Pedagogical resources
AQUATIC ACTIVITIES

FAMILIES WHO SUPPORT. TOWARDS AN ETHICAL AND SAFE AQUATIC EDUCATION

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Aquatic education is a shared responsibility between families and professionals. Supporting children's learning through trust, respect, and safety helps protect their well-being and build a positive, lasting relationship with water.

Introduction

Contemporary aquatic education has undergone a profound transformation over recent decades. Today's programmes no longer aim solely to teach children to swim, but also to help them develop a positive, competent and safe relationship with the aquatic environment. This paradigm shift has made children's well-being, aquatic literacy and drowning prevention the priority objectives of any educational programme (Shenoi et al., 2026; Fonseca-Pinto et al., 2024; Langendorfer & Bruya, 1995; Moran et al., 2012; Stallman et al., 2017).

However, this educational process does not depend solely on the work carried out by professionals. Scientific evidence shows that the family is one of the most influential learning environments during childhood. Early experiences with water, attitudes towards risk, perceptions of safety and confidence in the aquatic environment begin to develop long before a child takes part in a formal teaching programme. Therefore, the success of any educational intervention depends, to a large extent, on collaboration between educators and families.

In 2024, the Ibero-American Association for Aquatic, Special and Hydrotherapy Education (Asociación Iberoamericana de Educación Acuática, Especial e Hidroterapia or AIDEA) published the Declaration "Foundations for Respectful Aquatic Education in Childhood" (Fonseca-Pinto et al., 2024), establishing, for the first time, a set of principles aimed at

protecting children's rights in aquatic programmes. That declaration was primarily aimed at professionals, managers and institutions. This resource expands on that framework, positioning **families as key actors in safeguarding those rights**.

This shared responsibility also entails a shared ethical responsibility. Families not only accompany their children to lessons, but also play an essential role as observers, collaborators and guardians of their children's wellbeing. When an educational practice promotes development, autonomy and confidence, families help to reinforce it. However, when they observe practices that are incompatible with children's rights, scientific evidence or the basic principles of education, they also have a responsibility to take action. This resource aims to provide simple guidelines to help families understand their role in their children's aquatic education, identify the characteristics of respectful aquatic education, and recognise signs that may require reflection, dialogue or intervention. At the same time, it can help aquatic educators understand the role families play in this process and foster a collaborative relationship based on communication, trust and shared responsibility.

When families place their trust in professionals, this does not mean they should stop observing, asking questions or taking action when a practice may jeopardise a child's physical or emotional wellbeing. Shared responsibility for education requires us to recognise that protecting children is a shared task and that no methodology can take precedence over their rights and dignity.

The family: the child's first teacher, even in the water

Learning to swim begins long before the first organised lesson in a swimming pool. From the very first months of life, shared experiences with the family shape the way a child perceives water, builds their sense of security and develops their initial emotional responses to the aquatic environment. Every bath, every visit to a beach or swimming pool, every shared game and every reaction adults have to the water contributes to a body of experiences that will shape the child's future relationship with this environment. Research into child development shows that early family interactions constitute one of the main learning environments, where beliefs, expectations and behaviours relating to exploration, autonomy and the perception of risk are developed (Bandura, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

These early experiences can leave a lasting impression that extends beyond childhood. When they take place in a safe, respectful and supportive environment, they encourage a love of water, encourage children to continue swimming and help them adopt safe behaviour. Conversely, experiences characterised by fear, humiliation or a loss of control can lead to a persistent aversion to water and hinder future learning (Peden & Franklin, 2020).

This influence makes **the family the primary educational agent in the aquatic environment as well**. Their role is not limited to deciding when to enrol the child in a programme or accompanying them to the swimming pool; rather, they play an active part in shaping attitudes, habits and behaviours that foster a positive relationship with water. The confidence conveyed by adults, the way they respond to fear, the type of supervision they provide and the opportunities for exploration they offer all have a significant impact on the child's development of aquatic competence and future aquatic literacy (Moran & Stanley, 2006; Morrongiello et al., 2013).

Consequently, early years aquatic education should be understood as a process shared between professionals and families. The educator contributes the pedagogical and technical knowledge required to design safe learning experiences tailored to children's development, whilst the family provides the emotional support and educational continuity that enable these learning outcomes to be consolidated outside the pool. Evidence shows that programmes which actively involve families promote greater adherence, improve supervision practices, increase risk awareness and help to reduce unsafe behaviour in relation to water (Mekkaoui et al., 2022).

