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Handbook for trainers of swimming for disadvantaged people

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There are not great things, only small things with great love

Mother Theresa

Introduction

In this handbook we want to present experiences we got working with disadvantaged people (teaching and training them to swimming). We believe that our experience will be useful for all people doing the same job or are thinking about doing it. We wrote it in very personal way, trying to describe what was good and bad about the activity and how can we improve it.

The main aim of this handbook is to help to promote swimming as therapy (or at least as useful physical activity), to build the social network of trainers, and to disseminate positive results to locations where swimming is not available to disadvantaged people.

In next paragraph I want to present how, why and how I started to teach disadvantage people to swim or to coach some of them who are already swimming

I like swimming. My mother is from Dalmatia on Adriatic Sea so I think swimming is in mine genetic code. I learned to swim very young, getting first lessons in summer 1951 at seaside and then started to swim in a lake in a small village where we were living. It was strange event. I was in a boat with other boys and when we were around 10 m away from the shore I had a feeling that I can do it. So I jumped in the water and started to swim. Without a problem I came to the shore. And from that moment swimming was my favourite sport.

Swimming not only helped me to be in physical shape but to thought to loose and win, to work hard, and to be mentally strong. When I went to the university I stopped to train. I was still swimming every year however in a very irregular way. However in my late fifties I spent some time in Silicon Valley in

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California, and there I started to swim more often and after returned from California in 2004 I begun to swim regularly, almost every day. I even to start to compete again going to different Masters championships in swimming. One day Katja the coach of our masters swimming team asked me if I wanted to participate in a workshop where participant were learning the Halliwick method for teaching swimming to people with disabilities. After participating in two courses and after our swimming pool was reconstructed allowing for proper access to disadvantaged people I started to working with them twice per week.

I have to confess that in my life I never was helping disabled people; even I had very few contacts with them. During the first meetings with them I had a strange feeling, which is difficult to describe. It was some kind of uncomforting feeling because I never communicated with disabled people. However after some time this feeling disappeared and I found the way how to communicate and teach them. Every progress my students made also made me happy. Most exciting moment was when after hard work some of them learned how to swim. Everyone involved from the trainee, the parents and trainers really got full satisfaction out of that moment.

Personally I feel that this activity makes my life (I am 66 now) fuller, happier and satisfying and that my younger colleagues working with me have the same feeling. And I hope that people who will read this handbook will help us to improve it presenting their experience, and that the people who are not trainer will decide to join us.

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How to start

A journey of a ten thousand miles begins with a single step

Chinese proverb

If you decided to join the ones who are supporting disadvantage people and teach them to swim it is easy to do it. As first step try to find an organization in your environment that is already running such a program. Here you can find some of them or links to websites where you can get more information. You have to get in direct contact with them to find how they work and what kind of training they would recommend to you. If you have a feeling that you are not an excellent swimmers or that you do not have enough experience do not give up. Look at nice clip on Youtube in which Tom Peters explained that one of the best American swimming coaches did not know to swim.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nfGjVFIw1s

It is of course urban legend; however the true is that you do not have to be a perfect swimmer to work with disadvantaged people. Some other features and skills are much more important as empathy, good communication, enjoyment in giving...

Of course you have to participate in some courses to get necessary skills in teaching of swimming like Halliwick courses in Slovenia or some others depending on what is available at the location you are living.

However to learn a techniques it is not enough. We highly recommend that you get more knowledge about different kind of disabilities, psychology, and ways to communicate. There are several places you can get these knowledge and skills.

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Next important is to communication with your colleagues, who are already working with disabled people. You can learn a lot. As Peter Drucker guru of management said "Only with exchange of knowledge we can get new knowledge".

And last and the least, if you do decide to join us, you will be work hard but you will get great satisfaction. Helping and supporting others will help you too.

How to organize course and sessions

'The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.'

