



# Aqua Welcome

Empowering Newcomers Through  
Aquatic Physical Literacy

A practical guide for organizations  
supporting new-to-Canada participants  
in Greater Victoria, B.C.

 Sport for Life



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## Preface

Welcome! This resource is designed as a practical guide for organizations that support new-to-Canada participants in Greater Victoria, B.C. Its purpose is to help create welcoming, safe, and inclusive aquatic programs where new-to-Canada participants can build confidence, skills, and motivation to be active in the water. By following the principles of physical literacy and quality sport, your organization can play a crucial role in helping new-to-Canada participants feel at home and thrive through participation in aquatic activities.

This resource was co-created with the partners of a working group formed as part of the [Greater Victoria hub](#) of the [CO-PLAY Network](#). It was identified as a need by the partners of the hub and developed via several focus groups among the CO-PLAY partners and individuals of Greater Victoria.

# Introduction

Being able to move confidently in water is an essential life skill, one that opens doors to safety, fun, community connection, and even employment. In the Greater Victoria area, where pools, lakes, rivers, and oceans are part of daily life, developing physical literacy in aquatic environments helps new-to-Canada participants stay safe and feel a sense of belonging at the pool or beach.

Encouraging new-to-Canada participants to join aquatic programs is especially important. Learning these skills not only reduces the risk of drowning but also empowers people to enjoy recreational activities like swimming or paddling and prepares them for many unique activities found across Canada. By becoming comfortable in water, individuals gain confidence, enabling them to explore new opportunities for health, friendship, and personal growth.



Aquatic physical literacy also unlocks a world of exciting possibilities, from leisure swimming to participation in a wide variety of aquatic sports:

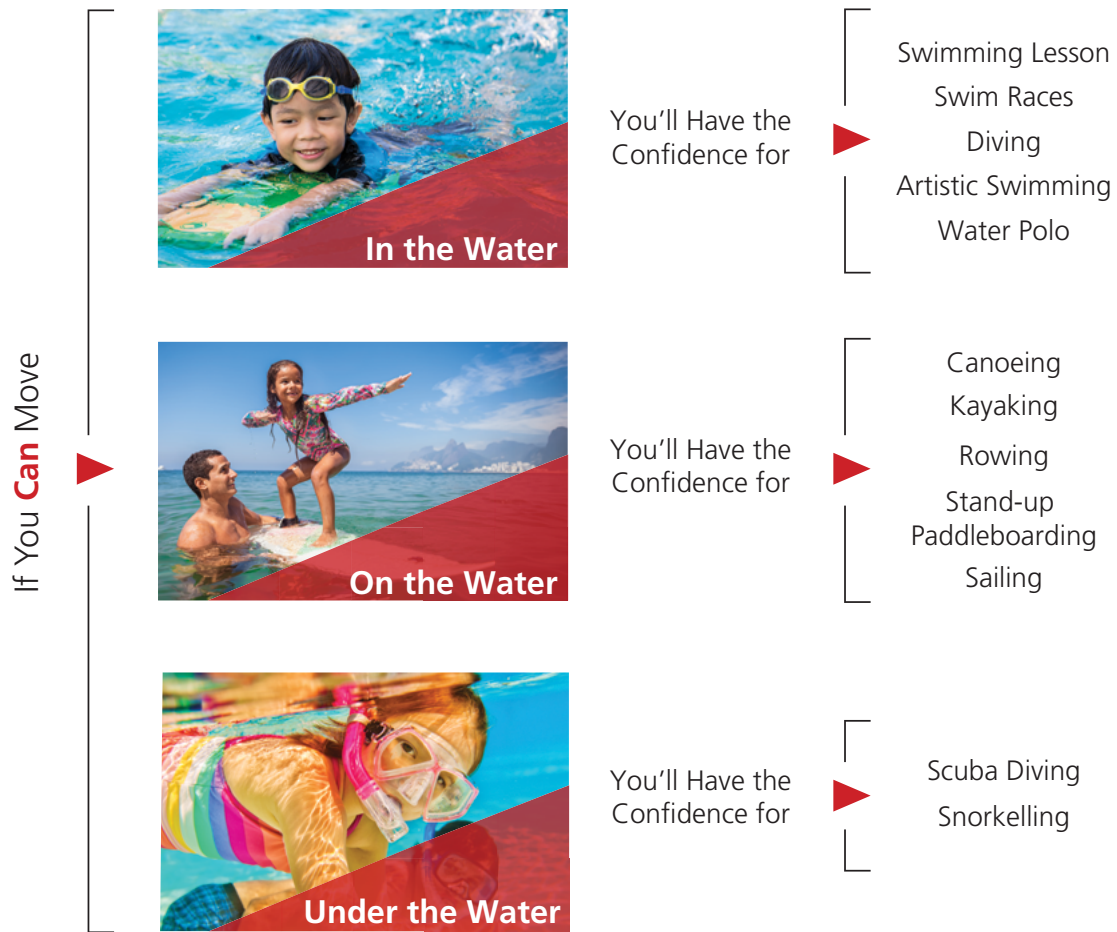


FIGURE 1: *If You Can Move, You'll Have the Confidence for...*



# Section 1: Foundations for Welcoming Aquatic Participation

## Physical Literacy

Physical literacy in aquatic environments means having the skills (such as floating, swimming, or moving confidently in water), the confidence (believing you can participate safely), and the motivation (wanting to be active in water) needed for safe, meaningful, and enjoyable

experiences in pools, lakes, rivers, or oceans. It is essential to acknowledge that these abilities are developed over time and can manifest differently for each person, depending on their background, culture, prior experiences with water, and individual needs.

## Physical literacy

is the...



...to be

**active for life**

FIGURE 2: Definition of Physical Literacy



Aquatic physical literacy is more than just learning to swim. It includes:

- **Skills and knowledge**
  - developing movement skills like balance, coordination, and control specific to water settings
  - building knowledge about water safety across different environments, from pools to open water such as lakes, rivers, and oceans
- **Welcoming environments**
  - creating spaces where everyone feels a sense of belonging, so that families are encouraged to share their traditions and beliefs, and activities are adapted, if needed, to be welcoming to them
  - encouraging teamwork and respectful communication so people from all backgrounds feel included
- **Cultural responsiveness**
  - recognizing that some cultures have unique relationships with water, and adapting programs to be more welcoming
  - supporting newcomers and those from diverse cultural or religious backgrounds by:
    - respecting varied comfort levels around water through flexible attire options (such as modest swimwear), gender-inclusive spaces, and multilingual resources when possible
    - ensuring everyone, regardless of age or background, has equitable opportunities to learn at their own pace without judgment

## Quality Sport

### Quality sport

based on *Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity* is...



FIGURE 3: *Definition of Quality Sport*

Quality sport in aquatic settings creates positive experiences by focusing on:

### Good People

1. Hire certified team members (such as pool staff, swim instructors, lifeguards) who value diversity and welcome everyone.
2. Encourage new-to-Canada participants to seek training and certification to become qualified lifeguards or aquatic leaders, bringing valuable perspectives to the team and helping their communities stay safe.
3. Provide cultural awareness training to staff and volunteers so they can better understand different traditions, practices, and preferences, building trust with participants from all backgrounds.



### **Good Places**

1. Ensure pools, aquatic centres, splash pads, lakeshores, and beaches are safe, clean, well-lit, and accessible for people of all ages and abilities.
2. Remove barriers such as inaccessible entrances; provide ramps/elevators, family change rooms, and translated signs/materials (including visual aids).
3. Create a welcoming aquatic environment so that no one feels left out because of ability, income, or background.

