Pedagogical resources
AQUATIC ACTIVITIES

MANAGING THE EMOTION OF FEAR OF THE AQUATIC ENVIRONMENT

Juan Antonio Moreno Murcia

January 6, 2025

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons license. Commercial use of the original work or any derivative works is not permitted, distribution of which must be done under a license equal to that governing the original work

asociacionaidea.com

MANAGING THE EMOTION OF FEAR OF THE AQUATIC ENVIRONMENT

Juan Antonio Moreno Murcia

The use of some practical strategies to manage fear of the aquatic environment, fostering confidence and security in learners through a structured and empathetic approach, can turn this emotion into an enjoyable learning experience.

Introduction

The aquatic environment offers multiple benefits, ranging from improving physical fitness to developing survival skills, but for many people, especially children, it can also be a **source of fear and anxiety**. This fear can act as a barrier that limits learning and the enjoyment of water activities. In the recent publication titled "Teaching to swim without fear" (Moreno-Murcia, 2025), it is established that understanding and managing this emotion is essential in order to guarantee a pleasant and effective experience in the learning process.

The aquatic educator plays an important role in **transforming this fear into confidence**. Through pedagogical strategies that consider the emotional functioning of the learner, it is possible to establish a safe and supportive environment where aquatic experiences are perceived as pleasant and motivating. This text addresses the importance of managing fear of the aquatic environment, offering a structured guide that, based on the study by Moreno-Murcia et al. (2020), identifies the main factors that influence this emotion and proposes practical phases to intervene empathetically and effectively.

Through an organized approach, the educator can not only address fear, but also **foster a trusting relationship** that motivates the learner to overcome their emotional barriers and build a pleasant connection with the aquatic environment.

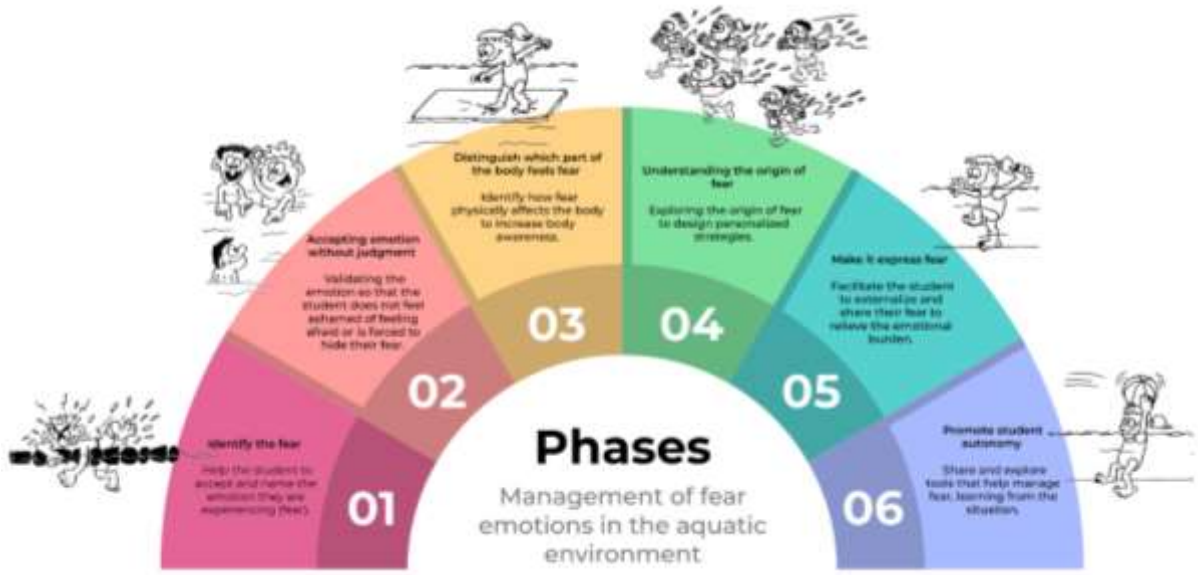
Creating a safe, enjoyable and supportive environment in aquatic education. Building trust

Gaining the confidence of the learner who is afraid of the aquatic environment is essential to their success in learning aquatic skills. Fear of the aquatic environment can be a significant barrier to progress and, in some cases, it can even grow worse if not handled properly. To overcome this obstacle, it is important that the aquatic educator, knowing how the human brain works when facing fear, develops a relationship of trust with the learner, creating a safe, positive and supportive environment from the first contact, where practical experiences can be stored in the memory in a pleasant way.

