

8-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Langendorfer, Stephen J. (2014) "Insights on Parents Attending Swim Lessons," *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education*: Vol. 8: No. 3, Article 2.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/ijare/vol8/iss3/2>

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Insights on Parents Attending Swim Lessons

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The role of parents within learn-to-swim programs has become rather controversial, at least in the United States. As a result of perceived inappropriate interference by some parents, many programs ban parents, caregivers, and other family members from the pool area during lessons. Some programs don't even allow family members to observe their children in swim lessons from a distance such as from a balcony, spectator seats, or through windows in the pool. As both a parent and a swim instructor, I have seen different sides of this controversy and I believe I can offer a few insights and principles related to the issues involved.

Parent Rights and Privileges

It is critical for everyone involved in the learn-to-swim process to keep in mind that parents, first and foremost, have a sacred duty to protect their minor children and assure their optimal development. In modern society, the child development process frequently involves parent delegating some specialized educational responsibilities to individuals with training in early childhood or elementary education as well as other specialists such as swimming, dance, gymnastics, or music instructors. These individuals act *in loco parentis*, that is, "in place of the parents."

Like parents, instructors vary greatly in their skills, experience, and appreciation of child development principles. One consequence of the variability in instructor and program quality has been that some parents try to impose themselves into swim lessons, sometimes in inappropriate and even offensive ways. [As a side note, parental over-involvement in and control over their progeny's lives is increasing at the university level in the United States. Despite the fact that college students are mainly no longer minors in the legal sense, some parents call their student multiple times a day and write letters to upper administrators about real or perceived student problems. This type of parent and their behavior have been labeled "helicopter parents" due to their 'hovering behavior.']

Some directors and instructors of learn-to-swim programs have responded to interfering parents by creating bans on all parents' involvement or even presence during swim lessons. Such across the board bans, of course, are examples of generalizing to the exception rather than dealing with individual instances where parents may have acted inappropriately. They result in subverting the right of parents to be ultimately responsible for their child. In effect, these bans place temporary *in loco parentis* status of the program over the basic rights of the parents.

Purposes and Quality of Learn-to-Swim Programs

One challenge in contemporary society to those acting *in loco parentis* arises from the societal diversity in backgrounds, interests, and expectations that exist. It is hard to know or even appreciate what different families may expect from a specialized program such as swim lessons. For example, some parents may have seen one of the popular online videos advocating that a toddler can and should be “drownproofed” using a behavior modification program. Others may want their child to learn the four competitive strokes so that the child can enroll in an age group swimming program at an early age. Others may have less specific outcomes in mind, but simply want their child to “learn to swim.” The problem is that these three different goals likely use very different approaches and teaching techniques, none of which has been subject to rigorous evidence-based investigation.

All organized learn-to-swim programs ought to include some kind of parent/caregiver education. This education ought to include information about the goal or purposes of the program, the general program philosophy, the credentialing agency with which the program is affiliated and the credentials of all staff, the general curriculum, and other important water safety information. By and large, swim lessons in and of themselves probably do not provide sufficient learning time for most individuals to gain a high degree of water competency. Most persons who become competent swimmers do so with additional informal experiences resulting from free swim or family vacations involving the water. Parents and caregivers provide a crucial role in those “extracurricular” aquatic activities. They need information about how they can facilitate their child’s water learning as well as assure safety.

A further challenge arises from the varying quality of learn-to-swim programs as well as instructors. The many excellent learn-to-swim programs that exist are directed by an experienced swimming instructor or instructors who have been trained and certified by one of the large national aquatic agencies such as the Y-USA, American Red Cross, or Boy Scouts. These programs follow evidence-based national guidelines and abide by generally accepted child development principles. I believe I can identify these high quality programs “with my eyes closed.” By that, I mean that if I close my eyes or turn around and face away from the water, I can hear the sounds of generally happy children who are enjoying the experience of gaining competence in the water.

