



Foundations for
**RESPECTFUL AQUATIC
EDUCATION**
in **Childhood**

2024



Foundations for respectful aquatic education in childhood

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Foundations for respectful aquatic education in childhood

The Declaration made in Benidorm (Spain) on May 5, 2024 by the AIDEA (Ibero-American Association of Aquatic, Special and Hydrotherapy Education) on Respectful Aquatic Education, is a document that marks a milestone in the history of aquatic education in terms of the rights of participants in aquatic programs. Developed by academics and practitioners from different regions of the world, the Declaration sets out, for the first time, the fundamental rights of children that should be protected in aquatic education.

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Presentation



Presentation

The justification for the creation of a document that presents the position of the AIDEA Association on respectful aquatic education in childhood lies in the need to promote educational practices that promote the integral and safe development of children in the aquatic environment. Some of the reasons for supporting this initiative include:



- **Importance of the aquatic environment in child development:** Water offers a unique environment for learning and the physical, cognitive and emotional development of children. Aquatics education can promote motor skills, self-confidence, water safety, and safety awareness, among other aspects crucial for child growth.
- **Need for focus on water safety:** Water safety is a critical concern for parents and caregivers. A respectful approach to aquatic education can teach children water safety skills and knowledge, gradually and safely, reducing the risk of injury and drowning.
- **Promoting respect for the environment:** Respectful aquatic education is not only about child safety and development, but also about respect for the aquatic environment. Teaching children about the importance of caring for and preserving water bodies from an early age can foster positive attitudes towards environmental conservation in the future.
- **Recognition of diversity in learning:** Every child is unique and has different needs and abilities. A respectful approach to aquatic education recognizes this diversity and promotes the inclusion of all children, regardless of their functional level of skill or previous experience in the water.





- **Contribution to the development of educational policies and practices:** Presenting a position on respectful aquatic education in children can influence the development of educational policies and practices at the local, national and international levels. You can advocate for higher safety standards, accessible aquatic education programs, and adequate resources to support the implementation of respectful approaches in different educational contexts.



Children's water activity, from 4 months to 6 years old, is usually a priority for many families, as it is believed to benefit the child's integral development and promote a positive relationship with the aquatic environment, as well as preventing drowning. However, while it's common to hear recommendations about this practice, the evidence supporting its benefits is limited and focuses primarily on drowning prevention. Studies have shown that

learning aquatic skills does not increase the risk of (Bugeja & Franklin, 2012; Taylor, Franklin, & Peden, 2020).

drowning

Regarding **drowning**, its definition refers to the process of experiencing breathing difficulties due to immersion or submersion in a liquid (WHO, 2014). When this process results in death, it is classified as "fatal"; while, if the victim survives, it is called "non-fatal".

It is relevant to note that, in the statistics on drownings, the number of hospitalizations is 2 to 3 times higher than the rates of fatal drowning. However, the impact on those who suffer a non-fatal drowning but do not require outside intervention, such as lifeguards or hospital care, is not yet fully understood.





The lack of evidence is partly due to research ethics, as it would be necessary to expose children to risky and stressful situations to obtain conclusive results. However, these practices are rejected by **ethical commissions** that protect the integrity of human life.

The **purpose** of this positioning is to inform society, aquatic professionals and facility managers that any aquatic program for children must prioritize the physical, emotional and social safety of the child, avoiding practices that put their well-being at risk.

It is crucial that aquatic education professionals act ethically and responsibly at all times.

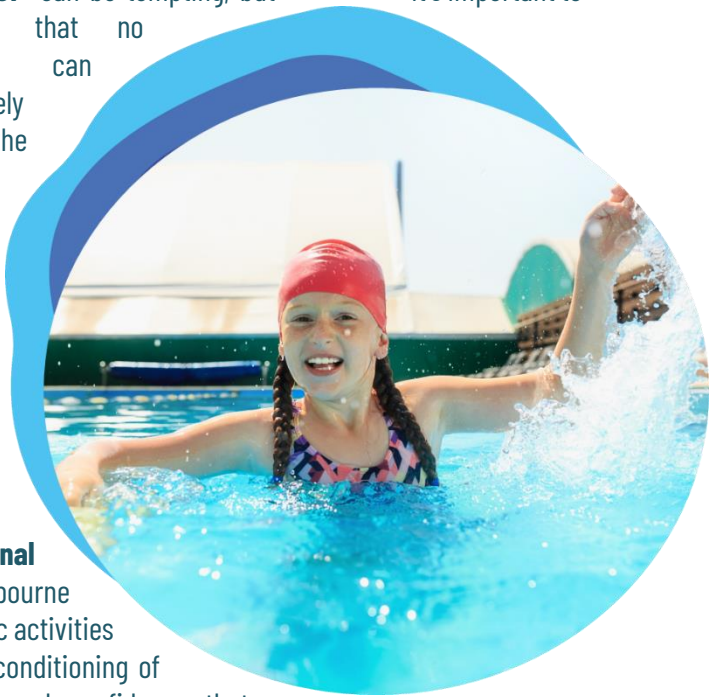
Children, by nature, are explorers; They see the world differently from adults. When they make decisions, they do so with the belief that it is safe for them, without risk of harm, and with a sense of motivation and curiosity. For them, fear is usually present in subtle ways and is not usually an obstacle to action.

Learning aquatic **competence** is important, but it must be done in a safe and developmentally sensitive manner. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to preventing drowning, and the responsibility lies with responsible adults, professionals, on how the learner understands the aquatic environment as a whole.

Enrolling a child in a program that promises to make them **"drownproof"** can be tempting, but it's important to understand that no guarantee can

completely eliminate the risk of drowning. Safety in aquatic

environments depends on several factors, including proper supervision, the existence of restrictive physical barriers, training in aquatic competencies, and an understanding of the associated risks for both the child and the adult in charge.



Relying on Article 4 of the **Charter of the 1994 International Conference on Children's Aquatic Education** in Melbourne which states that "the organizers and animators of aquatic activities shall reject any pedagogy based on violence or on the conditioning of children. They should promote a feeling of security and confidence that



encourages children to freely explore the aquatic environment", the **Ibero-American Association of Aquatic, Special and Hydrotherapy Education (AIDEA)** presents this updated position with the aim of guiding families and professionals on aquatic programs for children from 4 months to 6 years old. highlighting the importance of a multidimensional perspective of aquatic competence and the need for continuous updating of programs to ensure the safety and integral development of children. In summary, this document provides a solid basis for promoting safe, inclusive and respectful educational practices in the aquatic environment, thus benefiting the development and well-being of children worldwide.





Objectives

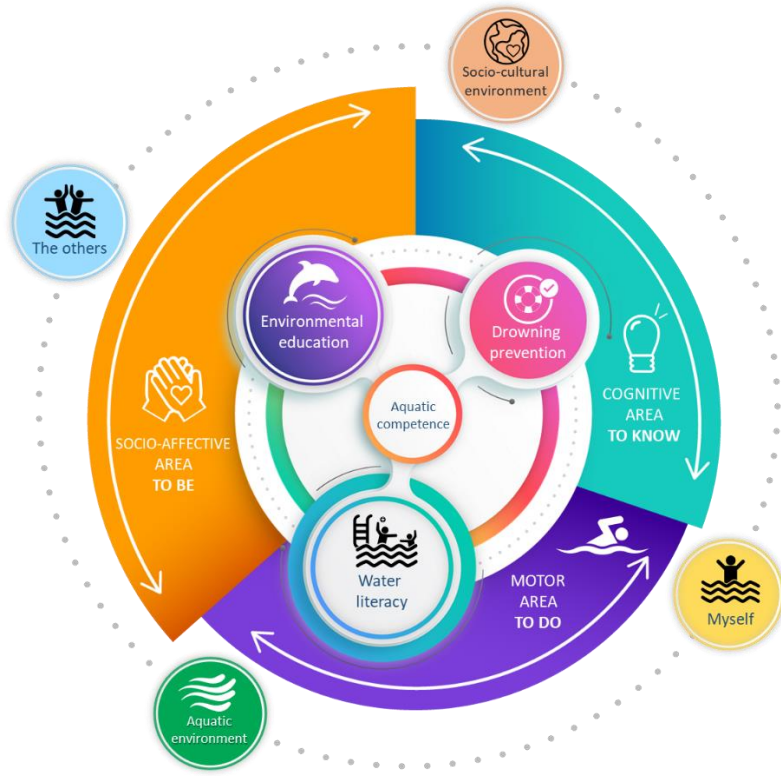


Objective of aquatic activities in childhood

The **purpose** of aquatic activities in childhood is to promote the integral development of the child through the acquisition of fundamental aquatic skills, addressing multiple aspects such as aquatic literacy, drowning prevention and environmental education (Figure 1, Fonseca-Pinto & Moreno-Murcia, 2023). This not only allows for more skillful and safe water experiences, but also promotes the child's overall well-being in their relationship with the aquatic environment, themselves, and others.



Figure 1. Multidimensional model of aquatic competence (Fonseca-Pinto & Moreno-Murcia, 2023).





During **childhood**, an important phase of growth and discovery, the child shapes his perception of the world and learns to interact with it safely, based on his experiences. Therefore, it is essential to provide access to a variety of enriching and positive opportunities.

Participation in aquatic programs during infancy lays the groundwork for children to explore more specific aquatic activities in the future, while also developing an emotional connection to the aquatic environment. The quality of these experiences significantly influences later stages of development.