This shared responsibility is reflected in three main objectives of contemporary aquatic education: to develop aquatic literacy, to prevent drowning, and to foster respect for the aquatic environment as a space for learning, social interaction and sustainability (Fonseca-Pinto et al., 2024).

Families play a direct role in these three objectives. They contribute to water literacy by encouraging positive and varied experiences in the water; they help prevent drowning by providing active supervision, adopting safe behaviours and reinforcing the instructor's advice; and they teach respect for the aquatic environment by promoting responsible attitudes towards other people and the natural world.

This educational partnership requires mutual trust, communication and a critical yet constructive attitude. Families should feel empowered to ask questions when they have doubts, and professionals should be willing to explain the rationale behind their approach. When both parties share a vision grounded in scientific evidence, respect for children's developmental pace and the protection of children's rights, the chances of creating a safe, positive and lasting aquatic experience are greatly enhanced.

What does respectful aquatic education involve?

From this perspective, respectful aquatic education involves building a positive, safe and meaningful relationship with the aquatic environment. The development of aquatic competence requires the integration of motor, cognitive, emotional and social aspects that enable the child to act with increasing autonomy, understand the risks of the environment and enjoy aquatic experiences in a way that is

appropriate to their level of development and responsibility (Moran et al., 2012; Stallman et al., 2017).

The AIDEA Declaration on Respectful Aquatic Education (Fonseca-Pinto et al., 2024) states that any programme aimed at children must prioritise the child's physical, emotional and social safety above any other educational objective. Furthermore, it expressly rejects teaching practices based on violence, conditioning or the use of fear as a teaching strategy, advocating instead methodologies that promote progressive and guided exploration, confidence and the child's holistic development. From this perspective, a high-quality aquatic education programme is characterised by:

- Always prioritise the physical, emotional and social well-being of the child and the group.
- Always begin an activity once the child has given their consent.
- Adapt activities to the child's stage of development, whilst respecting individual learning paces.
- Encourage the gradual exploration of the aquatic environment and offer challenges appropriate to the child's development, maturity and experience.
- Use play as the primary learning strategy.
- Support the child's emotions without ignoring or minimising them.
- Build confidence before focusing on performance.
- Maintain ongoing communication with families.

These characteristics are not merely methodological recommendations, but pedagogical principles underpinned by research into child development and motivation. Self-Determination Theory holds that children learn more effectively when they feel they can act autonomously, feel competent and build trusting relationships with the adults who support them (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Similarly, the bioecological theory of development emphasises that positive and repeated experiences in safe environments promote healthier holistic development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

In an aquatic context, this means that learning is not about overcoming fear through coercion, but rather about creating progressive experiences of exploration, safety and achievement that enable the child to build their confidence and competence. When children explore the water from a place of emotional security, curiosity and play, their active participation increases, learning is consolidated and they develop a greater willingness to take on new challenges. This sense of well-being also helps to ensure that they want to return to lessons and continue exploring the aquatic environment. Conversely, when learning is based on pressure, coercion or the imposition of tasks under the logic of "you have to do it because the teacher says so", the child's sense of control diminishes, stress increases, and both the acquisition of skills and the development of a positive relationship with the aquatic environment and with the teacher themselves may be compromised (Ryan & Deci, 2020). These experiences may subsequently manifest as resistant behaviours, such as showing reluctance upon arriving at the learning space, avoiding interaction with the instructor or, in more extreme cases, refusing to enter the facility.

The quality of a programme should not be assessed solely on the basis of the technical skills a child has acquired by the end of a course, but also on the confidence they have developed, the enjoyment they have experienced whilst learning, and their desire to continue taking part in aquatic activities in the future. This desire to return is also a significant indicator of how they are experiencing the programme: asking during the week when they will be going back to the pool, arriving at the lesson full of enthusiasm, or greeting the instructor with spontaneous displays of affection can all reflect the development of a positive bond with the activity, the environment and the person supporting them in their learning.

