifeguard is legally required, the no-other-duties rule generally makes the dual role unlawful by implication. Texas rule states that lifeguards conducting surveillance must not be assigned duties that would distract from proper observation. South Carolina states that lifeguards on duty shall have no other duty but to supervise the swimmers.



Georgia's state model plan is weaker than the national standard. It permits a second instructor, assistant, or dedicated monitoring adult as an alternative to a certified lifeguard. Complying with Georgia's minimum is not the same as meeting the standard of care, and Foundation programs in Georgia follow this document rather than the state model.

Standard Three: Credentials

Role	Required
Instructor	Water Safety Instructor or equivalent nationally recognized swim instructor certification, plus current CPR/AED and first aid. Basic Swim Instructor authorizes Learn-to-Swim Levels 1 to 3 only.
Lifeguard	Current lifeguard certification, which includes CPR/AED for Professional Rescuers and first aid. Shallow Water Lifeguarding is acceptable where the pool falls within its depth cap, which most community pools do.
Every adult on deck	Background check and abuse prevention training current before first contact with children.

California requires more than a swim credential. California law requires persons providing aquatic instruction at public pools to hold a certificate from a lifeguard training program, or equivalent qualifications, not merely a swim instructor certificate. The requirement is waived when a qualified lifeguard is continuously present — which this standard requires anyway. Meeting Standard Two resolves the California problem as a side effect.

Standard Four: State Legal Requirements

Play Academy Foundation operates in thirteen states, and swimming is the only sport in the portfolio that carries mandatory-staffing law. This table is the briefing document for counsel. It is not legal advice and is not a substitute for a written determination from each state authority before the first session there.

State	What the law does
Texas	A minimum of two lifeguards is required at any pool while it is being used for the recreation of youth groups, including visiting childcare or school groups. Effective January 2023. A nonprofit bringing a cohort of children to a community pool plausibly meets that definition. Two guards, not one. Resolve in writing with Texas DSHS.
Washington	When organized programs including formal swimming lessons are provided for users beyond the limited-use category, the pool reclassifies as a general use pool for the duration, and general use pools require lifeguards at all times. In practice, one non-resident participant can reclassify an HOA pool. Obtain a written read from Washington DOH before scheduling.
California	Lifeguard service is required for any public swimming pool of wholly artificial construction for the use of which a direct fee is charged. HOA and condominium pools are public pools under Title 22. Whether a lesson fee is a fee for use of the pool is a genuine legal question. A free program sidesteps it entirely.
Utah	Lifeguard service required if direct fees are charged or public funds support the pool. Same fee question as California.
Florida	Swimming instructors at a public pool must hold current certification in swimming instruction, first aid, and CPR from the Red Cross, the YMCA, or an equivalent national program. The Department of Health may seek an injunction against a pool employing an uncertified instructor.
Georgia	Izzy's Law, effective April 2024, requires all private swim instructors to have an aquatic safety plan in place before providing lessons. Named for a four-year-old who drowned during a backyard swim lesson, which is to say the law was written with this delivery setting in mind.
Idaho	Lifeguards required when bathers exceed thirty-five and children under thirteen swim without adult supervision.
South Carolina	Lifeguards on duty shall have no other duty but to supervise swimmers. Where one lifeguard is required, an additional pool staff member must be present to make an emergency call.
NC, AZ, TN, CO, NV	No statute found specifically mandating swim instructor certification. Absence of a state mandate is not permission to use uncertified instructors. The standard of care comes from the governing bodies instead.

The Texas youth camp question. If Foundation programming meets the Texas youth camp definition — two specialized outdoor activities, five or more minors, four consecutive days, four or more hours per day — an entirely separate and much heavier regime attaches, including swim testing and classification of every child before water access, separate zones by skill level, one adult supervisor per ten children, and annual background and sex offender registry checks for all staff and volunteers. Determine this before scheduling a Texas camp, not after.

Standard Five: The Community Launch Checklist

Every item is confirmed in writing before the first session in any community. A community that cannot produce all seven does not receive swim programming.

