

CHAPTER 28:

Teaching a Child How to Swim/Do Anything

One of the most amazing experiences I have had as a parent was watching Hazel learn to swim. Before we had children, my husband and I assumed we would teach her ourselves. You know, teach her to swim, puree our own baby food, take her on hikes.¹¹⁹ All those notions expecting parents come up with. Adorable!

Naturally, growing up across the street from Ocean Beach in San Francisco, Hazel was terrified of water until age four. This fear was only intensified by Jeff jumping into a swimming pool with her on his shoulders in an attempt to show her that being underwater wasn't that bad.

So, at age four we enrolled her in swim classes at our local swim school. Hazel marched up to her swim teacher on that first day and announced, "Hello, I'm Hazel and I'm not going underwater."

¹¹⁹ After four months of quarantine, my kids are traumatized by the word "hike."

Her swim teacher reacted immediately, saying, “Okay, Hazel. No problem! We’re going to have so much fun today.”

Two weeks later, Hazel was putting her face in the water. Four weeks later, she was holding her breath underwater. Two months of once a week, half-hour swim lessons later, that little girl was swimming.

How did this happen? First of all, that swim school has that shit dialed in. I was extremely nervous about signing Hazel up for classes. Mostly because I didn’t want to pay \$30 a week to have her sit around splashing her feet in the water. When I talked to the site director about this, he basically told me, “Chill, lady. A strong-willed four-year-old who is afraid of water? What, you think we haven’t seen that before? Please.”

I spend my professional life thinking about how children learn. So, I found the process of Hazel learning how to swim fascinating to watch. The children start off wearing inner tubes and floating around the pool. Then they float one by one under a foam tunnel with holes in it. Then the swim instructor pours water on top of the tunnel while they are going under it so water splashes over their heads. Then they spend some time without their inner tubes on, kicking and experimenting with putting their faces in the water. If a child refuses to put their face in the water, they are encouraged but not forced. The child who refuses to put his face in the water watches his or her peers getting lots of praise and encouragement. Eventually, he decides he may as well do it too. As soon as he puts his face in the water, he is applauded like he won an Academy Award.

Within a few classes, all the kids have mastered that first step to swimming. The process continues like this, with children being gently encouraged through play and fun to move one more step forward, every step of the way. When a child gains a new skill, they receive a sticker. When they get to the next swimming level, they get a ribbon. Parents

applaud every sticker and buy ice cream for every new level.¹²⁰ Gradually, children go from not swimming to swimming.

Watching it felt like watching a miracle. But the process is incredibly simple. Children learn to swim when they see the steps broken down into smaller steps (scaffolding) and when each step is reinforced with tangible reinforcement (stickers and ribbons) as well as intangible reinforcement (social praise). Children are further reinforced through the spoken and unspoken praise of their peers. New skills are taught through fun and play, rather than through terrorizing them (i.e. the old “sink or swim” approach). The swim teachers are all young, dynamic, caring adults who are skilled in their craft (i.e. they know how to swim). It is so simple that it seems silly to be amazed by it. And yet, it was breathtaking to watch.

One of the reasons I found the process so amazing to watch is that it is a super simple version of a problem I face in my work and personal life every day. How do you teach a child a new skill? How do you teach a new skill that is more complicated and invisible than swimming? The skills I teach the kids I work with are harder to see, harder to examine, and way, way harder to teach. Like joining in a group of kids playing on the playground. Or recognizing when you hurt someone’s feelings. But watching Hazel learn to swim reminded me that is actually the way children learn. So, why don’t we teach the harder, squishier, more emotional things using this simple method?

If we taught a child to regulate their emotions the same way we teach them how to swim, what would that look like? Right now, here’s how most of us attempt to teach our children to regulate their emotions:

“FRITZ, STOP CRYING! USE YOUR WORDS!”

Which is essentially the emotional equivalent of throwing him into a freezing cold pool. Right now, he doesn’t know how to regulate his emotions. He doesn’t yet have that skill. But we don’t think about

¹²⁰ I don’t think the ice cream part is an official part of the program. But it’s pretty obvious that this is what should happen. Isn’t that the sole reason that ice cream exists? To celebrate children’s accomplishments?

children's emotions the same way we think about learning how to swim. We generally don't think about these skills as something they have to *learn*. We think about them as something they have to *stop*. This would be like if instead of teaching Hazel to swim I tried to teach her how to stop drowning. It is easier to teach someone to do something than to teach someone to stop doing something.

What if we used the same principles that work for teaching a child how to swim, to teach them how to do something much more nuanced? Like regulating their emotions, or sharing a toy with a sibling, or explaining their feelings instead of throwing a tantrum.

