

Every Trick in the Book, and more.
Wendy Gallagher

Patterning

Teaching a child to swim involves creating a specific pattern of movement. In most swimming lessons, we see children holding on the step or the wall, kicking furiously while being instructed to “blow bubbles”. What I would ask is, is this truly creating an effective swimming pattern in the body. Human babies were born with specific patterns and reflexes, which are effective for, learning to crawl, learning to speak and walk. The most effective way to teach swimming is to reinforce effective movement patterning.

Breath Control

A prerequisite to any special movement would be developing proper breath control. It is pointless to teach active splashing to children with their arms and feet. If we watch very good swimmers, either animals or people, we see that there are specific body mechanics involved. One pattern we have to create is the position of the head. It is very imperative, especially in very young toddlers and babies, to establish a body position in the water that is very horizontal, with the head in line with the spine. This is the most effective swimming position. In order for the head to be aligned with the spine in a horizontal plane, the head ultimately must be under the water. So, the prerequisite for swimming is now breath control.

Cueing

We teach breath control by first teaching a “cue” for going under the water. When I cue a child, I like to involve as many senses as possible. When you begin a cue, you must have eye contact with the child. I usually use the words 1,2,3 then, visibly and audibly take a large open-mouthed breath myself. While I am modeling the inhalation, I give the child a slight lift up, so that they have time on the way down to complete the breath themselves, the roller coaster effect. The more resistant the child, the bigger the uplift, but they have to know you will follow through. It is fine to ask, can you put your face in the water? But, don't be surprised when they answer “no”. Many children when asked to put their face in the water for the first time by themselves, will respond by quickly dipping the head in and out, or, place the face into the water, and the inhale, oops! If this happens, going under water is plainly no fun, and therefore must be avoided at all costs. It is very important that going underwater be created as successful, meaning no choking or sucking water in the nose on the child's part. It is the teacher's responsibility to avoid these catastrophes by being the leader, and also being observant of each individual's child's tendencies.

Preliminary Cues

When a child is very fearful, as seen by a rigid body, and excessive, we must begin by slowly assimilating the child to the water. An approach I use is the do “ear dips” and hair dips before cueing for the face in the water. I have stories for everything, for this one, a quick, “ewe, you have dirty ears” works really well. Then, lift the child straight up in the air, say, “wash your ears”, and then quickly swish the child’s ear into the water, only washing the side of the head, avoiding any water into the nose. I like to use my hand on the side of the face to support the head for the first couple; many children feel more secure this way. To use the hand, lift the child up quickly, then before laying the child to your right, place your right hand on the side of his head, then you will tip his body to the right quickly, and he will automatically place the weight of his head into your hand. If the child is older, you can tell the child to lie in your hand. Use the wash your hair story, and lift the child up, and quickly dip the back of the child’s head into the water as you turn your body in a quick circle, almost a spin. The swishes are effective when done quickly and not too slow to lay a child down, because if it is slow, the child right away tries to sit up against the gravity of lying down, you missed your opportunity. When done quickly, you create a successful swish, and the child is either happy because he liked it, or, even if he feigns being upset, he knows it wasn’t really too bad after all. These preliminary water exercises help the child to trust that you can take care of him even when he is very unsure about these new events, or, worse still, has already had previous swimming lesson experience that told him otherwise.

Buoyancy (first back float)

It is very important to establish the sensation of floating with children in order to have them swim confidently. I teach a back float position right away, just to make it OK to have water in the ears. Again, a story for the little ones. Miss Wendy has magic fishies in the water. Do you see them? We look for fish. Hmmm where are they. They are invisible. Hmmm, better still. If you are so quiet, you can hear the fishies in the water. Shhh, be so quiet, don’t splash, you will scare the fishies. Feel free to embellish the story as you like. Then, while looking for the fish, gently place your hand over the forehead of the child, and hug the child’s body into yours, their face is looking away from you. Place the child’s head near your shoulder, but, do not start to lay the child down. You have your head next to the child’s ear, usually, the first time, I whisper the story in the ear of the child so the parent’s cannot hear, secrets are great. When you are ready to lay the child back, have a nice wrap around the child’s body with one arm (left), while the right arm is on the child’s forehead, sometimes I even pin down their arm under my left arm or it will reach up and push you in the face. Don’t think of this as cruel, consider it as swaddling, which always makes children intrinsically more secure and not less so. Another reason the hand is on the forehead is the tendency to sit up. When you don’t have the head, they place their head up, only to swallow a mouth load of water. In order for child to want to float again, you must create success. Then, in one movement, lay the child back onto your body in a float position, and blow bubbles into the ear of the child.

You will always have a few protesters, even with the fish, but far less, let me tell you. If the child protests, complete the quick blow of bubbles and sit up right away and let go of forehead. Oh no, your scaring the fishies. Then quickly try again. I usually do all skills three times, even with protests, and then let the child go back to the steps. When one child is still, of course, make a huge deal about it, praising gets you everywhere. Please be sure to only praise the things a child does well, no matter how small, but please be specific. Praise like, I liked the way you were so still, is better than a generic, good job. Children respond to repetition, so be patient and persistent and don't give up too easily.

