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Aquatics for Children with Challenges

By Susan J. Grosse

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Reviewed by Stephen J. Langendorfer, PhD, Bowling Green State University

According to their website, “The Aquatic Therapy & Rehab Institute (ATRI) is a nonprofit, educational corporation dedicated to the professional development of health care providers in the area of aquatic therapy” (www.atri.org). ATRI offers an aquatic course called “Children with Challenges.” A new manual, *Aquatics for Children with Challenges*, recently published (2014) by Susan J. Grosse, serves as the instructor manual for this unique aquatics course. The author provided me with a review copy of this text after inquiring about media reviews published in the *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education*. [Note: *IJARE* is interested in reviewing appropriate new aquatics- and swimming-related media including traditional print publications, CDs/DVDs, and electronic media as a service to members of the aquatic field. Contact the Editor to inquire about the process.]

The topic of this particular media review is wonderfully coincidental because of the editorial describing the ongoing aquatic legacy of Louise Priest, who, like author Susan Grosse, has had a lifelong interest in aquatics, in particular in adapted aquatics. In a way, the editorial and this media review provide a wonderful set of “book ends” around this *IJARE* issue. As I wrote in the editorial, my work and writing applies a developmental perspective to aquatics. My insights and understandings have been strongly influenced by the field of adapted aquatics as promoted by professionals such as Louise Priest and Susan Grosse. For example, one key developmental principle is to teach each individual based upon her or his unique needs. This principle obviously derives originally from the 1977 American Red Cross *Adapted Aquatics* for whom Louise was the primary author. Interestingly, in *Aquatics for Children with Challenges*, Susan writes about “to better meet the needs of children facing challenges” and “in better meeting the needs of children . . .” as well as including an entire chapter on individualization. I draw these historical parallels to suggest how well the current manual is based upon strong developmental and aquatic principles, something that I strongly value when evaluating various aquatic media.

Aquatics for Children with Challenges is a modest, spiral bound paperback manual that is oriented not only for instructors of the ATRI course by the same name, but essentially everyone, including children without adapted aquatic needs and parents who are interested in aquatics and children. It is organized into an introduction, seven primary chapters, one chapter of case histories, a brief list of aquatic organizations as resources, an innovative chapter called “quick references,” and a glossary of terms. Personally, I like the “aquatic” orientation of the manual

rather than a more traditional “learn to swim” approach. Like Susan Grosse, I believe aquatic activities include a much broader and inclusive focus than one oriented toward “learning to swim” which presupposes the need to teach and learn defined stroke patterns. Obviously, some children with challenges, including those with specific kinds of physical or neuromuscular conditions, are not necessarily suited to “stroking,” but certainly can benefit from participating in activities in appropriate water environments (e.g., see Chapter 2, “Benefits of Aquatics,” pp. 11–14).

Another aspect of this manual I found to be quite appealing was the inclusion of repeated attention to safety and responding to emergencies, as well as specific ways to keep an aquatic environment safe when assisting children with challenges. Chapter 1 (“Priorities,” pp. 7–10), Chapter 3 (“Specific Safety Topics,” pp. 15–33), Chapter 4 (“Challenge Specific Characteristics, pp. 35–42), and Chapter 6 (“Implementation,” pp. 59–89) each elaborate in different ways on the risks associated with an aquatic environment particularly as those risks interact with the human characteristics of both children without disabilities and children with disabilities. Because this text is designed for instructors of the ATRI course, as well as caregivers and parents, it is doubly important to stress the hazards and to point out how to reduce the risks while maximizing benefits. I feel it does that satisfactorily by reinforcing safety topics in different ways in different chapters.

Based upon what I have written earlier, a reader probably can guess that I find Chapter 5 (“Individualizing Aquatics,” pp. 43–57) to be highly important, both for those who are working with children with challenges as well those interested in adopting a developmental perspective. This chapter contains most of the components for individualizing that I believe are important. I probably would suggest re-ordering the major components of this chapter to follow the goal setting section with the assessment section (i.e., how does one know if the goal has been achieved) before describing the activity planning and pedagogy sections (i.e., how does one help a child achieve a specific goal). My personal aquatic experience suggests that by focusing on activities and teaching without first determining the assessment protocol can lead to de-emphasizing both goals (or objectives) and assessment (goal achievement) in favor of programming divorced from its goals and assessment.

Chapter 6 (“Implementation,” pp. 59–89) is a veritable wealth of information regarding the aquatic programming aspects of the ATRI course. I was fascinated (and even a little confused) by the “programming continuum” charts (6-1 to 6-4) that dominate the beginning of the chapter. The charts provide a wealth of information about how to make appropriate and safe decisions regarding programming for the children with disabilities. This particular chapter provides one of the more comprehensive approaches for helping instructors make developmentally appropriate decisions about individual children who will be in their care. It really does represent one of the best collections of practitioner-oriented aquatic materials I have seen. This chapter alone probably makes the manual worth buying for any aquatic practitioner who wishes to individualize their instruction.

Chapter 7 (“Therapeutics,” pp. 91–106) provides a very nice overview of various therapeutic approaches used in aquatics. Over the eight issues of *IJARE*, we have published educational articles that have referenced or described many of these therapies. It was nice to see them summarized in one place for individuals who may not be familiar and consequently may wish to learn more. I did feel that

much of the assessment section (pp. 98–106) might have fit as well or even better in the similar section in Chapter 5, although obviously the information is new and not redundant with that in Chapter 5.

The final chapter (8, “Case Histories,” pp. 107–112) also could have been included within Chapters 5 or 6, in my estimation. On the other hand, these examples are designed in “workbook format” and perhaps intended to stand on their own as part of the ATRI course. I did find them to be useful in integrating the information across a number of the previous chapters. I also noted how similar they are to the organization of an Individual Education Plan (IEP) although in a less bureaucratic and prescriptive format.

One hidden “gem” in *Aquatics for Children with Challenges* is the penultimate section (10, “Quick Reference,” pp. 115–124) and Chart 10-1, performance variations. I particularly like the organization of the performance variations because of its similarity to the “developmental readiness guides” that Larry Bruya and I first proposed in *Aquatic Readiness* in 1995. The format for performance variations (or readiness guides) follows a similar format: A challenging behavior or other characteristic is identified in the first column as “if this is present” and followed in the second column as “then, the following response may resolve the problem.” One of the reasons I always have appreciated this approach is because it provides one of the best alternatives to the “error correction model” used in most of aquatics. The error correction model presupposes that there is one “best” or “right” way to perform particular aquatic skills or strokes. As espoused throughout this manual, such a “one size fits all” approach certainly is *not* appropriate nor does it work with children with challenges.

I can personally recommend this new aquatic resource for any aquatic professional who is interested in an individualized or developmental approach. It is especially appropriate for those working in therapeutic and adapted aquatics and those working with children in the water. Although I have not yet had the opportunity to try out most of the ideas and activities provided in *Aquatics for Children with Challenges*, from everything I read in these pages and know of the expertise of the author, I believe it is well organized and ought to be a “must have” resource in aquatic practitioners’ libraries.