The **objectives** of these activities are materialized in three interrelated dimensions:

- **Aquatic literacy:** This dimension, integrated into motor literacy, seeks to develop a set of 15 essential aquatic competencies to interact with the aquatic environment with skill and safety. In addition to enhancing motor development, this dimension is influenced by individual characteristics and learning contexts.
- **Drowning prevention:** This dimension, incorporated into aquatic literacy practices, involves the transfer of knowledge and skills to real-world situations. In addition to strengthening cognitive and socio-affective aspects, this dimension has both a preventive and reactive role, teaching how to act in risky situations, and how to prevent them. Recognizing the need for adult supervision is part of safety.
- **Environmental education:** This dimension promotes knowledge and preservation of the aquatic environment, fostering pro-environmental attitudes and positive emotions towards nature. Through this dimension, it seeks to bring the reality of natural aquatic environments to pool programs and promote educational practices in real environments, always prioritizing the safety of the child.

These dimensions they are intrinsically related and are essential in the design of educational programmes that pursue specific objectives.

Learning in this context is not limited to theoretical knowledge, but also encompasses the development of practical skills and socio-emotional attitudes. Since interactions vary depending on contextual conditions and the age of the child, it is critical to understand that their exploratory nature and tendency to unpredictable interaction require **flexible and adaptive approaches**.





The **objectives of the declaration** for respectful aquatic education in childhood are:

education

- **To establish respectful educational standards and practices:** Provide guidance and recommendations for developing water education programmes and activities that are sensitive to children's individual needs and respectful of their physical, emotional and cultural integrity.
- **To encourage integral development:** to promote the physical, cognitive, emotional and social development of children through positive and varied experiences in the aquatic environment.
- **To promote inclusion and equity:** seeks to ensure that all children, regardless of functional level, experience, or socioeconomic status, have access to safe, quality aquatic education opportunities, including qualified professionals, respecting individual rhythms and the choice of learner-centred methodologies.



aquatic





- **To contribute to creating public policies:** to advocate for the inclusion of respectful aquatic education in public policies related to children, education, safety and the environment, at local, national and international levels.
- **To raise community awareness:** educating parents, caregivers, educators, authorities and society in general about the importance of respectful aquatic education and its impact on well-being and development in childhood and throughout life.

The declaration for a Respectful aquatic education in childhood, by establishing clear and specific objectives, can serve as a framework to guide actions and policies that promote safe, inclusive and respectful educational practices in the aquatic environment.





**Child development
and children's rights**



Child development and children's rights

If we ask ourselves what the **responsibilities of a baby** are, it may seem strange, since there are really no responsibilities of the baby. Their main objective is to grow, develop and meet their basic needs. What happens during this stage are natural processes of development and care provided by those who care for him, since the baby does not yet have the ability to make decisions or act, given his state of development.

In this sense, what **care** should the caregiver guarantee during early childhood?

- **Nutrition:** The baby depends on the caregiver to be fed and consumes the food provided.
- **Sleep:** It is crucial for their well-being and development.
- **Communication:** Expresses their needs through crying and makes vocalizations to communicate.
- **Physical development:** In a stimulating and age-appropriate environment, participates in activities that involve touch, palate, and motor actions such as crawling, turning, and crawling.
- **Connection and bonding:** It is established mainly with caregivers through physical and visual contact, hugs, smiles and attention to physical and emotional needs.
- **Stimulation and interaction:** An interesting and stimulating environment is essential to promote motor, cognitive and social development. Although direct adult manipulation is not necessary, opportunities for exploration in varied settings should be offered. The aquatic environment, in particular, offers significant benefits, since humans are not born adapted to it.

If an aquatic program is approached from a pedagogical perspective, there are many benefits for the baby in terms of motor development, visual perception and cognitive flexibility. However, **studies have pedagogical limitations to affirm that the child's development depends exclusively on this interaction with the aquatic environment** (Santos et al., 2023).

In order to respect children's development, it is essential to understand and distinguish between two concepts: autonomy and responsibility.

Autonomy refers to the ability to act and make decisions independently (unaided) in response to the need to adapt to different contexts. Self-regulation is fundamental to being autonomous and is centred on freedom of action (Deci and Ryan, 1985). **Responsibility**, on the other hand, is defined as a person's ability to act morally (Escámez & Gil, 2001), assuming the consequences of his or her actions. This ability implies both cognitive competences and the capacity to evaluate the benefits and harms of an action, which makes it inapplicable to children in the sensorimotor phase. In this context, responsibility acquires an important educational value (Diez & Sousa, 2008).



Educational programs promote the progressive acquisition of autonomy in the aquatic environment, but this is not synonymous with safety, as a child, let alone an infant, cannot be expected to know or act appropriately in a risky situation (Taylor et al., 2020). However, it is often observed that as the child becomes progressively more autonomous in interacting with the aquatic environment, the adult’s attention to supervision relaxes: even greater autonomy is not directly accompanied by responsibility. But a baby or child will never drown if an adult is present with adequate supervisory capacity.

In order for children to begin to assume responsibilities progressively, it is necessary for them to develop the ability to **understand and comply with some instructions** or tasks with the assistance of their caregivers, based on Piaget’s theories. This progressive learning process is adjusted to the age, maturation, and individual characteristics of the child, and is influenced by cultural effects and family expectations, as Bandura’s theory suggests. Starting at age 3, exploring simple tasks can be beneficial to a child’s future success in school, work, and relationships. These types of experiences offer opportunities for development, but do not include survival skills or responsible self-care.

Table 1. Some references of responsibilities in the infant stage.

0-2 years	2-3 years	3-5 years
They do not have specific responsibilities, they have needs that must be attended to by responsible adults and also have the safety of the environment guaranteed.	The responsibilities are simple and proposed, with guidance from the responsible adults.	They have simple responsibilities. They perform simple tasks much by imitating what they observe in their environment.
Examples: basic needs such as eating, sleeping and also ensuring the safety of the environment.	Examples: tidying up toys, helping to set the table	Examples: dressing, putting water on flowers.

It is important to allow the child to build its internal structures over time. The development of the cerebral cortex is essential for cognitive abilities, perception and consciousness. Each part of the cortex develops at its own pace, as cognitive abilities mature, and this is a gradual process (Singer, 2008), which will gradually contribute to greater autonomy.





Children's rights

Children's rights have been defined by the United Nations (UNICEF, 2019) in an agreement between several countries. How can we adapt considering the purpose of the development of aquatic competence throughout life?

- **Non-discrimination:** All children have the right to participate in aquatic programs that respect their individuality, regardless of their social, religious, economic or functional status.
- **Best interests of the child:** Educational practices in aquatic environments must respect the physical, psychological and emotional integrity of the child, providing benefits for the development of aquatic competence.
- **Compliance with rights:** The coordination of aquatic facilities must supervise educational practices to promote the well-being and development of participants.
- **Parenting Education:** It is important to provide families with information about child development, safety, and aquatic competence, as well as opportunities to develop parenting skills in a safe environment.
- **Survival and development:** Since the aquatic environment is inherently dangerous, it is vital to develop aquatic competence throughout life to address this multidimensionality (Fonseca-Pinto & Moreno-Murcia, 2023) according to development, experience, and maturation.
- **Parental Responsibility:** During water activity classes, adults should be instructed on drowning safety and prevention practices, the importance of restrictive physical barriers, and proper supervision, given the child's unpredictable actions and the dynamics of the aquatic environment.
- **Protection against violence:** Educational practices must comply with strict rules that prioritize the physical, psychological, and emotional safety of the child, without justifying the child's crying for any reason.





- **Access to education:** All children have the right to develop aquatic competence in a healthy educational environment, with competent professionals committed to the physical, emotional and psychological integrity of their students.
- **Experience, play, and interaction:** Children should have the opportunity to experience, play, and socialize in safe environments that promote ethical values, mutual respect, fairness, and social diversity.

These rights are designed to help the learner take personal responsibility and contribute to personal and social well-being over time. We believe this mindset will contribute to addressing drowning issues on a global scale, starting from our local communities and classrooms.

Educational practices healthy, positive and constructivists are a necessity and a right all over the world. Only those who are poorly informed could deny it. To learn meaningfully, it is crucial to have access to informed, evidence-based practices facilitated by people committed to their own personal development.





Child abuse or neglect



Child abuse or neglect

This is a sensitive topic that involves the use of strong terms, but sometimes what happens in some aquatic programs in a systematic way or in specific educational situations can be classified as **child abuse or neglect** (Table 2). Although it may not have been done with the intent to harm the child, the adult's behavior deviates from the usual and desirable interaction with an infant, which can cause actual or potential harm to the child's health and development (Glaser, 2000). These incidents are perpetrated by adults, whether male or female, and are considered preventable (Glaser, 2000).



Table 2. Adapted system of classification of abuse (Zeanah & Humphreys, 2018).

Physical abuse	When a responsible adult inflicts physical harm on a child by non-accidental means.
Physical neglect/failure to attend	When a responsible adult does not exercise a minimum degree of care in meeting the child's physical needs (nutrition, clothing, housing, hygiene, medical care).
Neglect/lack of supervision	When a responsible adult fails to take appropriate precautions to ensure adequate safety (proper supervision, safe environments) whether the child is inside or outside the home, depending on the child's particular emotional and developmental needs.
Emotional-abuse	When an adult caregiver persistently or extremely frustrates the child's basic emotional needs. This also includes parental acts that are harmful because they are insensitive to the child's developmental level, including psychological safety, foster care and self-esteem, and age-appropriate autonomy.

