



CHAPTER 10

THE CONSTRUCTION OF

POSITIVE BOUNDARIES IN THE

COMPREHENSIVE AQUATIC

METHOD

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THE CONSTRUCTION OF POSITIVE BOUNDARIES IN THE COMPREHENSIVE AQUATIC METHOD

Juan Antonio Moreno Murcia and Rita Fonseca Pinto

The Comprehensive Aquatic Method transforms boundaries into learning opportunities, enhancing confidence, trust, and growth through recreational strategies and the educator's emotional support.

Introduction



Let's imagine Axel, a three-year-old boy attending his first swimming lesson. During the activity, he tries to cross the line that separates the learning area from the deepest part of the pool. The swimming instructor, following safety protocols, tells him that he cannot cross that line because it is dangerous. Frustrated, Axel begins to

cry and scream, wanting to explore the forbidden area. This scene, along with others like it —such as entering the water without permission, taking materials from other classes, or demanding the presence of family members inside the facility— is common in children's aquatic education and leads us to a fundamental question: Is frustration inevitable when teaching boundaries?

Similarly, other signs of frustration are also observed in teenagers and adults. In these cases, the difficulty arises when they try to acquire a skill that they cannot achieve, influenced by previous negative experiences or limiting beliefs such as "this is not for me" or "I am not good at this." This type of mental block (sometimes this anger manifests itself as silence) can lead to demotivation, dropping out of classes, and even affect the structural development of the brain (Raufelder et al., 2021). This raises another key question: Is it possible to learn without feeling frustrated?

Both situations, establishing boundaries in childhood and managing frustration at more advanced stages, require attention and sensitivity on the part of the aquatic educator. An essential aspect of facilitating this process is teaching children to respect their own and others' boundaries, something that is built through observation, experience and, above all, a strong emotional bond. For instance, if a child says, "I don't want to go underwater," the role of the instructor should not be to force them, but to accompany

them: to build strategies that transform that “no” into an authentic “yes,” based on trust, not pressure or the threat of consequences.

In this context, this document will explore how to accompany children in the assimilation of boundaries and adults in the overcoming of blocks through the [Comprehensive Aquatic Method \(MAC\)](#). We will analyse how this educational proposal enables the establishment of positive boundaries and fosters respectful and meaningful learning in the aquatic environment.

▶▶▶ Aquatic education and the importance of establishing boundaries from the get-go

Scientific research from Talebi Anaraki et al. (2024), highlights the importance of educators setting boundaries, communicating expectations, and defining rules of behaviour for children and teenagers. These actions not only help to organise the educational environment, but also provide participants with a sense of security regarding what behaviours are appropriate or inappropriate. Some rules are linked to specific contexts, such as wearing a cap to enter the lesson, while others are cross-cutting and apply in any situation, such as not pushing a classmate into the water.

In favour of balanced parenting and the conscious setting of boundaries, Tirado (2019) indicates that one should not fall into authoritarianism or a lack of boundaries. Based on this principle, educating with boundaries in the aquatic environment is essential not only to ensure safety but also to contribute to the child's overall development. It provides a solid foundation for enjoying the water responsibly, developing important skills and growing as confident and respectful individuals towards the aquatic environment and others. Hereunder are some key benefits of setting boundaries:

- **Physical safety.** Clearly defined limits are essential to prevent incidents or accidents. Teaching where one is allowed to swim and to what point one can reach offers a safety framework.
- **Confidence in the aquatic environment.** Gradually establishing boundaries allows children to develop confidence in their aquatic abilities. As they acquire and master certain abilities, these boundaries can widen securely. Nevertheless, it is important to consider that the higher the competence, the more likely it is to have the necessity to explore and assimilate new challenges. This, even though it indicates progress, can



be linked to a decrease in perception or risk assessment. Exploring with safety or prevention measures requires constant supervision and guidance by the educator.

