

# Beyond Boundaries: Reimagining Wellbeing Through Swimming Programs for Young People with Disability

Dr Lynette Ellis PhD



The answer is  
swimming.

What is the question?



# Perhaps – Quality of life and human dignity

The infographic is set against a background image of a swimmer in a pool and a group of people walking on a path. The swimmer is in the foreground, wearing a blue cap and goggles, with water splashing around them. In the background, a group of people, including one in a wheelchair, are walking along a paved path towards a city skyline under a bright sky. The infographic includes several icons and text blocks.

**VALUE**  
Every person has value.

**SELF-WORTH**  
Know your worth. Be proud.

**EQUAL PARTICIPATION**  
Everyone participates. Everyone belongs.

**UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION OF THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES (CRPD, 2008)**

**DIRECTION**  
Know the way. Make choices.

**GOALS**  
Set goals. Take action.

**A FUTURE**  
Opportunities today. A better tomorrow.

**PARTICIPATION IN SWIMMING**  
*Exceeding Boundaries*

**RESPECT FOR DIGNITY**

**NON-DISCRIMINATION**

**FULL AND EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION**

**ACCESSIBILITY**

**INCLUSION**

**EQUALITY**

AND  
COULD  
IT BE  
THAT...



The  
future  
is  
a verb



# BREAKING THE BOUNDARIES

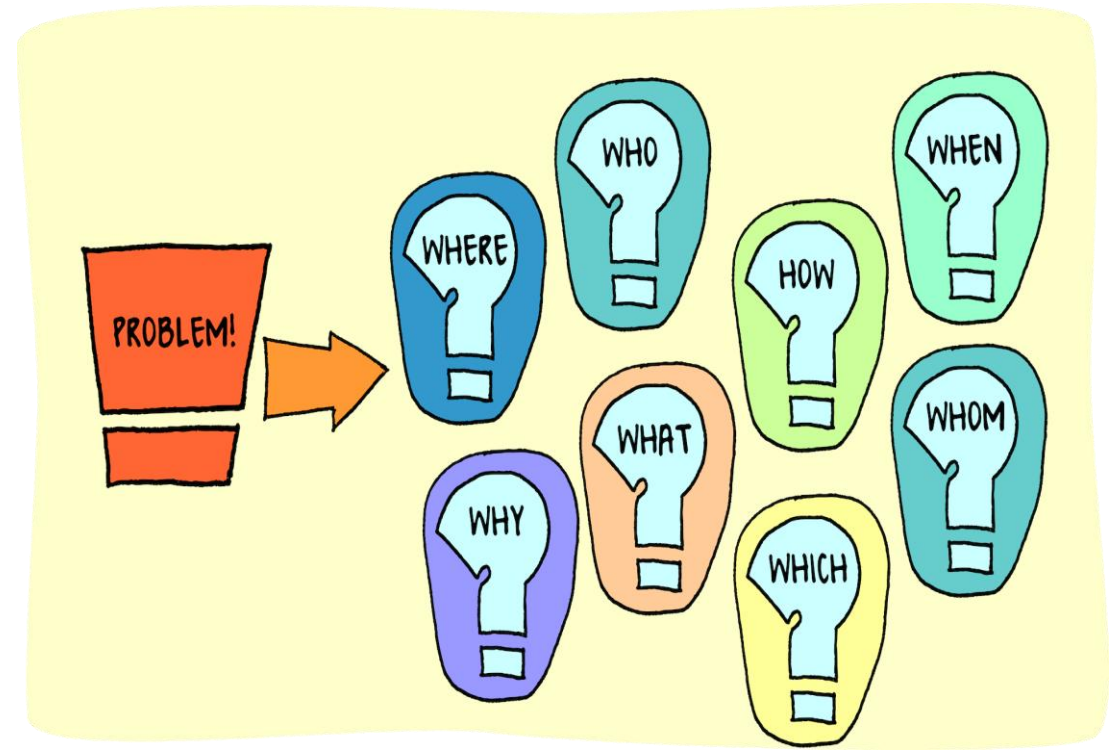
In 2026:

- United Nations legislation of Disability Rights Commission (2008)
- Disability Discrimination Act (1992)
- Human Rights Commission (1992)
- Disability Standards of Education (2005)
- Mparntwe Declaration (2019)
- NDIS
- NCCD



# So, what is the problem?

- Disability headlines
- NDIS
- Statistics
- Children not meeting physical activity guidelines
- Changes in society that includes expectations, parenting, social media
- Shifting goalposts of what was once deemed 'normal' and is now 'neurodiverse'
- What are beneficial experiences?
- What does policy promote as necessary for resourcing and disability support
- What about the responsibilities of state and federal governments?



Are we  
providing  
the  
correct  
solution?