Remove the Power Struggle

The best way to win a fight with a child is to not have it. If they know they are in a fight with you, they will want to win it. Of course, they'll win! They are little and you are big and you want something from them and they know it. Of course, they are going to withhold, because then they have all the power. Have you ever gotten into a fight with your significant other about something that you knew you were *totally* right about? When they text you to apologize, do you text them back right away? Or do you make them sit and stew because you have all the power? You let them sit there and wait for your text! Of course, you do! That's our kids; they have the power, and they know it.

So, how do you win a fight with a three-year-old? Make them think you aren't fighting with them. We spent a year trying to get Hazel to put her face in the water and she wouldn't. On her first day of swimming, she announced to her teacher that she wasn't going under the water and her teacher responded with a shrug. It totally threw Hazel off her game. She was ready for a fight. But her teacher responded as if the last thing she wanted was for Hazel to go in the water. That "okay, whatever" paired with a shrug was incredibly powerful for our little warrior. When she

realized there wasn't going to be a fight, she decided she may as well just have fun.

Make Learning Fun

Before we took Hazel to the magical swim class that actually taught her how to swim, we took her to a bad swim class that didn't teach her how to swim. The main problem with the first swim class was that the water was freezing cold. From the moment she got into the water, she was totally miserable. Of course, she wasn't going to swim! It wasn't fun!

This issue of things being fun comes up all the time in my professional life. Therapists will complain to me about their clients not making progress with their goals, or being unfocused and whiny during sessions. So, I will observe the sessions. And I will spot the problem within the first five minutes. I'm always extremely diplomatic with my feedback, but what I want to say is: "James. You aren't fun! I am so bored sitting during your sessions. Look at your client! He's losing his mind. Of course, he isn't following one-step directions. He wants to kill himself!"

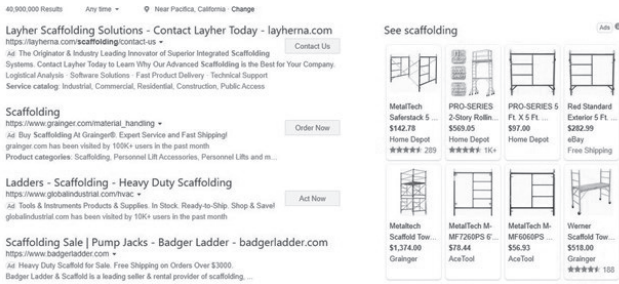
Adults are able to learn a lot from very un-fun situations. I just watched a three-hour-long PowerPoint about the Assessment of Functional Living Skills and I have never been so bored in my life. However, I did learn a lot. For children, especially young children, play is their work and you are going to have far more success teaching them something if it is fun.

Hazel's swim class has figured out how to break down every single little skill into its core components and teach it in a fun way. They have a little song or a dance or a toy that goes along with every little part of learning how to swim. No wonder she learned so quickly!

Scaffolding

I was about to explain what scaffolding is to you. Then I realized that I didn't know the exact definition, so I Googled it. Then I was going to type what I had just Googled onto this page, but make it sound like I

was super familiar with the definition and its origin, and not like I just Googled it and plopped it on the page. Then I decided to just cut and paste it here so you can see for yourself:



I am not exaggerating when I tell you that I was shocked that this came up when I Googled “scaffolding.” I am so immersed in the world of early childhood I forgot that “scaffolding” has a meaning outside of education. I know this makes me sound like a woman in *The Stepford Wives*, but my husband is out of town right now and I’m waiting for him to come back to change a lightbulb for me.¹²¹ I know a lot about a few things...and very little about a lot of things.

Turns out, “scaffolding” is a helpful metaphor. Scaffolds hold up a structure before it is strong enough to stand on its own. That is what we are doing with our children when we teach them a new skill. In swimming, you should *not* throw your child into the pool. Instead, you should gradually give them more and more freedom in the water, while holding them to make sure they don’t sink, until they are able to hold themselves. When you are teaching a child to read, you shouldn’t hand them an entire book and say, “Go for it.” Instead, read to them, and have them read a few words on their own, until over time they are good enough readers to read on their own. A skill should be taught bit by bit, gradually loosening the support until the child can do it independently.

121 If you marry an electrician you never have to change another lightbulb, right? That’s the deal?

Most people don't hand four-year-olds *War and Peace* and most people (other than my husband) don't dunk two-year-olds in the pool. But most of us *do* tell our children to stop crying, to calm down, to stop freaking out, without putting scaffolding up to support this skill they don't yet have. When you give your child a hug, that is emotional scaffolding. When you make guesses about what is wrong—"Is it because you are feeling shy?"—rather than telling them to go play, that is emotional scaffolding. For some reason, we expect these emotional skills just to blossom in children. Like one morning they will wake up and realize, "Oh yes, my syrup touching my pancake before I have dipped my pancake in my syrup is a normal part of human existence and definitely not worth screaming about."

