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Goggles: to wear or not to wear. Why is there such a question?

Zoe Cheale wonders why some education authorities prevent the use of swimming goggles during swimming lessons when their use can be the key to success for nervous swimmers.

Last year my son was starting school swimming lessons and just beforehand I received a letter stating that unless there was a written medical note to the contrary he would not be allowed to wear goggles as advised by the local education authority (LEA). As an experienced PE teacher I had been aware of the “goggle/no goggle rule” debate going on for some time and in the past I would probably have accepted that they had their reasons and would have been happy to go along with the stance taken. Now, however, after being trained as a specialist in helping people overcome their fear of water, I take quite a different view.

One of the key things we do in our conquer fear lessons is to introduce nervous new learners to goggles – and their reactions are wonderful! They come up smiling and happy, having often never experienced wearing goggles before. Their attitude to being underwater is fundamentally transformed. It helps them stay calm rather than panicked and, having taken away one of their concerns, allows them to concentrate on other things. An experienced teacher who had been invited to watch these sessions subsequently told me that he could not believe the reaction of the participants and how much difference it made to them when they were introduced to goggles.

This reminded me of a time a few years earlier when one of my son’s friends was learning to swim; he was six at the time. He didn’t want to put goggles on, didn’t want to put his head under and didn’t look that comfortable in the water. The swim teacher suggested that he may like to try some goggles and placed some toys in the pool for him to collect. After a few minutes he decided to try it – the teacher had left him to make that decision – and the smile on his face when he put them on and picked up the toys could have lit up the town. That smile is etched on my memory, especially as he spent the rest of the afternoon splashing, laughing, swimming under water. The change in him was like flicking a switch from a scared nervous swimmer to a happy one just in that afternoon. It made me wonder just why this “no goggle rule” had been put in place.

In researching this question it seems that the main reason is health and safety: swimmers might hurt themselves, goggles may reduce peripheral vision, the strap might snap across the face, goggles may shatter. The words ‘may’ and ‘might’ suggest that there is very little evidence of these incidents in a concrete form, or if so, not in substantial numbers. The education authorities have imposed these bans, according to an article in The Daily Telegraph, owing to “fears that they (pupils) would hurt themselves”. They have defended their policy saying that “it reflected National guidance by Sports bodies such as the ASA and the STA”. The ASA in its guidance to parents and guardians says “limited anecdotal evidence suggests there have been some incidents firstly as a result of goggles being made of glass or breakable plastics and secondly the putting on and taking off of goggles”. Again, anecdote suggests no hard evidence and the manufacture of goggles has moved on a great deal. Later on in the ASA/STA guidelines it also states that “if the correct goggles are purchased and used properly there are no health and safety reasons to arbitrarily ban their use”. Why have LEAs chosen to ignore this last piece of advice?

Educating people about the proper use of goggles is surely not that hard to do and the Swimming Times has already published a review on the latest goggles available in the February and March editions. Wouldn’t it be great to follow up these articles with one for children’s goggles, using youngsters right at the first rung of the swimming ladder? The article could also include advice for parents on how to fit goggles and use them correctly so that they can do this for their

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children. Regarding parental worries about children becoming forever dependent on goggles, many children end up smiling at you with one eye lens of their goggles filled up like a high tide so where is the problem there then? It can be just the stepping stone they need to get them past a temporary worry. And how many competitive swimmers swim for longer than twenty minutes without goggles on? It hurts most of us too much and causes halos in the vision on re-emergence because even pure water will have a drying-out effect by removing the thin layer of bactericidal fluid we have over our eyes.

I understand the concern that children do not always have their goggles available to them if they fall in a lake, river, stream and so they need to be aware of how it feels to not have them on in water but surely this could be a part of the swimming curriculum to give them that experience in the safety of the pool; I have seen this done on a number of occasions.

The Big Splash Campaign states that 20% of school children are unable to swim. I wonder how many of them are put off because they are not allowed to wear goggles in LEA school lessons? Has anyone asked those children who are not enjoying the water at all? Where are the health and safety people when it comes to reducing the numbers of pupils that cannot swim? Where does the "stop them hurting themselves" come in to it for those non-swimmers who are affected? One or two pupils at anecdotal risk of a strap going across their face compared to 20% of school children not swimming at all?

I am not saying that wearing goggles is the only answer but they could be part of a much bigger solution to help those afraid of water start on a much more positive step towards becoming swimmers. I think there needs to be a choice: if they want to wear goggles let them improve their experience from the outset so that they are calm enough to be able to hear what the teacher is saying, like the short-sighted who need glasses on land and are permitted to wear prescription goggles in order to fully participate.

I hope this starts a debate and gets people thinking more carefully about the use of goggles and giving people a choice, not just accepting the decision-makers' decrees when it comes to school swimming. Schools are spending a lot of their budget and timetable space on swimming lessons and understandably they have to follow the guidelines given to them but in making the decision to use that time for swim sessions I am sure they would want to achieve the perfect scenario for all their pupils: being able to swim when they leave school.

So let's put some goggles on common sense. It seems crystal clear to me.

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