Breath Control story

A story for for breath control I use quite often is to teach children about their lungs. Please remember, you don't have to waste hours on talking, children are smart, just tell them how it is. I usually start with a question. Can you breath under water? This is a great question for fearful children, what do you think they are worried about. Did you know that you have two big balloons in your tummy? We establish that we cannot breath under water, but, we have containers for air. When we swim, we fill up our lungs with air, and keep the air while we are under the water. You can embellish, fishies can breath under water, but, you have to come up like a whale. Show me how you can fill up your lungs with air. GOOD! Now, keep it. I model this by placing my hand over my own mouth after taking a huge breath. Then you remove your hand and say, now blow it! GOOD! You chat and practice for a while, then, take the child under the arms, give the cue, "get your air" "keep It", and give the child a forward face dip pulling them under the water in a U shape towards you. Never pull a child straight down vertically as it only forces water up the nose, who likes that?

Water in the nose story

Very simple. When we sniff under the water what happens? EWW, the water goes into our nose. Model what sniffing is. How do we get water out of our nose? Blow it. Always model yourself, children need to see and hear the actual blow. When I teach a young baby and child, or older sometimes, I model the blowing by placing my nose on their cheek, and blowing onto their cheek. Again, this is a full sensory cue, they can see it first, then hear it, and now feel it. You repeat this several times. Verbal cue could be, breath into the big hole, open your mouth and point to it, then say, blow out the little holes. I will poke my thumb and index finger into my nose because the kids think it is funny. Humor gets you everywhere.

Power

One easy way to teach children about being in the water is to give them power with it. When the water is in our ears, how do we get it out? Model shaking your head. Shake your head like a "wet doggy" When the water gets in our nose, how do we get it out?

Blow it! Blow the boogies!! When the water gets in our eyes, how do we get it out?
Blink them. Open close open close.

Create the breath control

So you have established the child's is taking a breath, and going under, and properly exhaling, MODEL the exhalation out the nose. With young babies I model the exhalation out of the mouth by doing a noisy "raspberry like" sound. This is a great distraction for them when they emerge out of the water surprised that you got them down in it, and they consider for a minute, should I cry? Then, you make a really great noisy spitting sound and say, spit it out. Blah. They love it. All of a sudden, they are just happy to be allowed to stick out the tongue and spit for you to see. Oh, GOOD ONE! I like to add, "yucky water" if it pleases the obstinate child.

Nose bubbles or "chocolate cake story"

After teaching a child to swim with the head down, for a short distance, the child needs to learn air exchange. Some children can "explosive breath", which means as they emerge the chin out of the water, they quickly blow out the nose or mouth and quickly take another breath. It is common when learning this that children forget to blow out when the head comes up. They are trying to breath, without first eliminating the old air. Verbal queuing for this would be to say, "blow", when they emerge, rather than the commonly used "take a breath". After blowing out, air intake is automatic. Another way is to teach the chocolate cake story.

Here is the yummy chocolate cake. We are going to eat it underwater. Model placing pretend cake into mouth, and close lips and hum, mmmmmmmmmmmmm! Then do it again, this time showing your nose in the water, mmmmmmmmmmm, making nose bubbles. Tell the kids the story until they really get it. Don't open your mouth under water; you will lose your cake. (This is how to avoid mouth bubbles). I can teach very young children nose exhalation with this, works great.

Now the child is swimming along, and your cue when they begin is, "eat your cake", then the child says, mmmmmmmmm, while under water letting the air out of the nose, when the air is gone, they emerge for more air. Cue is "eat your cake", again; model the mmmm sound for the child so they remember what to do. Modeling with sounds, facial expressions and touch is very important all the time. Repetition is key for children to get a skill concrete. After a while, you won't have to model so much, they will have the skill.

Push button.

Other children always open the mouth as soon as they come up for air and exhale out of the mouth. Usually this is accompanied by choking, as there is a little water in the nose, which rolls up higher when the head is tilted back for a breath. It is very important to teach the child to exhale out of the nose. I can do this by pressing my finger on the child's nose every time he comes up to blow out. First we talk about what we want.

Then practice on the step, face in, face out, and press on nose, and say blow your nose. This is a physical cue. By actively pressing onto the nose it is a neuromuscular reminder of what to do, instead of continuing in the old habit of mouth exhalation. I had one, whom I worked with, and he always choked, but I taught him by pressing on his nose myself when I worked with him. Then, when he would practice swimming back and forth on his own, I told him to press his own nose every time he came up to blow. This effectively retrained the habit to a great nose exhalation, instead of blowing out the mouth. Now, he doesn't choke, and his breath exchange is really quick and easy.