Aquatic Games and Gimmicks for Young Children

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Aquatic Games and Gimmicks for Young Children

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GO WITH GAMES

Imagine the preschool swim lesson where each day the children gather at a pre-determined spot, mark an attendance board themselves, and then enthusiastically begin a lesson by seeking out their instructor for guidance. The instructor starts by asking the class members "Who can . . . demonstrate how a whale spouts OR how an otter slides down a bank OR how a porpoise leaps out of the water?" These learning games are accompanied by the inevitable "Watch me! Watch me! I can! I can!" Further imagine this review session is followed by a rousing session of "Rocketship" or "Time Machine" as swimmers explore ways to use their limbs to move through the water. These exploration sessions conclude with "Tube Tag" or "Mat Pull." While all this is happening, the instructor is adapting the games and learning experiences to the developmental levels of less experienced class members so they can accomplish these skills at a minimal competency level within each skill. Finally, "Underwater Obstacle Course" concludes the "structured" part of the lesson by combining several previously-learned skills into a problem-solving format. The instructor then devotes individual time to those class members who are having difficulty with a new skill or who need to be challenged by a more difficult task.

Contrast the above lesson with the traditional format in which the instructor remains the center of attention throughout, from taking attendance to dismissing class. Typically all activities and drills are issued as a command from the teacher and the children perform the tasks one at a time. Games and "fun" activities are reserved for the conclusion of the lesson or for "free time." Paradoxically, games are either under the strict control of the teacher or are completely organized by the children with little or no control by the teacher.

These examples contrast in both philosophy and pedagogy. In particular, the first example illustrates a lesson which is child-centered and which encourages learning experiences and games from within a play context. The assumption made by the instructor of the first lesson is that the child is the major focus of the lesson and the learning which is to occur. The first lesson, however, also requires an instructor with different skills and expectations than those traditionally possessed by aquatic instructors. The instructor in the first example must use the child's inherent capacity and motivation for play to focus the learning experiences. Rather than guide the learning with "Do this" or "Do that," the instructor requests the children to demonstrate what they know or feel capable of doing. Importantly, the instructor views learning activities and games to be the center of the aquatic learning process.

So what is an aquatic game? An aquatic game may best be defined by understanding what it is *not*. It is *not* the rote drills and activities such as flutter kicking at the gutter or on a kickboard. It also is *not* a highly structured or competitive sport such as water polo, basketball, volleyball, or even relay races. A true aquatic game *is* an activity in which all children are actively enjoying the experience and which is serving its desired purpose (see below "Goals for Games") as a means for enhancing movement in the water environment.

GOALS FOR GAMES IN AQUATIC INSTRUCTION

For aquatic games to become an important part of the aquatic learning-teaching process, their traditional usage must be dramatically transformed. Games must move from an end-of-lesson, time-filling function to an active, integral part of the learning process. They must change from something to do with strokes to an experience that makes the child a better mover in the water. In order to appreciate how games can serve these new functions, the instructor must understand the many goals and purposes which games should play.

1. Games serve as part of the play process.

Play is viewed as the center way in which children learn. When children enjoy experiences and are having fun, their motivation is optimal to practice and learn. Games can be an important way to structure a child's play. In fact, in

the absence of adult intervention, most children will formulate their own games, first alone and then in pairs, and finally in small groups. The aquatic instructor should use this important naturally-occurring process to facilitate aquatic learning!

2. Games can provide developmentally-appropriate learning experiences for children of all ages, skills, and abilities.

It is a well-established developmental fact that motor skills, including aquatic skills, change as a child learns them. For instance, the way that an infant or inexperienced child moves their legs or their arms in the water is very different from the way they move their legs and arms after they have gained more experience. Games and learning experiences can provide a structured opportunity to attempt new skills or change the form of existing skills. They can help the child "get the idea" of the skill to be learned.

3. Games provide excellent opportunities for practicing and improving skills.

In order for swimmers to improve their skill level, they must have adequate practice experiences. Typical swimming practice situations usually are boring repetitive drills consisting of laps back and forth in the pool. Games and novel learning experiences provide a fun practice environment which can enhance swimmers' motivation and improve the quality of the practice. Additionally, within a games environment, skills can be practiced with increased variability. Recent research demonstrates that variable practice promotes faster and more adaptable learning.

4. Games can provide incentives and reinforcements for practicing and improving swimming skills.

Practice only makes perfect when the swimmer has positive practice intentions. Simple rote repetition does not improve a skill. Games provide an external purpose for participating and as such act as an incentive to encourage practice. In addition, the enjoyment of playing and even the status of winning can serve as a reinforcement for continuing to participate. When a child feels successful, they are more likely to practice again.

