

- A Lesson Learned -

Reflections from a Josh the Otter Reading Observation

Four weeks ago on a clear cold December day, I was able to free myself from work to attend my first Josh the Otter water safety lesson. The class was set at a local YMCA in North Omaha, one of a series of classes that the YMCA was sponsoring with the Joshua Collingsworth Memorial Foundation through a small city grant for six and seven year olds. The class composition was drawn from the working class neighborhoods of North Omaha, an area known for having a large number of minority children. That was important to me since minority children suffer drowning accidents at 2 to 3 times the rates that children from Caucasian ethnicity do. The class was held at noon on a large play area inside the main YMCA building. Although I had reviewed the educational materials a number of times before, I had never personally witnessed the impact of educational session 'in action' so I was eager to observe the educational process. Laura Thomas, projects manager for the foundation and Ashley Spitsnogle, the art director who created the Josh the Otter image were there to comprise the educational team. That was the first observation that struck me was the need for a 1-2 punch of two members for the class. At the time, I didn't realize the need for two instructors or an instructor and 'helper' for the class. By the end of the class, the importance of a team approach was driven home. To be honest, I really wasn't quite sure what to expect. As a pediatric intensivist, I very rarely work with healthy children. My focus is on critical illness including drowning victims so I deal with the aftermath of the event. Today's event was going to be a new experience for me, one that I had no preconception.

Shortly after my arrival, I placed myself off to the side of the play area so that I could watch the class without being a distraction. At the scheduled time, the children were brought into the room and seated on the floor. It was immediate from the start that the kids were expecting something special. Approximately 25 children about 2/3 boys and almost all either Hispanic or African-American ethnicity arrayed themselves in a tight bundle in front of Laura who seated herself within easy gaze by all of the children. The eagerness and anticipation of the moment was apparent on their faces that something special was about to happen. Laura exuded excitement towards the children and they fed off of her bright smile and focus enthusiastically. Laura started the lesson plan not as traditional instruction as I would have imagined. Rather, the lesson never felt like teaching but more of an interactive play session. The several teaching points that were made were told through the reading from the Josh the Otter story. Laura

moved seamlessly from reading to group questions asking for answers. Each time a question was asked at least a dozen eager hands shot up all wanting to be chosen to answer the question. The children were glued to the Laura throughout the lesson. I was surprised by the sustained focus of the children throughout the lesson. Despite their spontaneous packing themselves into a tight nit group, there was no jostling or horseplay as one would expect from two-dozen energetic children. From my observations, the children were having fun and getting the message. Laura's use of the story to teach the lesson was enjoyable even for me. Laura kept all of the children excited throughout the lesson with a mixture of a see-song rhythm, bright smile and being equally glued to the class. No child felt excluded. Laura's excitement to teaching and interaction captivated the children. None of the children were distracted from the lesson despite YMCA personnel moving in and out from the periphery of the room or during the filming that was taking place by a volunteer. As the lesson was concluding, Ashley who had been sitting next to me slipped away quietly. None of the students paid any attention to her as she exited the room. After she left, Laura concluded the lesson with a sing along of the Josh the Otter Theme song. At this point, Laura introduced Josh the Otter to the class. Ashley who had previously slipped from the room had changed into the Otter costume. When 'Josh' entered the room the kids sprang to their feet, some jumping and down with anticipation. Laura then led the children through the Josh the Otter song. Josh led the kids through a dance along which the children emulated. There were shouts of glee throughout the room. There was a lot of joy in the class while each child remained fixated on Josh's movements while singing to the cadence that Laura set to the music. Each child's enthusiasm never wavered throughout the class except for one child at the back of the class who initially seemed disinterested in the class. Her eyes wandered from the floor to the ceiling and back for the first part of the lesson but once she was able to answer a question she eagerly began to participate. Her focus became complete once the sing along started. Her eyes never wavered from Josh. The children danced and sang and continued to enjoy themselves throughout the whole event. As the end of the lesson, the crescendo of the event was each child getting to personally meet Josh the Otter. Although I thought the fever pitch of the room was already high, the energy pulsed to a higher level. Laura expertly got the children in a loose line and maintained control of the group as one by one each child got the opportunity to hug Josh. None restrained themselves from giving big bear hugs. All of the children wanted to stay close and be around 'him'. Several wanted to keep hugging him and not letting go. At the end of the lesson, the children were expertly swung to the next activity of the float for life water training.

Having two people, one as instructor and the other serving as Josh the Otter were central to the entire lesson plan. The children's anticipation was present from the outset and continued to build throughout the lesson. The anticipation of meeting Josh at the end seemed to keep the children focused on a fun and easy read with simple questions and group interaction keeping the children motivated throughout the session. None of the kids got disinterested or tired. The group size was perfect. Twenty to twenty five children seemed like a good number to keep everyone involved. Josh cements the moment – Josh cements the lesson – he serves as the visible embodiment of water safety – he is culmination to the children's impression that water safety is not just facts, but simple actions that children can embrace.

I was moved by the entire experience. It reminded me of my own experiences in kindergarten long buried in seemingly forgotten memories. I remembered the messages but not the lessons. Simple points taught through play and group interaction. Lessons taught by professionals whose names I long forgot but who understood that kids don't respond to lectures but through exchange, interaction and positive reinforcement. In about thirty minutes, I watched children use their minds and bodies to learn the central points of water safety taught through the Josh the Otter lesson plan. It never looked like traditional teaching and the children responded in kind. From my vantage point, my notion was that the children would remember the messages today, tomorrow and perhaps for decades. They might not remember the names of the their YMCA trainers or Laura. They might not remember the location or even the age that they participated in the Josh the Otter sing along. They probably will not remember the words to the song, but they will remember the lesson of don't go near the water without an adult in hand. They will remember Josh.

It was as instructive to me as it was to the kids that day. One I certainly won't forget either.

About the Author

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Dr. Truemper is one of the head Pediatric Intensivists at Children's Hospital in Omaha, Nebraska. He was Joshua's Primary Physician at Children's Hospital and has been a devout advocate for drowning prevention throughout his entire life. Currently his is serving as a Board of Directors for the Joshua Collingsworth Memorial Foundation.