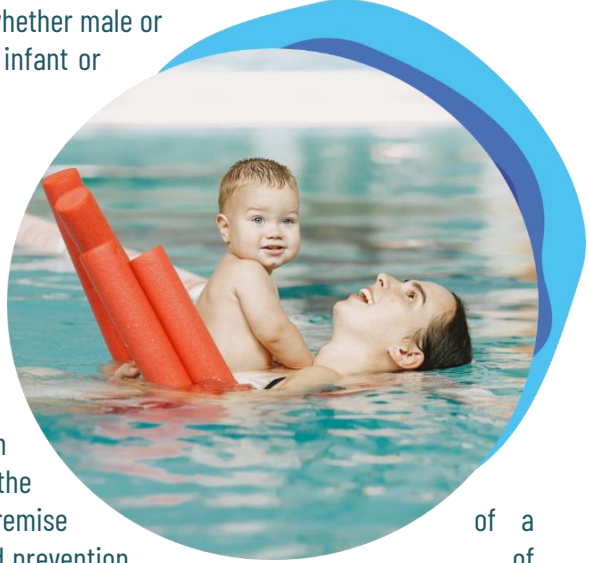
Note: It meets a severity rating for each type of abuse. The sexual one has not been included because it does not agree with the objective of the document.



How can we evaluate the pedagogical decisions of an adult, whether male or female, who chooses to continue with the instruction of an infant or child to float alone in the water despite his or her crying?

How can we judge the pedagogical decisions of an adult, male or female, who persists in teaching a child who shows discomfort to float or move in water, even swallowing water or vomiting, based on the belief that this will prevent drowning?

How can we qualify the decisions of adults who facilitate and allow these practices, whether in aquatic facilities or in the home, under the premise of a supposed prevention of drowning?



It is necessary to recognize the clear **differences between respectful and abusive or negligent educational practices**, since these situations can profoundly affect children's cognitive, socio-emotional, linguistic, and neurobiological development, with the consequences on mental health being especially worrying (Zeanah & Humphreys, 2018). These repercussions are not limited to childhood, and can affect adult life (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995; Glaser, 2000).

There are no specific guidelines for teaching in the aquatic environment, nor are there any specific programs to ensure that





drowning is avoided. **To claim that an aquatic program prevents drowning is as illusory as to claim that obtaining a driver's license guarantees to avoid traffic accidents.** What does exist are educational practices that promote greater safety in the interaction with water, without compromising the well-being or development of the learner, whatever their age. For this reason, the recommendations of the World Health Organization (2014) emphasize protective barriers, constant adult supervision, supervised aquatic environments and the development of aquatic competencies that include learning safety behaviors.

cases of widely known, occur children under 5 years of age, and it is very likely that this statistic is replicated in the aquatic environment. The **vulnerability of early life development** underscores the importance of a clear and precise positioning such as this, where the need to apply developmental science knowledge in child protection and well-being is recognized (Center of Developing Child, 2016). Adults have more resources to try to defend themselves in situations of abuse, but for babies and children it is necessary to guarantee an undeniable premise: they must be cared for and respected by responsible adults, whether they are their direct caregivers or

It is a fact that most abuse, in





professionals in the aquatic field.

In the search for the water safety, not everything is allowed. It is not the baby or the child who must adapt to the needs of the adult, but it is the adult who must respect and ensure the best interests of these beings in development and formation.





Bonding



The importance of bonding



The **bond established in the first years of life** with primary caregivers is fundamental for child development, greatly influencing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral life (Stinehart et al., 2012). Bonding behavior is characterized by the search for proximity by the dependent being (baby/child) when experiencing discomfort of any kind (pain, fear, cold, hunger, etc.). Naturally, the child seeks to approach the attachment figure because he or she trusts that it will be able to alleviate his or her discomfort and restore his or her emotional balance (Figure 2). The bonding circle of Hoffman, Gooper, & Powell (2019) is based on 4 key principles: secure bonding, emotional regulation, exploration, and **repairing breakups**. The "Circle of Security for Mothers and Fathers" program is an intervention supported by scientific evidence that seeks to promote a secure attachment in parenting. This program is based on the premise that children need the support of parents that encourage them to explore the world and welcome them when they return from their adventures, hands that are trustworthy, wise, loving and safe. If maltreatment occurs during childhood, bonding is affected (Glaser, 2000), and these effects can manifest in relationships established during adolescence and adulthood (Levy & Orland, 1998).

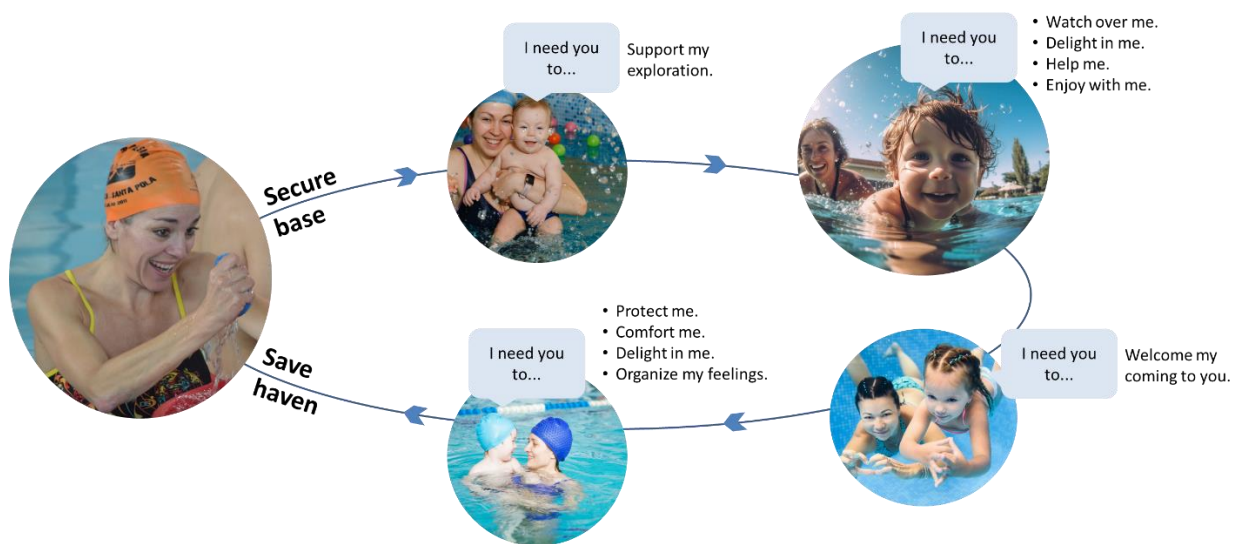
There are **four types of bonding**, and the type that is established between the infant and the caregiver depends largely on how the caregiver responds when the infant feels that his or her safety is threatened (e.g., when he or she is emotionally upset or frightened) (Benoit, 2004). Through bonding, internal models are developed that influence the child's perception of their worth and trust in others, or lack thereof (Myrick et al., 2014). Bonding plays a crucial role in a child's ability to learn.

- **Secure bonding:** The caregiver responds with sensitivity and affection, seeking to reassure the baby. They feel safe and able to express their negative emotions, trusting that they will be cared for when they need it.
- **Insecure-avoidant bonding:** The caregiver responds in an insensitive, rejecting, or avoidant way to the baby's needs. As a result, the baby avoids seeking comfort from the caregiver when they are distressed and can minimize their emotions in front of them.
- **Insecure-resistant bond:** The caregiver responds with little receptivity, unpredictability, or incoherence, leading the child to show extreme emotions to get attention and seek validation of his or her feelings.
- **Insecure-disorganized bond:** Aberrant and atypical behaviors are observed that are not limited to moments



of stress of the baby/child.

Figure 2. Circle of safety/family bonding attending to the child's needs (adapted from Hoffman, Gooper, & Powell, 2019).



What is the social role of the aquatic professional? What kind of bond are you expected to establish with students? What effect do abusive or unhealthy educational behaviors have on the student's development and self-image, in the short and long term?

During childhood, the **main caregivers** are parents, grandparents, older siblings, etc. As we develop, other relationship partners take on bonding roles, providing security and support (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2009).

From a **neurobiological perspective**, caregivers' environmental cues are crucial

According to Bowlby's theory, infants are born with bonding behaviors intended to ensure proximity to protective and supportive figures (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2009).





for the development and organization of neural systems during the first years of life (Friend, 2012). When caregivers respond appropriately to the child's physical and emotional states and interact affectively with them, emotional regulation and interpersonal connection in the brain are promoted (Friend, 2012; Meyer et al., 2013). These interactions contribute to the formation of neural connections and the development of the limbic system circuit, important for processing social interactions, regulating emotions, and managing stress (Friend, 2012).



Childhood trauma affects emotional and behavioral functioning, as well as attachment and trust-building processes, both within and outside the family environment (Scales & Scales, 2016).

It is the responsibility of the aquatic professional, to whom families entrust the care of their children, to establish affective relationships that promote the safety and well-being of children in the aquatic environment. These relationships will influence how children relate to water and their aquatic competence. These relationships will influence the way children relate to the water, their aquatic competence, but also the way they look at themselves and perform their inner discourse. Educational practices must respect the physical, emotional and cognitive needs of the student, avoiding any form of mistreatment or coercion.