### **Good Programs**

1. Offer aquatic activities that are fun, developmentally appropriate (matching skill levels), and inclusive of all cultures and backgrounds.
2. Offer aquatic programs at times convenient for families, celebrate diverse cultures through special events at the pool or waterfront, and invite ongoing feedback from participants to ensure programs meet real needs.
3. Build strong connections with local communities and settlement agencies to encourage joint participation, such as family swim nights or multicultural swim events.

By focusing on good people, good places, and good programs, we help ensure every aquatic experience is safe, enjoyable, accessible, and truly welcoming for everyone.

## CHECKLIST FOR AQUATIC PROGRAMS

<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Quality is Key:</b> Ensure every program is safe, fun, fair, and welcoming to all individuals, regardless of their background or ability.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Optimal Programming:</b> Design activities that match participants' age, skill level, culture, language needs, and life stage for meaningful learning experiences.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Inclusion is Non-Negotiable:</b> Remove barriers (language, finances, attire) so everyone can participate fully; welcome diverse swimwear and traditions.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Collaboration Makes the System Better:</b> Work with settlement agencies, community leaders, and families to co-create supportive programs.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Developmentally Appropriate Activities:</b> Adapt teaching to individuals' physical, emotional, social, and cultural needs; support learning at their own pace.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Life-long Participation:</b> Offer pathways from beginner to life-long involvement, encouraging family participation and celebrating achievements at every stage.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Continuous Improvement:</b> Seek feedback regularly from newcomers; adjust programs to better meet evolving community needs.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Marketing and Communications:</b> Ensure that newcomers understand the promotional materials. Display multiple languages when posting rules and policies, and use images or graphics, where appropriate, in place of dense text.



## Section 2: Addressing Barriers within Aquatic Programming

When planning aquatic programs that include new-to-Canada participants, it is essential to create welcoming, accessible, and respectful experiences for all participants. Consider these guidelines:

### Money

- Offer low-cost, subsidized, or free program options to ensure that financial challenges do not prevent participation. Share information about grants or local support that can help cover costs.

#### EXAMPLE

[KidSport Greater Victoria](#) administers grants of up to \$700 per child/year for children and youth living in the Capital Regional District, covering municipal recreation programs and Lifesaving Society courses.

#### EXAMPLE

The [Greater Victoria Advanced Aquatic Assistance Program](#) is meant to reduce the financial barrier to anyone who is interested in working in aquatics.

### Discrimination

- Make your zero-tolerance policy for discrimination clear during registration and orientation. Train staff and volunteers on anti-racism practices.
- Foster an environment where everyone feels safe, respected, and valued—and where any concerns are addressed quickly and thoughtfully.

#### EXAMPLE

[Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria's \(ICA\) Tools for Equity training program](#) addresses racial disparities and employment barriers faced by immigrants, refugees, and communities of colour in the Capital Regional District.

## Time

- Offer flexible class times or multiple session options to fit the busy and changing schedules of newcomer families who may be balancing work, school, and settlement activities.

### EXAMPLE

**Newcomers On Water (NOW)** provides free, drop-in rowing sessions for newcomers to Canada and refugees (age 16+) and introduces basic techniques, water safety, and community connections on the Gorge Waterway.

## Culture

- Integrate activities that honour diverse cultural backgrounds. This might include celebrating different traditions through special events or highlighting aquatic games from various countries.
- Welcome a variety of swim attire (such as modest swimwear) to respect personal beliefs and customs.

### EXAMPLE

**Power To Be** has been a registered charity since 1998, creating access to nature for youth, adults, and families living with cognitive, physical, financial, and social barriers, and offers programming specifically for newcomers.

## Information Access

- Using plain language, clearly outline what participants need to know, what to bring or wear, pool rules, and safety expectations.
- Use translated materials and visuals whenever possible to make information more accessible and comprehensible.
- Provide knowledge of where to find modest swimwear that allows people to move safely in the water.

