



Making Waves: Communication and Swimming!

This article was written by Ann Gresswell and Emilie Leeks for the Communication Matters Journal following a presentation at the Communication Matters National Symposium, University of Leicester, September 2006.

Through our experiences of teaching swimming using the Halliwick Concept, we have found the swimming pool to be one of the best places for increasing communication. In this article we will discuss why the swimming pool is such a good place for this, and how to make the most of the communicative opportunities offered with people who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). We will examine the Halliwick Concept approach to teaching swimming, and how it adds to the communicative experience in the pool. We hope that the article will give some ideas of things to try in the swimming pool environment.

Swimming – or just being in the water – is an excellent vehicle for communication; it is fun (unless you're very nervous!) and sociable, and everyone in the water is on the same level. This means you are meeting a range of people in a relaxed situation, and have lots of opportunities to interact. There are also fewer physical barriers and the physical closeness seems to encourage increased communication. Being on the same level means eye contact is easier – particularly important where you may be communicating non-verbally.

We teach swimming through an approach called the Halliwick Concept. This is a method used to teach disabled people to be competent and confident in the water. It is also successful for non-disabled people, such as family members, who often join in the swimming sessions.

Halliwick uses the term 'swimmers' for all learners, even if they are not yet swimming. One of the principles of the Halliwick Concept is to teach without using flotation aids (such as arm bands, rubber rings, etc). Not using flotation aids means that swimmers are given one-to-one support by an 'instructor' (who might be a parent, a teaching practitioner, a volunteer in a club, etc) in the water until they are competent. This is often seen as the difference between Halliwick and other ways of teaching swimming: although it is important, there are a number of other factors which are central to the Halliwick philosophy. We use an holistic approach, which takes into account social, communicative and academic development, alongside teaching swimming. We teach from the water, rather than from the poolside, meaning that we are all at the same physical level and social level. Group work, and games and activities (in groups or one-to-one) are an integral part of Halliwick. This gives plenty of opportunities for choice-making and contributing, learning, and having fun!

The holistic approach in Halliwick leads to many opportunities for socialising and communicating. Social skills develop through group work, where you encounter a range of experiences and practise different skills such as taking turns. Watching others, and working at your own level with your instructor in a non-pressured situation, helps to increase confidence. Using games also builds confidence – they are often familiar, repetitive activities, and of course are fun. Communication skills also develop, with the swimmers being encouraged to take control and responsibility for what happens in the sessions. For example, initiation of communication is encouraged, such as by waiting for a swimmer to indicate 'change' to change direction in a moving circle activity. Communication by any means is accepted and interpreted within the context of the activity, and time is given between or during activities for individual swimmers to discuss with their instructors what they would like to contribute next.

This article is about communication in the water (particularly focusing on AAC) but we also want to mention vocalising, as being in the water appears to promote vocalising and/or speech for some people. A speech and language therapist began some work on vocalisations in the water (sadly not completed as she changed jobs!), which compared vocalisations of a group of children (most of whom had cerebral palsy) in group activities in water and on land. Her initial findings were that the children vocalised more in the water than on land.

Breathing can be easier in water for some people – this may be due to any or all of the following factors:

- water giving support to the body (good support makes it easier to concentrate on breathing)
- the pressure of water on the chest giving proprioceptive feedback (allowing the swimmer to become more aware of their breathing)
- the emphasis on controlled blowing and humming (leading to better control of breathing)

If breathing is easier, vocalising is also easier.

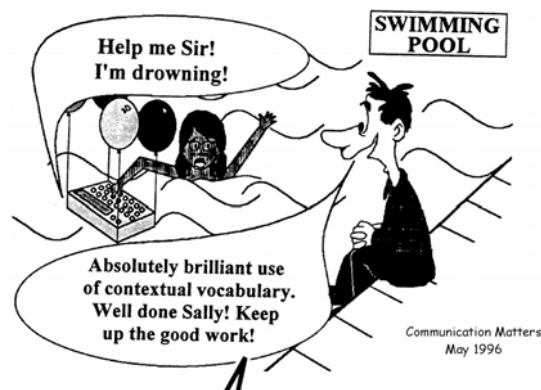
The swimming pool is a very good place to learn about breath control such as blowing and humming. The pressure of water on the chest helps exhalation, and the incentive to blow/hum (i.e. breathe out) to stop water getting into your airways (nose/mouth) is great! We teach about blowing out (there is no need to teach breathing in again, as this happens automatically) when the face is near or in the water. Humming (blowing out through the nose, rather than the mouth) can be useful for some people who find blowing out very difficult, and will eventually be needed for more advanced underwater work.