6. A certified lifeguard is contracted for every scheduled session and will not instruct.
7. Instructor credentials are current and on file, including CPR/AED and first aid.
8. Ratios for each planned group meet Standard One, with named staffing, not aspirational staffing.
9. The state legal position has been confirmed in writing for that state, including the fee question in California and Utah and the reclassification question in Washington.
10. An emergency action plan exists for that specific pool, with rescue equipment located, a phone confirmed to have service on deck, and the address posted.
11. Entry and exit control is defined: how children arrive, where they wait, and how the deck is secured.
12. Parent observation rights are stated in writing. Instructors may not prevent observation.

Part Two: The Swimming Progression

The Foundation does not author its own swim progression. It delivers an established one — American Red Cross Learn-to-Swim, or the YMCA equivalent — and maps it to the PLAY bands for character instruction. The two axes are independent, as everywhere else in this curriculum. A twelve-year-old beginner is a Climber for character instruction and a Level 1 swimmer for skill instruction, and there is no contradiction in that.

Swim stage	Typical age	PLAY band	What character instruction looks like
Parent and child, preschool aquatics	3 to 5	Sprouts	One word per session. Courage and listening dominate. Getting in at all is the named moment.
Learn-to-Swim 1 to 2, beginner	Any age	By age, not by level	Effort and trying again. The child who puts their face back in after swallowing water.
Learn-to-Swim 3 to 4, intermediate	Typically 8 to 12	Climbers	Consistency and honesty. Lap counts and intervals become self-reported.
Learn-to-Swim 5 to 6, competent	Typically 11 plus	Climbers or Summit by age	Integrity, self-awareness, and pacing. The middle of the set is unobserved.

Never assign the PLAY band from the swim level. A thirteen-year-old beginner is Summit and must be spoken to as one. Teaching them in Sprouts language because they are in Level 1 is the single most damaging mistake available in this family, and it is the fastest way to lose an older beginner permanently.

Water Competency

Water competency, as defined by the Red Cross and echoed by the World Health Organization, is a set of component skills rather than an ability to swim a distance. It is the life-safety outcome the Foundation is actually pursuing, and it is what should be reported to funders: enter the water, surface and orient, float or tread, turn, swim a distance, and exit. A child who can do those six things has the thing that prevents drowning. A child with a fast twenty-five metre freestyle may not.

Part Three: Running and Track

Running requires no facility, which makes it the most scalable program in the portfolio and the least documented. There is real published guidance on distance, heat, and program structure. There is essentially none on supervising children moving along open sidewalks with street crossings, which means the Foundation is writing original policy there and should say so rather than implying a standard exists.

Age Divisions and What They Imply

USA Track and Field uses six two-year divisions determined by year of birth. The event menu is itself an implicit statement about age-appropriate distance, and what is absent from the young divisions is more informative than what is present.

Division	PLAY band	Longest track event offered
8 and under	Sprouts and Climbers	400 metres
9 to 10	Climbers	400 metres
11 to 12	Climbers	800 metres
13 to 14	Summit	1500 metres
15 to 16	Summit	3000 metres
17 to 18	Summit	5000 metres

- The 800 does not appear until 11 to 12. The 1500 does not appear until 13 to 14. The 3000 does not appear until 15 to 16.
- Hurdles do not appear until 11 to 12. Pole vault does not appear until 13 to 14. Hammer and steeplechase do not appear until 15 to 16.

Verification required. USATF blocks automated retrieval, so this table was verified against an association rendering of the national rules rather than the national rulebook. Some associations offer a 1500 metres at 9 to 10 and 11 to 12. Confirm the event menu for the two youngest divisions directly with USATF before publishing anything that cites it.

The Growth Plate Claim Is Folklore

Coaches, parents, and board members will repeat the claim that distance running damages children's growth plates or stunts their growth. It is not supported. It was asserted before it was tested, has never been demonstrated in distance runners, and the American Academy of Pediatrics reversed the 1982 position that generated it in 1990, concluding that if children enjoy the activity and are asymptomatic there is no reason to preclude them from training for and participating in endurance running events.