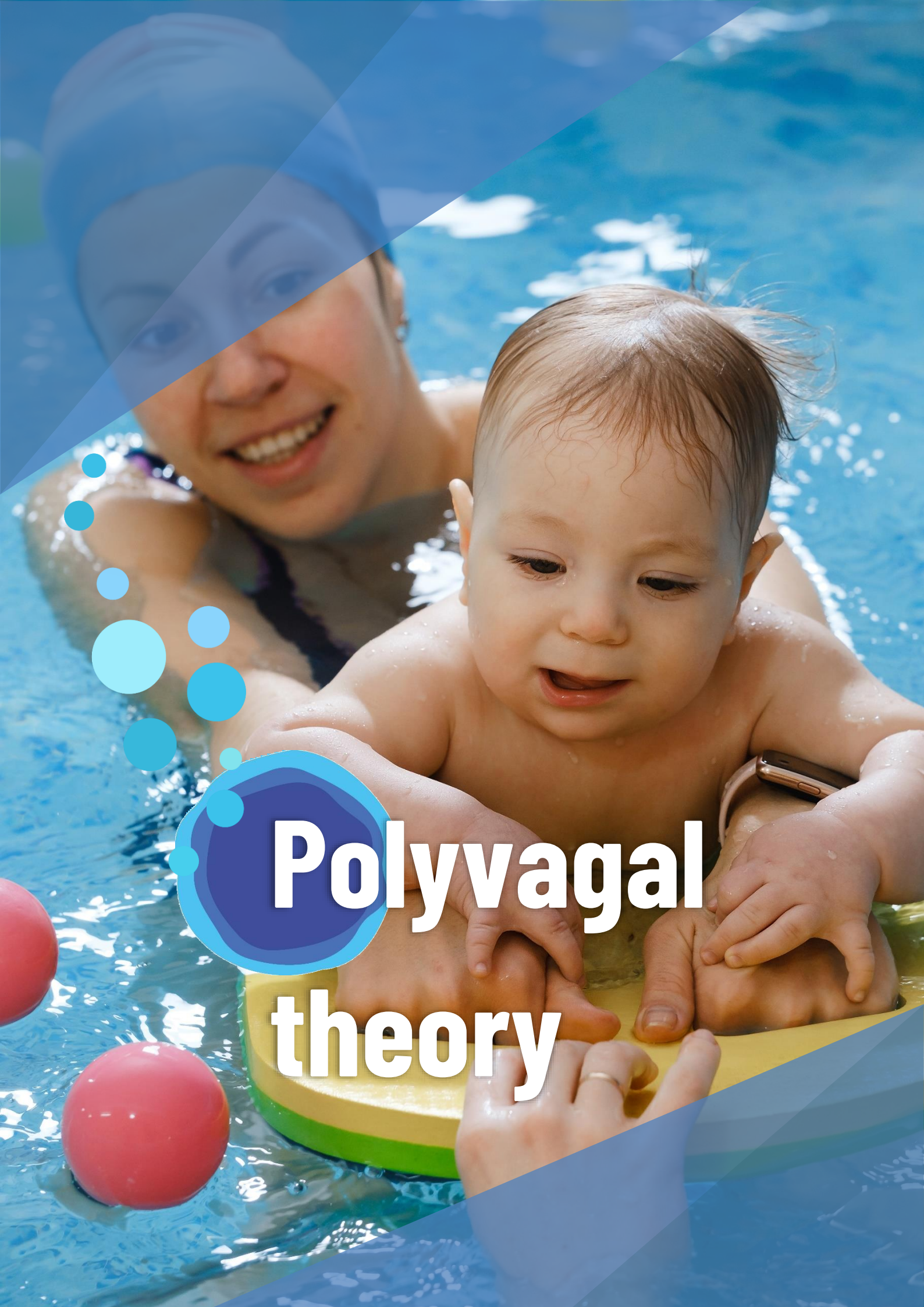
Learning is a process that requires commitment and motivation, but babies cannot feel this kind of commitment in the cognitive sense. However, the **affective relationship** they establish with the aquatic professional conditions their willingness to actively participate in the learning process. Therefore, it is imperative that aquatic professionals are sensitive to the emotional needs of children and build trusting relationships so that learning can occur, and as a result, safety in aquatic environments can be enhanced.

The **aquatic professional** plays a decisive role in forming **safe and healthy bonds** with children in the aquatic environment. These relationships affect not only children's aquatic competence, but also their long-term



emotional and social development. It is essential that aquatic professionals are aware of their role in children's lives and strive to build relationships based on respect, trust and mutual care, with drowning prevention being a natural consequence of a positive, participatory and developmental learning process.





**Polyvagal
theory**



The polyvagal theory

Talking about **polyvagal theory** implies recognizing that emotions, often considered as subjective, have a measurable neurophysiological substrate, which provides an innovative scientific perspective to study the feeling of security (Porges, 2020).

The **Autonomic Nervous System (ANS)** is present in all of our experiences,

acting as our internal surveillance system, similar to a

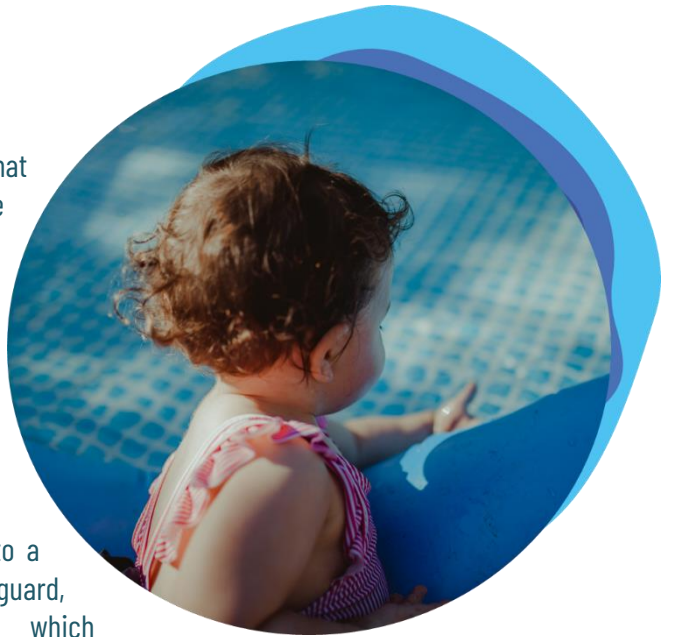
lifeguard,

which neurocepts what is happening around us and sends messages of safety or danger based on its assessment. This assessment is based on the individual profile and is influenced by life experiences. Its main purpose is to guarantee our safety, an intrinsic need in every human being.

The **vagus nerve** is the primary component of the ANS, being the origin of most parasympathetic innervations. In addition to influencing functions such as the gastrointestinal tract, respiratory system, heart, and abdominal viscera, it also affects our behavior and the way we experience our day-to-day lives.

being,

When we feel safe, our nervous systems maintain well-growth, and restoration functions, allowing us to be available





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and curious about the environment and others, without perceiving or expressing threats or vulnerability (Porges, 2022). This sense of security arises from within the body and is a fundamental biological need. However, their recognition depends on the SNA status at the time, which can vary from person to person and at different times.

The **polyvagal theory of Porges (2022)** suggests a specific hierarchy of responses to a stimulus. If the neuroceptive system detects a threat, the response of the ventral parasympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for regulating social interactions, is activated. If this response is not enough, the sympathetic nervous system kicks in in fight-or-flight mode. If both systems fail to resolve the threat, the dorsal parasympathetic nervous system response, associated with immobilization, is activated (Figure 3).

Infant/child behavior can change drastically from deep crying to feelings of satisfaction and enjoyment after a session, which can raise questions about the abusive nature of educational practices. However, even when the desired behavior is achieved, the elevated cortisol level experienced during these experiences can lead to physical and emotional imbalances with potential long-term repercussions (Rossi & Madormo, 2020).

Pedagogical strategies they must be based on prevention and respect for the safety and well-being of the child, and not on coercive practices.

The methodologies that they use forced practices to teach aquatic skills are deeply misguided, as they do not guarantee safety and can induce risky situations or even drowning (Scales & Scales, 2016).

Pedagogical strategies should be based on knowledge about childhood, education for life in interaction with the aquatic environment, where prevention is part of the training and is not based on coercive practices.

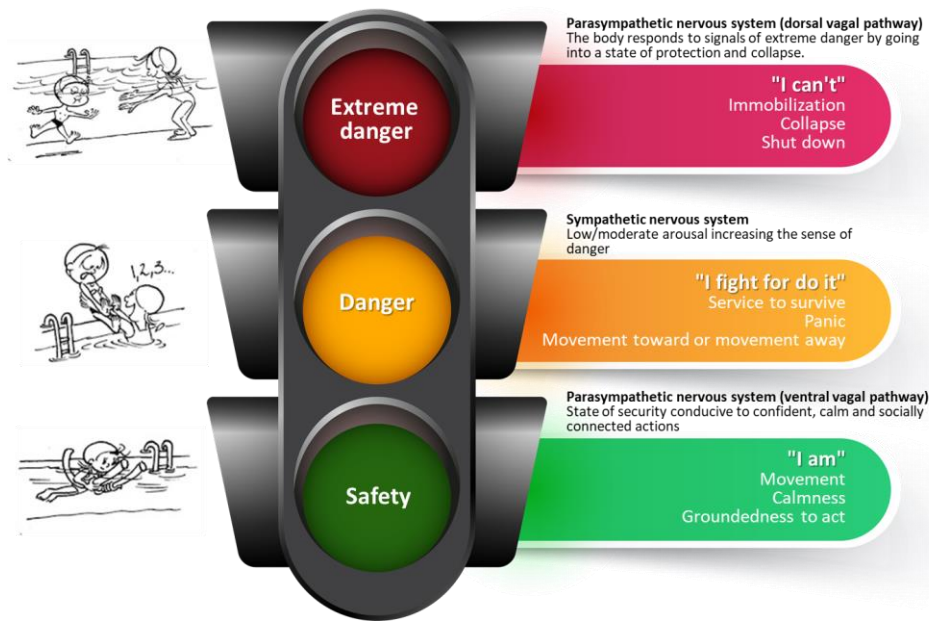
The human being's ANS serves as a reference for their **behavioral, emotional and physiological reactivity** in a situation. A sense of security is a fundamental biological need, but its recognition depends on the state of the ANS at the time. It is essential that educational practices promote a safe and respectful environment for learning and the development of aquatic competence, prioritizing the physical, emotional, cognitive and social well-being of the person.

