

Have Summer Fun in the Water and sneak in some Physical Therapy!

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Sally McClelland, Physical Therapist, began competitive swimming at the age of 10, was a swim instructor at the age of 16, and began her career as a Physical Therapist in 1977. She combined swim instruction with aquatic Physical Therapy into what is a unique approach to improving a child's gross motor abilities. She recently lectured in Ireland on the subject of 'Aquatic Therapy' for European therapists, teachers and parents.

When the weather gets warm here in Southern California, many of us will spend time in pools trying to cool off. Water has many specific qualities which make it an excellent environment for recreation, exploration and therapeutic intervention. What a great way to have fun - and increase strength and range of motion as well as improve balance and sensory integration!

QUALITIES OF WATER

Density

Simply put, water is thicker than the air we move about in every day. This thickness creates a resistance to our every movement, helping to make us stronger. If a child is involved in Aquatic Therapy, it may look as though we are playing in the water, but every activity is structured to strengthen certain well-defined movement patterns.

Buoyancy

The water has a quality that pushes us upward. This pushing force helps to negate the effects of gravity that we deal with every day in our world. Gravity keeps our feet on the ground, and we quietly fight it all day long to stand upright. In the water we can relax. We are lighter, especially in water that is chest deep. The stress and strain on our joints is greatly lessened. We feel different, and have to initially work very hard at becoming adept in the water, whether standing, on our backs, or on our stomachs. When we achieve a comfort level on our stomach with our head down in the water, we are ready to learn to swim.

Hydrostatic Pressure

Water is heavy, and it exerts even pressure all over our body parts that are immersed in it. This is relaxing and helps calm the nervous system through our *proprioceptive and tactile systems. It helps to give us more input about where our body is in space when we move about.

ACTIVITIES IN THE WATER to enhance BALANCE and STRENGTH

Besides just plain fun and respite from the heat, water is also one of the best therapeutic mediums for increasing our strength. Water has increased density as contrasted with our air environment, and this density provides increased

resistance to our every move. Most children love the water, and they don't realize their bodies are getting a good work out while in it.

- Play: Water that is waist or chest deep can be used for games such as tag, an excellent activity for working on strength of the trunk and extremities.
- Water tag also provides a challenging balance activity with all the stops, starts, and turning.
- If your child is not able to hold his or her breath successfully in the water, you might want to consider using arm bands to help keep them from submerging. While these should never be used without supervision, they provide an excellent way for children to experiment with moving their bodies in an aquatic environment.
- Once comfortable on their stomachs, DISCOURAGE arm motion, instead encouraging the child to work on kicking to move through the water. Holding onto a fun noodle with both hands out in front promotes the necessary streamlined position.
- Play: Fun noodles can also be used to straddle, and once proficient at balancing on these, it's fun to have races.

AND ALWAYS - ALWAYS! - be sure to practice water safety. Never leave children alone in the pool (not even for a minute), never turn your back on them, use sunscreen and learn CPR.

*Proprioception: the ability to sense the position, location, orientation and movement of the body and its parts.