Water is one of the most versatile tools in a therapist’s tool box. Many therapists do not use it as they are not comfortable with it or familiar with what to do. It can be intimidating at first, but these tips and guiding ideas can make it easy to begin.

Water can be in a big bucket with sponges, paintbrushes and meat basters, coming from a sprinkler or showerhead, or in a local pool or lake. Water is fun, motivating and provides variety for both the child and therapist. Swimming can become a lifelong leisure and sensory diet activity. It also provides social and community integration opportunities for all kids, both high and low functioning. The properties of the water can offer a dynamic environment, a new sensory motor challenge, supported mobility and independent success. It also permits easier handling of the child for the therapist than on land.

Aquatic therapy should always be in adjunct to land therapy as one part of a comprehensive program. The evaluation and re-evaluations should be completed on land with the family involved. Activities are then based on the evaluation and the goals established. General goals include providing opportunities to experience movement and exercise in a fun, motivating activity; improving functional skills and independence, assisting in parent education and family bonding and teaching modified swimming for lifelong fitness, community integration and social opportunities.

For a therapist new to aquatics, specific goals can be hard to define. Swimming and aquatics can be used to address these specifics

- Sensory motor and musculo-skeletal components such as flexibility, balance, strength, tactile/proprioceptive processing, vestibular processing, and respiratory capacity
- Functional mobility and functional skills such as fine motor, oral motor, bilateral coordination, sitting, reaching, walking, turning
- Safety in and around water, particularly if the clients live near a lake or have pool in backyard or neighbor’s yard, or if it is a part of their physical education requirements
- Social interaction, play and cognitive skills such as attention span, motor planning, self confidence, turn taking and enjoyment

Next time your student’s class is going to the pool, tag along. Start out slowly by just observing how you can make their time therapeutic. What could you structure? What activities/exercises would benefit each individual child? In the community, observe your own child taking swimming lessons. Take mental notes and see what activities might benefit a child on your caseload. Take it slow and only do what makes you comfortable. If you’re not a swimmer, then create obstacle courses along the walls, do crazy jumps from the side, use paintbrushes for tactile input and sponges and meat basters for hand strength. The options are endless. Just remember to keep it safe, fun and therapeutic! I would love to hear from anyone interested in beginning or those that are already in the pools. Please feel free to contact me.

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