Therefore, a first step is to have a tool that allows you to manage the emotion of fear every time it surfaces in the participants. Intending to facilitate a pedagogical strategy in

this sense, Figure 1 presents an approach organized according to phases proposed and adapted to the role of the aquatic educator to guide students in the processing of fear of the aquatic environment. This will guide the aquatic educator to **work in a structured and empathetic way with the fear of the aquatic environment**, respecting the emotional process of the student and helping him to build confidence and security.

Figure 1. Phases in the management of the emotion of fear in the aquatic environment.



According to the study by Moreno-Murcia et al. (2020), the **main fears of the aquatic environment** in children are hierarchized as follows: self-perceptions of competence are the most important factor, since a low perception of one's own abilities significantly increases fear; previous experiences, especially negative or traumatic ones, also play an important role in directly influencing the child's disposition towards water; equipment and facilities, such as the use of flotation materials or the perception of the depth of the pool, can increase or decrease the feeling of security; social factors, for instance the influence of parents, peers, and educators, affect how the child interprets and copes with fear; and personal attitudes towards the aquatic environment, depending on whether the child approaches it with curiosity or anxiety, shape their experience. This order of importance reflects how internal and external aspects interact to form the perception of the aquatic environment. Examples applied to each factor are presented below according to the emotion management phases of fear of the aquatic environment.

Management of the emotion of fear in the aquatic environment related to avoidance factors of aquatic competition

Phase	Objective	Educator Actions	Importance
Identifying fear	Help the student to recognize how they perceive their aquatic abilities.	• Ask "Do you think you can stay afloat? What gives you more security or insecurity in the pool?" • Observe their reaction when trying new water activities.	It allows the educator to detect concrete insecurities that can be addressed with specific tasks.
Understanding the Source of Fear	Identify how their perception of competence influences their fear.	• Explore: "What do you think you need to learn to feel safer in the water?" • Introduce activities that reinforce fundamental skills, such as floating or moving in shallow water.	It helps to build a plan based on your current level of competence, reinforcing key areas.
Promoting autonomy	Develop confidence through small achievements that reinforce their perception of ability.	• Congratulate specific advances: "You've learned how to immerse your face in the water, that's fantastic!" • Set achievable goals that gradually increase their confidence.	It reinforces self-esteem and motivates the student to face the water with a more positive and confident attitude.

Management of the emotion of fear in the aquatic environment related to avoidance factors of previous experiences

Phase	Objective	Educator Actions	Importance
Identifying fear	Help the child to recognize how a past experience is affecting their current perception.	• Ask "Is there anything you remember about the aquatic environment that made you uncomfortable?" • Use examples: "Sometimes people feel afraid because something happened before, is that the case for you?"	Recognizing the connection between previous experiences and current emotions allows us to contextualize fear.
Understanding the Source of Fear	Identify the specific event or situation that generated the fear in order to address it directly.	• Explore with empathy: “Do you remember if it was something like falling into the water or not knowing how to float that worried you?" • Reassure: "That doesn't have to happen again. I'm here to help you to avoid it."	Understanding the origin allows you to design specific strategies to overcome fear, showing the child that it is possible to prevent similar experiences.
Promoting autonomy	Help the student transform that unpleasant experience into learning.	• Suggest: "What do you think you can learn from that situation to feel more confident now?" • Introduce progressive exercises in a controlled environment, reinforcing safety.	It reinforces the child's ability to cope with challenging situations and use their experience as a learning tool.