Michelangelo

After you got necessary knowledge and skills you have to start to work with disadvantaged people. It is responsible and not an easy task. However it is important to be well organized and to have high goals. During the organization of your course session you have to plan several activities. Here are the most important points to keep in mind:

- Come in contact with parents/caretakers/tutors of disadvantaged people. Try to get as much information as possible about person you will teach how to swimming. What kind of disability, person has, how the person behaves, what is the best way to communicate with them. Record the data in participant's personal file. Try to get some medical data if possible. Big mistake is to forgo this preparation. Without gathering essential information from parents/caretakers/tutors it is much more difficult to work with disadvantaged person.

- Try to get in close contact with person you are going to teach or train. Communicate using information you got from people, who are taking care of your student. Do not be disappointed if things are not going as fast as you planned or expected. It will take time but surely there will be some progress.

- At the start of course do some measures of physical and mental state of the students. Define how you will measure the progress of students. Save your observation after each session in the file

- Plan each session carefully from start to end. Define what the objectives of session are and how they will be realized. Select the method you will use, define the timing of the session. This will help you a lot. At the end of session inform the parents or care takers about the progress made; if there were problem discuss it. If there is a progress award for the students then say that to the parents. It will strongly motivate both student and parents.

- Collaborate strongly with other trainers. Exchange experience, discuss the problems. It will improve your work, performance and will build a strong team.

- Take time after the session to discuss the performance of session with other trainers. Write down the observation and conclusion. Sometimes it looks that there is not time to do that, but it is crucial for success.

What are most important elements you have to take care of

Doesn't matter if you are going slow, as long as you are still going

Chinese proverb

Patience is the key; do not expect fast results because teaching is not a simple task. Do not be obsessed with short term results. Working with disadvantaged people means look for long-term results. And you will get them if you will be patient enough

Second, it is extremely important that students overcome the fear of water, and feel comfortable in the swimming pools. It means you have to try to

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develop a relaxed atmosphere. This can be most easily achieved by playing games. On photos below you can see some examples

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As you can see from the photos students enjoy playing. Try to collect a lot of ideas for different games. Try to include some singing or adopt a game you already know to water conditions.

The next important step is to teach students correct breathing techniques. This is not simple, especially for certain kinds of disabilities. However without correct breathing it is very difficult to learn to swim. Try again to do it with a game. Look at the screen shot of the video from the website illustrating development of breathing techniques.

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After students learn how to breathe you have to teach them basic swimming techniques. Here you have to adapt to each individual student. They have different disabilities, they have different level of adaption to water, some are a little bit afraid some are more courageous. There is no general recommendation how to do it. Again it is important to be patient, to discuss problems with other trainers, to talk with students and parents. In long-term there will be positive results. It is very difficult to explain a feeling you will have when your student starts to swim.

However swimming is not the only element you are developing. It is equally important to develop social skills of students, to teach them how to communicate, to socialize; again it is a task that has to be done individually.

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On photos below there are some example of socializing developed during the courses we have organized.
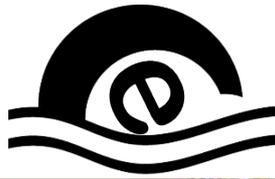

It is very important to build the team, to develop the feeling of group membership.

To do this we always finish the session as illustrated on the following photos. We ask all students to come together put their hands on top of one another.

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After the preparation phase trainers asks "who we are"; and all participating in session say the name of group and separate jumping as you can see on photo below.

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Conclusion

It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.

Harry S. Truman

Some final remarks

Teaching swimming to disadvantaged people is not an easy task, but it gives a high level of satisfaction and fulfilment.

Try to learn more about techniques of teaching swimming, different disabilities, psychology, and socializing.

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Be open, communicate with colleagues, people who are taking care of your students; exchanging information, experience and knowledge. That will help you to perform your task better.

Do not expect to get credit, inner satisfaction and feeling will be best award for your work.

Visit regularly www.eswimming.eu, make your contribution to this website.