Foundation coaches do not repeat the growth plate claim. Building a program on an argument that a better-informed parent can refute costs credibility that will be needed elsewhere.

What the evidence does support is narrower and more useful: overuse injury driven by rapid increases in training load, concentrated around the adolescent growth spurt. That is a progression problem, not a distance problem, and it produces a rule a volunteer coach can actually follow.

The Load Progression Rule

From the American Academy of Pediatrics clinical report on overuse injuries, overtraining, and burnout in young athletes, published January 2024. These figures replace every mileage cap in circulation.

Rule	Figure
Weekly increase in training load	No more than 10 to 20 percent per week
Rest from all organized sport	At least 1 day per week; strive for 1 to 2 days off from competition and sport-specific training
Sports per day	No more than 1
Time off each sport per year	2 to 3 months
The safety test itself	Symptom-based and enjoyment-based. Ask whether it hurts and whether they want to. Do not count miles.

This is why Y7 Self-Awareness is safety-critical in this family. The entire safety model depends on children distinguishing hard from hurt and reporting honestly. A child who cannot tell the difference, or who has learned that reporting pain means losing their place, is genuinely at risk. Teach the distinction explicitly and never penalize an honest report.

Heat

Heat is the most likely severe-outcome risk in this family for most of the Foundation’s operating footprint, ahead of any injury mechanism. Wet bulb globe temperature is measured with an actual device thirty minutes before activity and every thirty minutes during. A handheld meter is the single highest-value safety purchase for an outdoor summer program.

WBGT	Requirement
Below 79.9 F	Normal activity. At least three rest breaks per hour, minimum three minutes each.
80.0 to 84.5 F	At least three breaks per hour, five minutes each. Cold water immersion available.
84.6 to 87.5 F	Maximum two hours. Twenty minutes distributed rest per hour. Cold water immersion available.
87.6 to 89.9 F	Maximum one hour. Twenty minutes rest per hour. Consider postponement.
Above 89.9 F	No outdoor activity. Delay until conditions cool.

- Exertional heat stroke is a core temperature above 104 F with central nervous system dysfunction — collapse, confusion, seizures, irrational behaviour. Cool within thirty minutes by whole-body ice water immersion at roughly 35 to 58 F. Stop cooling at 101 to 102 F. Cold water immersion capability is not optional at the higher thresholds.
- The claim that children cannot handle heat as well as adults was retired by the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2011. The levers are hydration, exertion, recovery, and clothing, not age. This does not make heat safe. It means the response is behavioural rather than a blanket age restriction.
- Lightning: no place outside is safe when thunderstorms are in the area. Resume only thirty minutes after the last thunder or lightning, with the timer resetting on each occurrence. On open ground with no substantial building nearby this is an evacuate-and-cancel rule, not a shelter-in-place rule.

Original policy, honestly labelled. No governing body publishes guidance on supervising children running along open sidewalks with street crossings. Foundation route policy is a deliberate synthesis rather than an implementation of an existing standard, and should be documented as such — which is both more honest and, if anything ever goes wrong, more defensible.

Part Four: The Thirty-Six Lessons

Each entry gives three moments to watch for, a line on how the moment changes across the age bands, a note that applies to both sports in the family, and, where one sport genuinely differs, a sport variant naming it. The value, the framing, the questions, and the carry-it-home challenge are in the pillar document.

One moment is enough. A coach is looking for one, and naming it out loud within seconds. Three are given so that a coach who misses the first has two more available.

Pillar P — Perseverance in Self-Referenced Sports

P1 — Effort

Moments to Watch For

- A swimmer who finishes the length rather than stopping at the flags, or a runner who holds pace to the line rather than easing at the cone.
- A child who works at the same intensity in the middle of a set as at the start, when nobody is watching the middle.
- A child who asks for one more length or one more repetition.