- **Respect for the aquatic environment.** Boundaries also promote respect for the environment. It is necessary to teach how to care for water and marine life, and to raise awareness of the characteristics and dynamics in natural environments, as well as their differences in comparison to controlled environments, such as swimming pools. The aquatic medium is always risky, with variable levels of danger.
- **Risky behaviour prevention.** Specific rules regarding behaviour in the water and its surroundings help to prevent accidents and to teach responsibility.
- **Preparation of advanced activities.** Respecting basic boundaries and valuing actions and consequences prepares us to face greater future challenges.
- **Ethos development.** Aquatic practice requires discipline, emotional regulation and self-control, qualities that are developed when establishing boundaries.
- **Relationship strengthening.** Clear and consistent boundaries create a safe space that strengthens the bond between educators and students.

Experiencing the boundary from the swimming pool



In childhood, frustration often arises when a child is unable to achieve a desired goal due to their lack of experience with boundaries, or when they seek something different from what the boundary communicates to them. This state, if not managed correctly, can not only lead to accidents in the aquatic environment but also fuel fear. This is because the perception of vulnerability, danger, and lack of confidence in their abilities will increase the perception of the aquatic environment as dangerous or threatening. Fear, in turn, will intensify frustration by generating physical, mental and nervous system tension, making progress even more difficult (Moreno-Murcia, 2025). As aquatic educators, we can help them to

understand that:

- Goals are not always achieved immediately. Constant practice and perseverance are essential.
- The true value of learning lies in the process, not just the result.

- Some situations that arise from children's natural urge to explore and discover, and, although desirable, do not always match the child's level of competence or the demands of the context or moment.
- In adolescence, certain provocative behaviours should not be carried out due to their potential to cause harm. The boundaries that each person communicates deserve respect, and there are universal rules of coexistence that must be followed regardless of the context.
- Observing and understanding what is being done, and how it is being done, facilitates the acceptance of these boundaries and rules.
- Promoting respect for rules of conduct in aquatic environments and involving students in defining them, such as deciding when to enter the water, how to move around the pool, or how to interact with peers during games, is a key strategy for achieving more collaborative compliance. Most importantly, this does not eradicate fun but rather frames it in a safe and respectful space for everyone.

For instance, if a student runs around the pool to get there first and fails, the educator can intervene with questions that encourage thinking: "What are the risks of running around the pool?" or "What is a safer way to get from one point to another?" Based on these questions, the importance of respecting both the space and pace of each classmate can be explained, emphasising that overtaking others is not appropriate.

It is essential to teach that students should walk, respect the established order of the activity, and value each small step forward. The close presence of the educator, whether in or out of the water, is also very helpful in providing safety and support.

Another example might be a child who, after overcoming their fear of submerging themselves, wants to get into the water without waiting for their turn. This wait can cause frustration and anxiety. In these cases, it is important to stop the action, ask them to sit down, and, if appropriate, place a hand on their chest while saying "wait" with a firm but kind look. Then, you can ask, "When is it safe to go into the water?" or explain, "If you jump in too soon and need help, I may not be able to help you." Questioning and dialogue are essential, as understanding the meaning of a rule facilitates its acceptance and compliance, which is the basis of MAC reasoning.

Frustration is not necessarily negative; it is an opportunity to learn and grow. It reflects the desire to achieve something, even if the answer or solution has not yet been found, or the need to accept that the situation does not always match one's desires. Accompanying children or teenagers in managing their emotions while teaching them boundaries and working through their frustration with respect allows conflictive moments to be transformed into valuable and positive educational experiences.



MAC and building positive boundaries in aquatic education



The MAC is fully aligned with the construction of positive boundaries in aquatic education, as well as with the exploration of emotional regulation in various contexts through co-regulation (teacher-student). This approach seeks to develop children's aquatic competence in a comprehensive manner, respecting their individuality and promoting meaningful learning.

The principles of MAC in building positive boundaries and emotional co-regulation are:

- **Emotional bonding.** It encourages mutual recognition and respect, creating an environment that leads to the acceptance of boundaries. The feelings and thoughts of others are valued, recognising their own pace. Within this framework, children are encouraged to discover other emotional states, moving from the belief "I can't, I'm not capable" to "I'll try because you're by my side".
- **Increased personal possibilities.** It promotes self-determination, curiosity and creativity, allowing boundaries and new learning to be perceived as opportunities for growth.

