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The Passion, The Power, & The Thin Red Line

One could say that being involved in teaching swimming is more than just a job. Let's face it; it's so much more. As the nun's who taught me at school used to say when describing why they were nuns, "it's the inner urge that **THIS** is exactly what you were put on this earth to do". Having attended Bruce Sullivan's many courses on personality types has taught me that whilst many different personalities are involved in this industry, the majority of those that actually teach, and teach exceptionally well, have one major difference that sets them apart from the rest – they are Intuitive.

What is Intuition?

I like the following definition – "a process in which instructors efficiently code, sort and access experientially conceived mental models for use in making instructional decisions" (facultyfocus.com). Intuition is the way that we deal with problems successfully as they happen. Some will say that you can't teach intuition and others will say that it can be experience that teaches this. I do believe that it is a "sixth sense" as such, but that new teachers, or those that don't appear to have it, can learn off those that do. Intuition is the reason a teacher can teach a child to float within 1 to 2 lessons when a teacher who doesn't have it, may have been trying for 6 months.

As a teacher of swimming we have tremendous power. We have the power to make a huge impact on a child's life from a very young age. Furthermore this impact can carry over to the next generation and the next. Whatever process the parent's experience from their own swimming lessons as children will be the process they expect for their own children – whether good or bad. Having taught for 35 years, I have seen how this process of experience cycles through generations. We all have our goals, visions and missions, but what are the processes to achieve these?

What is Trauma? Trauma is defined as a physical or psychological threat to a child's physical integrity, sense of self, safety or survival (Vermont CUPS Handbook p.170). There is no room for any form of trauma in swimming lessons.

There is absolutely no place in any Program for a Child to be taught under duress!

Considering that for many the very nature of water can be frightening, how can we make the Learn to Swim Experience a positive life changing experience for all?

In about 1997 at one of my swim schools (with 1200 students per week), I had a beautiful lady who brought her 3 children to the swim school twice weekly. This particular lady was actually a swim teacher at another swim school but chose to bring her children to my school. One day she said "I have come here 6 times a week for the past couple of years and I rarely see a child cry. Where I teach we can have up to 3 in every class of 6 crying for up to a term". I proceeded to tell her my "secret" and said that she was welcome to share it with her swim school. She did so but the situation didn't change for her because the owner was not open to this way of teaching and did not believe that it was possible to not have children cry or under duress in a lesson.

What is the Secret?

So what is the difference between the two schools "methods" and what is the "secret"? In my opinion it is knowing where the thin red line is. That is, knowing an individual's social, emotional, mental and physical abilities and being able to never cross that line. Or if you do, knowing how to recover without causing an extended regression. Keep in mind that it is not the knowledge of the teacher but the execution of the knowledge that will dictate your success.

The following are things that I have done since I commenced swimming teaching 35 years ago and have never failed.

- **Assessment**

Always assess the individual child and parent. Ask questions and observe.

- **Correct Class Placement**

Make sure based on your observations that the child is placed in an appropriate class for their social, emotional, mental and physical ability. Regardless of whether a child can swim 20 metres of the pool on their own at age 2, do not place them in a class on their own if they are socially, emotionally or mentally unable to take instruction happily and safely without their parent. (This was one reason my mum in the example above had up to 3 of every 6 kids crying in her class. No matter what, when they turned 2.5 years they were taken away from mum and made to go in the water on their own with the teacher).

- **Parent Education**

Educate your parents on the how and why at your swim school. Get them on board.

- **Class Size**

Make sure the numbers in the class are small. Suggest 3 for beginners, and 4 for stroke development and babies and toddlers. Allows individual attention and assessment to all. (In bigger commercial swim schools it is still possible to use the basis of this procedure).

- **Free First Lesson**

Give a "first free" lesson. This takes the pressure away from parents who may have an expectation that a swimming lesson means their child gets in the water and swims regardless of their personality, age or "issues". Advise them it is purely a "get to know the go" at swimming and an opportunity to build that very important initial rapport with the teacher.