But that isn't going to happen. They will get there. But the more you can support them along the way, the less likely it is they will collapse in a pile of bricks on the sidewalk...that metaphor really fell apart in the end.

Positive Peer Pressure

Young children respond extremely well to positive peer pressure. That is why they are willing to put their faces in the water after they have seen other kids do it. That is also why they are more likely to follow directions at preschool than they are at home. Positive peer pressure is a force you can use as leverage to teach your child better emotional functioning skills. This process happens naturally when they start school. It is a sad fact, but second graders are less likely than third graders to wear a pirate costume to school. Kids tend to make each other better. And they also make each other less interesting.

How can positive peer pressure help you teach your child emotional skills? Kids handle difficult situations like pros all the time, and they don't usually get credit for it. Give them credit! When you see children in books and movies using their words instead of throwing tantrums, point that out to your child. When you see this behavior in a classmate

or friend, make note of it. You don't have to say to your child, "Wow, Henry didn't even cry when his mom left. You would have had a complete meltdown." Instead you can say to Henry, "Great job saying goodbye to Mom without crying! I could tell you were upset but you handled that really well!"

You can elicit your child's help in noticing positive behavior in their peers. You can have them comment on each other's behavior: "Tell Fritz he is doing a great job listening!" It isn't that helpful to turn your child into a snitch¹²² who notices every time another kid is crying. But helping them to notice and encourage good behavior in peers can be helpful.

Tangible and Intangible Reinforcement

Tangible reinforcement is when you give a child an object or food after they exhibit a wanted behavior. In Hazel's swim class, the kids get ribbons and stickers when they learn new skills. If you have potty trained a child, you have probably used tangible reinforcement. If you have gotten a child to eat a vegetable, you have probably used tangible reinforcement, saying something like, "If you eat two bites of broccoli, you can have ice cream." Tangible reinforcement in parenting is extremely common. Sometimes it is referred to as bribing. Same thing, fancier phrase.

Tangible reinforcement gets a bad rep sometimes. We want children to want to behave well. For the sake of it. Not just because they get something in the end. I understand that in principle. Adding tangible reinforcements doesn't mean we don't ultimately want the child to do the behavior without the reinforcement. Most adults will eat broccoli even if they aren't getting ice cream after dinner.

Tangible reinforcement can build habits that eventually are reinforced by themselves. This works. I have seen this happen with clients and with

¹²² Jeff taught Hazel "snitches get stitches" and now every day I live in fear that she will say that to someone at school.

my own kids. It works for potty training and doing chores. But it can also work for social behavior.

Give me a break, you're probably thinking. *I'm not going to bribe my kid into being a good citizen. That doesn't sound like a good idea.*

Hear me out:

We eventually want children to do all kinds of skills, from using the bathroom to helping out a friend in need, without receiving any tangible reinforcement. We don't want eight-year-olds to expect an M&M every time they help us carry something in from the car. Eight-year-olds help us in part because of the intangible reinforcement they receive. Intangible reinforcement is any kind of praise the child gets, or even just the feeling of satisfaction they receive. Intangible reinforcement is the reason any of us do anything. We don't need to be complimented anytime we help someone (although it is nice); sometimes it is enough just to feel that warmth of knowing we did the right thing.

Fritz and Hazel have a "helper jar." Every time they help me with anything, I put a pom pom in the jar. When the jar fills up, I buy them a small toy. The helper jar allows for both tangible and intangible reinforcement. Every time they do a chore or something helpful, they get a pom pom to hold for a minute and put in the jar. That in and of itself is rewarding, because my kids are very small and get excited about things like pom poms. I also make sure to provide them with intangible reinforcement. "Great job with emptying the dishwasher, Fritz!" When they receive this intangible reinforcement, they experience the warm feeling inside of having done a great job.

Sometimes, I ask them to do a chore and then reward them. Sometimes they offer to do a chore because they want a pom pom. Sometimes I "catch them doing good" and see Fritz picking up toys without being asked.¹²³ So, I surprise him and give him a pom pom as well as lots of

¹²³ This has literally happened once.

praise. Then they receive another tangible reinforcement every time the jar is filled by getting a toy.

We have been doing this for a year and I have seen amazing effects. They have gotten used to helping. They like how it feels to help. They sometimes clean up without being told. When I ask them to help me, or to help each other, they will do so without saying, “Where is my pom pom?” The tangible reinforcement helped to build a desire for the intangible. Hopefully, they will eventually be people who help old ladies cross the streets without asking for money.

Back to swimming: I cannot disclose the name of this magical swim school because what is this? Some kind of #sponsored Instagram feed? But I will say that whatever exorbitant amount of money I ended up giving them to teach my kids to swim, it was probably worth it. And if there was an emotional school I could send them to where they could learn other life skills that quickly, I would pay those people too.