The MAC strategies for setting positive boundaries and promoting emotional co-regulation are:

- **Reflective learning.** Questions are used as the main tool to encourage reflection on one's own actions and the need for certain boundaries. Example: if a child pushes another into the water for fun, they can be asked: "What is the danger of pushing a classmate?", "What would you do if they needed help?".
- **Active participation.** Students take the lead in building knowledge, which promotes understanding and acceptance of boundaries and their transfer to other contexts beyond the aquatic environment. For instance, understanding that encouraging a classmate to do something they do not want to do (such as entering the water) can

be risky and must be respected. Here, the importance of respecting limits is also highlighted when a student expresses that they do not want to perform an activity.

- **Group feedback.** The teacher provides feedback to the group, reinforcing the importance of boundaries for everyone. For example, at the beginning of the class, three or four specific safety rules can be agreed upon depending on the session, and at the end, the importance of having followed them can be acknowledged.
- **Individual adaptation.** Learning rhythms and styles are respected, adjusting boundaries, communication methods and the teacher's presence according to the needs of each student. It is essential to trust that learning and respect for boundaries are always possible, focusing on solutions and positive aspects. The availability and presence of the teacher are key, especially in times of greater challenge, when boundaries are not respected. These moments, although difficult, are the most valuable pedagogically.
- **Recreational approach.** Games and dynamic activities are used to teach water skills and boundaries in a fun way, such as the use of posters with pictures, motor stories or simulations of real situations.

The benefits of the MAC when building positive boundaries are:

- **Intrinsic motivation.** By focusing on enjoyment and personal challenge, boundaries are naturally integrated into the learning process. They are not only related to individual safety, but also collective well-being, as an expression of mutual respect.
- **Self-assessment.** It encourages students to recognise their own boundaries and possibilities.
- **Holistic aquatic competence.** Not only are physical skills developed, but also social and emotional skills, which facilitate understanding of boundaries.
- **Trusting environment.** A safe environment is built, which strengthens the bond between educators and students, and among students themselves. This promotes the acceptance of boundaries, the recognition of achievements and their celebration.



It is important to note that these benefits are not only individual but also collective. A class represents a diverse micro-society. Respecting limits is not only a matter of personal safety, but also of respect for others. In the same way that when driving a car, we must respect traffic lights to live together in harmony, in aquatic education boundaries represent a simple but essential reference point for coexistence, enjoyment and safety for all.



Stages in the intervention of the aquatic educator when building boundaries through the MAC