Children's rights also apply in the swimming pool

The swimming pool is an educational setting and, like any other context designed for children's learning, must ensure full respect for children's rights. Water safety education is no exception: no educational objective – not even accelerating learning or preventing drowning – justifies practices that compromise a child's physical or emotional well-being (Fonseca-Pinto et al., 2024).
From this perspective, every child should be guaranteed at least five fundamental rights whilst taking part in a water-based education programme.

The right to feel safe means that the learning environment must instil a sense of physical and emotional security. Safety is not limited to preventing accidents; it also involves creating a supportive atmosphere in which the child feels that their emotions are understood, that they can explore without fear, and that the adults accompanying them are there to protect them. A child who feels safe is more willing to learn, experiment and build a positive relationship with water.

The right to learn without fear means that no aquatic skill should be taught through intimidation, coercion or deliberate exposure to situations that cause distress. Intense fear triggers physiological stress responses that are incompatible with effective learning and can lead to emotional consequences that last for years. Scientific evidence and AIDEA's position both reject any teaching method based on violence, conditioning or emotional distress as an educational strategy.

The right to be heard recognises that even the youngest children are constantly conveying information about how they are experiencing the water. Their gestures, body language, facial expressions and their desire to move closer to or further away from the water are all legitimate forms of communication that must be interpreted and respected by adults. Listening to a child means recognising their emotions as part of the educational process and adapting our approach where necessary.

The right to progress at one's own pace serves as a reminder that children's development does not follow a uniform progression. Every child matures differently, builds their confidence at different rates and requires experiences tailored to their individual characteristics. Constantly comparing children with one another or imposing identical objectives on everyone runs counter to the principles of a personalised and respectful education, based on developmental progress rather than solely on the rapid acquisition of skills.

The right to enjoy water is perhaps the most important objective of all. Water-based education should help children build a positive, safe and lasting relationship with the aquatic environment. The joy of playing, discovering, exploring and feeling competent is the main driving force behind continuing to engage in water-based activities throughout life. When early experiences are associated with well-being and confidence, children are more likely to continue developing their water skills and adopt safe behaviours in the future.

These five rights should not be understood as separate elements, but as interrelated principles that shape a child-centred educational experience. Feeling safe, learning without fear, being listened to, progressing at their own pace and enjoying the water all contribute together to safeguarding their wellbeing and dignity throughout the learning process. Figure 1 summarises this relationship and places the child at the centre of every water education experience.

Respecting these five rights does not mean lowering educational standards or delaying learning. It means understanding that the true aim of aquatic education is not merely to teach children to swim, but to help them develop the ability to interact with water in a competent, safe and emotionally healthy way. From this perspective, the quality of a programme should not be measured solely by the skills a child is able to demonstrate at the end of a course, but also by the way in which they have experienced that process and by the respect with which they have been supported throughout their learning.

What can families do?

Families can play a crucial role. Observing how the instructor teaches, how they respond to the child's emotions, how they organise learning situations, how they communicate educational objectives, or even how they interact with families, provides very valuable information about the programme's educational quality. **A truly respectful approach to water-based education is recognised not only by what children learn, but also by the way in**

which they learn.

Figure 1. The five rights of the child in water safety education.

Questions every family should ask themselves when observing a lesson:

- Is my child taking part because they want to explore, or because they feel obliged to?
- Does the teacher support the child's emotions or try to ignore them?
- Are different learning paces respected?
- Does play take centre stage in teaching?
- Is trust built up before the difficulty of tasks is increased?
- Is communication with families open and transparent?
- Does the child's wellbeing seem to be more important than the speed at which they learn?

- Does the child generally show a willingness to participate, explore and interact with the teacher?
- Does the teacher's verbal and non-verbal communication convey calm, respect, empathy and emotional support?
- Does my child show a desire to return to the activity and maintain a relationship of trust with the teacher?

Warning signs that families should not ignore

Most water safety lessons are delivered to high professional and ethical standards. However, there are certain practices and changes in a child's behaviour that should give any family cause for concern. These signs should not be interpreted in isolation, but rather by considering their intensity, persistence and the context in which they occur. Table 1 lists some of the main warning signs relating to both the child's response and the instructor's behaviour.

Table 1. Warning signs in the child and in the instructor's behaviour in the aquatic environment.