Across the bands. Sprouts keep going without stopping. Climbers hold intensity in the unwatched middle. Summit rate their own effort honestly and act on the number.

In this family. Effort here is unwitnessed by design. The child is the only person who knows what happened in the middle.

Sport variant. Swimming: the wall is the temptation. Running: the corner out of sight is the temptation. Both reveal effort a coach cannot see, which is exactly why this family teaches it best.

P2 — Trying Again

Moments to Watch For

- A swimmer who swallows water, coughs it out, and puts their face back in.
- A runner who is dropped by the group and keeps running their own pace rather than stopping.
- A child who fails a skill test and asks to attempt it again the same session.

Across the bands. Sprouts get back in and try again. Climbers reset without waiting to be encouraged. Summit re-engage after a bad result rather than withdrawing.

In this family. Failure here is private. Nobody sees a bad split but the child. That makes trying again a genuinely internal decision and worth naming when it becomes visible.

P3 — Mistakes

Moments to Watch For

- A swimmer who names their own error — breathed too late, dropped the elbow, glided too long.
- A runner who recognizes they went out too fast and adjusts the next repetition.
- A child who asks what to fix rather than asking whether it was good.

Across the bands. Sprouts shrug off a miss and keep going. Climbers name the error. Summit distinguish a technique error from a pacing decision.

In this family. These sports produce numbers, which makes error analysis unusually concrete. A split is feedback, not a verdict.

P4 — Finishing

Moments to Watch For

- A swimmer who finishes at the wall rather than to the flags.
- A runner who accelerates through the finish rather than to it.
- A child whose last repetition of a set matches the quality of the first.

Across the bands. Sprouts touch the wall or cross the line every time. Climbers hold form at the end. Summit finish a set at standard when the result no longer matters.

In this family. This family teaches finishing better than any other in the curriculum, because the end of a length or a lap is unambiguous. There is no partial credit at a wall.

P5 — Hard Things

Moments to Watch For

- A child who chooses the harder lane, the longer distance, or the tougher interval when offered a choice.
- A swimmer who works their weakest stroke rather than repeating their strongest.
- A child who holds technique when tired rather than reverting to what is easy.

Across the bands. Sprouts stay with something difficult. Climbers choose the harder option out loud. Summit build a session around their weakest event.

In this family. The avoided session is the one that matters. Every swimmer and every runner has one.

Sport variant. Swimming: breaststroke and butterfly are usually the avoided strokes. Running: the hill and the interval are the avoided sessions.

P6 — Patience

Moments to Watch For

- A swimmer who holds a technical change through a stretch where their times get worse.
- A runner who holds their assigned pace early rather than going with the front.
- A child who waits their turn on the wall or at the start without crowding.

Across the bands. Sprouts wait their turn calmly. Climbers stay with a change that is not paying off. Summit hold pace discipline against the temptation to chase.

In this family. Pacing is patience made measurable. A child who can run the second half faster than the first has learned something no lecture delivers.

P7 — Courage

Moments to Watch For

- A swimmer who puts their face in, jumps in, or swims a new depth for the first time.
- A child who enters a race or a time trial they might finish last in.
- A child who attempts an unfamiliar stroke or event in front of the group.

Across the bands. Sprouts get in and try. Climbers enter something they might not win. Summit attempt an event that exposes a weakness publicly.

In this family. Swimming carries genuine fear for many children. Getting in at all is a courage moment and should be named as one, not treated as the baseline.

P8 — Focus

Moments to Watch For

- A swimmer who counts strokes or holds a breathing pattern for a whole length.
- A runner who holds form in the last portion of a repetition when it starts to fall apart.
- A child who runs the same routine before every start.

Across the bands. Sprouts watch and listen. Climbers recover attention quickly. Summit use a pre-start routine that genuinely resets them.

In this family. Attention degrades with fatigue here more visibly than anywhere else. Watch the last repetition of a set, not the first.

P9 — Consistency

Moments to Watch For

- A child who attends and works at the same level on the unglamorous days.
- A swimmer whose stroke count on the last length matches the first.
- A child who does a small amount on their own between sessions and says so.

