Pedagogical resources
AQUATIC ACTIVITIES

EDUCATING WITHOUT FORCING IN THE AQUATIC ENVIRONMENT: KEYS TO RESPECTFUL GUIDANCE

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Main keys for supporting children in the water through a pedagogical approach, emotional connection and respect, incorporating Nonviolent Communication and the Comprehensive Aquatic Method.

Introduction: water as an emotional and relational space

In the aquatic environment, educators often encounter situations where a child fails to make progress, freezes up or reacts emotionally in an unexpected way. The aquatic environment is a setting where emotions emerge with particular clarity. Water alters the sense of balance, changes bodily perception and evokes feelings of vulnerability, curiosity, enjoyment or tension. In this context, the relationship between the educator and the learner takes on particular importance, as emotions directly influence the child's willingness to trust, explore and learn. As Rosenberg (2006) suggests, Nonviolent Communication (NVC) fosters relationships grounded in empathy and human connection, creating an atmosphere where emotions can be expressed without fear of judgment. It is a tool for building emotionally healthier relationships and managing conflict constructively (Machín et al., 2025).

The **Comprehensive Aquatic Method (MAC)** shares this approach by viewing the pool as a space where the physical, emotional and cognitive dimensions are integrated (Moreno-Murcia, 2026). The MAC posits that the educational relationship in the water must be underpinned by presence, calm and respectful support, values very similar to those Hopkins (2020) describes in his restorative model, which focuses on developing relationships based on listening and emotional reflection. This convergence makes the aquatic environment an ideal space for applying NVC, as the physical experience amplifies the need for clarity, safety and emotional support.

Nonviolent Communication applied to the aquatic environment

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) offers aquatic educators a way of intervening that prioritises relationships, understanding and respect for pupils' emotional processes. In an environment such as water, where emotions are intensified and become visible through the body, this form of communication takes on particular significance (Rosenberg, 2006).

NVC is organised into four components that can be applied naturally in daily practice in the pool. It is not a matter of following a rigid sequence, but of developing a way of observing, interpreting and supporting what happens in the water.

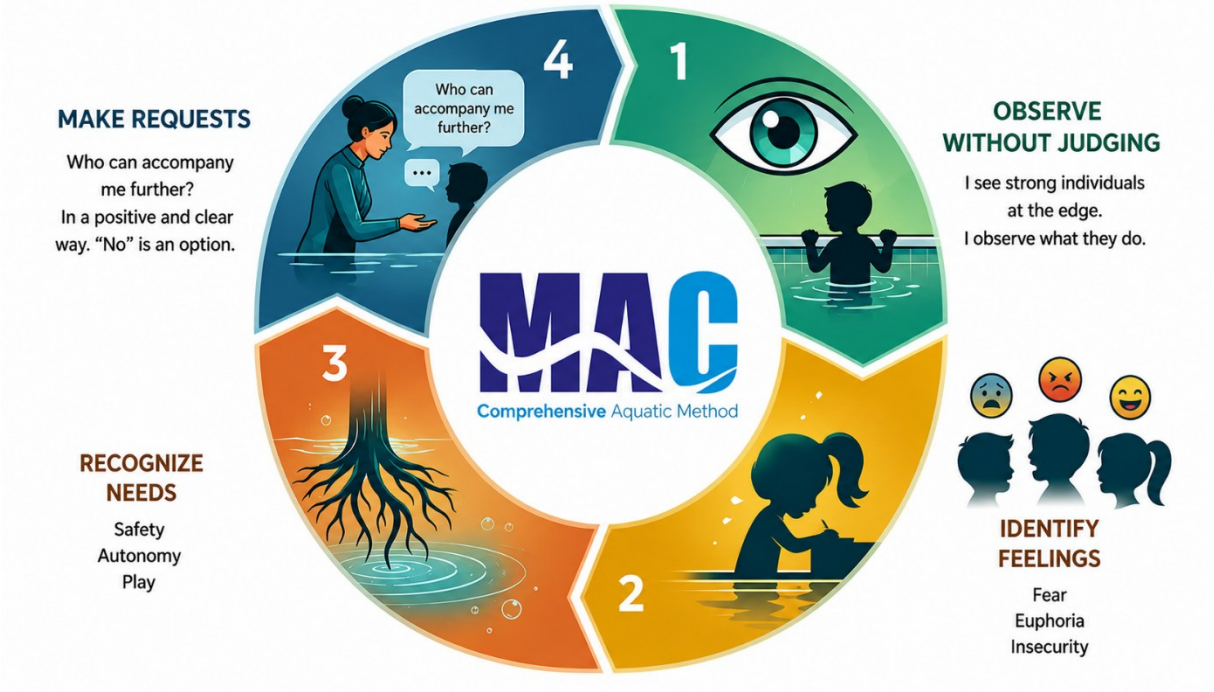
How to apply NVC in the aquatic environment

