

Learn To Swim

For Infants & Toddlers



Teach your baby to swim
and avoid common mistakes.

By Barb Nolan

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Thank you to all the budding little swimmers who posed so beautifully for these photographs and all the babies and toddlers who, over the years have taught us the importance of patience, understanding and education in an early learning swim programs.



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The Benefits of Swim for Babies and Toddlers

For most parents, the primary reason to enroll a young child in a swim program is safety. After all, drowning is the leading cause of injury related death in the US and Australia for under 5's. For every drowning, many more children are left with permanent brain damage. But learning water safety skills is only one of the many benefits of swim lessons. Did you know that infant and toddler developmental swim lessons build emotional competence, motor skills, language development, and even executive function, which is the basis for later learning and academic success? In this chapter, we will explore the many benefits of infant/toddler swim lessons.



Play and Learn: Building Social Competency

You're about to embark on an amazing journey of wonder as you and your baby explore, and in time, master the aquatic environment. As you frolic, play and learn in the water, your baby learns to trust you. This trust forms the foundation for a deep, bonding relationship that will last a lifetime.

Additionally, as your child becomes accustomed to the water, she will gain confidence in herself. Imagine the thrill a young tot feels at learning to float, submerge or kick through the water! Young children have little control over most aspects of their lives, but mastering swimming is a major achievement—one that boosts self-esteem and encourages independence. Through swim lessons, children learn to explore and test their limitations. They learn that it is okay to try new things, make mistakes and try again.

Swim lessons are often a child's first experience in a social setting, as well. Left to their own devices, very young children usually don't engage directly with other tots. Instead, they play next to each other without obvious contact. Through the structure of swimming lessons, though, children learn skills like sharing, asking for a turn or making conversation.



As your child gains social competency, she will learn to laugh, talk and play with her peers. These lessons offer a strong, social network and many parents and children go on to form friendships based on the relationships they develop at swimming lessons.





Kick and Splash: Developing Motor Skills

A newborn baby has very little control or awareness of her body. For the first three or four months of life, infants are driven by the reflexes they are born with. At around four months, babies develop more controlled actions and begin to explore the cause and effect of these actions.

Water play is a wonderful activity for promoting developing motor skills. Children love the sensory experience of feeling cool or warm water on their skin. This sensory input is at once, calming and energizing.

Babies become aware of their arms and legs as they paddle and kick. These exercises also help develop large muscles and improve coordination and balance. Floating and submerging exercises build the core muscles, so important for balance and strength. And, the experience of floating and moving through the water increases baby's ability to balance and self-correct.



Silly Songs and Nonsense Rhymes: Building Language Skills

From the moment your child is born, she is communicating with you. Through her earliest cries, she expresses her wants and needs. As children grow, they have a natural desire to share thoughts and ideas through language. Swimming lessons are an ideal activity for promoting this innate tendency.

First, learning to blow bubbles in the water is an excellent oral motor exercise that strengthens the muscles of the mouth necessary for speech. During swimming lessons, you are also constantly communicating with your baby through words and touch. Baby learns to watch you for hand and eye cues.

Many swim teachers incorporate silly songs and nonsense rhymes into the lessons. These activities do more than just keep a child's attention. Songs that rhyme or engage in word play teach children phonological awareness skills, including rhyming, hearing sounds and segmenting words. These skills form the foundation for later literacy success.

Brain Boost: Supporting Healthy Brain Growth

According to Angela Ehmer, literacy consultant at Literacy Solutions Australia, a newborn baby has around 100 billion neurons or nerve cells. As a child grows, synapses, or neural pathways, form between these cells. These pathways allow the brain to send and receive impulses and information, making all learning possible. The connections in the brain grow more quickly during the first three years of life than at any other time. Strong, complex brain connections increase a child's potential for later learning and growth.

So how do neural pathways form? Neural pathways are formed and strengthened through both repetitive and novel experiences. Repetitive activities may seem boring to you, but they're strengthening the pathways in a baby's brain. Think of it this way: imagine you walk daily, following the same route, through the forest. Eventually a comfortable, well-worn path emerges. You know this trail so well you could walk it in the dark barefoot. Repetition in early childhood strengthens brain connections in much the same way. Toddlers and young children love to play the same game over and over again and read the same book night after night because doing so strengthens their learning and confidence.