Across the bands. Sprouts come ready every time. Climbers hold a daily habit. Summit keep standards with no supervision at all.

In this family. This is the defining value of the family. Nobody can carry a swimmer or a runner. What they did on the ordinary days is the only thing that shows up on the day it counts.

Pillar L — Leadership in Self-Referenced Sports

L1 — Responsibility

Moments to Watch For

- A child who manages their own goggles, cap, towel, shoes, and water without a parent.
- A child who is on the wall or at the start on time without being called twice.
- A child who returns equipment — kickboards, pull buoys, cones, batons — without being asked.

Across the bands. Sprouts look after their own things. Climbers arrive prepared. Summit take over what an adult used to do for them.

In this family. Goggles are the recurring test in swimming. A child who cannot manage their own goggles cannot yet manage a session.

L2 — Initiative

Moments to Watch For

- A child who starts their own warm-up without being told.
- A child who organizes lanes or groups before the coach does.
- A child who sets out cones, kickboards, or lane ropes unprompted.

Across the bands. Sprouts find something that needs doing. Climbers move before instruction finishes. Summit lead a warm-up without being assigned.

In this family. Individual sports offer fewer leadership roles by default, which makes initiative the main route into leadership here. Create the openings deliberately.

L3 — Teamwork

Moments to Watch For

- A swimmer who leaves proper space on an interval so the swimmer behind is not caught.
- A runner who takes a turn at the front of a group rather than sitting in.
- A child who paces a slower training partner rather than dropping them.

Across the bands. Sprouts share the lane and the lane rope. Climbers make the person next to them better. Summit take the pacing job that costs them their own session.

In this family. Teamwork is not automatic here and must be built. Relays, group runs, and shared lanes are the only structures that create it, so use them deliberately.

L4 — Accountability

Moments to Watch For

- A child who admits they cut a length, missed a lap, or started early.
- A child who owns a missed interval rather than blaming the lane, the clock, or the group.
- A child who reports their own time honestly when nobody was checking.

Across the bands. Sprouts say it was theirs. Climbers own it without an explanation. Summit correct a result that was in their favor.

In this family. Lap counting and interval keeping are almost entirely self-reported in a training session. That makes accountability constantly live and rarely observed.

L5 — Encouragement

Moments to Watch For

- A child who cheers for the last finisher rather than the first.
- A child who waits at the end of a run or a set for a slower training partner.
- A child who tells a training partner specifically what they did well.

Across the bands. Sprouts cheer. Climbers give specific credit. Summit encourage somebody who is directly competing against them.

In this family. Finishing order is public and unambiguous in this family. Who greets the last child across the line tells you everything.

L6 — Communication

Moments to Watch For

- A child who says clearly that they need a rest, are cold, or feel unwell.
- A child who asks a question about a set rather than guessing at it.
- A child who tells a training partner the plan before a group run or a relay.

Across the bands. Sprouts use a clear voice to ask for what they need. Climbers ask rather than guess. Summit organize a group session verbally.

In this family. In water, a child cannot be heard while swimming. Teach a signal system and check understanding before the set, not during it. This is a safety behavior first and a character lesson second.

L7 — Service

Moments to Watch For

- A child who helps a younger or nervous child into the water or to the start.
- A child who takes the pacing job in a group run and gains nothing from it.
- A child who packs up equipment nobody assigned to them.

Across the bands. Sprouts help without being asked. Climbers take the job nobody wants. Summit mentor a younger swimmer or runner with no audience.

In this family. Cross-age mentorship works unusually well in this family, because a competent twelve-year-old is genuinely useful to a nervous six-year-old at the shallow end.

L8 — Integrity

Moments to Watch For

- A child who reports an accurate lap count when a shortcut would never have been noticed.
- A child who restarts an interval they left early on.
- A child who does not cut a corner on a course when out of sight.

Across the bands. Sprouts tell the true thing. Climbers hold the count honestly. Summit reject an advantage that was available and unquestioned.

