

My kid won't swim the Olympics

By [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#)

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Caroline competes each summer with our pool's swim team, and last week their coaches had given them an assignment to watch some of the Olympic time trials held in Omaha. It was fun to watch elite athletes swimming at the top of their game and to listen to Caroline's observations about the different strokes.

I took particular note of [Davis Tarwater](#), who was once described as one of the best swimmers never to make an Olympic squad. The announcers last week noted that he has a 30 hour a week job designing banking software for third-world countries. I wondered how having a job like that impacted his ability to train at the highest level. As it happened, he failed to make the team in all three events he attempted, [only getting a slot in 200 m freestyle](#) after Michael Phelps opted not to swim that event in London.

Don't get me wrong--Tarwater is an elite athlete, holding a national record. And it sounds like he feels a sense of mission around his "day job"--I don't think he's doing it for the money. But it was a reminder for me of the roles that circumstance and privilege play in achievement.

The other day our swim coaches posted the ladder with the kids' times thus far. In the 9-10 age group, Caroline is currently 6th in freestyle and backstroke and 4th in breaststroke and butterfly. Caroline is a good swimmer technically, and she loves the sport. She's had some fun victories and finishes this season, but she is not in the top tier of her teammates. Then again, she's competing against kids who play various sports year-round, including kids who swim competitively for a program that is supposed to be amazing but costs almost \$2,000 a year.

The pressure to achieve, to give one's kids the best of everything, is huge around here. As a mother, I am in it, even as I disdain it. I felt a little torn when I read the ladder this weekend. If we had the time, energy and money to invest in her swimming, maybe she would move up from the middle of the pack. But we just don't have the extra bandwidth to make that happen. I already push my job to the limits

of its flexibility; I wrote last week's sermon on deck at the *pool*, for heaven's sake. One of those elite swim programs meets at 4:30 in the morning. Yes, you read that right.

Caroline doesn't seem all that interested in upping the intensity of her swimming, so I'm certainly not going to push it. This post isn't really about swimming. Rather I'm struggling with how we talk to our kids about privilege. How do we understand our own privilege? How do we frame competitive events like a swim team in a way that encourages kids to do their best, while acknowledging that some kids have an advantage by virtue of circumstance?

And can we explain all of this to our kids in a way that doesn't foster bitterness, but rather a hunger for justice? I don't want my kids to resent the only child with the mom who can devote time and energy to driving them to extra practices. But I *do* want them to wonder about kids who don't even have the advantages we do. Our upper middle class swim problems are small potatoes; read [this article](#) that profiles six people who live at the different levels of income disparity in the U.S. and extrapolate it out. You think competitive swim team is expensive? Have you checked out four year colleges lately? What does all of this look like for the Pallwitz kids (page 3 in the article), whose parents are barely making ends meet? What will achievement look like for them?

When the playing field is uneven at many levels, what does it mean to "do well"?

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