When the child	When the educator
Shows persistent, intense fear.	Physically forces the child to carry out a task.
Constantly tries to escape from the water.	Puts the child in the water against their will.
Refuses to attend lessons.	Mocks their emotions.
Shows a sudden change in behaviour before going to the swimming pool.	Downplays the child's fear ("it'll pass").
Gradually loses confidence in the instructor.	Uses threats or punishments, such as excluding the child from an activity.
Says they do not want to return to the swimming pool, even on days when there is no lesson.	Prevents the child from regulating their own emotions.
Seeks eye contact with the family or calls out to them insistently.	Rejects the child's family's presence when the child persistently asks for them to be there.

The presence of these signs may indicate that the child's experience in the water is compromising their emotional wellbeing and requires careful assessment. In the case of the educational practices highlighted, their normalisation may lead to stress responses, a loss of confidence and a rejection of the activity.

Research shows that programmes incorporating training aimed at families improve supervision, increase knowledge about the risk of drowning and promote more appropriate preventative practices (Mekkaoui et al., 2022; Morrongiello et al., 2013). Furthermore, this training helps to develop greater awareness and sensitivity regarding what is done, how it is done and why it is done in aquatic education. From this perspective, shared responsibility does not consist solely of receiving information, but also of actively participating in the educational

process. This participation involves recognising both the rights of families and the responsibilities they assume in creating a safe, respectful and educational aquatic experience for the child, as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Families' rights and responsibilities.

Families' rights	Families' responsibilities
Find out about the educational objectives.	Respect the natural pace of a child's development.
Observe lessons when the programme allows.	Avoid putting pressure on the child to achieve quick results.
Ask for explanations about the methodology used.	Reinforce safety messages at home.
Ask how fear and getting used to the water are managed.	Work together with the teacher.
Raise any doubts or concerns.	Always prioritise the child's wellbeing.

Families do not need to become specialists in aquatic education to fulfil this role. Participating in an informed manner, observing, asking questions and working alongside the professionals helps to create a more transparent, safe and respectful experience for the child.

When a practice is inappropriate

Addressing an inappropriate practice does not mean confronting the professional or systematically questioning their work. As in any educational setting, there may be practices that do not align with scientific evidence or the ethical principles that should guide teaching. In such situations, families' involvement can help to identify, analyse and rectify the problem. **Respectful communication based on dialogue is usually the first step towards improving the quality of education and safeguarding the wellbeing of all children.**