In this family. This family is the purest integrity test in the curriculum. There is no opponent to catch you and often no coach in sight. The only witness is the child.

L9 — Influence

Moments to Watch For

- A child whose warm-up standard the rest of the lane or group quietly matches.

- A child who stops the group complaining about a hard set.
- A child whose steadiness lifts a group that has gone flat.

Across the bands. Sprouts are copied by younger children. Climbers notice their effect on the group. Summit set the tone on purpose.

In this family. One child treating a hard set seriously changes a whole lane. One child treating it as optional does the same in the other direction.

Pillar A — Attitude in Self-Referenced Sports

A1 — Respect

Moments to Watch For

- A child who follows pool or facility rules without being reminded.
- A child who listens to the lifeguard or facility staff the first time.
- A child who takes a technical correction without a comeback.

Across the bands. Sprouts show listening ears and careful hands. Climbers describe the behavior rather than the feeling. Summit treat facility staff as people rather than furniture.

In this family. Aquatic facility rules exist for safety, not convenience, and a child who ignores them is creating risk rather than being cheeky. Treat it as both a respect lesson and a safety correction.

A2 — Sportsmanship

Moments to Watch For

- A child who congratulates whoever beat them, immediately.
- A child who stays to watch and support the last heat or the last finisher.
- A child who does not make excuses about the lane, the conditions, or the course.

Across the bands. Sprouts clap for others. Climbers handle a loss within ninety seconds. Summit conduct themselves so competitors want to race them again.

In this family. In a timed sport the result is unarguable, which removes every excuse and makes this lesson unusually clean.

A3 — Manners

Moments to Watch For

- A child who greets the coach and the lifeguard by name.
- A child who thanks facility staff at the end of a session.
- A child who makes eye contact when spoken to by an adult.

Across the bands. Sprouts say please and thank you. Climbers greet adults by name. Summit thank staff specifically for the work rather than generally for the day.

In this family. Lifeguards and facility staff are usually thanked by nobody all day. Point this out to the group once and watch what changes.

A4 — Gratitude

Moments to Watch For

- A child who notices the pool was opened, cleaned, and staffed before they arrived.
- A child who thanks the adult who drove them, unprompted.
- A child who helps put away what somebody else set out.

Across the bands. Sprouts thank the person who brought them. Climbers name something prepared for them. Summit thank somebody for work nobody mentions anymore.

In this family. A community pool represents an enormous amount of invisible labor and expense. Say so.

A5 — Emotional Control

Moments to Watch For

- A child who is frustrated by a time or a failed skill and continues the set.
- A child who does not slam a kickboard, a board, or a bottle.
- A child who settles themselves without an adult stepping in.

Across the bands. Sprouts take one big breath. Climbers name their own tell. Summit hold composure after a result that undoes months of work.

In this family. Water amplifies distress and cold amplifies frustration. A child who is cold is not being difficult. Check temperature before you correct behavior.

A6 — Response

Moments to Watch For

- A child who adjusts without complaint to cold water, wind, rain, or a changed session plan.
- A child who accepts a slower lane or group and works properly in it.
- A child who keeps their standard after a disappointing time.

Across the bands. Sprouts choose their next thing on purpose. Climbers respond well to something outside their control. Summit refuse to let a result dictate their next session.

In this family. Conditions are the recurring uncontrollable here. Cold water, heat, wind, and a busy pool are the curriculum, not the obstacle to it.

A7 — Inclusion

Moments to Watch For

- A child who partners with the least confident swimmer or slowest runner without being asked.
- A child who adapts a game or a set so a beginner can take part.
- A child who brings a nervous newcomer into the group at the shallow end or the back of the run.

Across the bands. Sprouts invite. Climbers choose the person usually chosen last. Summit make a newcomer's first session easier.

In this family. Ability gaps are wider and more visible in this family than any other. A non-swimmer and a competent swimmer cannot share a set, which makes deliberate inclusion structural rather than optional.