### EXAMPLE

City of Victoria's Community Access Swimming Lessons has been co-created based on the needs brought forward by the **Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria**, **Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society**, and other newcomer-serving organizations.

## Communication

- Communicate in simple language; provide interpretation services if available.
- Check in regularly with participants and their families to understand their needs and address any questions in a supportive manner.

### EXAMPLE

The District of Saanich offers numerous languages for its [online registration platform](#).



# Section 3: Existing Aquatic Programming

The following organizations offer aquatic programming relevant to newcomer participants in Greater Victoria.

	Organization/Program	Environment	Details
Government	City of Victoria – Community Access Swimming Lessons	Pools	Low or no-cost swimming lessons for newcomer families, offered at flexible times.
	Greater Victoria Recreation Departments	Pools and outdoor experiences	Learn-to-swim programs offered across municipalities and townships in Greater Victoria.
	BC Parks – Goldstream Park	Lakes and outdoor experiences	Nature-based aquatic exposure (e.g., salmon run in fall).
	Capital Regional District (CRD)	Recreational beaches	Monitors recreational beaches for bacteria, samples for blue-green algae, and conducts summer beach water quality sampling in coordination with Island Health to issue advisories.
Non-Profit	Gorge Narrows Rowing Club – Newcomers On Water (NOW)	Lakes	Free, drop-in rowing sessions for newcomers (age 16+); offers intro to basic techniques, water safety, and community connection. Sundays 12–2 p.m.
	Freshwater Fisheries Society of BC	Lakes	Free learn-to-fish program for youth and families. Equipment provided and hands-on experience included.
	Science Venture – Ocean & Wildlife Programs	Oceans and lakes education	Tailored programs for new-to-Canada participants. Requires advance notice and depends on funding availability.
	Shaw Centre for the Salish Sea (Sidney)	Oceans education	Beach education and tailored tours for newcomer families during hosted events.

	Organization/Program	Environment	Details
Non-Profit (continued)	Lifesaving Society – British Columbia & Yukon Branch	Pools and lakes	Swim to Survive® program focused on water safety and building comfort in aquatic environments.
	Island Swim Club and Pacific Coast Swimming	Pools	Swim clubs offering tailored classes for newcomers.
	Victoria Synchro and Victoria Artistic Swimming Club	Pools	Artistic swimming programs available for youth.
	Saanich Water Polo School	Pools	Introductory water polo programs for new-to-Canada participants.
	Triathlon BC	Lakes and oceans	‘Come-try-it’ events introducing participants to multi-sport activities.
	Power To Be	Outdoor experiences	Programs including paddleboarding, canoeing, and kayaking for youth, adults, and families.
	Open Aviron Rowing Coastal Association (OARCA)	Oceans	Open water and coastal rowing opportunities in British Columbia.
	AdventureSmart	Outdoor experiences	National outdoor safety program promoting safe recreational activity.
Private/For-profit	Victoria Swim Lab (British Swim School)	Pools	Paid swimming lessons with tailored options for newcomers.
	Independent Consultants	Various	One-on-one aquatic programming available at a cost.

## Careers in Aquatic Sectors

Aquatic skills can also lead directly into meaningful careers across many sectors:

- **Navigation and Transport:**
  - boat crew member
  - ferry operator
  - harbour master
- **Diving and Rescue:**
  - commercial diver
  - search and rescue diver
  - marine field researcher
- **Water Safety and Emergency Services:**
  - lifeguard
  - pool staff
  - swim instructor
- **Environmental Protection and Conservation:**
  - aquatic habitat monitor
  - fisheries officer
  - conservation officer
- **Sport and Recreation Instruction:**
  - swim coach
  - program leader
  - camp counsellor
- **Education and Facility Management:**
  - pool manager
  - aquatics coordinator
  - advanced instructor
- **Engineering and Technology:**
  - underwater technician
  - marine engineer
  - aquatic facility inspector

By welcoming new-to-Canada participants into aquatic programs and supporting their journey from basic water skills to sport participation or job training, we help build safer communities while creating pathways for life-long enjoyment and success both in and around water. Ultimately, a strong aquatic background has the potential to transform a love for the water into a versatile toolkit for many meaningful, high-impact careers, including water safety, sustainability, and facility leadership.



