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Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?

Following another warning from the ASA about the swimming abilities of primary school pupils, Andrea Andrews wonders whether encouraging fear of the water among those learning to swim, and their parents, is the best approach. Here she suggests that there is a better way.

When teaching pre-school children to swim I occasionally play the game What's the time Mr Wolf? in the water with them. We use the countdowns to take watery footsteps or paddle our hands towards the child that is playing lupus and the children love it. To them it is one of the first times they get to experiment 'on stage' and it is a landmark when they decide they can run the show as the wolf, hearing themselves speak out in front of people and dictate the state of play. Sometimes there is a child playing sheep who loves the game until the wolf says "Dinner time!" and I have to step in lightly before meltdown because their imagination has run away with them. These children intrigue me because they have built a world inside the game that is so strong that they cannot endure being 'chased'. Often these children are bright and strongly aware of what their parents expect of them in lessons at a pool.

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This leads on to the role of fear in learning to swim and how the approach taken with it can influence the outcome dramatically. I have noticed a strong correlation between the parent asking for frequent progress reports and the child having difficulties in engaging with the water. In other words, the child is feeling pressure to learn as fast as possible and ends up being considerably hampered as a result. I find this frustrating as the message the child is receiving from its parents can override anything I try. I am not suggesting that I should take precedence; I am just regretting the fact that it is so much harder to do my job effectively and the child's enjoyment of water is marred by a strong dislocation. I see it when the child tries to kick their legs too fast, lift their nose clear of the water or flinch when they get splashed. If they are new to the water they clearly have some negative second-hand knowledge from somewhere.

The news about school swimming failing 51% of our 11-year-olds is shocking and yet it does not surprise me. I think it has been this way for a very long time and the reasons are historical. Swimming teaching has grown out of attempts in the past to standardise something that is inherently unique to the psyche of each individual. We all come to the pool with myriad ideas, folklore and narratives about how the water will treat us but increasingly there is urgency in the voices of parents who are very worried from the outset. What this does is prime the child to expect failure and humiliation. What they need instead is to know that they have lots of time to do what they do best, which is to learn through play about their environment. As a teacher I want to give them that but pressures are placed on my shoulders to move them on as fast as possible so that I can teach the next child as well. So I go as slowly as I can but…

The answer is to take a long, hard look at how to reduce the unnecessary fear in safely guarded aquatic environments. I do not mean sledgehammer tactics for all fears that are brought to the pool because we cannot do much about that until one generation of parents are satisfied that their children can look after themselves in water and are therefore able to hear what we tell them for their children. We can

also have superb posters that crisply and gradually inform near poolside. What I mean is a long-term strategy to teach far more adults to swim and make lesson structure work with the innate capabilities of children to learn about what water can do for them, rather than fostering heightened anxiety about even the most safely guarded conditions. We already have the second part but it is not being implemented by the teachers on the ground. They do not understand the importance of the fundamentals, neither do parents. The children do but no one has asked them. This is a huge waste of a prime resource.

Children grow into adults and we now know that there is a generation which has lost their connection with the aquatic thread of familial support so vital to their descendants. The first stages are crucial times for learning the rules of future engagement with water and they must move at the learner's pace (adults and children), not anyone else's. We need to study the psychology of the child to understand what they hear when we speak and what they need to hear to help them learn effectively, reliably and resiliently.

How do we do this? Slow ourselves right down and ask what we wanted to know when we were learning as well as asking the current young learners themselves. As a specialised teacher of afraid adults (yes, they are very like learn-to-swim children frozen in time) I can tell you what these things are but they may seem trivial to you; and your burgeoning knowledge about catch-up front crawl and tumble turns may be getting in the way of your ability to believe me. They want to know they can genuinely say, "No, that's too hard for me"; know where water goes when you put your mouth in, nose in, eyes, ears, head; how to stand up from a float before you float. They want to know the new rules of gravity and balance, which seem to have changed with the advent of buoyancy, and they want above all to know where and how they are going to get their next breath. This all sounds so logical but it takes time to find out these things first-hand. First-hand is the key phrase because our bodies dismiss positive rumours and listen very hard to negative ones. The list of knowledge required grows exponentially with every fearful experience so the learner must be in charge of their own comfort to avoid negatives. They need to repeat comfortable achievements over and over and over again before they move on to the next relevant step. Once is never enough as it has to be embodied and positively connected with the psyche to become permanent.