Observing without judging involves describing what is happening without labelling or interpreting the child's behaviour. Phrases such as "I can see you're holding the edge" or "I can see you're splashing your friend" help to create a calmer and more respectful basis for communication. Identifying feelings involves putting into words what the child might be experiencing at that moment. Phrases such as "you seem to be feeling insecure" or "you seem to be very excited" facilitate connection and help the child recognise their own emotional state.

Recognising needs involves going one step further and understanding what the child might need. In the water, these needs are often related to safety, calmness, independence, clarity or connection with others. For example, a child who won't let go may need to feel more secure, whilst another who is splashing about may be looking for play or interaction.

Making a request involves proposing a clear, specific and respectful action, without imposing. In the water, this can be expressed through suggestions such as "would you like us to try this together?" or "could you do that more slowly so it doesn't splash?". The request opens the possibility of shared action and reduces resistance. This sequence can be understood as an integral part of aquatic practice (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Application of Nonviolent Communication in the aquatic environment



Applying these principles enables the educator to move from simply correcting behaviour to understanding what lies behind it. Rather than viewing behaviour as a problem, it is understood as an expression of an emotion and a need.

In aquatic practice, recognising the emotion behind a child's behaviour allows for a more tailored educational approach. When a child's needs are met, emotions that promote learning tend to emerge. The child shows confidence when they let go, try things out and dare to explore; they experience enjoyment when they move freely, smile and participate; and they show interest when they pay attention, get involved and observe with curiosity. These responses indicate that they are in a state of readiness to learn. On the contrary, when needs are not met, emotions emerge that hinder interaction with the aquatic environment. Fear is expressed when the child clings on, tenses up or avoids moving forward; frustration appears when they protest, freeze or give up trying; confusion manifests itself in hesitation, or difficulty understanding instructions; and unregulated euphoria can be observed when they splash, invade personal space or lose control. These responses should not be understood as problematic behaviours, but as signals that guide the educator on how to support the process.

Before addressing the physical behaviour, it is essential to understand the emotion driving it. A child who refuses to let go may need reassurance; one who splashes may be seeking play or connection; another who freezes may need calm, time or support. Addressing these needs does not mean stopping the teaching but rather creating the conditions necessary for learning to take place.

From this perspective, NVC enables us to intervene from a different approach: one that is not focused on correcting what the child does, but on understanding what the child needs in order to learn. When integrated with the Comprehensive Aquatic Method, this form of communication fosters an environment in which the child feels safe, understood and able to explore the aquatic environment.

The Comprehensive Aquatic Method as an integrating framework

The MAC offers a perspective that complements NVC by placing the body and emotion at the heart of learning. NVC describes a respectful approach based on non-interference, deep observation and trust in individual rhythms. This attitude aligns with the way the MAC invites the educator to be in the pool: with calm, presence and bodily awareness. Through slow gestures, a gentle tone of voice, an appropriate distance and a non-invasive attitude, the educator becomes a stable emotional anchor. This presence facilitates exploration and helps to manage any tensions that may arise.