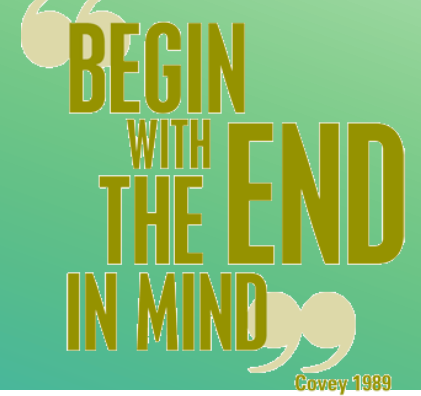
$$\begin{aligned}x &= \frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a} \\&= \frac{-(-10) \pm \sqrt{72}}{2(7)} && \text{Positive discriminant} \\&= \frac{10 \pm \sqrt{36 \cdot 2}}{14} \\&= \frac{10 \pm 6\sqrt{2}}{14} \\&= \frac{\cancel{2} (5 \pm 3\sqrt{2})}{\cancel{14}_7} \\&= \frac{5 \pm 3\sqrt{2}}{7} && \text{Two real solutions}\end{aligned}$$



56  
**BEGIN**  
**WITH**  
**THE END**  
**IN MIND**

Covey 1989

# Starting at the beginning .....



- I am a mother of four children. My youngest son has Down Syndrome, and has been the catalyst for my research
- I have been an educator in the primary sector for over 40 years, the last 15 of which has been focusing on young people with disability in a variety of roles.
- My experience as a mother of a child with a disability, an educator, middle leader and now inclusion education consultant together with the evolution of NDIS, social media and changing societal expectations, led me to question how young people with disability were to navigate an increasingly complex future.
- I experienced ableism firsthand – how my son was treated as not being able to accomplish tasks he was adept at, and in my role as a middle leader regarding the opportunity for participation in swimming that was accorded to mainstream students.
- My ire was up; I was determined to work this through

## *Why not other sport?*

Swimming was the one activity that my cohort of students with complex learning profiles could participate in without too many additional supports

It was fun without placing additional demands on them

It was practical, provided an opportunity to build safety skills

It was what my son had excelled at – and I had seen the benefits

I had the questions, I had the starting point, I had the motivation.

So, I started.

## Why swimming?



# I found that

The case for participation in swimming:  
It's not about swimming itself – it's how  
swimming acts as a multidimensional vehicle  
for human flourishing, belonging and  
participation



## HEALTH AND WELLBEING:

- Physical health:

- Benefits: Health: physical, mental, social
- Linked to wellbeing
- Preventative measure

- Mental health:

- Is more than the absence of mental disorders
- Includes individual, social and structural factors
- An individual needs to identify and realise aspirations to satisfy their needs, and be able to cope with, or change their environment

- Social health:

- Is determined by the quality of social relationships
- Is a core criterion of health

# Physical health



- Is an outcome of physical activity
- Is a platform for enhancing overall wellbeing and promoting a healthy lifestyle
- Prevents heart disease, stroke, diabetes
- Is a means of improving mental health, quality of life, overall wellbeing
- Benefits cognitive and psychological development
- Impacts community health at a population level, individual level, and delivery of care
- Substantial economic gains that influence the utilization and effective prioritization of health services and costs

## A word cloud centered around the theme of mental health and wellness. The words are arranged in a circular pattern, with 'MENTAL HEALTH' being the largest and most prominent. Other words include 'HAPPINESS', 'WELLNESS', 'LIVING DIET', 'HEALTH', 'FITNESS', 'ENDURANCE', 'POSITIVE THINKING', 'ANTIOXIDANTS', 'NATURAL', 'DIET', 'HEALTHY FOOD', 'WEIGHT LOSS', 'RELAXED', 'RUN', 'MENTAL HEALTH', 'LIVING', 'RUN', 'WEIGHT LOSS', 'HEALTH CARE', 'WELLNESS', 'ANTIOXIDANTS', 'ENDURANCE', 'POSITIVE THINKING', 'NATURAL', 'DIET', 'HEALTHY FOOD', 'WEIGHT LOSS', 'RELAXED', 'RUN', 'MENTAL HEALTH', 'LIVING', 'RUN', 'WEIGHT LOSS', 'HEALTH CARE'.

- Enables individuals to handle life's stressors, recognise their abilities, contribute to their community, holds significant value for overall wellbeing
- More than just the absence of mental disorders
- The individual needs to identify and realist aspirations to satisfy their needs
- Be able to cope with, or change, their environment
- Good mental health addresses:
  - Self-realization
  - Sense of autonomy
  - Sense of mastery of the environment

[illegible]

Also includes basic cognitive and social skills:

- An ability to recognise, express, and modulate emotions,
- An ability to empathise with others,
- Flexibility and ability to cope with adverse life events and function in social roles, and
- Having a harmonious relationship between body and mind.

# Social health



- Determined by the quality of social relationships
- Essential to human health and wellbeing
- Forms the basis of social health for the community
- Core criterion of health
- Defined as the ‘adequate quantity and quality of relationships in a particular context to meet an individual's need for meaningful human connection (Doyle & Link, 2024)
- Forms part of the tripart of model of health
- Both an outcome of and something that is predicted by, the interplay of physical and mental status (Doyle & Link, 2024)

# Theme 1 – Direction: Sense of Self in an abled world

*Theme – Direction - Sense of Self in an abled world*



*Goals*

- Specific and attainable tasks



*Health and Wellbeing*

- The level of positivism and self-esteem, world view, and the level of negative feelings