Photo: Canadian Swimming Coaches Association

**Gregory Arkhurst**, *Olympic swimmer and Canadian national team coach*

Origin: Ivory Coast

Role: Olympic swimmer, elite coach in Canada, competed for Ivory Coast at the 2000 and 2004 Olympics while training in Canada.

Emigrated to Canada and became head coach of CAMO Natation in Montreal.

Became the first Black coach on a Swimming Canada Olympic staff and won Canadian Coach of the Year awards.

Source: [swimming.ca/blog/celebrating-black-history-month-get-to-know-greg-arkhurst](https://swimming.ca/blog/celebrating-black-history-month-get-to-know-greg-arkhurst)



## Conclusion

In Greater Victoria, aquatic environments are more than places to learn to swim; they are spaces where safety, confidence, belonging, and opportunity come together.

By working collaboratively, newcomer-serving organizations can design inclusive, culturally appropriate, and accessible programs that remove barriers and open pathways for participation, leadership, and employment in aquatics.

At the same time, newcomers bring strengths, experiences, and perspectives that enrich these environments and help shape more welcoming communities.

Together, this shared commitment creates a powerful cycle: organizations become more inclusive and effective, and newcomers feel empowered to participate, connect, and thrive.

When everyone has the opportunity to develop aquatic physical literacy, communities become safer, stronger, and more connected, and all who call Greater Victoria home can feel confident, welcome, and at ease in and around the water.

# Links

## Contributing Partners

City of Victoria, Parks and Recreation Department

[victoria.ca/parks-recreation](http://victoria.ca/parks-recreation)

Esquimalt Parks and Recreation

[esquimalt.ca/recreation](http://esquimalt.ca/recreation)

KidSport Canada

[kidsportcanada.ca](http://kidsportcanada.ca)

Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria

[icavictoria.org](http://icavictoria.org)

Saanich Parks, Recreation and Community Services

[saanich.ca/EN/main/parks-recreation-community-services.html](http://saanich.ca/EN/main/parks-recreation-community-services.html)

University of Victoria, School of Exercise Science, Physical & Health Education

[uvic.ca/health/exercise/index.php](http://uvic.ca/health/exercise/index.php)

Vancouver Island Hispanic Network Society

[vihns.ca](http://vihns.ca)

West Shore Parks and Recreation

[wspr.ca](http://wspr.ca)

## Resources

*New-to-Canada Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity Pathway*

[sportforlife.ca/portfolio-item/new-to-canada-long-term-development-in-sport-and-physical-activity-pathway](http://sportforlife.ca/portfolio-item/new-to-canada-long-term-development-in-sport-and-physical-activity-pathway)

*Physical Literacy in Aquatic Environments: A Discussion Paper*

[sportforlife.ca/portfolio-item/physical-literacy-in-aquatic-environments-a-discussion-paper](http://sportforlife.ca/portfolio-item/physical-literacy-in-aquatic-environments-a-discussion-paper)

## Training

### Live workshop

*Engaging Those Who Are New to Canada via Physical Literacy and Quality Sport*

[sportforlife-sportpourelavie.ca/catalog\\_course\\_detail.php?courseid=52](http://sportforlife-sportpourelavie.ca/catalog_course_detail.php?courseid=52)

### On-demand learning

*Welcome to Canada: Engaging New to Canada Participants in Sport and Physical Activity*

[sportforlife-sportpourelavie.ca/catalog\\_detail.php?courseid=1521](http://sportforlife-sportpourelavie.ca/catalog_detail.php?courseid=1521)