I myself used to feel impatient with the nervy at times and eager to impart my knowledge of strokes and transmit to as many people as possible my own love of water. However, it did not take me long to realise that not everyone was ready or able to benefit from my well-meaning efforts. After ASA L2 qualifying I found myself forming an uncomfortable sensation in the pit of my stomach whenever new students came to me with fears as there was the ever-present pressure to release the burgeoning knowledge I had in the right order and in the right circumstances to give the maximum benefit for everyone's time and money. I explored ways of trying to help people with varying degrees of success and continually sought help and advice from other teachers. We need to build a culture of the open sharing of ideas today.

It quickly dawned on me that other teachers were feeling exactly the same way as me and we all seemed to be working towards subconscious management strategies, ranging from developing a thick skin (leaving a hollow pit in my stomach), trying to force trust (an exercise in futility), letting strugglers hang on to our vocal encouragements (all they can hear is the buoyant tone of our voices), all the way to avoidance strategies with justifications for doing so (defeat). None of this was ever comfortable for me and I actively sought out fixes through continuing professional development, watching lots of other teachers, evaluating my own lessons, talking to parents, seeking advice and reading about patterns of human behaviour. Comparatively my results were never bad and often very good. I was not a failing

teacher but some students were still failing no matter what I did. Knowing there must be something else still missing, I noticed that fun activities, lots of laughter and guided discovery got much better results with those who are afraid of water. I also found out that there are some very common mistakes being made in our teaching.

There are two common fallacies that breed fear in safe aquatic places. The first is: kick your legs as soon as possible – hit the ground running – don't stop until you reach safety.

To illustrate this imagine a six-month-old coming to the pool with its parents for the first time and about five minutes after getting in the water they say to the child: "KICK, KICK, KICK!" Where has this come from? Why do they need to learn to kick when they haven't even experienced a proper float yet? Telling a learner (child or adult) to kick sends a subliminal message about how long it is safe to be in the water. It also implies planning instead of being in the moment to experience their body in its new surroundings. It is a ghastly distraction from the task of learning and serves only to imbue a fear of water. If games are used to move a ball by kicking with legs that is a different story as it provides positive information. If you cannot feel that you are floating by stopping to experience it properly, kicking is jerky, stressful and hollow. There is so much to learn before your body would ever want you to kick. So often the body gets short-changed with kicking too early; losing chances to learn along its natural course of aquatic readiness. The time differences are not worth the final cost of disengagement with water and the implications it brings.

The second fallacy is: don't spit – blow out in the water as soon as possible so you are ready to breathe in the air.

Children love to explore with their mouths and they learn a great deal by shipping water in and out. If they are told to stop spitting (no one likes it in their face and that needs discouraging) they are losing valuable learning opportunities and gaining a sense that they must not drink the water because it is what? We do not want to see hyponotraemia through excessive water intake but we want them to build breath control. So just where do they start if they cannot spit? They need to 'ship'; it leads to facial skills.

Blowing out involves expelling air which makes the body lose buoyancy. This is felt in some learners (particularly adults) and it makes them fearful. They are also engaged in an unnecessary action for someone whose body wants to know what default is for them in water. If you hold your breath you are still and able to turn your attention to finding out other things. Blowing out is a form of movement that obscures learning from other feedback forms. Blowing out also leads to bubbles going up the nostrils sometimes causing pain in the sinuses and in the eyes or ears. Blowing out can be fun to play with later on and it is a competitive swimmer's skill. It does not need to happen from the first moment, like a mantra to save your life. It throws away potential when introduced too early and out of an exploration context.

There is so much more to know about the true process of learning to swim by noticing it forming in the mind as well as body because knowledge of fears leads to unique insights. What a gold mine! Who is going to call time on fear-avoidance strategies and lead true engagement? Well done to the ASA for publishing a census that shocks us all. I just hope we look in the right place for the answers instead of encouraging a fear of failure to grow unchecked in school pools across the land. Psychological science is used to help the elite but not those at the base of our swimming pyramid; at least not yet. I look forward to vital research being done in neurophysiology and risk intelligence.

I am now officially holding my breath…

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