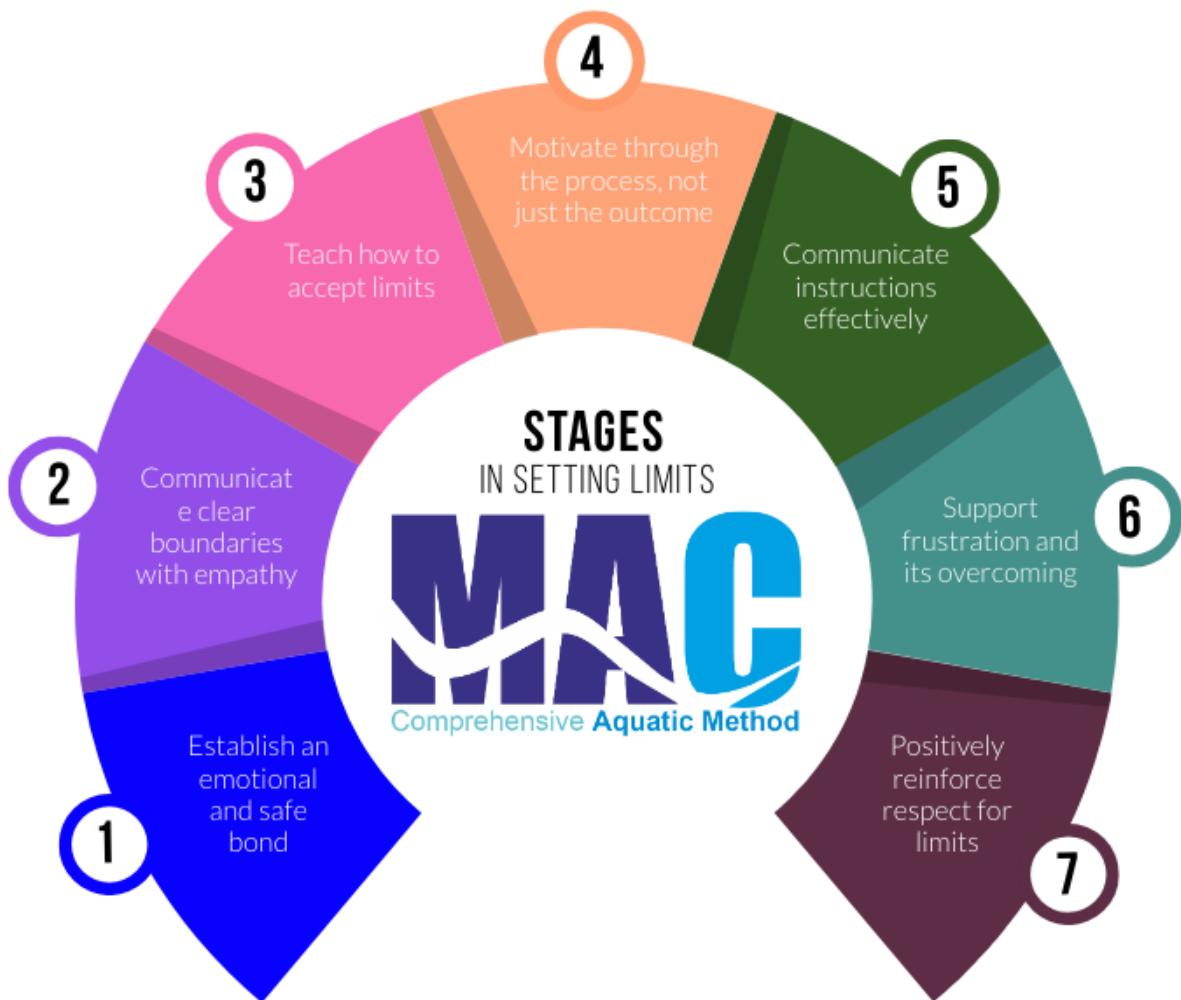


In addition to setting firm boundaries, it is possible to express affection and make students feel loved, a key aspect of their emotional development and subsequent learning.

Setting rules and enforcing them can go hand in hand with physical contact, a kind tone of voice, emotional validation, and genuine concern for their well-being. Research from Boullion et al. (2023), indicates that this combination of warmth and firmness promotes better socio-emotional adjustment, higher self-esteem, and the development of self-regulation skills in childhood and adolescence. For example, Marcos does not want to get out of the pool, even though it is time to go home. He starts complaining and saying he wants to stay "just a little longer!" The educator, together with the parent, indicates to him by crouching down to Marcos' height with a friendly smile: "Marcos, I can see you're having a great time in the pool, and I love seeing you like this! You've been swimming and playing fantastically. But remember, we said we'd leave after this last song? It's almost dinner time, and then you have to get ready for bed and read your favourite book. See you at the next class."

Setting boundaries in aquatic education is a process that contributes to children's overall development. This involves not only establishing rules but also teaching them to accept these rules as part of learning and personal growth. Through MAC, aquatic educators can effectively guide learners using strategies that integrate empathy, clear communication, and positive reinforcement. Hereunder is a proposed staged intervention to achieve this goal (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Phases in the construction of boundaries with the MAC.



Stage 1. Establishing a safe and emotional bond

Objective: to build emotional trust as a basis for accepting boundaries.

Development: before introducing rules, it is essential that the child feels emotionally secure. The emotional bond between the educator and the learner lays the foundation for boundaries to be understood not as imposed restrictions, but as signs of care. It is recommended to use a calm and affectionate tone of voice, to be approachable and empathetic, and to be attentive to the child's emotional cues. Eye contact, smiling, and close body language (such as crouching down to their height) reinforce this connection. Emotional validation also plays a key role: verbally acknowledging what the child is feeling helps them feel seen and understood.

Example: "Marcos, I can see you're having a lot of fun, and I love seeing you like this! But it's time to go home, as we agreed..."

