

## Working With Children in the Water

By Dori Maxon PT,MEd

Do you know how to swim? “YES!” shouts 8-year-old Dimitri. “No,” says Dimitri’s mom who is shaking her head. Who’s right? I guess that depends upon your definition of swimming, eh? For me, anytime a child is in the water and moves (or attempts to move) any body part, that’s “swimming”. So, yes, Dimitri can swim. Not independently, but he can swim. His mom will learn, I hope, to be proud of the incremental changes we may soon see in time. She’ll be more likely to see them if I (or Dimitri) point them out to her. Ahhh.... Wow.... Well done... will grow in her vocabulary. She’ll ask me, “How did you get him to do that? I will say, “He told me what he needed, I listened, and let the water do its magic.” Then I’ll entice her and say, “I can show you if you’d like.”

A knowing child, the gifts of the water, sensitive and experienced eyes and hands, and voila! A new swimmer graces the water and a new believer in aquatic therapy is born. The water can afford children with special needs a welcoming and natural place for them to play, learn, get stronger, develop skills, and grow. They can be children first doing what they do best, PLAY! We as therapists, teachers, and facilitators learn to take the amazing energy they have, set up environments and tasks, add a dash of facilitation and challenge, a well timed splash or two, and voila! The children are on the path to trying new skills, techniques, and foundational components to the mountain of motor skills that awaits them. It is that simple? Sort of. As therapists, teachers, and facilitators, we use our background of knowledge of child development, motor development, language, cognition, social development, parent child relationships, fun, games, water principles, therapy principles, humor, and genuine engagement and give the child the chance to succeed. Then we take all that knowledge, remember to play first and add therapy second, and yup, it seems to work. We’re on a roll and Dimitri is swimming, in his eyes, working on foundational components to pre gait, in our eyes, and having fun, in his mother’s eyes. His mother is starting to get the picture. Rotation of the pelvis, weight shift, upright trunk positions fostering breath control for language and head control for improved vision. It’s starting to piece together. What does it all look like? Fun! Engagement! Concentration! Experimenting! Rick Taking! Acquisition! What are the results? We see newly explored motor patterns, emerging mobility and gait, core strength and endurance, more focus, and communication. A few weeks later we hear from the land based therapists saying their usual... “Whatever you’re doing, keep it up!”

Are you ready to transition your knowledge base and your handling skills to the water? Do you have experience already and would like to share new techniques or ideas? We will journey together focusing on the bigger picture and honing in on different aspects of addressing the needs of children with developmental and/or physical challenges in the water. In our Pediatric Handling course we will look at the points of contact, lines of force, developmental

progressions, as well as using the gifts of the water to help achieve our goals for children with a wide array of developmental challenges. This will serve as an anchor for the many variations we call upon to create individualized programs for children. We'll review neurodevelopmental and sensorimotor based aquatic therapy handling techniques to facilitate movement patterns, functional skills, cognition, play, socialization, and communication in children with special needs. We will review body mechanics for working with children of various sizes and shapes, handling principals, demonstrate handling skills that are adaptable for children with higher tone and/or lower tone. Overall, this course will give you a strong foundation to build and adapt your therapeutic handling skills with children in the water. Take these skills, build on them, play with them, grow with them, and swim with them!

As we move from "The Wheels on the Bus" to "The Eensy Weensy Spider" we must refine our skills further and open our eyes to the multiple domains which can be addressed in the young child. The early years are such a vital period for exploring and developing foundational skills in children. Group programs can have a positive impact not only on the child's development in multiple domains, but on child and parent connection. We will look at handling skills for the younger child and demonstrate how we can bring these therapeutic principals into the "wellness world" of activity and play. We will build on therapeutic principals in a group setting to address the unique developmental needs of the young child. We will address sensory, motor, and language enrichment as well as the parent-child connection, learning to play in a beneficial way, and parent support needs. We will structure our treatment sessions around developmental principals as well as the gifts of water play so the children get the most benefit from the activities. You will see what an honor it is to be a facilitator, using your tools of observation, group leadership, and knowledge of therapeutic principals, water skills, and teaching skills to help create a healthier path for children with special needs and their families. There is so much value to working with little ones in groups. You will have a chance to improve your skills, share ideas, and see how we can best support the young child in their time of maximum benefit.

When will my child walk? Mobility and walking skills are core to exploring the environment, cognitive development, physical health, and independence. Did you know that moving in a gravity reduced environment can unleash those central pattern generators and children can demonstrate those reciprocal patterns? Using the properties of water and the fun on the environment, we can foster the foundational movements which may help children to develop their pre-gait and gait abilities. Foundational movements as those from the Pediatric Handling course will be put to use as we focus on this functional task. We will look at sensory and body awareness, weight bearing, weight shift developmentally and in the lower extremities, balance, rotation, stability and mobility. Moving forward, we can help older children increase their endurance and maintain their ability to walk and remain mobile. Walking, dancing, and upright activities are fun in the water. So while you're learning to walk or maintaining your abilities, consider adding a little tango to that side step, a dosi-do with your partner, or run those bases. The water lets you work on therapeutic goals and add fun to your therapy.

I believe that every child is a swimmer and that the water is magic. For me it is truly a gift to be able share with you my passion for working with children n the water. After working in the water for 30+ years I have learned from the many children, volunteers, families, and colleagues from a variety of disciplines and in our blossoming field. Join me for sharing, playing, and learning more about working with children in the water!