While repetitive activities strengthen neural pathways, novel activities form new brain connections. Consider, for example, how much cognitive effort is involved in learning to climb stairs for the first time. Your toddler must analyze the stairs, consider a solution and then send a message to her arms and legs to get moving. She must carefully balance as she goes up the stairs. Once she reaches the top, she wonders how to get down. Through this intense effort, new connections form between the neurons in the brain. So it is with any new activity that requires mental effort. Meeting new people, learning to walk, speaking first words or playing a new game all build brain connections.

Swimming lessons offer rich opportunities for both novel and repetitive activities. When a baby or toddler begins swim lessons, everything is novel—new people, new activities and the sensation of being submerged in the water. As your baby progresses through swimming lessons, she'll repeat activities many times to master them. Once your little tot learns one skill, she goes on to new skills so she's constantly being challenged.

Swim lessons also build executive function, a skill many teachers believe is essential for later academic success. Executive function refers to the ability to follow directions, organize information, make decisions and delay gratification. During swimming lesson instruction, babies and toddlers must analyze and problem-solve many situations, such as "*How do I turn over on my back?*" or "*How do I reach the edge of the pool?*" These activities develop the critical thinking and executive function skills your child needs to thrive in school and life.





Neurons and connections at work in the brain



Swimming Lessons: Learn through play

Watch your baby or toddler at play and you'll notice a few things. First, young children learn through doing and exploring, rather than passively observing. Often the whole body is moving at once! Young children also love tactile, sensory experiences like blowing bubbles, playing in the sand or working with craft clay. Below are a few of the concepts your child learns through swim lessons:

Developmental swim lessons offer playful, hands-on experimentation that is geared to a child's natural learning style. Through engaging games, sensory water play and nurturing touch, children progress and learn quickly. Whether your child is a young baby, an older toddler, or even a preschooler or above, swimming lessons offer life-long benefits.



What to Look For in a High-Quality Developmental Swim Program

A friendly, welcoming atmosphere

Happy parents and happy children

Age appropriate activities

Children separate from parents when they are emotionally ready

Water safety skills are an integral part of the program, woven throughout the curriculum

Children are not pressured to move faster than their confidence allows

The water is warm and clean

Class sizes are small enough for individualised attention

The staff is qualified and well-trained

The school has an open door policy. Parents are allowed to observe at any time

The center adheres to all public licensing policies

Teachers and administrators happily answer questions or concerns

Getting Started: Tips for Success

You recognize the many positive benefits of a developmental swim program and you're ready to get started. Now what? The first step, of course, is selecting a high-quality swim program. Do some research on the programs in your area, but recognize that swim programs can vary considerably in quality.

Get recommendations from other parents. Look for a school that has friendly, qualified staff, as well as clean facilities and warm water. Nothing dampens your child's enthusiasm more quickly than frigid water. Visit the center and ask lots of questions.

Once you've found a swim school that you feel comfortable with, share your enthusiasm for the water with your child. Go swimming a few times before lessons start to help your child become comfortable in the water. In this section, we'll discuss other strategies for getting the most from swim lessons.

Inspire Confidence

Your child's approach to the water is unique, and is largely dependent on temperament and previous experiences. Some tots seem fearless and take to the water quickly. Other children are more timid and may need gentle encouragement. In both cases, your child looks to you for cues on how to respond to the water.

Take a calm, confident approach. Your child will pick up on any fears you might have about the water, so it's important to address those fears first. Pick a swim teacher that you feel comfortable with and share any fears. Alternatively, if you fear the water or worry that you lack the patience for the task, ask your partner or even a trusted grandparent to take your child to swim lessons.

Watch your child closely to monitor her comfort level with the water. For the first three years of life, your little one understands more words than she can communicate. This inability to adequately express feelings and needs can result in tantrums and frustration, both in and out of the water. Give your full attention and understanding and respond quickly to feelings of insecurity. Through gentle, confident touch, your young child learns attachment and feels reassured and secure.

Avoid Sleep and Meal Times

Any parent knows that a tired, hungry baby is a sure-fire recipe for tantrums and meltdowns. Be sure to schedule lessons at a time when baby is fresh. Swimming is hard work, so bring a drink and snack for your little one to eat afterwards.



Offer Flexibility

One of the most challenging aspects of teaching young children is their unpredictability. One day, your little one dives enthusiastically into the water. The next day, she clings to your legs and refuses to get in the pool. Rejoice in your child's moments of success and confidence, but don't worry too much about off-days. Your baby or toddler's emotions can be tricky. Sometimes a little smile shows uncertainty, while at other times, it means, "I'm ready for more." Your close observation provides the clues you need to make accurate assessments for the very best results.