Halliwick, as mentioned above, uses groups and games to develop skills in the water. This way of working also supports development of a variety of communication skills. Games and activities can be used with both children and adults – adapted as necessary! Singing and music are very motivating, or sessions might be based around a story (e.g. ‘We’re Going on a Bear Hunt’). Competition-type games, for example musical statues, relay races, water basketball or water polo are also useful. Teenagers may particularly enjoy these activities, and will develop skills in team work, turn-taking and even cheating! Sometimes we go on a ‘visit’ – to the seaside, zoo, fairground, football match... The possibilities are endless!

Communication in the swimming pool, just as on land, will consist of a variety of aspects, including speaking and listening, signing/gestures, communication aids (symbols and charts), and writing/drawing. To make it as easy as possible for effective communication to take place, we need to adapt to each other and to the situations we are in. Things to consider include:

- **Speaking and listening**
 - Use a clear voice, position yourself where you can be easily seen, modify your speech – use key words, keep it simple
 - Use facial expressions, tactile clues, and objects
 - Speak clearly (but take care not to *over-exaggerate!*) when someone is lip-reading
 - Give demonstrations – but make sure they are accurate!
- **Signing/gestures**
 - Again, consider your position – be seen, and make sure your hands can also be seen
 - Think about the physical support your swimmer may need when they are signing – they may need more support at these times
 - You may need to adapt your support if signing – and an extra pair of hands may be better, or essential!
- **Communication aids – symbols and charts**
 - Low-tech aids may need to be accessed differently when in the water, e.g. eye pointing instead of hand pointing
 - The format may also need to be changed – e.g. enlarging a page of book
- **Writing and drawing**
 - You’ll need to have a pen and board that can be used in a wet situation!

Generally, high-tech aids will not be useful in the water,



and care must also be taken with them on the poolside.

We may be heading to a point where some aids (e.g. the Toughbook) can at least be available to a swimmer on the edge of the pool, but even then consideration would need to be given about how to access the aid.



Some of the resources you will need on the poolside in terms of AAC are objects of reference (objects which represent the activity, e.g. a small piece of sponge to indicate playing with the sponges), photographs, pictures and symbols – laminated for the last three options of course! When using symbols, remember that individuals will use different systems, and that you will need to prepare appropriate resources in advance to make sure you have what you need, and that it is suitable and accessible for each swimmer.

When thinking about symbols, along with considering which symbol system/s to use, you will also need to think about the following:

- the colour of the background of the symbol
- whether you will use black and white or colour symbols
- whether you can laminate them with matt pouches, as these tend not to reflect the light so much (which can be quite a problem in the swimming pool!).

Once you've got all your symbols together, you'll need to think about how you're going to present them. There are certain practicalities which you'll need to consider, as it is more challenging in water than on land to keep all of your resources organised. Communication books are not very practical in the water (although they will be necessary on the poolside/in the changing room), but individual charts (laminated!) can be great – especially as they will float! You don't want too many charts bobbing around, so a floating tray could be useful. An Etran frame is also a useful way of displaying symbols – try a small one, with handles, to make it more manageable in the water.

Whatever you consider using, you need to think about the following factors:

- Is it waterproof?!
- Is it easily accessible?
- Do you need a spare pair of hands?
- How will a swimmer indicate on the charts?
- How does a swimmer indicate 'yes'/'no'?
- Are you giving enough time for the swimmer to confirm their choice/comment?

Now we need to reflect on the vocabulary choices we are making – think about the activities you're going to be doing, and also things that swimmers might want to say. Consider the different functions of communication (not just making choices in an activity). For example:

- Taking control
- Commenting
- Questioning
- Choosing
- Socialising

Wherever possible, discuss vocabulary choices with the swimmer and, where appropriate, with their parents/carers – they are bound to have ideas you haven't thought of! It is important to discuss and prepare resources in advance, but you'll want to keep adding to your resources over time.

A feelings chart is a very useful one to always have available. This gives opportunities to comment (e.g. 'I'm enjoying this' 'This is scary' 'I'm cold'), but also gives opportunities to take control. Make sure you also have a 'something else' symbol on each chart, so that the swimmer can let you know that they're thinking of something that isn't on the chart!

We hope that this article has given you ideas of things you could try in the swimming pool environment, and has shown how many communication opportunities there are available which can be capitalised on. You are very welcome to contact me at any time if you'd like further ideas or information:

- Ann Gresswell: ann_gresswell@hotmail.com

...or have a look at these websites for more thoughts on swimming with Halliwick, and on AAC:

- www.halliwick.org.uk
- <https://acecentre.org.uk>
- www.communicationmatters.org.uk



Now go and make waves!

2024 - update to this article (by Ann Gresswell)

Things have moved on since this article was written back in 2006. The article said 'Generally, high-tech aids will not be useful in the water,' but now there are many speech output devices that can be used in the water.

Also, there is now a useful resource that has been developed by SwimPix.



Go to www.aswim.uk for more information about this resource.