A8 — Listening

Moments to Watch For

- A child who executes a set correctly the first time it is explained.
- A child who confirms the set back before starting.
- A child who lets another child finish speaking on the wall.

Across the bands. Sprouts show listening ears. Climbers repeat back what was said. Summit take a correction fully before responding.

In this family. A misheard set in the water cannot be corrected mid-length. Confirm understanding before they push off, every time.

A9 — Energy

Moments to Watch For

- A child who arrives ready and gets in or gets going without delay.

- A child who lifts the group at the point in the session where energy drops.
- A child who keeps their own energy up during a repetitive set.

Across the bands. Sprouts bring a ready face. Climbers notice whether they added energy or took it. Summit hold energy through a long, dull, necessary block.

In this family. Repetitive training is where this family loses children. A child who can generate their own energy in a dull set has the thing that keeps them in sport at sixteen.

Pillar Y — YOU in Self-Referenced Sports

Y1 — Identity

Moments to Watch For

- A child who swims or runs a poor time and is the same person afterward.
- A child who describes a result without turning it into a statement about themselves.
- A child who does not define themselves by their lane, group, or seed time.

Across the bands. Sprouts name something good about themselves that is not winning. Climbers separate swam badly from am bad. Summit compete freely rather than protecting a personal best.

In this family. Times and lane assignments make hierarchy explicit and permanent in a way no other family does. This lesson matters more here than anywhere.

Y2 — Confidence

Moments to Watch For

- A child who attempts a distance or a depth they refused a month ago.
- A child who names something they can now do that they could not before.
- A child who races without asking for reassurance first.

Across the bands. Sprouts show what they can do. Climbers keep a record of proof. Summit rely on their training log rather than on encouragement.

In this family. This family produces the cleanest evidence file in the curriculum. Times, distances, and skill levels are all countable, and a child can be shown their own progress in numbers.

Y3 — Fuel

Moments to Watch For

- A child who arrives having eaten something substantial before a session.
- A child who chooses water over a sugary drink.
- A child who talks about what food does rather than whether it is good or bad.

Across the bands. Sprouts name a fuel food. Climbers connect what they ate to how the session felt. Summit manage their own pre-session nutrition.

In this family. Endurance work makes under-fuelling immediately visible as a fade. Never comment on any child's body while teaching this, in this family above all others, where bodies are visible and comparison is constant.

Y4 — Rest

Moments to Watch For

- A child who connects a flat session to a short night without prompting.
- A child who talks about a consistent bedtime rather than a random one.
- A child who prioritizes sleep over a screen and says so.

Across the bands. Sprouts name their bedtime routine. Climbers notice the difference sleep makes. Summit manage sleep around training and competition.

In this family. Early morning sessions are standard in both sports and destroy sleep if bedtime does not move with them. Ask about it. Do not diagnose.

Y5 — Body

Moments to Watch For

- A child who drinks during a session without being told, including in the pool.
- A child who uses breath deliberately to settle before a start.
- A child who takes the warm-up seriously rather than treating it as a delay.

Across the bands. Sprouts drink water and take a breath. Climbers describe their own activity outside sessions. Summit run a hydration or breathing protocol on purpose.

In this family. Swimmers do not feel themselves sweat and routinely under-drink. Say this out loud: being in water does not mean being hydrated.

Y6 — Goals

Moments to Watch For

- A child who names a process goal rather than a time they cannot directly control.
- A child who works their stated goal without being directed to.
- A child who reports back on progress from a previous session.

Across the bands. Sprouts say one thing they want to get better at. Climbers pick a goal they control. Summit structure a session around a stated objective.

In this family. This family tempts everyone toward outcome goals because the clock is right there. Push toward process: stroke count, breathing pattern, even splits, negative split.

Y7 — Self-Awareness

Moments to Watch For

- A child who says they need a break rather than pushing into distress.
- A child who recognizes the difference between hard and hurt and reports it.
- A child who names a strength of theirs accurately, without inflating or dismissing it.

