

The Parking Lot

Who would have thought a water-phobic child could become an international swimmer? Ernest did it. He didn't just swim in local competitions; he miraculously moved up the ladder to provincial, national, and even international races. Sounds like the story of Cinderella, but in this case, God is his fairy godmother.

When Ernest was around the age of 12, he would stay in the family van and refuse to step outside the vehicle when we arrived at the parking lot of the sports complex. We had no idea why he was so afraid. Could it have been the check-in counter setup, the color of the building or something on the notice board? It could have been anything. He knew that inside the complex there would be a gym, swimming pools, and water slides in front of him. He knew there would be the smell of chlorine, overwhelming noises, and humidity. He always looked very uncomfortable and tense.

Later, when his two younger siblings signed up for swimming lessons, we realized that he was afraid of the water. He was water phobic. The two younger children would get changed, go inside the pool by themselves and take swimming lessons. It was very tough for a parent to run between the parking lot and the swimming pool to handle three children, even though it is just eight or ten meters away. I thought there must be a better way - mammy's way.

I remember reading about something called desensitization or acclimatization, a way to make him not sensitive or anxious about the surroundings gradually, over time. Making him go into the sports complex was not a choice; it was necessary with his siblings taking swimming lessons. I would have even hypnotized him if I could. Although he is a very sweet and obedient boy, he can be very strong-willed with certain things and will not budge, so desensitizing him seemed to be harmless and less invasive. And seriously? It was my only choice. Turns out, it was the best choice.

This is what I did: I put a light, easy-to-fold plastic sitting stool outside the family van and tried to get him to sit on it. Initially, he refused to get out of the vehicle, let alone sit on the stool. How could I get him out of the van? What could lure him out? Food, I guessed. So, I tried to entice him with food. Who would say no to food? Our family had a strict family rule about eating: no food in the bedroom and only certain food in the vehicle. I am not sure what made him get out of the vehicle and sit on the stool. The food or the family rule? Either way it worked. He got out of the vehicle and sat firmly on the stool without moving. His fear of the sports complex was still daunting. As the days went by, Ernest became more and more comfortable sitting on the stool. He would move his legs, stand up, and stretch. That

was step number one. Each day, the stool was moved closer and closer to the sports complex/swimming pool with less and less food. That was step number two. (Of course, many thanks are owed to the lifeguards and swim coaches from the swimming pool. They helped keep an eye out for the younger siblings after they finished their swimming lessons, while I ran back and forth to the parking lot for Ernest, either to keep an eye on him or continue with my 'training'.)

As the days went by, Ernest was getting closer and closer to the sports complex, and eventually just sitting outside the pool area. It took him a long time to get inside the pool entrance. Now came step number three: be ready and have faith! He was always changed into his bathing suit, even though it was a big hassle to get him changed. I had to be positive and have faith that he would overcome the challenges and that, at the very least, he would touch the water in the pool. If that is not faith, I'm not sure what I would call it. The least I could do was to wait faithfully and patiently for the moment this boy would get up from the stool to try the water. I stayed with him for weeks as he sat on the stool, watching people playing in the water. Finally, with much encouragement, coaxing, and a little pressure, he eventually tried. First, the toes were resting in the water for a few days, then the legs joined them. Eventually, he was completely in the water! The rest is history.