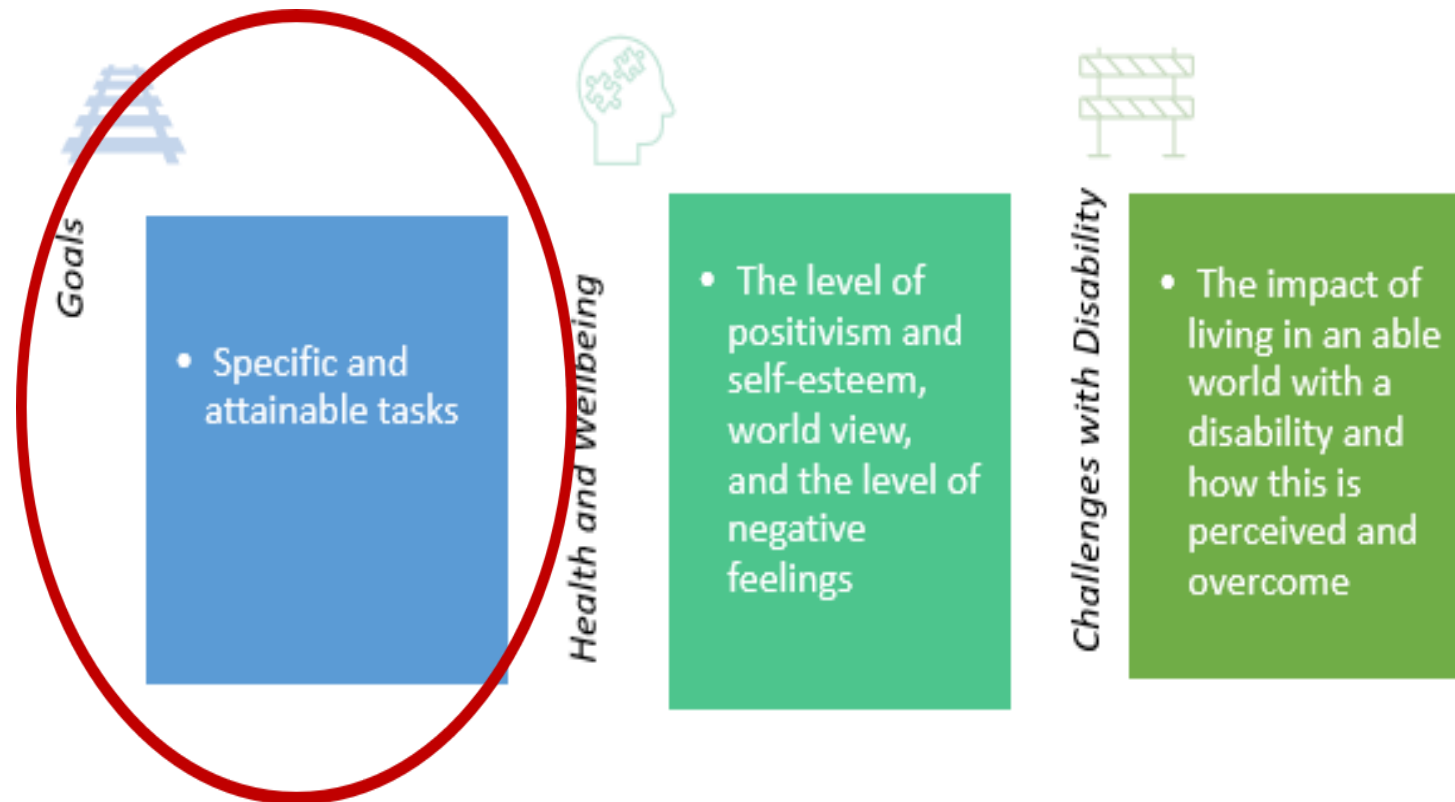


*Challenges with Disability*

- The impact of living in an able world with a disability and how this is perceived and overcome

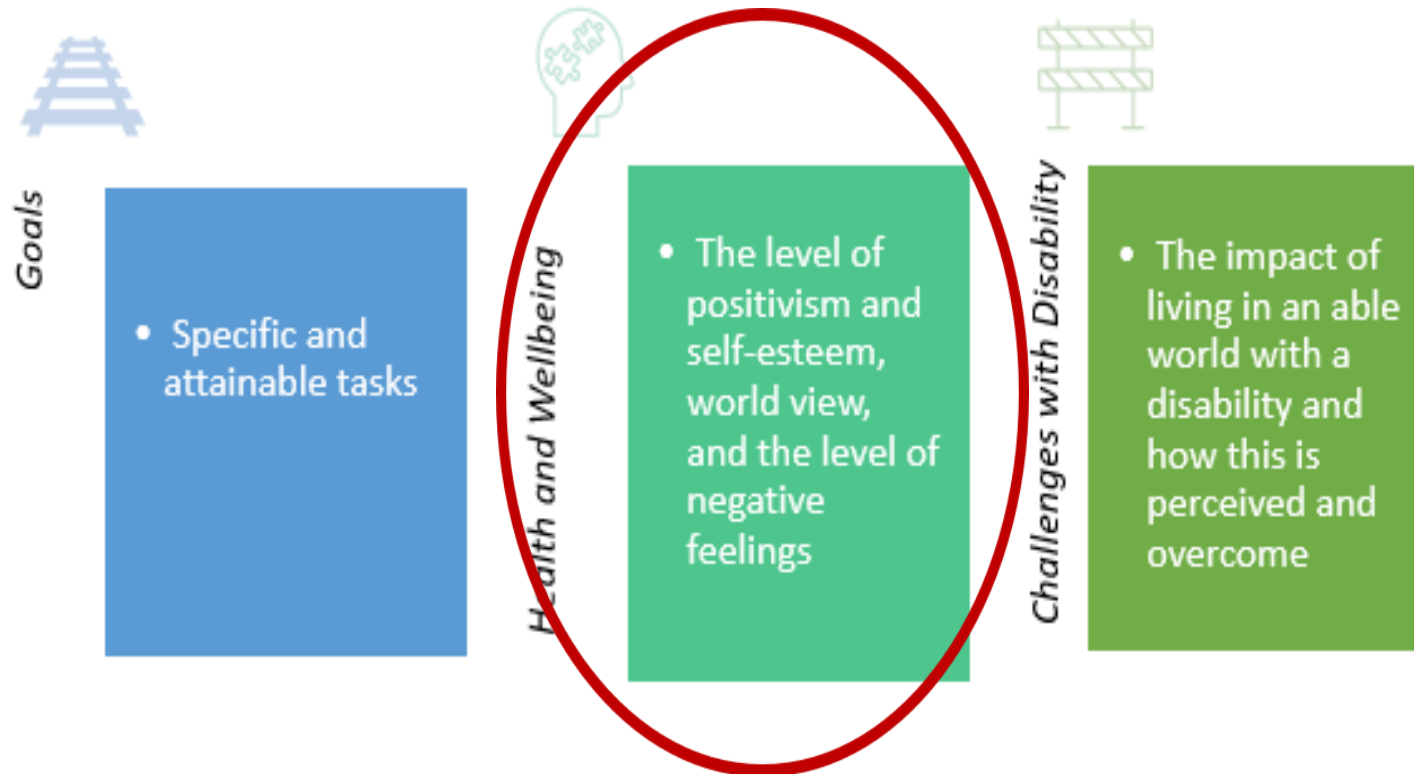
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# Theme 2 – Pathway: Environment