Across the bands. Sprouts notice how their body feels. Climbers name their trigger and their limit. Summit distinguish productive discomfort from a warning sign.

In this family. This is the safety-critical version of the lesson. In endurance sport, a child who cannot tell hard from hurt is at real risk, and the whole safety model depends on children reporting honestly.

Y8 — Honesty

Moments to Watch For

- A child who gives an accurate self-rating rather than a flattering one.
- A child who admits they eased off in the middle of a set.
- A child who acknowledges a weakness without being prompted.

Across the bands. Sprouts tell one honest thing about their day. Climbers rate their effort honestly. Summit reject an available and true excuse.

In this family. Nobody but the child knows what happened in the middle of that set. This family asks for honesty more often, and with less oversight, than any other.

Y9 — Balance

Moments to Watch For

- A child fully absorbed in play or movement without needing prompting.

- A child who keeps going when given the option to stop.
- A child present through the whole session without reaching for a phone.

Across the bands. Sprouts play hard in the water or on the grass. Climbers trade screen time for movement. Summit manage their own device use around training and sleep.

In this family. Both of these are lifetime activities requiring almost no equipment. Say that to Summit: swimming and running are the two things they can still do at seventy, anywhere in the world, for free.

Coach Notes for Self-Referenced Sports

What This Family Teaches Best

Value	Why This Family Teaches It Well
P9 Consistency	Nobody can carry a swimmer or a runner. What a child did on the ordinary days is the only thing that shows up on the day it counts.
L8 Integrity	Lap counts and intervals are self-reported, often with no coach in sight. The only witness is the child.
Y8 Honesty	Nobody but the child knows what happened in the middle of that set.
P4 Finishing	A wall and a line are unambiguous. There is no partial credit and no interpretation.

What This Family Teaches Poorly

- L3 Teamwork and L6 Communication do not occur naturally. They must be built through relays, group runs, shared lanes, and pacing assignments, or they will not appear at all.
- L9 Influence has fewer natural openings because there are fewer leadership roles. Create them deliberately — lane leader, pace setter, warm-up leader — and rotate them.
- A2 Sportsmanship is unusually clean here because the result is unarguable, but for the same reason it produces fewer teachable conflicts than an officiated sport does.

Delivery Errors Specific to This Family

- Assigning the character band from the skill level. A thirteen-year-old beginner is Summit. Speaking to them in Sprouts language because they are in Level 1 is the fastest way to lose an older beginner permanently.
- Correcting a cold child. Cold amplifies frustration and distress. Check water temperature and time in water before you correct behaviour.
- Explaining the set after they push off. A misheard set cannot be corrected mid-length. Confirm understanding before they leave the wall, every time.
- Naming only the fastest. Times rank children permanently and publicly. Effort, honesty, and finishing are available to the slowest child in the group and should be named there most often.
- Letting outcome goals dominate because the clock is right there. Push toward process goals — stroke count, breathing pattern, even splits — which the child controls.
- Treating getting in as the baseline rather than as courage. For many children, entering the water is the hardest thing they will do that week.

Talking to Parents About This Family

Swim parents ask when their child will be able to swim. The Foundation’s answer is water competency rather than a stroke or a distance: enter the water, surface and orient, float or tread, turn, swim a distance, exit. A child who can do those six things has the thing that prevents drowning. Report progress in those terms.

Running parents ask whether distance is safe for children. The answer is that the growth plate story is not supported, that the real risk is increasing training load too quickly, and that the Foundation follows a ten to twenty percent weekly ceiling with at least one rest day a week and two to three months off per year. Then



say the part that matters most: the test we use is whether it hurts and whether they still want to, and we ask both, every session.

Play Academy Foundation, Inc. is a national nonprofit that brings professional sports, wellness, and recreation programming directly into the neighborhoods where children live.

Roughly half of American high school students attend no physical education in a given week, and fewer than three in ten attend daily, against a national recommendation of daily physical education. That deficit has held for thirty years. The Foundation exists because it is not going to close on its own.