- **Make The Child Feel Safe**

Make sure that it is clear to the child that they are safe and you will not "make them" get in. For those children that have had previous bad experiences at swim schools or who just are apprehensive about new activities or may have some other issues I actually tell them to, "Please don't get in. Sit with mummy but don't get in". I allow the mum and child to sit next to the class on a chair so they are close to the class but not interfering with it.

- **Make The Child Feel Included**

Use this time to include them in the lesson while they are at the side of the pool. E.g. ask them to pick out some toys for the kids in the pool and talk to them about which one they like. Give them a board when the others are doing board work. Ask them if the kids are splashing them and mummy when they kick. Generally any nice conversation that can settle them and allow them to process what is going on. Intuition will dictate how much interaction you need to give the individual.

- **Gain Their Trust**

By the end of the lesson the child will realise you aren't going to grab them and take them in against their will. It is important you have also advised the parent they are not to at any stage to try to encourage the child to get in verbally because generally they do it at the wrong time and the wrong way. I generally say to the child, who by the end of the lesson who may not have gotten in, "It's time to go home now. Thank you so much for your help with the toys. Can you pack this toy up for me? Don't get into the pool but it's ok if you want to just stand on the ledge and pick up the crocodile for me. Is that ok mum? Don't forget to get your sticker on the way out. If you like you can come back another time to see me. Bye." Children need to feel in control to feel safe.

- **Assess All Possible Factors**

The above approach works! But if it doesn't there could be other things to take into account. Is the child suitable for a class on their own? They may be better in a class with mum in the water. Do they have some sensory dysfunction or other issues? Maybe they need to come at a quieter time of the day. Look at the other children in the class. Does the child not like the opposite sex and are they the only one of their gender in the class? Do they not like men? Are they a special needs child who may need some private lessons initially? Is mum giving off negative vibes to the child due to her concerns or perhaps embarrassment? By the end of the lesson you will have learnt much about where this individual will need to fit in.

- **Engage Your Students**

In class engage with your students. "Nice Peppa Pig swimmers. Did the tooth fairy come? Where you going after swimming. Let's have fun!"

- **Be Flexible & Adapt To Your Students**

Recognise days that a student may be a little off. Make allowances and empathize, "Having a bit of a tired day today? I know, me too. We'll just take it a bit easy and cool off today". Be intuitive and be able to adapt.

- **Give Praise**

Remember you have the power to make a child feel good about themselves. Give praise.

- **Don't Exclude "Naughty" Children**

Avoid sitting "naughty" children out. Change the way you teach these children. Go and watch a teacher who is experienced at this and rarely needs to resort to exclusion.

- **Never Cross The Thin Red Line**

Never judge yourself based on the inability of a child to do a skill and be tempted to push them past their capability. I have been to hundreds of swim school to observe teachers and one of the biggest mistakes I see teachers do is to allow a child to perform a skill under duress. E.g. A child happily jumps in, turns under water and starts to swim back to the edge. About a metre from the edge they start to panic. The teacher yells out, "You can do it, keep going". The child gets to the side with a look of fear on their face and the teacher says, "See you can do it". This child will not happily do the skill again because 'You crossed the thin red line!'

You should at the point of them showing signs of distress, give assistance, or a little touch and guidance. As an adult you may think the experience of a child who does get back to the side would be they will continue to do it because you showed them they could do it. In my experience that child will always balk at performing that skill in the future and will not trust you.

Understand the privilege it is to be entrusted by these parents to be involved in the education of their children. Teach from the heart with love and respect and never, ever use the excuse that it is ok to use force or perform anything in the water under the guise of "it will save the child's life and I would rather have a crying child now than a drowned one later".

These means do not justify the end!

My son recently bumped into a student I had 30 years ago in the mid 1980's. He said, "How's your mum? You know, I don't remember much about her, but I remember running down the side of the building to get into lessons. I loved those lessons and it gave me such a love of swimming that now my whole life revolves around water – skiing, surfing, fishing, boating and I even swim to keep fit now". Now that's what it's all about!

by **Chris Dellit**

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