*Theme: Pathway - Environment*



*Swimming Community: The People*

- The social unit with shared, significant characteristics that enhances a feeling of unity.



*Water: The Place*

- The physiological effect of water: immersion, parasympathetic response, calming response, pink noise.



*Swimming: The How*

- The power of water: muscle strength, flexibility, structured input, development of mental and physical skills

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# Theme 3 – People: Support and Advocacy



*Parents*

- Goal support, communication, awareness



*Coaches*

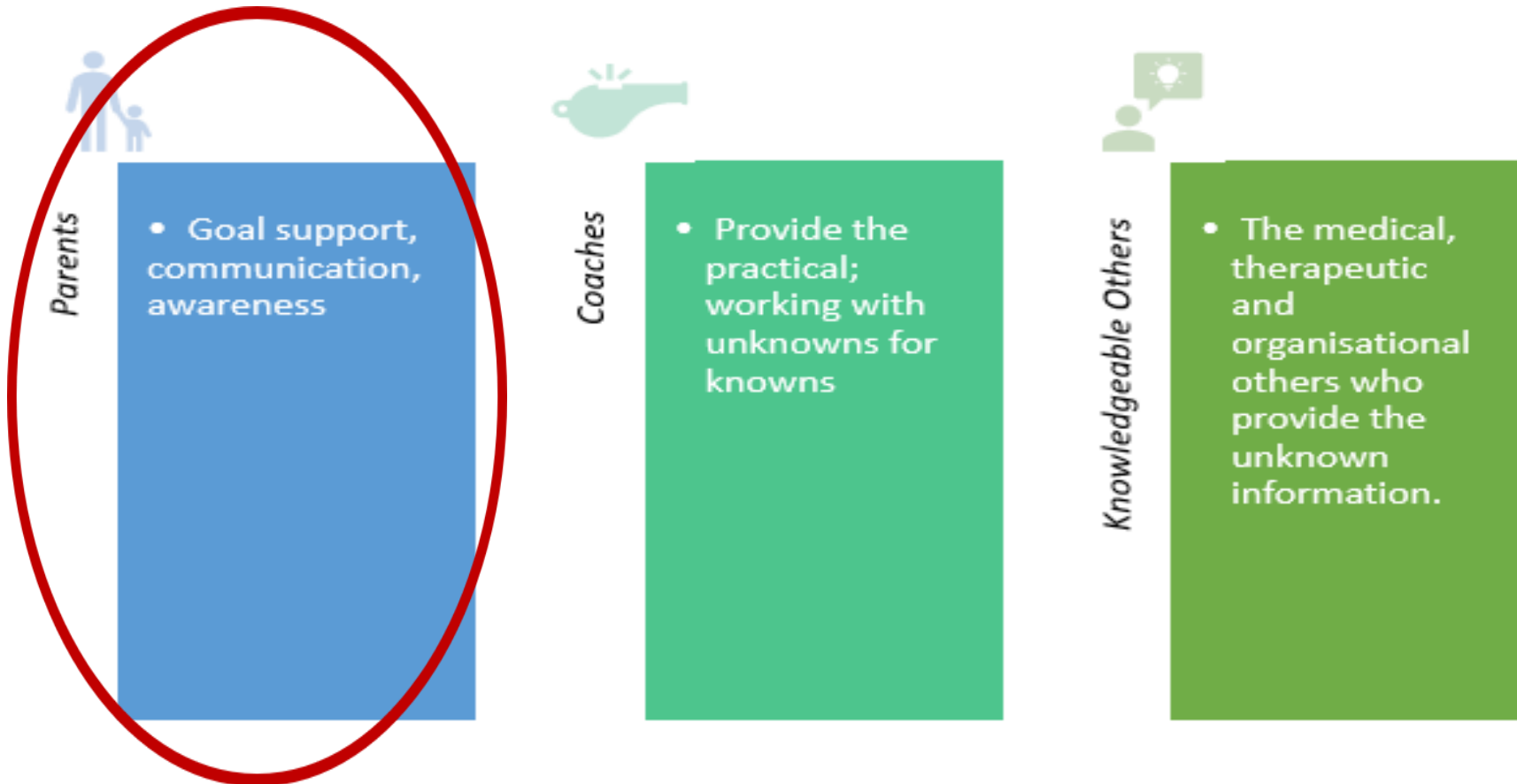
- Provide the practical; working with unknowns for knowns



