



UNITED STATES SWIM SCHOOL
ASSOCIATION

www.uswimschools.org

Learn-to-Swim

LEARNING TO HAVE FUN!

BY MARGEE CHARRON

When teaching children how to swim, don't forget the FUNdamentals!

I began the journey into my swimming career because teaching swimming was always the thing that I enjoyed most. People would ask me what I wanted to do when I got a *real job*. My answer was always “to teach swimming.” Indeed, this was not a popular career path in those days.

After working for a variety of other independent and non-profit organizations, I soon realized that their goals and beliefs in the learn-to-swim business were very different than mine.

To many of the organizations for which I have worked, the “bottom line” approach was their way of running a business. By only looking at financials, good customer service to the students and their parents had been missed: a bottom-line, driven employer, who was focused on increasing his revenue, increased the class size. Naturally, he thought, “The more students, the more revenue.”

However, the downside was that customer service suffered. Instructors had more students in their classes, and this affected student learning as well as safety. An organization had lost a golden opportunity to increase its profit margin by not understanding how good service to all of its customers can greatly generate income.

A BACKYARD BUSINESS

The first summer that I opened for business, I only taught individual lessons. The business began in my backyard, and I was the only instructor. I felt that I could provide the customers at that time with good

service in a private-lesson setting. We now teach group classes as well as private lessons. For the benefit of student learning, we keep our class ratios at 4:1.

I have always been a good learner when I enjoyed the subject. If the teacher made learning fun for me, I wanted to learn more. When I began looking at curriculum for the swim school, it was very important for me to incorporate what we believed: *that learning to swim is fun at every level of swimming!*

By using a student-centered approach to teaching swimming, an environment that is the most effective for students to maximize learning is created. By creating a non-threatening environment, the students will be able to take in and retain information. If they perceive a threat—which, for children, can be anything they don’t like—you will see students react with a “fight, flight or freeze” response.

If this response is not addressed at the students’ level—and they feel forced or tricked—they will consider the environment hostile, and learning will not occur. If students feel uncomfortable, their ability to learn and form new memories from these learning experiences is greatly reduced.

In a positive emotional state, a student’s brain is in the “reward state” and neurons in the brain branch out to create solid foundations for new permanent motor learning to occur.

A PLACE TO PLAY

Play has been considered the first form of learning. Through the study of child development, we have seen that it is through play that children make meaning of their environment. It also has been shown that play allows children to be creative, develop social and language



[PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MARGEE CHARRON]

When Margee Charron began looking at the curriculum for the Bubbles to Butterfly Swim School, it was very important for her to incorporate what she believed: that learning to swim is fun at every level of swimming!



CHILD-FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT

- Water temperature
- Children are able to sit, stand or support themselves in the water
- Caring, smiling instructors
- Teaching aids, toys—not just kickboards!

CUSTOMER SERVICE

- Welcoming environment
- Information about program—newsletters, website, phone
- Personal touch
- Supportive of parent concerns

Each week, our students see a different group of themed toys. For all of the lessons, we use toys that float and toys that sink, but during some weeks, we have toys that we use at the steps of the pool that serve as teaching aids to help keep the students' attention. This helps pass the short time while they are waiting for their turn, and it also limits the possibility of wandering off the steps.

We do not limit ourselves to pool toys. We use all kinds of toys in the pool—as long as they have no parts that may rust or any small pieces.

Having a variety of teaching aids each week helps us keep the fun in learning for our students. We can use the toys to help distract students who may be upset or to pique their interest (i.e., “What toys will we have next week?”).

There are many developmental skills—including vocabulary development, beginning sorting skills and sensory development as well as colors, numbers and animal

recognition—that are incorporated into the lessons through the use of toys. By using a variety of teaching aids, we are helping our students learn so much more than just swimming skills.

Here's a list of some of the weekly equipment we use:

- Themed toy ideas—Winnie the Pooh, fish, fire trucks, farm animals, dinosaurs, ducks, Little Mermaid and turtles
- Use of mats—large and small
- Animal-shaped boards
- Swim noodles
- Numbers and shapes
- Foam puzzles or shapes
- Bath-time books, mirrors
- Watering cans and cups

A WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY

Teaching swimming is an amazing job! We have the opportunity to leave a lasting impression on each person with whom we come in contact.

Can you remember the name of your first or most memorable swim teacher? You may not remember exactly what skills you practiced, but you certainly will remember the way they made you feel in that experience.

When you are teaching your next class, don't forget the **FUNDamentals!** ♦

Margee Charron has been working professionally in aquatics for more than 25 years. She began Bubbles to Butterfly Swim School (Baltic, Conn.) in 1998 as a backyard swim school at her home. The swim school operates year-round by leasing hotel pools during the winter months, and by leasing two pools from a state campground during the summer.

skills and challenge their physical skills in the environment.

In our swim program, we have incorporated this fun approach to learning into the aquatic environment. We teach each lesson by providing the students with aquatic skills and teaching equipment that encourage confidence and skill development in a positive environment.

Here are some factors to consider when creating a positive learning environment:

INSTRUCTORS

- Trained in child development
- Friendly, caring
- Knowledge of skills and progressions
- Understanding and able to empathize