This convergence is also evident in the way conflicts are addressed. Hopkins (2020) explains that restorative practices enable conflicts to be transformed into learning opportunities through simple questions designed to encourage emotional reflection. For example, these questions (“what happened?”, “how do you feel?”, “what do you need?”, “how can we make it right?”) and their incorporation into the aquatic environment allow disputes over equipment, splashing or turns to be managed without resorting to punishment or coercion.

The MAC also provides a deep understanding of the relationship between emotion and movement. The body expresses what words sometimes leave unsaid: the way one floats, holds on, breathes or glides reveals inner needs. NVC provides the language to interpret these signals with respect, whilst the MAC offers the tools to support them through body awareness. Thus, both approaches merge into an educational practice in which the body, words and

emotion recognise one another.

Practical application: real cases in the aquatic environment

A theoretical understanding of NVC and MAC provides educators with a solid framework from which to support pupils' emotions, needs and rhythms. However, for this approach to be fully meaningful, it is necessary to visualise how it plays out **in real, everyday situations in the water.** Below are several practical case studies illustrating how NVC and the MAC can be naturally integrated into aquatic dynamics. These examples should not be seen as set formulas, but rather as **pedagogical guidelines** that help to recognise the coherence between theory and practice.

Case 1. Fear of letting go of the edge. A child clings to the edge and avoids entering the deep end. The usual temptation might be to encourage him with phrases such as "come on, you can do it" or even to give him a gentle push to get him out of his comfort zone. Using the MAC approach and drawing on NVC, the teacher opts for a different approach. First, they **observe without judgement**: "I can see you're holding the edge and you don't want to let go." Then they **validate the feeling**, putting it into words: "It seems you feel insecure or worried." From there, the educator recognises the **underlying need**, which could be for safety or support: "perhaps you need to feel safer before moving forward." They then make a n**egotiable and respectful request**: "would you like us to float together, holding my hand, for a few breaths?" This intervention is complemented by a **calm presence in the water**, the use of a relaxed tone, a close but non-invasive body position, and a willingness to provide physical support without rushing. Progress is not forced: the belief is that emotional security will open the door to learning. **Pedagogical key**: emotional security is the foundation for the child to dare to explore the aquatic environment.

Case 2. Excessive excitement and splashing the group. A child becomes very excited: he splashes around vigorously and splashes other children, who appear uncomfortable. Instead of resorting to a "stop that!" or "I'm going to punish you by taking you out of the water", the ideal approach is to start with a **non-judgemental description**: "I can see you're moving your arms very quickly and the water is splashing onto the others". Then connect with the **child's feelings**, which may be enthusiasm or a need to play: "you seem very excited and keen to move around". Next, verbalise your own **need**: "I need the group to feel safe and for everyone to be able to enjoy themselves without being disturbed." Finally, make a **clear and specific request**: "can you move your arms more slowly so you don't splash so much, and then we can play together in the area where everyone wants to get wet?" In this way, the swimming instructor helps to **regulate the group's intensity** without breaking the connection. They accompany the child's movements with slower body movements, deep breathing and a gentle tone, helping the child to synchronise their rhythm with the environment. The implicit message is: I can go along with your energy without invalidating it, but I'll help you channel it. **Pedagogical key**: Energy is not corrected; it is accompanied and regulated to foster harmony and learning.

Case 3. Conflict over equipment. Two children are arguing over a board. Instead of intervening immediately to decide who was right, the teacher practises **non-immediate intervention** where safety conditions allow, allowing a few seconds to see if the children can resolve the situation themselves. If it is not resolved, they intervene from a restorative perspective. First, they **ask what has happened**: "what happened with the board?". Then they invite the children to **express their feelings**: "how did you feel when it was taken away from you?". Next, they probe into **their needs**: "did you need to keep floating with it because it made you feel safe?". They conclude by offering a space for **resolution**: "what can we do so that you both get what you need?". Often, the solution is not to divide the material, but to clarify needs: one child may need security, another may need to play. With this understanding, the educator helps to find creative strategies without resorting to punishment or imposition.