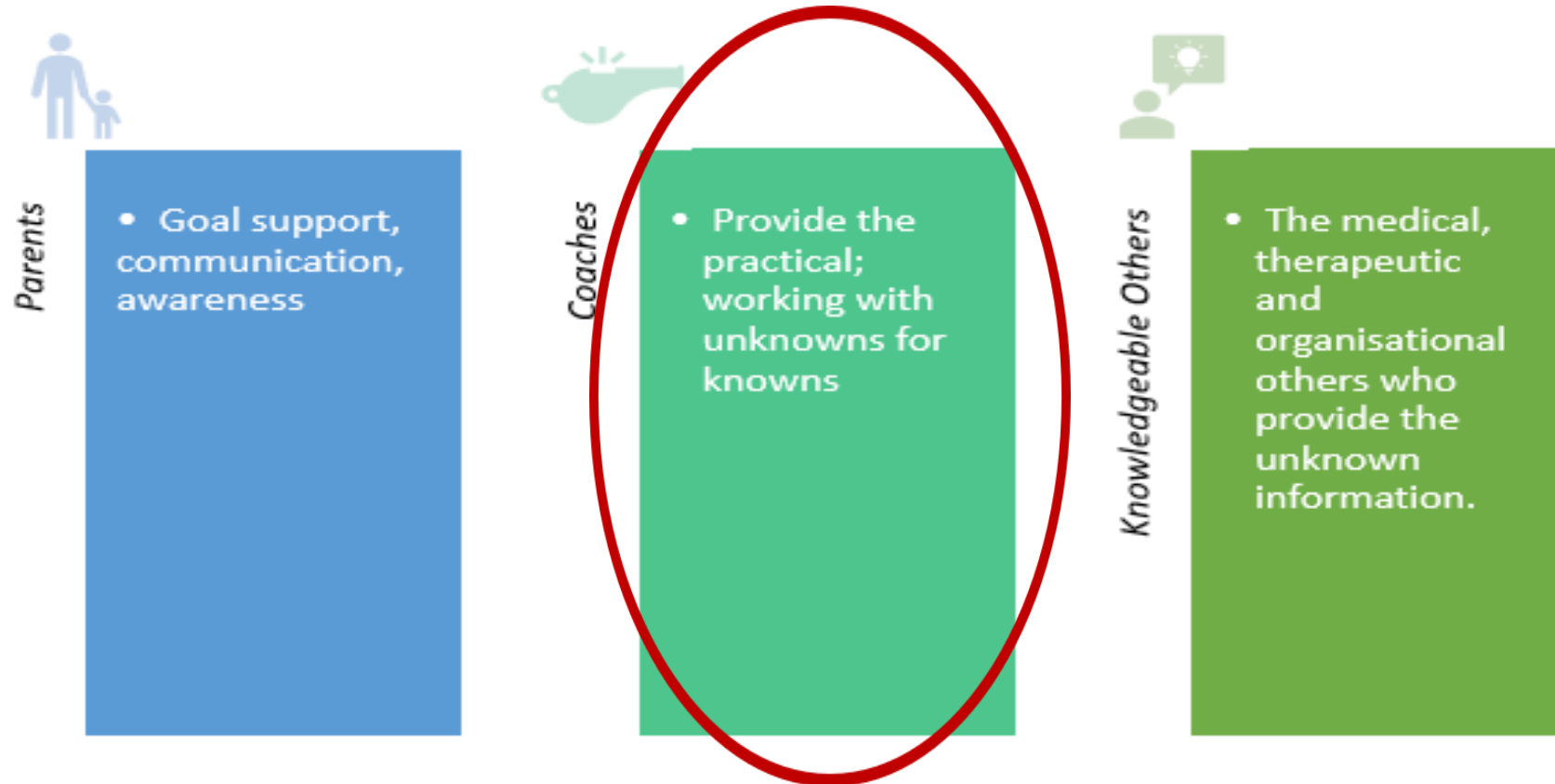
*Knowledgeable Others*

- The medical, therapeutic and organisational others who provide the unknown information.