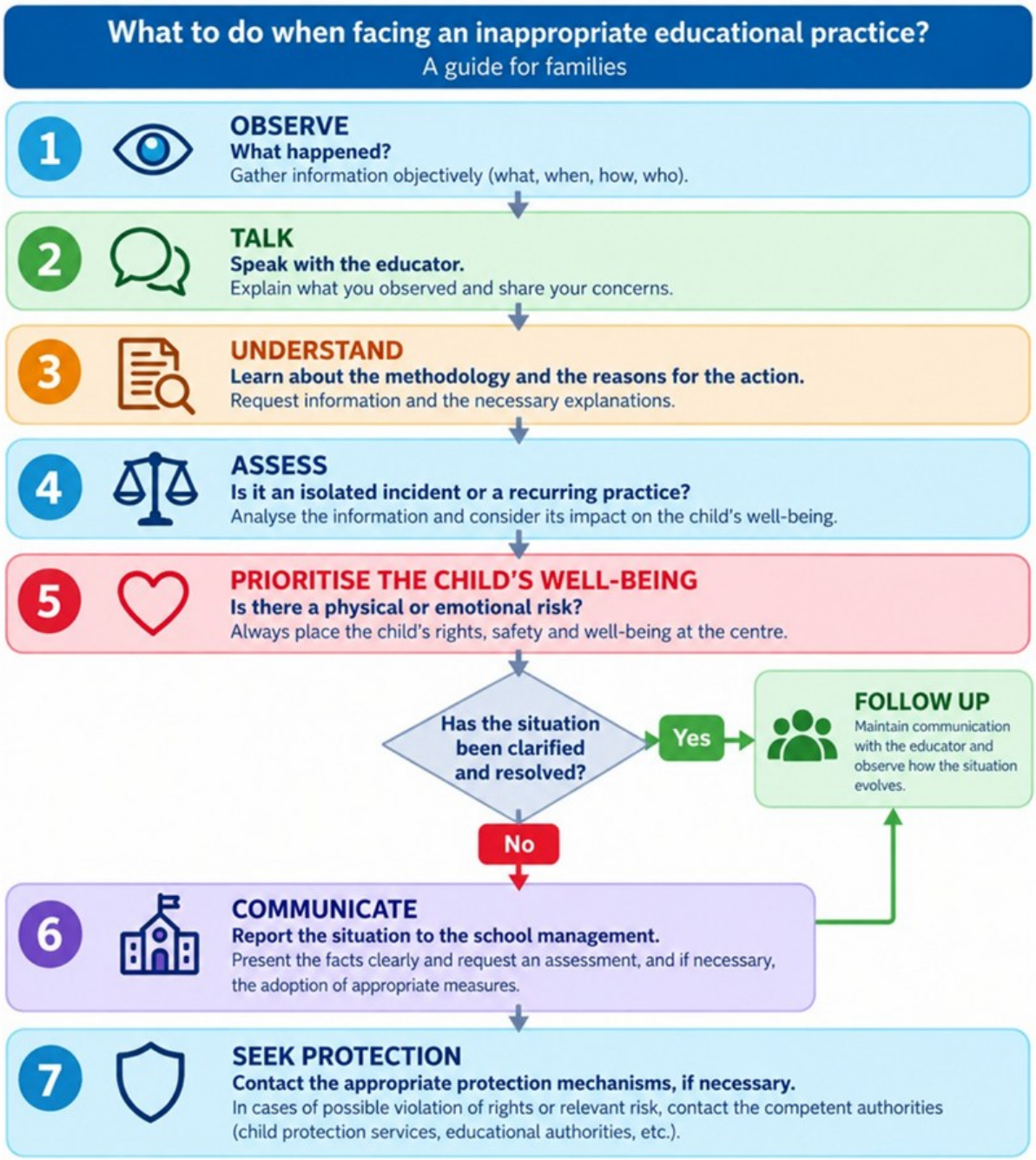
If a family observes practices that are incompatible with respectful teaching, their response should follow a proportionate sequence:

1. Observe what has happened objectively.
2. Discuss the matter with the professional to understand the situation.
3. Request information about the methodology used.
4. Assess whether this is an isolated incident or a regular practice.
5. Always prioritise the child's physical and emotional protection.
6. If there are indications of behaviour that could be harmful to the child, report the situation to the centre's management.
7. Where the behaviour could constitute a violation of the child's rights or pose a significant risk to their safety, make use of the protection mechanisms provided for under the applicable regulations.

This sequence enables a progression from observation and dialogue towards increasingly

protective measures when the situation remains unclear or persists. Figure 2 summarises this course of action, placing the child's physical and emotional wellbeing at the heart of the decision-making process.

Figure 2. Course of action for families faced with inappropriate educational practices.



It is worth bearing in mind that **parental consent does not legitimise actions that infringe the child's fundamental rights, nor does it exempt parents from any liabilities that may arise from harmful conduct**. The specific legal assessment will always depend on the country's legislation and the circumstances of the case.

What a family should never accept

There are boundaries that no educational practice should cross. Regardless of the methodology used or the results sought, the child's wellbeing, dignity and rights must always take precedence. Therefore, a respectful approach to swimming instruction cannot condone any practice that:

- Physically coerces the child.
- Humiliates or ridicules them.
- Uses fear as an educational strategy.
- Ignores emotions.
- Compromises emotional well-being.
- Reduces learning to obedience and exploration to repetition.

As a summary of the principles set out throughout this resource, Figure 3 sets out ten key guidelines for supporting water-based education within the family setting. The ten-point guide takes children's wellbeing as its starting point and brings together criteria relating to trust, respect for individual paces, listening, observation, safety and collaboration with professionals. Its aim is to provide families with a simple framework for **recognising, supporting and promoting safe, respectful and positive aquatic experiences.**