For the young, inexperienced, or fearful swimmer, an aquatic game can serve as a fear-reducer or distractor. This form of motivation induces the child to overlook their fear or hesitancy by involvement in the game or activity. The appropriate game is so attractive, motivating, and fun to the young child that they can't keep themselves from the water!

GUIDELINES FOR AQUATIC GAMES

Simply adding games to a lesson cannot guarantee the achievement of their designated purpose. There are several guidelines and principles which improve the chance that games and learning experiences can serve their desired purpose.

1. A particular game should only be used after prerequisite and readiness skills have been accomplished.

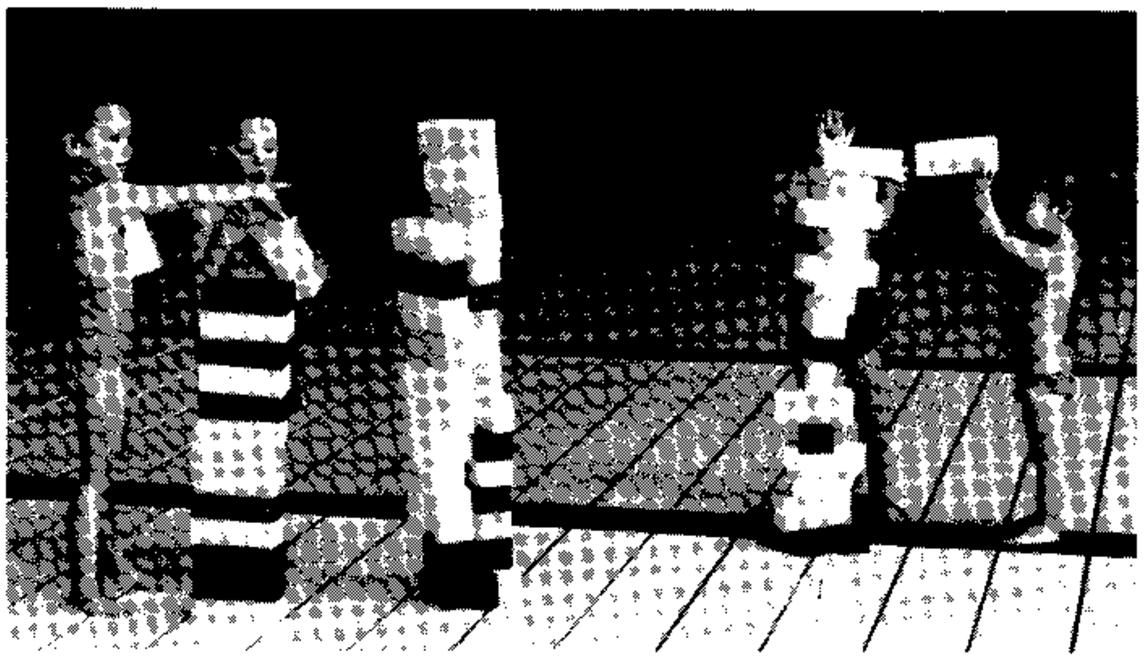
Before using a game or learning experience such as "Porpoising" or "Otter" as part of water adjustment or pool entry experiences, the child must already have acquired basic entry and movement in the water skills plus have lost any debilitating fear of the water.

2. Games must be adapted to fit the developmental and skill levels of all children.

Games should not be viewed as static sets of rules, but as flexible situations within which the practice, learning, and motivation purposes can be achieved. When one or more children cannot achieve the prerequisite skills required of a standard game, then either the game should be adapted and changed to accommodate the children's needs or a different game should be employed.

3. The complexity of aquatic games and learning experiences must match the cognitive, social, and motor skill levels of the children using the game.

Many traditional games have complex rules and strategies which cannot be comprehended by young or inexperienced children. In particular, many games require abstract thinking and social interactions with other children of which most young children are incapable. Games for young children must use simple directions, involve only rudimentary strategies, and require only individual or parallel play by the children. Often, games which children have developed themselves reflect the best levels of complexity.



4. Games and learning activities should involve minimal, if any, levels of competition for young children.

Traditionally, relays, tag, and other competitive team arrangements have comprised the inventory of aquatic games. Unfortunately, such games emphasize a single winner and do not reward correct performance. Young children react to the stress of competition in varying ways. Most children regress and do poorly in the face of competitive stress. Since the goals and purposes for aquatic games are to enhance practice, learning, and motivation, only games at which ALL children can "win" and be successful should be used.