Unfortunately, there are other programs which are less appropriate both in the way they try to administer learn-to-swim and in their lack of understanding of developmentally appropriate practices. Sometimes, these are self-organized programs offered by well-known swimmers in their own or rented facilities with no credentials aside from personal experience. They may act under the mistaken assumption that children learn like adults and should be “trained” like competitive swimmers. Usually, I can identify poorer quality programs by sound as well: Either there is very little child noise or the primary sound is an instructor issuing commands to “do this” or “do that.” Sometimes poorly organized programs go in the opposite extreme with lots of loud noises of yells and screams of children who are essentially engaging in “free time” instead of organized learning activities.

Evaluating Learn to Swim Programs

I suggest that parents or guardians who are seeking swim lessons for their minor children (i.e., anyone from the age of approximately 6 months to 17 years) needs to follow the principle, “*caveat emptor*,” or “let the buyer beware.” I do not mean to suggest that parents should be overly cynical or assume that all learn-to-swim programs have problems. I do believe, as I have presented earlier in this essay, that parents ought to understand they have certain important rights as the legal guardians of their children and that they need to know who and what they are allowing their rights to be delegated *in loco parentis*. Similarly, I strongly believe all learn-to-swim programs need to be prepared, in writing, to explain to their clients exactly what they believe and how their program operates. Here are several suggestions I would make about choosing a program (and that a program should be prepared to offer to clients).

Check Out the Program

On the several occasions when we have moved to a new location, I have admired how diligently and purposefully my wife has sought out information about potential family medical professionals by looking at their online presence and then scheduling an appointment with the doctor or dentist. I believe parents need to use the same rigor in choosing a swimming program for their children. They need to read what the program has printed, both in hard copy and especially online, and they need to interview the program director. Any program director too busy or disinterested in being interviewed disqualifies their program from consideration.

Identify the Primary Program Purpose

As part of the interview process, the parent should have identified their own goal for their child’s swim lessons (e.g., developing water readiness; pre-competitive training; water competence) and should determine that the goals of the particular learn to swim program matches their own.

Check Credentials and Curriculum

One important element of any program ought to be the presence of qualified instructors using an approved curriculum. The program director should be able to produce the credentials of all staff members immediately upon request. Don’t take someone’s word for it: Politely insist on knowing who has credentialed the instructors and which program curriculum they follow. If it is a curriculum or program you have not heard of before, be certain to check it out online. Parents also should inquire about the program’s risk management and emergency action plan. Failure to have either of these immediately available should be cause for heading out the door.

Insist on Observing a Session

I think the best way to make sure what a program director says and what is actually happening in a learn to swim program is to see one or more sessions. If observers are not permitted, I recommend walking away and finding another program. I

believe my “listening test” is a simple way to see if the practices in the program are developmentally appropriate. Laughing, smiling children following directions from instructors who do not have to shout is a positive indicator for an appropriate program. Multiple crying or quiet children and loud shouting instructors or general anarchy should disqualify a program.

Ask for References

It is not inappropriate to request the names of several individuals who have had children in the program. While I would not make my own decision simply on the basis of parental recommendations, what other parents say about a program, especially its strengths and weaknesses, can be very revealing, especially if any of the previous steps have raised questions or concerns.

Be Willing to Walk Away

Even if all of the previous steps have led the parent to enroll their child in a learn-to-swim program, it still may not be the best fit for the individual child. Sometimes what a parent thinks a child needs and what the child perceives or actually needs can be very different. A tearful or reluctant child, at least after several lessons, suggests that there is a problem or a mismatch. I am not advocating a *laissez-faire* approach to parenting in which at the first sign of tears, the parent stops the lessons. On the other hand, particularly if the child is young (i.e., 6 months to 4–5 years of age), any organized swim lessons may not be right for them yet. Instead, the parent could opt to bring the child to family swim time at a pool or an uncrowded time at a beach and simply play with the child around the water to help them feel comfortable.

I firmly believe that all children should learn to swim and become competent in and around different aquatic environments. When and how each child does that can vary widely across children. Being flexible and adapting to the needs of each child is a good principle for parents—and for learn-to-swim programs—to follow.