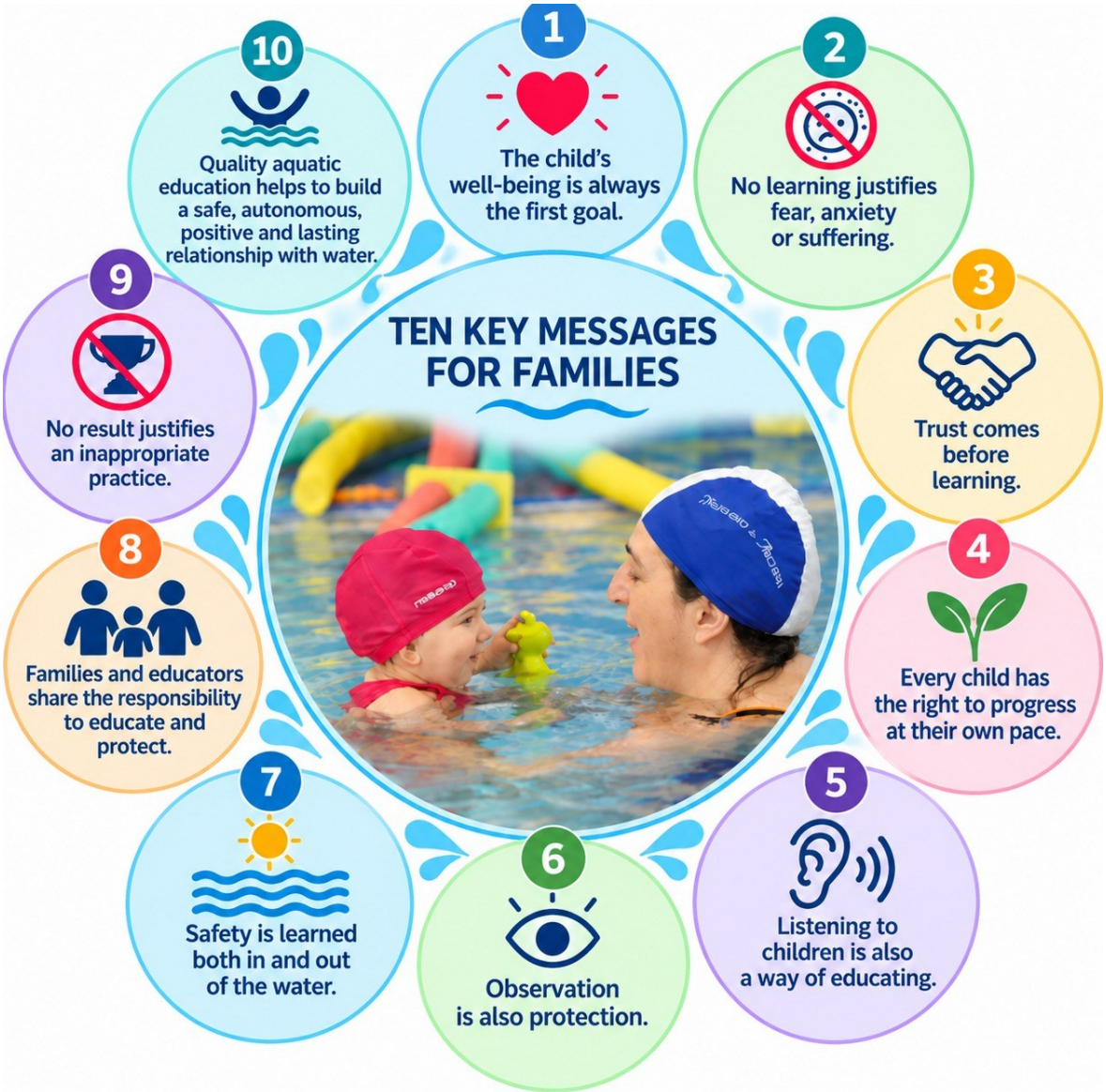
Conclusion

In aquatic education, families play an irreplaceable role that goes far beyond simply enrolling their children in a water-based activity or accompanying them to the swimming pool. Observing, asking questions, engaging in dialogue with professionals, understanding the pedagogical foundations of the programme and ensuring that children's rights are respected are all part of a shared educational responsibility that contributes directly to improving the quality of teaching and safeguarding the child's overall well-being.

Every family should remember that learning to swim can never be justified at the expense of fear, intimidation or emotional distress, and that active and responsible adult supervision is a fundamental measure for preventing drowning.

Families are not mere spectators when it comes to water-based learning. Their support is essential to ensure that every experience in the water respects their children's dignity, rights and wellbeing. Water-based education is a shared responsibility.

Figure 3. Ten-point family guide for ethical and safe aquatic education.



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