Management of the emotion of fear in the aquatic environment related to avoidance factors to equipment and facilities

Phase	Objective	Educator Actions	Importance
Identifying fear	Help the student to recognize which aspects of the physical environment generate insecurity.	• Ask "Are you scared of the size of the pool or that you can't touch the bottom?" • Observe how it interacts with equipment, such as vests or floats.	Identifying specific elements allows you to adjust your environment to make it less intimidating.
Understanding the Source of Fear	Examine how characteristics such as pool depth or size influence their perception of fear.	• Explain: "The pool has different depths. We can start in a part where you feel safer." • Allow them to explore the equipment on land before using it in the aquatic environment.	Reducing the impact of external factors allows the child to focus on their learning and not on the environment.
Promoting autonomy	Teach how to use the computer as a tool for safety and confidence.	• Show how flotation materials or vests work to keep you safe. • Encourage testing the equipment gradually: "Would you like to use this while practicing?"	Effective use of equipment strengthens confidence and decreases fear of water.

Management of the emotion of fear in the aquatic environment related to social avoidance factors

Phase	Objective	Educator Actions	Importance
Identifying fear	Help the student to identify how the people around them influence their perception of water.	• Ask, "What do you think when you see your friends swimming? Do you feel similar or different?" • Share examples of positive experiences from other children to normalize learning.	Recognizing how the comments or actions of others influence fear helps the student to separate their own feelings from external pressures.
Accept emotion without judgment	Validate that social influences can generate fear and that it is valid to feel it.	• Reassure them: "Sometimes seeing others makes us feel insecure, but that doesn't mean you can't try." • Create an inclusive group environment where no one is judged by their level.	It allows the student to understand that it is normal to feel different and that they are not alone in their experience.
Promoting autonomy	Help the child to develop confidence in their ability, regardless of outside opinions.	• Encourage self-evaluation: “How do you think you can improve on your own, without comparing yourself?" • Celebrate individual achievements, avoiding comparisons with other children.	It reinforces the idea that personal progress is more important than external validation, empowering the child.

Management of the emotion of fear in the aquatic environment

related to avoidance factors by personal attitude

Phase	Objective	Educator Actions	Importance
Identifying fear	Help the student to identify their emotional predisposition towards the aquatic environment.	• Ask "How do you feel when you see the pool? Is it something that excites or scares you?" • Observe their body language looking for signs of anxiety.	It allows us to understand whether the fear is due to a generalized unpleasant perception or to specific factors.
Accept emotion without judgment	Validate any emotion the child expresses to build confidence.	• Say "It's normal that we like some things more than others. We can work together so that the pool doesn't scare you so much." • Offer safe alternatives that align with their comfort level.	Validation helps the child to feel understood and decreases the pressure to change their attitude immediately.
Promoting autonomy	Promote a positive change in their attitude through pleasant experiences in the aquatic environment.	• Celebrate every step: "You got your feet wet today, that's an improvement!" • Introduce fun water-related activities through games.	It reinforces the association of the aquatic environment with pleasant experiences, changing the child's predisposition.

Conclusion

Fear of the aquatic environment is an emotion that can limit learning and make it difficult to experience water-related activities. However, when addressed appropriately, it creates an opportunity for aquatic educators to establish a trusting relationship with learners, **creating a safe, enjoyable and motivating environment**. This approach allows not only to overcome emotional barriers, but also to build an enriching and rewarding connection with the aquatic environment.

Identifying factors **that contribute to fear**, such as perceptions of competence, previous experiences, physical environment, social influences, and personal attitudes, is essential to developing effective pedagogical strategies. By respecting each learner's emotional process and working in a structured and empathetic way, educators can help transform initial difficulties into meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences.

With an organized methodology, such as the one proposed in the **phases of managing the emotion of fear of the aquatic environment**, it can be ensured that participants not only overcome their fears, but also enjoy and make the most of their relationship with the aquatic environment.

Bibliography

Moreno-Murcia, J. A. (2025). *Teach to swim without fear*. Sb editorial.

Moreno-Murcia, J. A., Huéscar, E., de Paula, L. & Gómez, N. (2020). Design and Validationof a Scale to Measure Fear of the Aquatic Environment in children. Motricidade,16(4),370-378. https://doi.org/10.6063/motricidade.20242