A good rule of thumb to determine the child's ability to cope with either competitive stress or complexity in an aquatic game is to observe a child within the game setting and note how well they are using their skills. If they regress noticeably from previous levels of performance, then the game is too stressful, either as a result of the competition or because of its complexity. This is solved by adapting the game to eliminate competition or reducing the complexity or by eliminating the game's use.

5. Games and learning experiences should be used to serve one of the designated goals and purposes.

Too often games have been used in a lesson when the instructor is at a loss as how to fill up all the time required of a lesson. From a games perspective, games need to fit

into a lesson the same way that any other instructor-directed drill or experience does: for a specific goal or purpose!

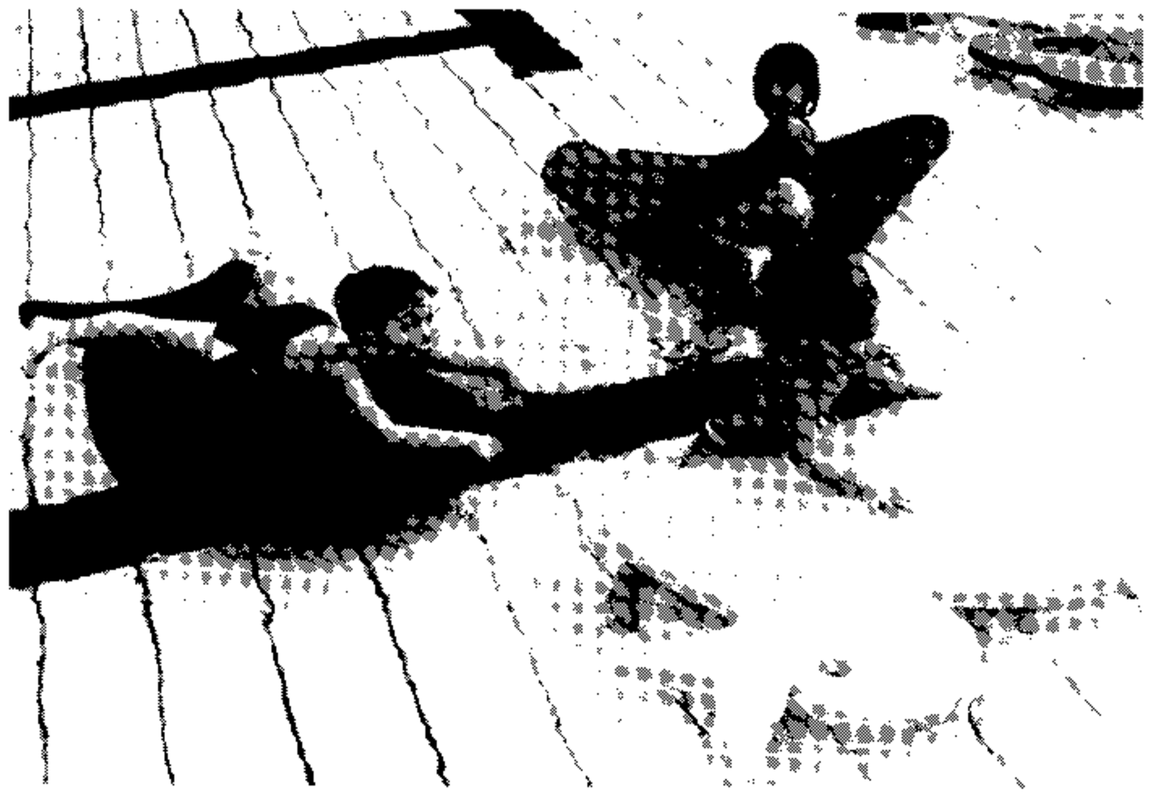
AQUATIC GAMES AND GIMMICKS: SOME EXAMPLES

Aquatic games and gimmicks should be viewed from motor learning theory which views swimming skill changes as a three stage process. The first stage, "getting the idea," is the time during which the child first grasps what the skill requires and makes her/his first attempts. Stage two is the period during which the child practices and consolidates a skill so that s/he is able to perform it repeatedly and consistently. The final stage is the expert level during which a child masters the skill and is able to adapt it to novel situations.

Different aquatic games, gimmicks, and learning experiences are used depending upon the stage in which a child is presently performing a particular skill. For instance, games like "Magic Candle," "Straw Bubble Blowing," or "Whale Spouting" are best used to "get the idea" of breath control. "Porpoising" and "Fish Talk" are games more suited for stage two children who already have begun breath control activities, but who need to develop consistency in getting and holding the breath. For the child who needs advanced practice in breath control skills, "Water Croquet" and "Charlie over the Water" are recommended.