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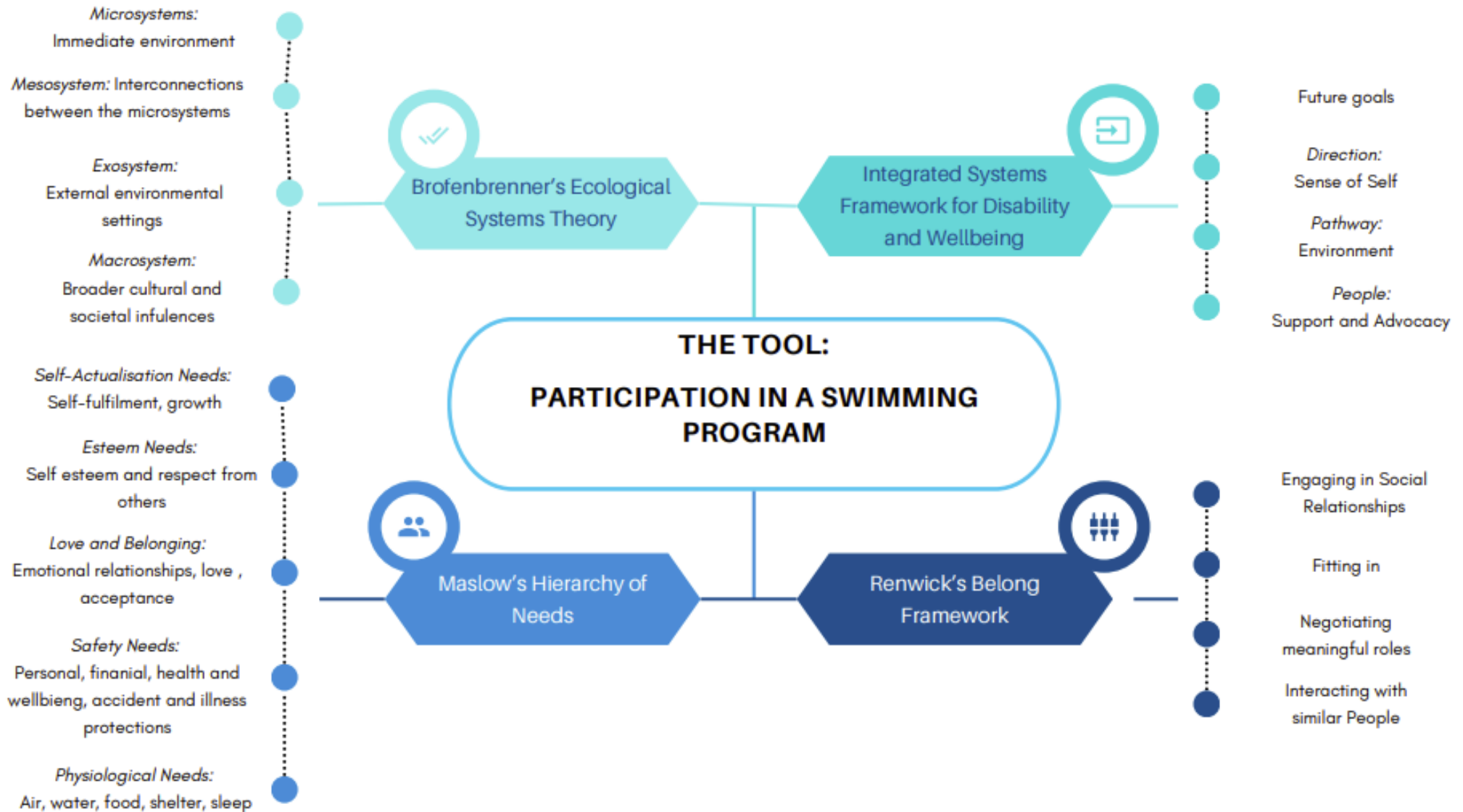
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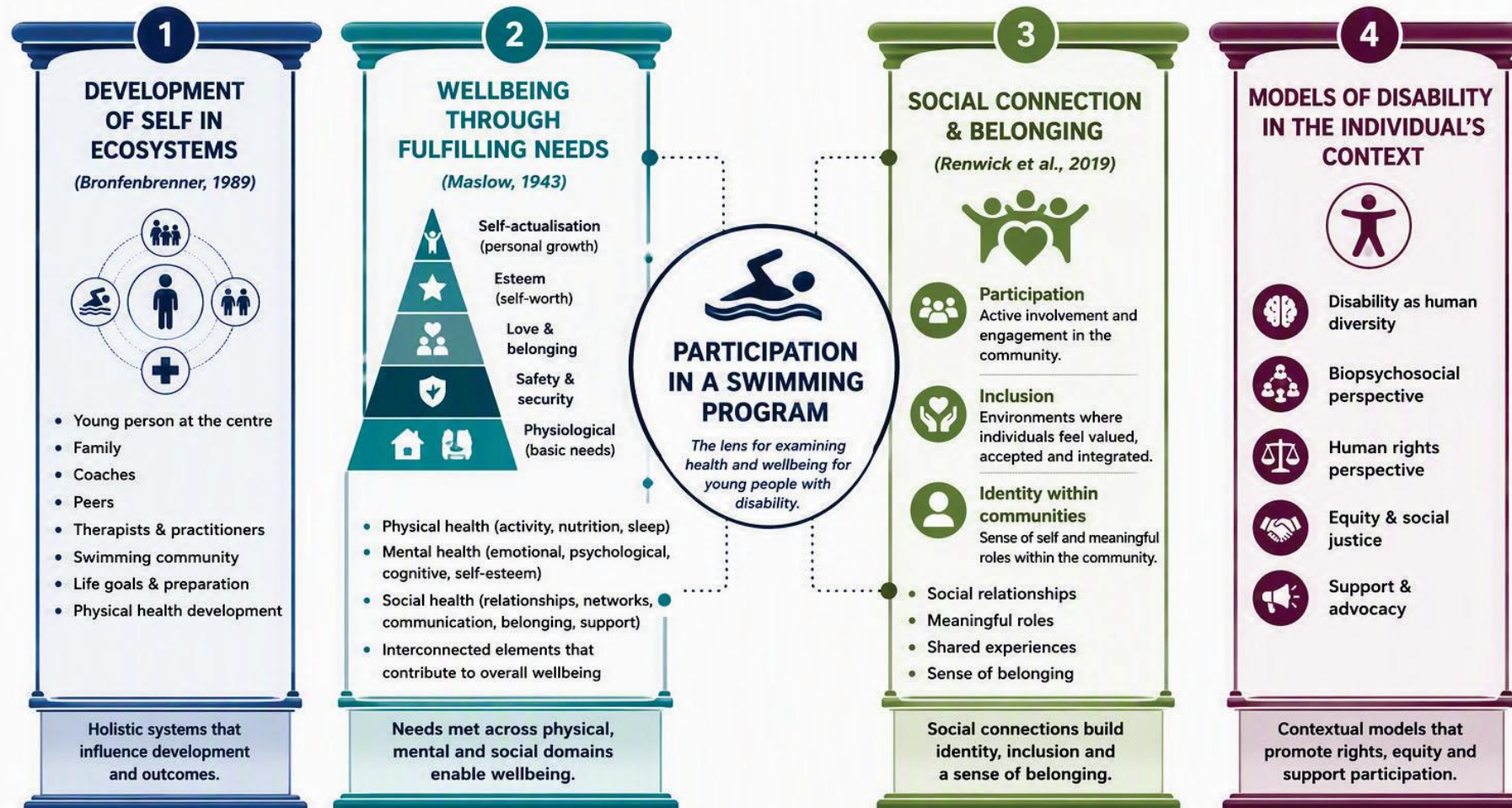
# Integrative Framework for Health and Wellbeing