In the context of aquatic education, this theory offers valuable insights into how to create an environment





Figure 3. Polyvagal theory (Porges, 2023).



safe and supportive for children. As a summary of the polyvagal theory in aquatic education, we highlight:

Safety and connection route. Polyvagal theory emphasizes the importance of the "ventral pathway," which is associated with feelings of security and social connection. In the aquatic environment, this involves creating an environment where children feel safe and supported, facilitating their ability to learn and enjoy water activities.

Stress responses and self-defense. The autonomic nervous system has several stress response pathways: the sympathetic pathway (fight or flight) and the "dorsal pathway" (immobilization). Understanding these responses helps aquatic educators recognize and manage stress in children, avoiding situations that may trigger fear or trauma.

Importance of a safe environment. An aquatic environment that respects the child's safety and comfort signals is essential. This includes clear communication, emotional support, and creating an environment where children feel heard and valued.



Social bonding and connection. Fostering bonding and positive social interactions in the water is crucial. Water activities should be designed to promote cooperation and joint play, strengthening bonds between children and between children and adults.

Emotional regulation and autonomy. The polyvagal theory also stresses the importance of emotional regulation. Educators need to be attentive to children's emotional needs, helping them manage their emotions in a healthy way and promoting their self-esteem and autonomy in the water.

Body signals and nonverbal communication. Attention to children's body cues and nonverbal communication is important. Educators should be sensitive to signs of discomfort or stress such as coldness, abdominal pain, body tension, resistance to suggestion, seeking the parent's lap, adjusting activities to ensure that each child feels comfortable and safe.

In short, apply Polyvagal theory in aquatic education involves creating a safe and empathetic environment, where children's physiological and emotional responses are respected and addressed, facilitating healthy learning and development in the water.





Playing



Right to learn by playing

United Nations, in 1989, in article 31, paragraph 1, states that "States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to play and recreational activities appropriate to his or her age, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts."

More recently, the **United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013)**, in paragraph 14c, understands **children's play** as "any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by the children themselves; it takes place wherever and whenever they want and whenever the opportunity arises. Caregivers can help create environments conducive to play, but play itself is voluntary, intrinsically motivated, and an end in itself, not a means to an end."

Play involves the exercise of autonomy and physical, mental or emotional activity, taking an infinite number of forms that can be developed both in a group and individually. These

forms evolve and adapt throughout childhood. The game's main features include fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility, and lack of productivity. These factors combined contribute to the enjoyment that gambling provides and the incentive to keep playing. Although play is often considered non-essential, the Committee reaffirms that it is a fundamental and vital dimension of children's enjoyment, as well as an indispensable component for physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development.

Play plays a critical role in child development, as it contributes

From the first months Babies explore and understand both themselves and the environment around them through playful interactions with their caregivers. As they get older, toddlers develop their physical and social skills by inventing and sharing games with siblings and friends of the same age.



significantly to all aspects of children's growth. Through play, children acquire a wide range of skills and competencies from an early age.

Pretend play is especially important, as it provides a key context for children to develop skills such as empathy, emotional regulation, problem-solving, group planning, and negotiation. **Active play**, especially when done with the support and guidance of adults, introduces children to early concepts about language, literacy, math, and the world around them. In addition, play encourages the development of critical thinking and reflection skills in children, preparing them for deeper and more meaningful learning in the future.



Although children naturally feel the urge to play and seek opportunities to do so even in adverse environments, the Committee recognizes the need to ensure certain conditions for the full realization of the right to play. It is essential that children are free from harmful pressures, violence, discrimination and physical danger. They also need adequate time and space, access to natural environments, material resources, and the opportunity to interact with other children. In addition, it is crucial that key adults recognize the importance of play, support children's demand, and support them in their play activities. Therefore, governments must work on promoting and protecting these conditions.

Play is essential for the integral development of children, as it increases their cognitive, physical and emotional skills, encourages creativity and provides them with tools to face future life. In addition, play is a natural way of learning for children, who are born to learn by playing.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the right to play as a primary factor for development and growth in childhood. **To deny this right would be a violation of the fundamental human rights of children.**

From a **pedagogical approach**, play is a natural learning mechanism that activates positive emotions in children, making learning more effective and meaningful. It allows children to explore, test the world around them, and build their social standing. In the specific context of aquatic education, play should be understood as an essential tool for the development of cognitive and physical skills in children. Provides opportunities for the expression of creativity, self-confidence and capacity building

Play is a fundamental human right of childhood and a key principle for respectful learning in aquatic education. It allows for the holistic development of children, and activates positive emotions, which facilitate meaningful





learning, and is a natural way for children to explore, learn, and develop in the aquatic environment.

Benefits of playing

Play contributes to the **integral development of children**, allowing them to learn unconsciously, since their neural networks are activated when they are happy and relaxed. Through play, children can enjoy pleasurable experiences, creating a fantasy world from real-life elements and transforming them to disconnect and relieve their frustrations. For this reason, an effective strategy is to take advantage of what they like the most and brings them happiness, adapting it to the educational objectives.

You

In play, the child has the freedom to make decisions that will allow him to learn in a practical way. Because younger people integrate play as a matter of course in their learning contact with the context, these situations help them not to be as afraid of the repercussions as they would in real-life situations.

learn from both success and error. Children learn to face and solve problems that, in real life, they could not solve, which helps them gain self-confidence and lose the fear of making mistakes. Teaching them to see their mistakes rationally and not emotionally provides a more valuable lesson than the topic at hand: it teaches them how to handle frustration and learn from mistakes. The development of play in children is linked to several key dimensions in which play plays an important role: cognitive, socio-affective and motor.

logical

reasoning. Learning is about giving meaning to what you acquire. Any educational activity should ensure that children reflect on their learning, making reflective learning the foundation of active learning. Therefore, games should incorporate questions, discussions, and problems to be solved through what has been learned, as well as dynamics that only allow progress through feedback. Studies show that educators who ask a lot of questions during play often get better results from children.



Play fosters **socio-affective development** by promoting relationships between children, stimulating companionship and teamwork. Learning through play provides satisfaction and self-control, while strengthening social skills, conflict resolution, communication skills, and increasing motivation and responsibility. In addition, it helps to overcome embarrassment. Games involve knowing and abiding by a set of rules, which fosters respect and understanding that cooperation is essential to achieving common goals. You learn to live together with others. Play scenarios can facilitate collaboration as a group, improve social skills, support emotional development (self-esteem), offer practice in working together to solve problems, and provide children with a sense of collective accomplishment that reinforces self-esteem and competence to handle their own affairs. When games are played in company, learning outcomes are better. Collaborating offers great satisfaction, reflected in shared achievements. In addition, if the game presents a challenging objective for the team, they will be able to better overcome difficulties and achieve more ambitious goals.

Play allows motor development. Through the activity, children develop and integrate neuromuscular aspects such as coordination and balance, becoming familiar with their body schema, acquiring dexterity and agility, and improving their sensory abilities. Motor benefits include improvements in balance, strength, object manipulation, mastery and discrimination of the senses, eye-motor coordination, imitation ability, and overall coordination





**Stress in
childhood**



Effects of stress on childhood

In this paper, we will consider **stress** as a measurable state during which homeostatic functions are altered, in line with the polyvagal theory. In addition, we will also explore how certain behaviors of the aquatic professional can enhance this neuroperceived feeling of stress.

During the **early stages of brain development**, constant modifications occur due to environmental influences. Caregiving or maltreatment are aspects of these influences, and maltreatment can crucially and negatively affect a child's development and future (Glaser, 2000).

The **neurodevelopmental sequence** is genetically predetermined and begins in the lower brain centers (brainstem), progressing to the higher ones (cerebral cortex) (Nelson & Bloom, 1997). During the first 2 years, there is an overproduction of axons, dendrites, and synapses in various regions of the brain, genetically determined. However, the survival and persistence of these synaptic connections depend on the environment and the signals it communicates to the brain (Courchesne, Chisum & Townsend, 1994). Brain maturation is dependent on experience and varies between people (Turner & Greenough, 1985).

Early **social experiences in childhood** have a decisive influence on the development of neurological and biological systems, both positively and negatively (Thompson, 2014), with long-term effects and the possibility of disease manifestation (Kessler et al., 2010; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012).



There is evidence that **stress in childhood**, as a result of abusive experiences, can generate depressive symptoms, depressive illness, and anxiety later in life, as the child cannot avoid abuse (Hughes et al., 2017).



So, what is the role of the adult, to observe or attend to the needs of the baby/child? Primary caregivers should respond sensitively to the infant/child, observing and appreciating their emotions accurately. This is essential for the caregiver to be able to decide what to do, seeking to co-regulate the child's affection, arousal and behavior, thus helping to face frustration and refocus their attention. Young children have not yet developed the ability to self-regulate and need help learning to plan their actions. The development of these executive functions requires the maturation of the frontal lobe of the cerebral cortex (Glaser, 2000), and in this stage it has occurred yet.

not





Trauma



What is trauma and how does it occur?

Due to immaturity in brain development, children and young people are more vulnerable to trauma (Thomas, 2019). A **traumatic experience** in childhood increases vulnerability to future mental and physical health problems (Toof et al., 2020), as well as the risk of having difficulty managing stressful life situations functionally and effectively (Banker et al., 2019).

A distinction must be made between two important concepts:

- Stress causes an adjustment of the autonomic nervous system to support defense, while also altering optimal bodily processes by deviating from homeostatic functions, due to the activation of evolutionarily older neural pathways that seek to ensure survival (Porges, 2022). It is possible to distinguish between positive and negative stress (McEwen, 2013), based on the duration and consequences of the alterations. Brief disturbances followed by rapid recoveries function as neural exercises that promote resilience, while more chronic disturbances without recovery periods can lead to disease and tissue and organ damage.
- Trauma is an event, set of events, or circumstances that have an emotional, psychological, physiological, and neurobiological effect (SAMHSA, 2014), and occurs in the face of a feeling of relative helplessness (Scaer, 2001) that persists after an increase in stress that is part of the experience of threat, violence, or life-threatening event. It is something beyond the unconscious and may be the result of a single or repeated situation, in which the fight or flight response has not been completed, leaving marks in the nervous system that can be manifested through symptoms such as anxiety, dissociation, etc. Trauma is not the event itself, but the way the body reacts to it, it is something that depends on individual perception (Scaer, 2001).