The MAC encourages this dynamic because it understands the material as a physical and emotional mediator, not simply as an object for use. **Pedagogical key**: Conflict is an opportunity to understand needs and build shared solutions.

Case 4. Frustration at being unable to float or glide. When a child tries to float or glide but fails, they tense up, sink, protest or say things like "I can't do it". Using the MAC approach, the educator acknowledges the situation without judgement: "I can see you're trying to float and your body is tensing up a bit". They then **acknowledge the feeling** of frustration: "it can be very difficult when things don't go as you expect." Next, they identify the **unmet need**, usually calm, clarity or support: "perhaps you need to feel calmer before trying again." They then make a **realistic suggestion**: "would you like us to try it more slowly while I hold your back?" Following NVC and in keeping with the spirit of the MAC, the educator acknowledges the situation without judgement; the educator adjusts the physical support (position of the hands, depth, direction of movement), but always maintaining the principle of accompanying rather than correcting. The key is to **anticipate the emotion before the motor movement**, bringing the child to a state of emotional readiness suitable for learning. **Pedagogical key**: Before teaching the technical movement, it is necessary to regulate the emotional state that influences it.

Case 5. Freezing up or unexpected crying in the middle of the session. Sometimes, for no apparent reason, a child starts crying, freezes up or asks to get out of the water. Here, the focus is on **validating the emotion without downplaying it**: "I can see you're crying and it looks like you're feeling overwhelmed". We then explore the **need**, which may be for rest, closeness, security or clarity: "perhaps you need a moment out of the water with me." Rather than forcing the activity to continue, the educator offers a **safe space**: "let's sit together at the edge and you can tell me if you want to come back when you feel ready." In this case, the MAC helps us understand that the body has entered a state of sensory overload and needs to regain its balance. Regulation occurs through shared breathing,

eye contact, stillness and the absence of pressure. When the child calms down, they decide when to return, thereby strengthening their autonomy and confidence. **Pedagogical key**: Stopping, supporting and waiting are also part of learning.

The practice of NVC and the MAC is not limited to supporting the child, but also involves the educator's self-care. Before intervening, it may be helpful for the professional to take a moment to breathe deeply, observe their own emotional state and connect with the calmness of the water. This prior self-regulation facilitates an intervention that is more mindful, less reactive and more consistent with the principles of this model.

Keys to apply in the water

In everyday practice, educators can incorporate this approach through simple actions that guide their response:

- Observe before intervening, taking a few seconds to understand what is happening.
- Put what you see into words, avoiding labels and judgements.
- Acknowledge the emotion the child may be feeling.
- Link that emotion to a need.
- Support the child before correcting them, prioritising emotional regulation.
- Adjust your own body language, tone and pace of the interaction.
- Make clear, respectful and negotiable suggestions.

Conclusion

Teaching in an aquatic environment involves going beyond the teaching of motor skills. It entails understanding that every action a child takes is driven by an emotion and a need, and that only when these are addressed does a genuine willingness to learn emerge. From this perspective, the swimming pool ceases to be merely a space for technical instruction and becomes a relational environment where presence, listening and support take on a central role.

The integration of Nonviolent Communication and the Comprehensive Aquatic Method offers the educator a more mindful way of intervening, where one observes without judging, names emotions, recognises needs and proposes actions based on respect. This approach does not eliminate teaching, but places it within a more human context, where learning is built on safety, trust and connection.

In this process, the educator not only teaches children how to move in the water, but also supports each child in relating to themselves, their body and their environment in a safer and more meaningful way. The focus shifts from what the child does to also addressing where they are coming from, recognising that learning cannot be separated from the emotional experience that underpins it.

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