# Integrated Systems – Four Pillars

## INTEGRATED SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK FOR DISABILITY & WELLBEING

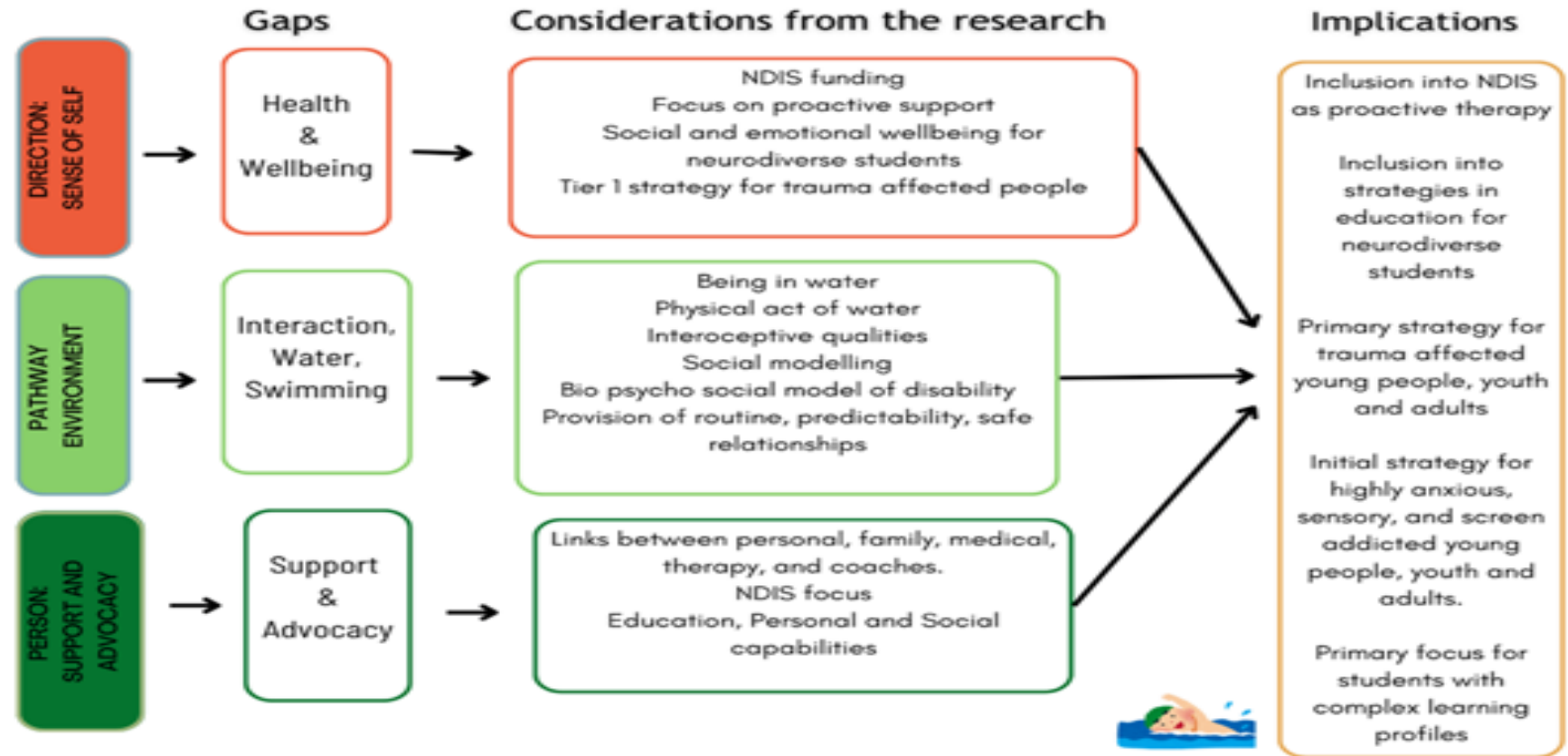
Four interconnected pillars supporting health, wellbeing and participation for young people with disability.