Physical **trauma includes physical abuse**, and examples of triggering situations include experiences such as a life-threatening injury or illness, physical assault, natural disasters, terrorism, experience in a refugee camp, experiences of war, and violence in the community or at school (SAMHSA, 2017). Trauma experienced in childhood may not manifest itself with symptoms for a long time and can be triggered, for example, by a car accident in adulthood (Banker et al., 2019).

Emotional trauma includes psychological abuse and its impact can be greater than physical and sexual trauma, and is not always visible (Banker et al., 2019). Examples of triggering situations include witnessing domestic violence, neglect, separation from parents or family, illness or injury of a parent, and experiencing the loss of a loved one (Samhsa, 2017). It can also include bullying by caregivers, family members, and community members. These types of experiences compromise one's ability to regulate emotions, establish bonds, and relate to others. How can I trust a caregiver or trusted person who has harmed me?





Overcoming trauma in life is a long way to go (Toof et al., 2020). One cannot use risk as a valid reason to create trauma in another human being out of levity or out of a belief that there is a greater purpose. In addition, it is something perfectly avoidable and it is possible to educate in a respectful and healthy way in the aquatic environment, regardless of the age. Assuming that internal competition must precede external competition (Porges, 2022).

Prácticas que pueden generar el trauma. La realidad de los programas acuáticos



Learning to swim has been considered a fundamental strategy to prevent drowning (Rahman et al., 2012), and the World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes it as one of the main strategies for this purpose if it is associated with knowledge of aquatic safety. The importance of learning to swim is undeniable. What we want to highlight here is how you learn to swim and how aquatic competence develops from an early age.

Having the **opportunity of designing an aquatic educational program is a privilege** and, at the same time, an enormous **social responsibility**, since we have human lives in front of us, susceptible to being influenced both positively and negatively by the quality of pedagogical practices. Focusing on the behavior and not on the person, regardless of age, can have negative consequences.





A program Aquatic education has the responsibility and duty to ensure safety (physical, emotional, cognitive) and promote the well-being of the participant and their family throughout the learning process.

Aquatic programs should ensure that practices contribute to the multidimensional development of personal aquatic competence and thus to drowning prevention. Why is it so important to address prevention? Because we are talking about human beings, about lives dependent on other people and an environment that is dynamic and inherently dangerous.

It is true that swimming teaching methodologies, especially self-rescue techniques in infants, have been discussed for many years. However, there is only one exploratory study conducted by Peden and Franklin (2020), which analyzes the effects of negative experiences in the aquatic environment. This study concluded that **negative water experiences** can lead to fear and even a phobia of water, which affects the ability to learn to swim and results in lower water proficiency compared to other children of the same age who have not had negative water experiences.

Practices **that generate stress or fear**, according to this perspective, are considered abuse and are counterproductive to the well-being of the learner. It is essential to understand that the end does not justify the means. It is possible to develop aquatic competencies using healthy educational practices, adapted to the age, pace and characteristics of the learner.

It is essential for professionals who work with physical contact and at such an early age to know how to observe and interpret body language, especially signs of defensive behavior, to minimize the toxic effect that the situation can unchain.

Abusive experiences can include submerging or diving the child before they are ready, practicing skills against their will, watching the baby or child cry without intervening, and making disparaging or appreciative comments while ignoring the baby's crying. In addition, it is important to recognize the signs of emotional or physical stress in the baby or child and stop the activity if necessary.

After **intense events stored as traumatic**, it is likely that phobic behaviors in relation to the aquatic environment will manifest themselves. These can include crying, verbally refusing to attempt skills, requesting a minor skill when asked to try a new skill, and clinging to the teacher and refusing to enter the pool.

The **long-term effects** on human beings of abusive or inappropriate pedagogical practices are significant and can compromise the construction of safe and healthy bonds.



Trauma has an important impact on our emotional and behavioral functioning. Clinicians should not overlook how childhood trauma disrupts attachment processes and trust-building, both inside and outside the family unit (Scales & Scales, 2016). One of the fundamental tenets of attachment theory is that the quality of an intimate relationship depends on emotional accessibility and responsiveness (Young, 2008).

Abusive pedagogical practices can have a variety of long-term consequences, including:

- Low self-confidence.
- Anxiety.
- Distrust.
- Reduced self-efficacy.
- Modeling of problematic behaviors.
- Learning difficulties.
- Obstruction in the construction of secure attachment relationships.

These **consequences** can profoundly affect a child's emotional and psychological well-being, and can persist throughout life if not properly addressed. It is critical to recognize the impact of educational practices on identity formation and emotional development, and to work to promote educational environments that foster positive growth and emotional wellbeing.



Respectful practices



Respectful water practices



The **way in which each person learns** shapes not only his relationship with knowledge, but also with life itself. Respect, a critical variable in this process, is decisive for the formation of character and personality (Miller & Pedro, 2006). Often, we are urged to respect our elders, but this approach means arrogating to ourselves the voice of babies and children.

According to Wessler (2003), a **respectful classroom** is an environment where students feel physically and emotionally safe, and are valued for who they are. However, it is often mistakenly believed that adults know children's feelings best, when in fact they are role models for them. Aquatics, as adults and facilitators of learning processes, are included in this role, while infants and children are developing living beings, with emotions and needs of their own.

According to **the Pirovagal theory**, social connection is a biological imperative for human beings (Porges, 2022). Therefore, the conduct of the aquatic professional is fundamental in the process of learning and discovering the aquatic environment.

This process is based on the trust that the family places in the facility and, therefore, in the aquatic professional. Methodologies should therefore be based on scientifically validated principles that **respect the universal rights of children** and promote the goals of practice.

The concept of **aquatic competence** adopted here is clear in its content, function and purpose. With its comprehensive approach, it seeks to promote safety and enjoyment of the aquatic environment, without compromising the comprehensive well-being of the child.



Aquatic professionals they must communicate confidence through their practices, using respectful language and paying attention to the student's body language (Miller & Pedro, 2006). In addition, the learning environment must be adapted to the individual needs of the students, with strategies that encourage active participation and the variety of content.

In addition to teaching the content necessary for learning to be positive and lasting, it is crucial to consider how that learning is processed. This is where **teaching methodologies** come into play, which must actively involve the student in their own learning process.

Respectful **educational practices** must prioritize the dignity, autonomy and well-being of all students, regardless of their age. Valuing empathy to prevent and manage negative feelings during learning is essential (Peden & Franklin, 2020).

The student's family also plays a crucial role in this process, being the main bonding figures that will help the child feel safe in their environment. Therefore, their involvement and support from the beginning is essential.

Aquatic education has a long-term purpose and aquatic competence is personal and influenced by the environment. It is essential that aquatic professionals and families work together to promote a safe, respectful, and stimulating learning environment for all children.





Safe baby-family unit vs at-risk baby-family unit

In line with the multidimensional conceptualization of aquatic competence (Fonseca-Pinto & Moreno-Murcia, 2023), aquatic programs must evolve to promote the training of adults who are **"good caregivers"**, in addition to teaching swimming. This is to ensure that the baby/child-family unit can enjoy any aquatic environment more safely.



Prevention and teaching of aquatic competence recommendations

at these ages focus on raising awareness of the need to adopt multiple layers of protection, including restricted access to the water through physical barriers, teaching swimming skills and water safety (water competence), proper use of flotation devices, and proper supervision. These measures are classified as primary and secondary prevention. Improving the quality of supervision so that adult caregivers can identify risk situations and respond appropriately is a tertiary measure.

Traditionally, the concept of **supervision** includes three dimensions: attention (visual and auditory), proximity (tactile, in or out of reach), and continuity (constant, intermittent, or absent). The stronger these dimensions are, the greater the protective capacity and the lower the risk of drowning for the baby or child. Therefore, caregivers must be able to adapt their supervision strategy according to the needs of the child and the environment.

The **American Association of Pediatrics** (2021) has added a fourth dimension, "supervisory competence", to act in aquatic environments without professional supervision. This competency involves possessing the knowledge and skills necessary to safely implement the Drowning Chain of Survival. This is crucial in situations such as domestic swimming pools, water containers, and other uncontrolled aquatic environments.

A **lack of supervisory competence** can result in loss of critical time while a child is underwater or not breathing, increasing the risk of sequelae or death by drowning. Additionally, rescuers without this skill are at a higher risk of being swept underwater by the child, which can result in multiple drownings.



Without these competencies, the "baby/child-family" unit becomes an at-risk "group" in aquatic environments, with a greater potential for adverse outcomes due to long dive times, delayed rescues, and inadequate emergency care, which can lead to drowning tragedies. It is critical to address these dimensions of supervision in aquatic classes to ensure the safety and security of all children in the water.

The legacy of care and protection

From an **anthropological perspective**, in cultures traditionally linked to water, aquatic knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation within the family nucleus, ensuring survival in unique environments (Dawson, 2018; Mead, 1972; Denning, 2015). This transmission takes place through daily community life and/or rituals, marked by attentive and close care from the adult that accompanies the child's freedom of exploration. Autonomy and care progressively expand as the child grows, develops, and matures.



