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Self-agency and Swimming: Letting Babies Be Your Teachers

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If you are anything like me, you may never have heard of the term “self-agency,” at least not in the context of teaching swimming. I have my spouse, my daughter, and one of my grandsons to thank for helping me to understand the concept of self-agency and to place it into the context of what I have come to believe about *how* we should be teaching swimming (or as I prefer to phrase it, “facilitating someone learning how to swim”). I realize this may sound a bit like some kind of “New Age” craziness but bear with me as I try to explain.

Over the past year as I have spent more time with my grandson during his third year of life (the so-called “terrible twos!”), my daughter corrected me on several occasions during my playful interactions with my grandson. The correction usually occurred when “Grandpa” was being impatient and trying to get (a.k.a., coerce) my grandson to do something I wanted him to do. These were not instances involving my grandson’s or anyone else’s health or safety. It may have been over the choice of which book to read or ending a session of our pseudo-roughhouse play in which he and I often engage. My daughter and son-in-law have worked diligently with their son helping him understand that in many cases, he has the right to say ‘No!’ Yes, I know how that may sound to traditionalists: “What? Are you nuts? Letting a two-year-old kid say ‘No?’ You are just letting the kid get away with anything! He will be unruly, undisciplined, and selfish.”

One of the problems identified with our current society is that too many people feel powerless to say ‘no,’ beginning perhaps when they were children. An extreme example comes from the horrifying instances of pedophilia when an adult took advantage of a child’s powerlessness and fear of say ‘no.’ The confidence and sense of self to make and control one’s own choices and actions (again, not in cases of health and safety, of course) is the essence of ‘self-agency.’ In fact, the self-agency to say ‘no’ is in and of itself not at all selfish, but a sign of one’s own personal discipline.

Self-agency and Learn-to-Swim

So, what does self-agency have to do with learning to swim? In fact, I believe it has a great deal to do with how and how well we adults interact with children in the water and during learning to swim. Our traditional learn-to-swim instructional methods have been called “command style” or “teacher-centered” (Mossten & Ashworth, 1990). I have written before in another editorial (Langendorfer, 2012) about what I feel were the evils of “command style” teaching that I dubbed the “tell, show, do” teaching approach. It presumes that children learn primarily by copying what an adult says and shows (via demonstration) rather than the child really “owning” the task, knowledge, or attitude themselves by exploring and constructing their own learning.

My recent insights about self-agency and swimming came from my interactions with my grandson and from a group discussion about developmentally appropriate practices in learn to swim. Most readers probably don't realize that my own earliest professional experiences and notoriety in the aquatic field came from my pioneering efforts in helping the YMCA of the USA and the American Red Cross create and refine their infant and preschool swimming programs. I recall feeling uncomfortable with a number of practices and activities that others often used with babies and young children. They included regimens of submerging infants multiple times after counting '1-2-3!' or blowing in their faces to make them gasp and reflexively hold their breaths. They also included manually manipulating a young child's legs in a kicking action or rotating their arms to simulate a crawl stroke. I was even uncomfortable about the amount of time expended with "holding positions" for parents so their babies wouldn't wriggle out of their grasps. I realize these same practices continue today in many programs and I can imagine readers asking themselves, "What the heck is wrong with these practices? We use them all the time with no problem!"

I argue that the problem with these practices is that they all ignore a child's sense of self-agency or control over their own bodies and actions. I have consistently been a firm believer in employing developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) using child-centered constructivist approaches to learning and teaching. My colleague, Mary Ann Robertson (1993) defined DAP as when a clinician (e.g., a parent, caregiver, teacher, coach) understands what a child is ready for and needs, then provides them with a task or experience that meets that need. Implicitly, it also means that a child has the absolute right (again, save for an action or choice that puts them in immediate peril) of saying "no" to that experience. Even 2-, 3-, or 4-year-old children should have the right to express that they do not want to go underwater or to jump from the side or to have their limbs manipulated for them against their will. I have come to see this as every child's inalienable right!

Another way I came to more fully comprehend the concept of self-agency and swimming has been since I have been working with the U.S. Masters Adult-Learn-to-Swim (ALTS). I realized that the last thing I should do to a usually-fearful adult is to push them too hard or too quickly. Certainly, no one I know would purposefully push an adult's head or even face underwater. They would never come back again, I am certain. So, I asked myself why would I do something similar to an infant or young child? I think instructors have submerged babies or young children simply because we are bigger and stronger and can! Of course, to do such means that we ignore that baby's developing sense of self-agency. What they learn from it might be construed as "someone bigger or stronger than me can make me do whatever they want, regardless of what I want."

I have always been taken by a quip that one of my research heroes, Dr. Myrtle B. McGraw, frequently used (McGraw, 1985). She was fond of saying, “Let babies be your teachers!” All these years later after hearing her proclaim that, I am suddenly beginning to more fully comprehend the complexity of what Dr. McGraw meant by that phrase. I am not certain she had ever heard of self-agency, but her life’s work was the study of the gradually changing sense of self-agency among babies and young children in the context of their developing motor skills, cognitive knowledge, and attitudes. I have watched McGraw’s original 16mm movies hours on end in which she chronicled the development of children from birth to in one case 22-years-old. The things that children could achieve when Dr. McGraw set the stage for them were truly remarkable and a testament to what can happen when we allow children to explore and fully develop their own capabilities – and their self-agency! We need to emulate Myrtle McGraw and make certain the pedagogical practices in our learn-to-swim programs fully embrace our swimmers’ self-agency.

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Founding Editor

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