Together, these four pillars interact dynamically to support participation, health, wellbeing, inclusion and developmental outcomes for young people with disability in a swimming program.

# Summary of Key Findings

## Summary of Key Findings

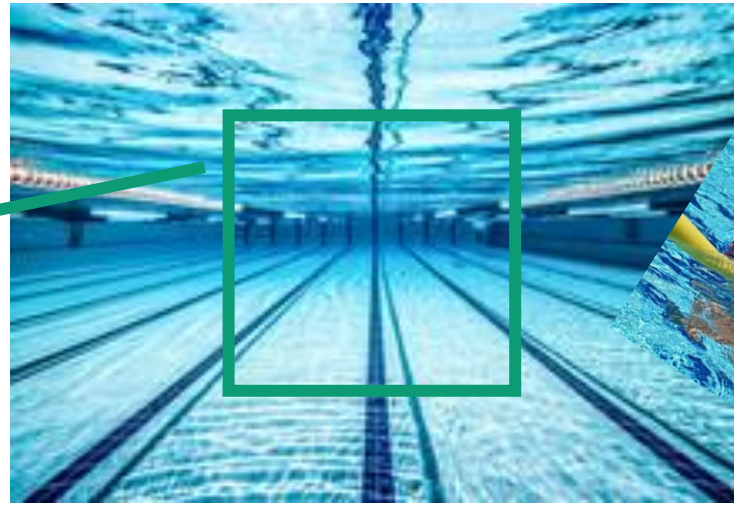
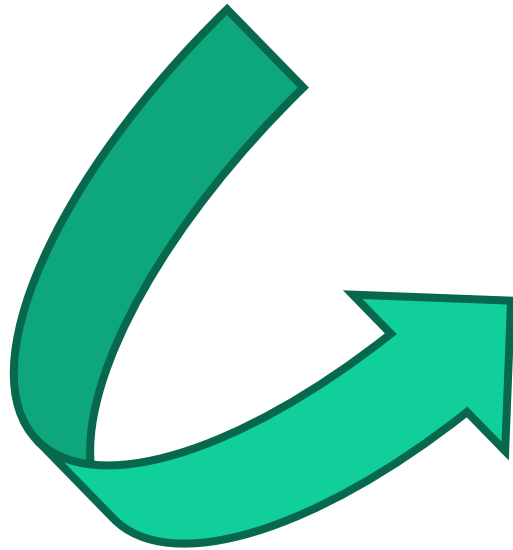


Swimming is not simply:

X Recreation

X Exercise

X Therapy



Swimming can be:

✓ Development

✓ Belonging

✓ Advocacy

✓ Participation

✓ Wellbeing



# Beyond Boundaries: Policy Implications

## Current barriers

- Fragmented governance
- Limited collaboration
- Inconsistent funding
- Access inequities
- Risk-averse systems



## Needed reforms

- Prevention-focused funding
- Recognition of sport as wellbeing infrastructure
- Greater collaboration across sectors
- Inclusive program design

# Policy Implications for Educators and Practitioners

Beyond skill  
development  
...

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Are we building  
belonging?

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Are we promoting  
agency?

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Are we supporting  
identity?

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Are we strengthening  
wellbeing?

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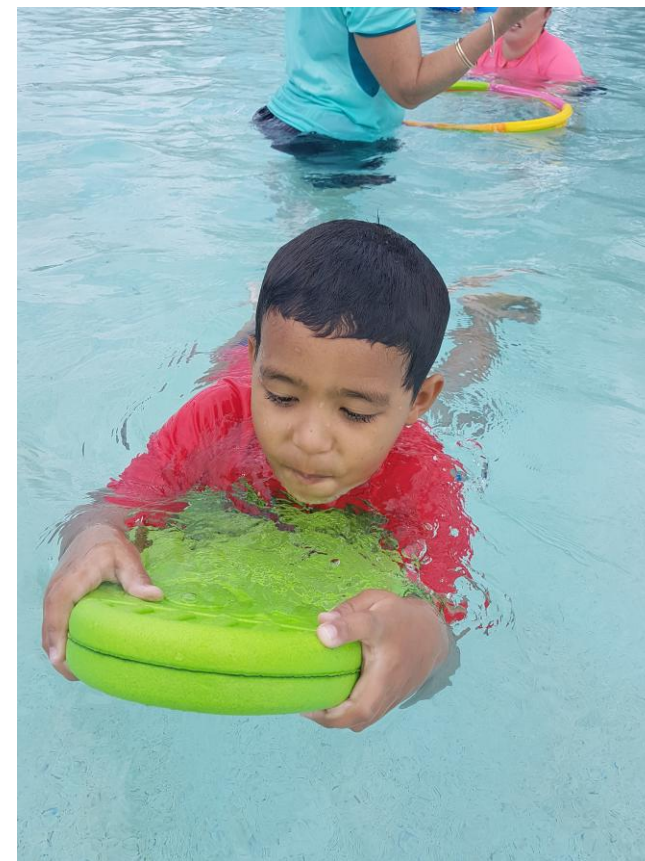
# Final Takeaway

**Participation → Belonging → Wellbeing**

Swimming programs create opportunities for:

- Health
- Connection
- Agency
- Inclusion
- Flourishing





# Pushing boundaries

## Making the future, a verb

**Beyond boundaries,  
swimming  
becomes a pathway  
to  
human flourishing.**

**Dr Lyn Ellis PhD**

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