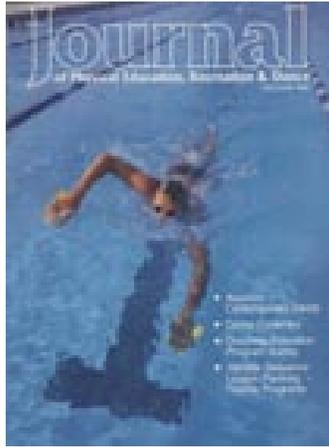


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Contemporary Trends In Infant/Preschool Aquatics— Into the 1990s and Beyond

STEPHEN J. LANGENDORFER

One of the profound, yet subtle, changes in infant/preschool aquatic programs is the gradual shift away from teacher-centered methods of instruction toward more child-centered, developmental programs.

Perhaps the most rapidly expanding area of aquatics over the past two decades has been programs for infants and preschoolers. Aquatic programs for young children have shown an increase in the number of local and nationally standardized programs, program enrollments, printed materials for instructors and parents, and gradual acceptance within the aquatic, educational, and medical communities.

The number of aquatic programs for instructing young children has increased dramatically. Before 1970, no standardized aquatic programs for children under the age of six years existed in the United States. By the mid-1980s, Hicks-Hughes and Langendorfer (1986) estimated that five to ten million children under the age of six years participated annually in structured

aquatic programs. By the end of the 1980s, the USA's two leading national aquatic agencies, the American Red Cross (1988) and the YMCA of the USA (1987), had organized and published nationally standardized programs for children six months to six years of age.

The number and quality of published materials available to preschool swimming instructors have also increased spectacularly. In 1967, the only widely available printed resource for an instructor of young children was Virginia Newman's *Teaching an Infant to Swim*. During the next decade, the YMCA instituted their "Tadpole Program" for three- to five-year-olds. During this same time period, a number of swimming instructors published texts describing the methods and techniques developed from their experience. Most recently, instructor manuals for nationally standardized programs, *Y Skippers* (YMCA of the USA, 1987) and *Infant and Preschool Aquatic Program* (American Red Cross, 1988) became available to instructors certified by these agencies.

Introducing young children to the water changed from a controversial novelty during the late 1960s to the level of well-accepted "fad" status by the late 1980s. In 1971, the Council for National Cooperation in Aquatics (CNCA) issued their first statement denouncing "organized programs for infants and children under three years of age . . . for developmental reasons." From the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, medical authorities, especially the American Academy of Pediatrics (1980, 1985; Diamond, 1975), also condemned swimming programs for infants. In 1985, however, the CNCA reversed that trend by publishing a set of