Premises



Proposal for the definition of respectful aquatic practice



with engaged

A respectful aquatic practice is characterized by activities and tasks designed according to the learning needs, development and maturation of the learner, as well as their physical, psycho-emotional and social demands, taking into account primarily the individual rhythm. During this practice, the learner shows verbal or nonverbal consent, concordance, and predisposition through adaptive postural responses and adjustments, and demonstrates joy or interest in the activity.

movement and student participation. If any show discomfort, reach out and offer help with skin-to-skin contact or reaching out for them to take. Use phrases like: "That's a little scary, but I can help you if you want to try now", "We can stop now and come back later", "I'm here with you".

An **example of a respectful aquatic practice** would be when the trainee takes the tubular float in his hands, places it under his arms, maintains eye contact with the aquatic educator and waits with enthusiasm and curiosity for the next step (active, joyful, socially body). The teacher stands at arm's length, smiles and sings a song to promote

From this position, we consider that a **forced aquatic practice** would be defined by activities or tasks based on needs extrinsic to the participant's learning, which may ignore their developmental characteristics, maturation and learning pace. The aquatic educator persists in the activity against the will of the apprentice, employing coercion, threats, intimidation or humiliation. The learner manifests defensive reactions (verbal and/or non-verbal), discomfort, anguish, crying or submits without showing emotions.

An example of a **forced aquatic practice** would be one where the apprentice does not want to float or stay on the tubular float only expressing anguish and/or fear through crying, muscle tension and/or words. Despite this, the professional decides to continue with the activity, staying physically distant and using phrases such as: "Stop being cheesy and do your homework", "Don't worry, that will pass", "You don't need to be afraid, look at others", "If you don't, you won't be able to play at the end of class".

It is important to recognize that this type of situation can occur in any session, since the interpretation of these situations depends on the meaning attributed by the observer or decision-maker (Ramsey, 2021). The **professional's behaviors** depend on his or her personal experience, belief system, and interpretation of the learner's behavior. If an adult has as a principle not to let a child cry, he will attend to his signs of distress with



affection, proximity and a friendly and positive tone of voice. On the contrary, if the adult interprets that the child is manipulating or believes that he should not pay attention to crying to prevent the child from thinking that he will always be cared for, he will keep the child in the situation so that he learns to self-regulate emotionally. This approach can lead to trauma or a negative experience with aquatic education, as the child will learn that crying will not provide help, consequently, feeling alone and unprotected. This is not learning, but conforming to survive, which damages their confidence and explores their vulnerability (Giller, 1999). Therefore, **the aquatic educator's good intentions do not justify coercive, humiliating, or intimidating behaviors to achieve any goal** (Table 3).

Table 3. Signs of distress, trauma-enhancing situations, and stress-enhancing behaviors.

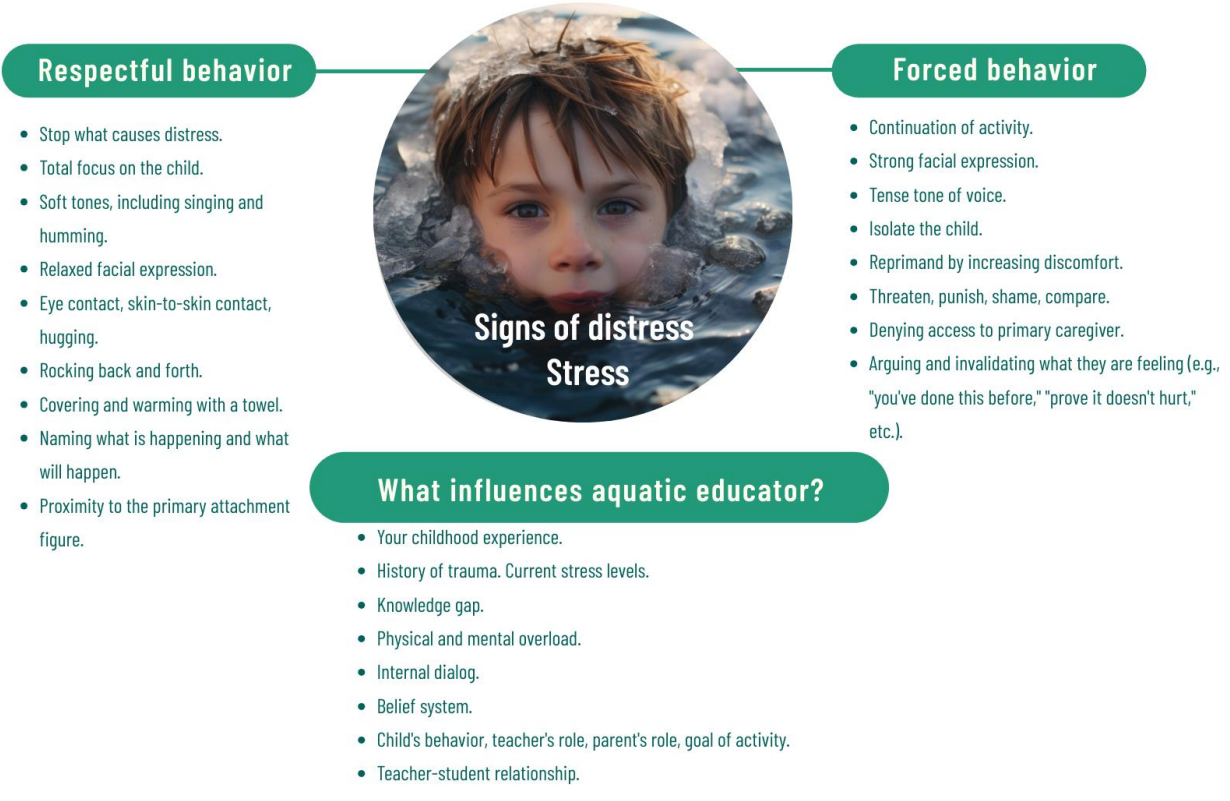
Signs of distress	Situations that enhance anguish, stress and/or trauma	Professional behaviors that enhance anguish, stress and/or trauma
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crying. • Disorganized arm and leg movements like fighting. • Muscle tension. • Apnoea. • Hiccups. • Cough. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Float on your back. • Bucear o sumergir. • Entering the water, possibly because it is associated with a dive or because of the depth of the pool. • Separation from parents/caregivers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insisting on something that the baby/child resists by presenting distressing behaviors. • Punishment, punishment for some behavior in the session, excluding the child from the session. • Hold on tight so that the child obeys and satisfies the adult's need. • Letting cry in the situation of discomfort (for example, because the adult is looking for reference). • Do not provide assistance when requested, leaving him alone, for example, in a tubular float, where the adult watches, but does not attend to the infant's need.

According to Ramsey (2021), in aquatic education classes, forcing a child to do something against their will, especially when they are distressed and have not given consent, is considered coercion. It is critical to understand that an adult's interpretation of a child's distress and resistance, whether as manipulation or genuine fear, does not justify the use of force. The teacher's personal development, availability, joy in what he/she does, time, and patience are essential in these transformational processes. There are appropriate strategies based on neuroscience to intervene in situations of stress or distress (Figure 4).





Figure 4. Strategies to use with a child who exhibits signs of distress according to neuroscience (based on Australian Childhood Foundation, 2011).





When we observe a change in behavior or obedience in a child, it is likely to be fear-based and part of their attempt to stay safe through a response of submission and avoidance of conflict (Walker, 2013). This does not necessarily indicate that the child is happy, motivated to continue, or cognitively engaged with the processes set out for the session. Although it may seem cooperative in the moment, the child may develop feelings of internal anger that may manifest later during the session, outside of it, or as a depressed or anxious mood.

It is not possible to completely control the effect of the practices on the child's internal system. However, the best can be provided through positive experiences based on scientific evidence, using play as a learning strategy and focused on the student. Therefore, the aquatic educator must continue to learn,

maintain curiosity and be constructively self-critical in the pursuit of his/her mission. This allows them to develop personally and professionally, nurturing the love and passion for aquatic education in the infant stage.

Essential premises for respectful aquatic education

Aquatic education is not only about teaching swimming, but also about fostering a respectful and safe relationship with the aquatic environment. This comprehensive approach promotes safety, confidence, and enjoyment in the water, while respecting each person's individual rhythms and needs. Below are the essential premises for respectful aquatic education that summarize the essence of this document (Figure 5):

1. Safe environment. Create a welcoming environment that stimulates curiosity and exploration, without eliminating the risk inherent in learning. Be present and available to attend to the physical, emotional and cognitive needs of the student, without generating fear or threat.

Safety is paramount in aquatic education classes and in all activities in, around, and under water. A good educator must always be alert and aware of the aquatic environment and the students. This includes the ability





to anticipate and avoid dangerous situations, as well as knowledge of **first aid and CPR**.

Teaching children to respect water is a very important part of water safety education. Children begin to learn to respect water as they go through the process of learning to swim. They also begin to understand their abilities and limitations in the pool. Children need plenty of exploratory play under strict parental supervision and formal learning that instills values of water safety. This concept of "respect for water" can be observed even in the smallest babies.

Children need to learn to follow water safety rules. This means teaching them to read pool signs or signs displayed in other settings. Things such as teaching children to never swim alone and get into streams or rivers, never diving when the depth of the water is unknown, and that often debris in the water can be dangerous are also important.

Parents must be example and teach their children safe behaviors in living with water. Close-range supervision is indicated for children under 5 years of age. But all children still need active adult supervision long after this age.

2. Support. Love is the force that drives the work of any human being. So you have to take care of the well-being of the learner and be committed to the learning process. As a facilitator of learning, you have the power to generate positive experiences that make a difference in people's lives. Avoid causing harm or harm to learners in the teaching-learning process.

A friendly and welcoming environment helps students feel comfortable and less anxious. The educator assumes ethical and moral responsibility by creating a climate of respect and positivity, and understands that it is an honor that families offer by allowing them to work with their children to assist them in "discovering the aquatic environment". A friendly, positive and supportive environment promotes learning and helps reduce fear of water, especially in the little ones.