Stage 2. Communicating clear boundaries empathetically

Development: the educator should communicate limits directly, but without resorting to an authoritarian tone. The child must understand the reasons for the limits imposed, especially when they are related to their safety. To do this, it is important to use clear language adapted to their age, giving only one instruction at a time. Whenever possible, alternatives should be offered within the limits of what is permitted to redirect attention and avoid frustration.

Example: “I understand that you want to use the flippers now, but today we are going to strengthen our legs by practising without them. We will use them together later”.



Stage 3. Teaching to accept boundaries as part of the learning process, recognising that they are part of both the environment and the activity itself

Objective: to promote a positive understanding of boundaries, seeing them as opportunities for growth and as fundamental elements for ensuring safety.

Development: children must understand that boundaries are a natural part of life and human coexistence. They are present in all areas, including the learning process. The aquatic educator has the responsibility to help them redefine boundaries as a sign of care and not rejection. Modelling a positive attitude towards boundaries, explaining their function and linking them to personal development is key. This phase is also an opportunity to cultivate autonomy, self-control and mutual respect within the group.

Key phrase: “Boundaries are there because we believe in you and want you to grow up strong and happy in the water.”

Stage 4. Motivating departing from progress, not success

Objective: to strengthen students' self-esteem and self-regulation.

Development: emphasising the process over the result allows children to value their effort and persistence. Sharing personal experiences of how challenges were overcome can be inspiring. Celebrating small achievements, such as overcoming a fear of water or improving a skill, reinforces self-confidence and creates a positive learning environment. This intrinsic motivation fosters resilience in the face of mistakes.

Example: "Today you realised when you needed a break, and you took it. That's learning to listen to your body!"

Stage 5. Communicating effective directions

Objective: to increase understanding and execution of proposals without frustration.

Development: clear communication avoids misunderstandings and facilitates learning. The educator should give one instruction at a time, using concrete and visual phrases. Verifying the student's understanding is essential and can be done by asking them to explain or demonstrate what they have been told. If they are unable to act, the task can be simplified or tried again at another time. Offering physical assistance and being with the student in the water is a way of showing commitment and support.

Example: "Lie on your back, open your arms, inhale... this is how we float like stars. I am right here if you need to hold on to me."

Stage 6. Helping with frustration and overcoming

Objective: to develop emotional resilience in the face of limitations or mistakes.

Development: the learning process includes moments of frustration, fear and loss. The educator must be present to provide emotional support to the child, recognising and validating their feelings. Alternatives can be offered or activities adjusted so that the child can continue participating without feeling defeated. It is also important to teach that mistakes or not achieving a certain skill at a given moment are a natural part of learning.



Example: "Today, you couldn't pass all the hoops as you wanted, but you learned to breathe differently. That's also an achievement!"

Stage 7. Positively reinforce respect towards boundaries

Objective: to consolidate emotional learning through affective recognition.

Development: when a child respects a boundary or rule, the educator should acknowledge this verbally and affectionately. This not only reinforces the behaviour but also strengthens the child's self-confidence. Positive reinforcement can also be applied to collective behaviours, encouraging cooperation and mutual respect.

Example: "I love how you waited your turn to jump into the water. That makes everyone feel safe and happy."

Conclusion

Accepting limits is a fundamental skill for personal and social development. Defining them clearly conveys security, structure and organisation, which are essential aspects in any educational environment. From the perspective of the aquatic educator, this involves teaching that, depending on the context, there are behaviours that are more or less appropriate for each moment. Although limits can cause frustration, this is a natural part of the learning process. Through sustained effort, children and teenagers discover that rewards, such as mastering new skills, come with time.

Through emotional support, the creation of routines, the use of creative alternatives, and the modelling of good practices, aquatic educators can help learners perceive limits not as barriers, but as opportunities to grow, gain autonomy, and enjoy the aquatic environment. Positive and enjoyable experiences not only foster a love of the activity but also contribute to the development of greater aquatic competence, a key factor in safety in aquatic environments.

The MAC approach provides an ideal framework for building healthy boundaries and emotional regulation in different age groups. By focusing on understanding, active participation, and respect for individuality, this approach transforms the perception of boundaries: from imposed restrictions to opportunities for meaningful learning and personal growth.

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