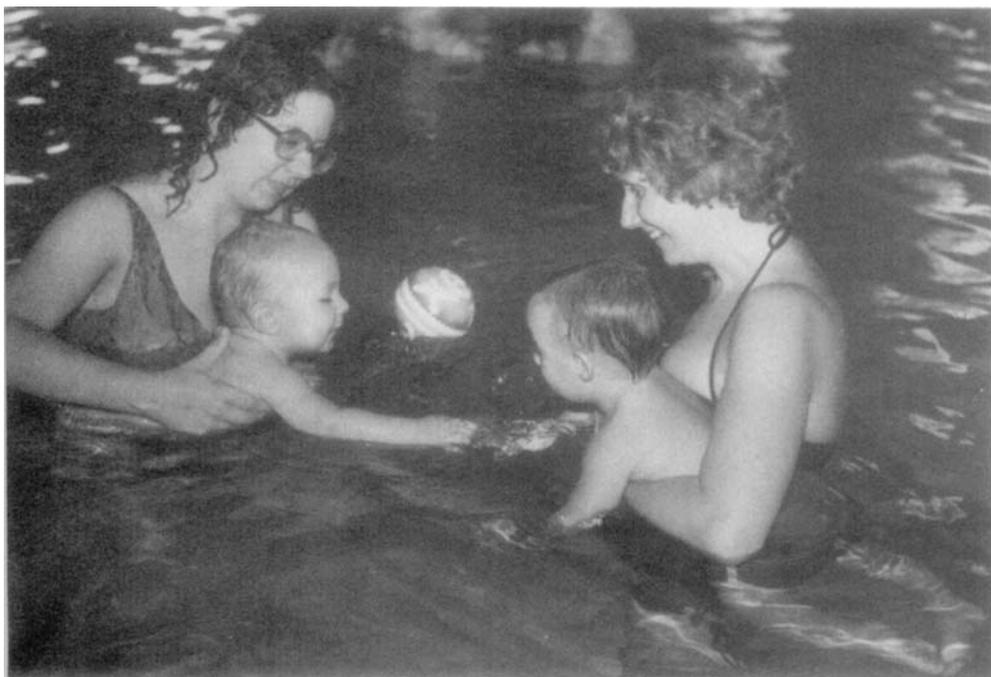


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guidelines for the conduct of programs for young children under three years of age and by forming the National Advisory Committee on Aquatics for Young Children. Around the same time, both the YMCA and American Red Cross organized steering committees to study the need for national programs in infant and preschool aquatics. By 1990, the field of infant and preschool aquatics appears to have come of age in terms of acceptance.

During the latter half of the 1980s, with the advent of the national programs several subtle changes began to appear which demarcate important trends for the next decade and beyond.

From fiction to fact

In a 1986 article in *JOPERD*, this author sought to debunk a number of the current "myths" or "fictions" which had grown up around infant and preschool aquatic programs (Langendorfer, 1986; 1987). It was apparent that all too often both proponents and critics of infant/preschool swimming had ventured inaccurate opinions and observations about practices, safety, benefits, and dangers of swimming for young children. Fortunately, as the area of infant/preschool aquatics matured, many authors, researchers, and aquatic agencies began to question the accuracy of the many claims and beliefs made about aquatic activities for young children.

The resulting trend toward questioning and examining claims produced several important outcomes. First, an awareness has been established that not all claims and opinions about infant/preschool swimming have a strong basis in fact. Aquatic professionals have begun examining and modifying their claims about the benefits of infant/preschool swimming. Simultaneously, critics of aquatic programs have softened their objections and even acknowledged several of the benefits. For example, while it has not been unequivocally established that infant and preschool swimming lessons produce broadbased enhancement of child development (Diem, 1982; Langendorfer, 1974), the remedial benefits to some handicapped children are recognized

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along with the recognition that swimming lessons often do produce earlier acquisition of swimming skills (Erbaugh, 1980; 1987).

A second parallel and equally important outcome has been the increasing commitment to research in aquatics for young children. This commitment to research was established to improve the collective understanding of young children in the water. Until the mid-1980s, what little research dealing with young children in the water existed was published in medical, psychological, or physical education journals. In 1985, the *National Aquatic Journal*, published by the CNCA, became the first periodical aimed at the professional aquatic educator. A series of research-based articles on infant/preschool questions and topics have appeared in the *NAJ* throughout the past five years (Langendorfer, Roberts, & Ropka, 1987; Sayre & Auxter, 1987).

Subsequently, the CNCA's National Advisory Committee on Aquatics for Young Children, the National Swimming Pool Safety Committee and other national groups began promoting the conduct of research specific to aquatics and young children. This emphasis on acquiring and disseminating new information in turn will permit aquatic professionals to continue examining the validity of many beliefs and opinions.

From teaching to learning and developing

One of the more profound, yet subtle, changes in infant/preschool

In the 1980s the idea was introduced that young swimmers should be permitted to learn through play.

aquatic programs is the gradual shift away from teacher-centered methods of instruction toward more child-centered, developmental programs. Murray's *Infraqatics* (1981) and Shank's *Child's Way to Water Play* (1983) marked the introduction in the literature of more humanistic and developmentally sound aquatic programs for young children. Each work, in its own way, suggested that it was inadequate to teach young children as if they were miniature adults, that teaching traditional strokes was less important than permitting young children to learn through play, and that the process of learning aquatic skills was sequential and progressive.

At about the same time, studies were published (Erbaugh, 1978; 1980; 1986; 1987; Langendorfer & Willing, 1985; Langendorfer et al, 1987; and Wielke & Houben, 1978) which challenged many basic assumptions about the way aquatic skill acquisition occurs. These studies suggested that younger and less experienced children demonstrate predictable rudimentary aquatic movement patterns before progressing with time and experience to more advanced forms of aquatic



Photo: West Virginia University School of Physical Education

Parents in the twenty-first century will become more critical and informed consumers of aquatic programs for their young children.

movement. For example, young, inexperienced swimmers may use a "plantar push" or bicycling/running leg action in the water (Langendorfer, et al., 1987). Later these same swimmers use a more extended up-and-down alternating leg action which approximates a traditional flutter kick. Similar changes in aquatic actions occur in the arms, body position, breathing, and water entry (Langendorfer et al., 1987).