Table 1.
Concept Area: **Breath Control and Breathing**

Game/ Author	Skill Level/ Prerequisite	Purpose	Description
Magic Candle Langendorfer & Bruya (in press)	"get the idea" water entry minimal fear	Learn breath control	Hold finger up as imaginary candle. Challenge child to "blow out." Move hand rapidly to make the candle disappear. Repeat above and below water surface and with more than one finger.
Straw Bubble Blowing Langendorfer & Bruya (in press)	"get the idea" minimal fear	Learn breath control	Use drinking straw to get child to blow bubbles out and suck water in through the straw.
Whale Spout Langendorfer & Bruya (in press)	"get the idea" minimal fear water entry	Learn breath control with water in mouth	Challenge child to take water in the mouth and spit it into the gutter. Then practice spitting high into air or at targets.
Porpoising German (1987)	practice face submersion	Practice rhythmic breath control	Jump high out of water and get quick breath before quickly submerging. Repeat and try head first surface entry.
Fish talk German (1987)	practice face submersion	Practice exhaling; breath control	Submerge mouth and exhale making noises like fish or ducks. Try to use words and have classmates guess what is said.
Water croquet D. Kral (original)	adv. practice underwater swim. breathholding	Improve breath control w/other skills	Arrange weighted hula hoops. Swim through as many hoops as possible in one breath. Repeat.
Charlie over the water YMCA (1987)	adv. practice breath control and propulsion	Improve intermediate skills	One member "it" and others in circle around "it." They chant: Charlie over the water; Charlie over the sea; Charlie catch a tuna; But he can't catch me! If each swimmer recovers a ring before being touched, s/he is safe.



Another important contribution which aquatic games can make are with those skills which show decided developmental changes across time and experience. For instance, as mentioned earlier, both arm and leg actions change dramatically from first attempts to advanced skill levels. Aquatic games can contribute significantly to allowing children first "to get the idea," then practice, and gradually refine their mechanics of arm and leg action without overstressing them initially.

The child who cannot yet swim may benefit from the "Alligator Swim" or "Spider Swimming." The child who has taken her first few strokes of dog paddle will benefit from "Twenty Ways" and from "Rocketship." The child who can do both a beginner stroke and a rudimentary crawl can perfect their stroke and build endurance with the "Time Machine" and "Handicapped Tag."

Table 2.
Concept Area: **Arm/Leg Propulsion**

Game/ Author	Skill Level/ Prerequisite	Purpose	Description
Alligator Swim Kral (original)	get the idea water entry minimal fear	Getting feet off the bottom	Students place hands on bottom, gutter, or steps and walk on hands like alligator; add leg kicking.
Spider Swim Kral (original)	get the idea water entry minimal fear	Move through water using support of wall	Students hold wall (gutter) with hands and feet and move along wall. Movement can be accompanied by "Eensie Weensie Spider."
Twenty Ways Canadian Red Cross (1984)	practice water entry breath control	Explore ways of moving in the water	Using movement exploration method ask swimmers to move through water in different ways. Swimmers should move at their level of skill.
Rocketship Langendorfer & Bruya (in press)	practice face submersion breath control prone float	Practice a progression of prone propulsion skills	Starting at wall or shallow water students begin as a group with "Count down" and "blast off." Progress from prone glide, prone kick glide, beginner stroke, and crawl stroke. Repeat with supine skills.
Time Machine Langendorfer & Bruya (in press)	adv. practice beginner skills	Lead ups to front crawl stroke—arms and legs	Using a story format, have swimmers enter "time machine" and learn to swim like a caveman (dog paddle), a Roman soldier (human stroke), a knight (sidestroke), and an Olympic athlete (crawl).
Handicapped Tag German (1987)	adv. practice deep water basic strokes submersion	Practice forms of strokes with varied limb use	Tag game with "it" tagging swimmers who then become handicapped by the loss of the limb that is tagged.

The tenet of this paper is that aquatic instructors of young children are not using their resources to the best advantage. Young children learn best through play and love to perform animated games and gimmicks. Having used a traditional model of transmitting information from teacher to pupil for many years, the aquatic instructor often misses the opportunity to use play and fun during a game as a major method for learning. Going with more games and gimmicks makes the lesson more fun for both child and teacher AND enhances the learning process.

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AUTHOR NOTES

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