3. Play. The learner is a human being who deserves the best that can be offered, always prioritizing their safety and comprehensive well-being. The basic needs of feeling safe guide all pedagogical decisions.

Teaching at an early age through stories, adventures, songs and games at the level of understanding of the person, guarantees the discovery of aquatic competence in familiar environments and the understanding of staying away from unfamiliar environments.

Playing outside of the formal lesson is great to help build confidence and teach children to respect the water. Children need to explore a variety of environments such as the beach, creek, and public pool with water at



different temperatures. All of these environments have different hazards and things to consider. The more exposure children have to this diversity, the better understanding they will develop. You may also find that children will feel very safe swimming in the familiar environment where they receive their swimming lessons. However, they will feel less safe and even fearful in unfamiliar environments. This should be respected, as it may indicate that the child understands the dangers of water, may be able to respond better in future risky situations. With exposure to these positive experiences, confidence is likely to grow, but never with a full guarantee of not drowning.

4. Professional competence. Methodological decisions and practices should be based on scientifically proven pedagogical and psychological principles to benefit the learner and his or her family. The purpose **of the aquatic educator** is to serve the interests of the learner and to create a positive and effective learning environment. Act with honesty, coherence and responsibility in the exercise of aquatic education. Comply with the ethical duties and obligations of the teaching profession in the aquatic environment.

5. Active listening. Deeply value the feelings and thoughts of each person who participates in an aquatic education program. Listening without interrupting or judging is essential, as the communication of the other reveals their needs and also reflects the own sensitivity.

An empathetic educator is able to perfectly understand the needs and concerns of their students by valuing their feelings; which implies being sensitive to their thoughts that cause fears and limitations, knowing how to support them appropriately. Empathy fosters trust between the educator and the student, which facilitates the learning process.

6. Trust. To be a trusted figure for the apprentice and their family in everything related to the learning process and the aquatic environment. This relationship of trust is decisive in fostering an environment conducive to learning. Build the ability to make informed decisions about their participation in water activities. Respect their freedom to express their fears, preferences, and limitations.

Cultivate a relationship of trust, an effective bond in which affection with students is practically inevitable. Educators must be accessible and show concern for the well-being of their students. Trust facilitates open communication and learning. Students feel safe and supported, which improves their performance and enjoyment in classes.

7. Equity. Accounts for considering each of the students as a unique being, with their own needs and rhythms. Everyone has the right to develop their aquatic competence, regardless of age, functional diversity, religion, socio-economic status, race or ethnicity. Recognize and respect the rights of apprentices, regardless of their





abilities or conditions. To promote fair and non-discriminatory treatment in the aquatic environment. Guarantee equity and equal opportunities in access to water activities. Apply fair and transparent criteria in the evaluation and qualification of apprentices.

8. Personal competence. Recognize the richness of each professional's individuality and experiences. Sharing these experiences in a balanced way with the well-being of the other enriches the teaching-learning process and contributes to the integral development of the human being through water.

Patience is key to allowing students to learn at their own pace, helps create a positive learning environment, and reduces students' stress and anxiety about wanting to learn quickly. A good teacher must be able to repeat instructions and offer constant support without showing frustration. The appropriate use of language that allows communication to be clear and appropriate to the level of understanding of the students is essential. The terms and approach should be varied so that they are understandable and motivating for each age group. Invariably, effective comprehension improves learning and skill retention.



9. Humility. Recognize the privilege and responsibility of being part of someone's learning process. Honor the trust they place in the educator and commit to work from a place of humility and dedication. To promote values such as safety, cooperation, care for the environment and mutual respect in the aquatic environment. To promote the development of an ethical conscience and moral principles in the participants.

A humble educator understands that each student progresses at his or her own pace. Unrealistic expectations should not be set and every small progress should be valued; Expectation can lead to frustration and frustration to failure. Excessive pressure can cause anxiety and demotivation. Appreciating individual progress helps to maintain a positive attitude towards learning.

10. Community. Foster a spirit of collaboration and mutual support, where experiences are shared and the sense of community is strengthened among all those involved in the aquatic learning process and its care.

A good educator must be involved and trained in cultural awareness in order to promote aquatic education within their communities, promoting better physical and mental health, safety (reducing drowning rates), community cohesion and understanding (fostering social cohesion and mutual understanding between diverse groups by creating spaces where everyone can participate).



Figure 5. Infographic of the bases for respectful aquatic education in childhood.

Foundations for
RESPECTFUL AQUATIC EDUCATION in Childhood
Benidorm Declaration

2024

1
SAFE ENVIRONMENT

To be present and available to meet physical, emotional, and cognitive needs without creating fear or threat

2
SUPPORT

Care about the learner's experience. Be committed to the learning process through positive experiences.

3
PLAY

To guarantee the right to playful learning in childhood, enabling the growth of self-esteem and the ability to thrive.

4
PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE

Teach by relying on scientifically proven pedagogical and psychological principles. Keep updated.

5
ACTIVE LISTENING

Listen without interrupting or judging; Value the feelings and thoughts of each participant.

6
TRUST

Foster a conducive learning environment that inspires confidence in the learner and their family.

7
EQUITY

Develop aquatic competence, regardless of age, functional diversity, religion, race, or ethnicity.

8
PERSONAL COMPETENCE

Foster a conducive learning environment that inspires confidence in the learner and their family.

9
HUMILITY

Recognize the privilege and responsibility that comes with being part of someone's learning process.

10
COMMUNITY

Encourage all those involved in the aquatic learning process to work together and support each other.

AIDEA

The Declaration made in Benidorm (Spain) on May 5, 2024, by AIDEA (Ibero-American Association of Aquatic Education, Special Education, and Hydrotherapy) regarding the Right to Respectful Aquatic Education in Childhood, is a milestone document in the history of aquatic education concerning children's rights in aquatic programs. Drafted by academics and professionals from different regions of the world, the Declaration establishes, for the first time, the fundamental rights that should be protected in children's aquatic education.

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Conclusions



Conclusions

Despite the importance of **ensuring safety in aquatic environments**, it is critical to recognize the essential role that children play in their holistic development. For this contribution to be optimal, it is imperative to provide caring and stimulating environments, that involve an appropriate degree of risk, but never compromise the physical, psychological, emotional or social well-being of children.



To conclude this document on **respectful aquatic education in childhood**, the following contributions can be highlighted:

- Respectful aquatic education in childhood is essential for the integral and safe development of children. It provides opportunities for physical, cognitive, psychological, emotional and social growth in a unique and stimulating environment such as the aquatic environment.
- Promoting teaching practices that promote water safety gradually and respectfully is essential to ensure that children acquire aquatic skills and competencies with enjoyment and confidence
- Respectful aquatic education also involves instilling respect for the aquatic environment, promoting the conservation and preservation of bodies of water and fostering a positive connection with nature from childhood.
- It is important to recognize diversity in learning and ensure the inclusion of all children, regardless of their skill level or previous experience in the water, in educational programs and activities in the aquatic environment.
- Collaboration between parents, caregivers, educators, authorities and the community at large is crucial to promoting respectful aquatic education that ensures children can enjoy the water in a positive and beneficial manner.



- Public policies that support the implementation of respectful aquatic education practices should be advocated for, as well as adequate resources to ensure that all children have access to opportunities to receive a safe, quality aquatic education.

In summary, respectful aquatic education in childhood is essential for the well-being and development of children, as well as for promoting positive attitudes towards water and the environment. By following principles of respect, safety, and inclusion, we can ensure that children can enjoy water more safely and beneficially throughout their lives.

In addition, it rejects the use of teaching strategies that tolerate crying or uncontrolled ingestion of water in order to achieve an ability to float and move independently, while waiting for the help of an adult caregiver. This adult should be carefully watching over the child's interaction with the aquatic environment or ensuring that the environment is not accessible to the child.

It is important to make it clear that, based on the arguments presented throughout this document, the AIDEA (Ibero-American Association of Aquatic, Special and Hydrotherapy Education) advises against participation in aquatic programs that promote child survival or self-rescue.





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"**Foundations for Respectful Aquatic Education in Childhood**" addresses the importance of providing a safe and respectful environment for children in the field of water activities. This document offers a comprehensive guide for educators, parents, and professionals interested in promoting child development through play and exploration in the water, always respecting the rights and needs of the little ones.

Throughout its pages, several **fundamental themes** are explored:

- Presentation: An introduction to the importance of respectful aquatic education and its long-term benefits.
- Objectives of aquatic activities in childhood: Definition and analysis of the key objectives that should guide any aquatic activity aimed at children.
- Child Development and Rights in Children: A review of how child development should always be considered within the framework of children's fundamental rights.
- Child Abuse or Neglect: Identification and prevention of situations of abuse or neglect in the context of water activities.
- The importance of bonding: The relevance of building solid and secure emotional bonds through water play.
- The Polyvagal Theory: An explanation of this theory and its application in the aquatic environment to promote children's safety and emotional well-being.
- The right to learn by playing: The defense of play as a fundamental right and its role in child learning and development.
- Effects of Stress in Childhood: How stress can affect children and the importance of creating aquatic environments that minimize these negative experiences.
- What Is Trauma and How Does It Occur (Trauma Risk): A look at childhood trauma risks and how respectful aquatic practices can prevent it.
- Respectful aquatic practices: Proposals and strategies to implement practices that respect and promote the integral well-being of children in the water.
- Essential premises for respectful aquatic education: Fundamental principles and values that should guide all aquatic activity aimed at children.
- Conclusions: Final thoughts and a call to action to promote respectful and conscious aquatic education.

This book is an indispensable tool for all those who seek to promote a healthy and enriching aquatic environment for children, guaranteeing their **integral development and well-being**.