The existence of these instruments and the developmental sequences which they represent can encourage aquatic professionals in the next decade to fundamentally restructure their programs. First, they suggest the need to pretest before beginning instruction in order to identify the beginning developmental levels for each child. Second,

instructional progressions should be modified to meet each child's unique needs. Third, new methods and techniques must be developed which match the many changing needs of young children in the water. This basic shift from a pedagogical to a developmental perspective in early childhood aquatics will continue to have profound effects on infant/preschool swimming into the twenty-first century.

From risky business to risk management

Another developing trend in infant/preschool aquatics for the next decade will be the examination of the risks inherent in the water and in programs for young children. It is widely recognized that drowning is the second leading cause of accidental death among children five years and younger (Dawson, 1989; Geddis, 1984; Guliad & Sattin, 1988). Aquatic educators have primarily looked toward instructional programs as the main means of reducing and eliminating this hazard for young children. They have often overlooked, however, the potential hazards which their own programs may create. For example, in a recent out-of-court settlement, a private swim club in Florida paid \$950,000

as a result of the death of a preschool swimmer from the use of inappropriate "drownproofing" instructional techniques, failure to employ certified instructors, failure to have or to practice emergency action plans, and other improprieties (Carroll & Langendorfer, 1989).

In the coming decade, with the rising insurance costs for pools and aquatic programs and the increasing awareness of the dangers of water, especially to young children, aquatic professionals dealing with this age group must become increasingly safety conscious. Several recent articles have recommended the adoption of risk management systems for preschool swimming programs (Langendorfer & Bruya, 1988; Langendorfer, Gray, & Bruya, 1989). These articles may serve as the prototypes for similar risk management programs for early childhood aquatic programs. Undoubtedly, increased emphasis and awareness of risk management will become an integral part of all instructor training programs.

From drownproofing to playing with parents

Concern over the drowning issue has led to the appearance of a number of behavioral and conditioning aquatic programs. These swimming programs have traditionally been operated under the premise that young children must be "conditioned" to learn to swim and thus to decrease their risk of drowning. Such programs have been organized under a narrow curricula which deals with a child falling or plunging into a pool, turning around or over, and subsequently paddling back to the side. In contrast, both the YMCA and the Red Cross preschool aquatic programs have opted to stress variations on a play approach to aquatic learning for young children. They have been organized under the general early childhood education assumption that play is the central learning technique for young children. They also have put a primacy on parental involvement in the teaching-learning process of young children.

Despite much testimonial evidence from parents about the efficacy of one type of program over another, neither technique has been

widely tested to determine whether it in fact works at all or even better than other techniques. A recently completed doctoral dissertation (Illuzzi, 1989) was the first attempt known to test different techniques among preschoolers. Among a variety of findings, the play approach was demonstrated to be as effective as more traditional teacher-centered instructional techniques.

The early childhood aquatic programs of the next decade will encourage the continued participation of parents. Both the YMCA and the Red Cross include important parent orientation components in their programs and insist on parent involvement in the water with children under three years of age. With increased safety information and involvement in their children's learning, parents will become more critical and informed consumers of aquatic programs for their young children. When guided in the right direction, this trend will enhance the development of high-quality programs.

What next?

The next decade will be an exciting one for infant/preschool aquatics. With the slowing of the birth rate, absolute numbers in aquatic programs may begin to level off. However, because of the popularization of programs offered by the YMCA and Red Cross, along with improved and individualized teaching methods, a greater proportion of young children can be expected to enroll in infant/preschool classes throughout the coming decade.

The next ten years will be marked by strong challenges for aquatic professionals working with young children. The quality of preschool programs must be enhanced through more comprehensive research programs. Aquatic researchers and practitioners together must examine what we know about the aquatic skill acquisition process of young children. We must also understand the best and most appropriate pedagogy for the aquatic instruction of young children. We must examine and evaluate the medical and developmental benefits and risks and arrive at appropriate risk management approaches. We are responsible for infant/preschool

aquatics reaching its full maturity by the year 2000.

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