Be prepared to accommodate the swings in emotional readiness that occur from day to day. Make lessons fun, but don't push until your child is ready. If your child seems overwhelmed by an activity, move on to something else and try again another time. Don't engage in a power struggle, which will reduce your child's trust and stall growth. Instead, continue to offer nurturing, patient support and spend regular time in the water. Soon, your child's confidence will increase and you'll see fewer moments of hesitation.

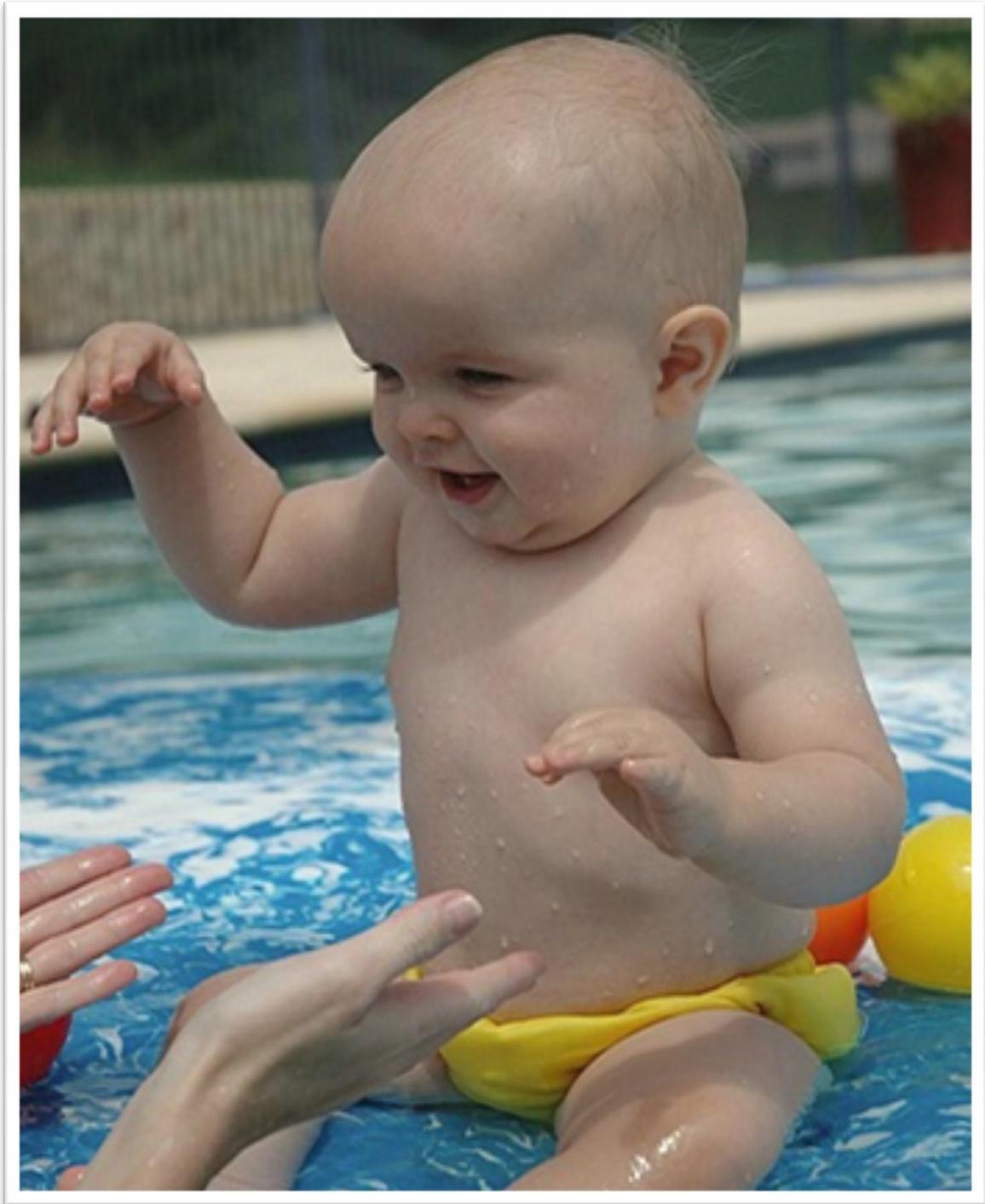
Make a Commitment

Just like crawling, walking and running, swimming is a loco-motor skill that requires plenty of practice to master. If you attend one 30-minute lesson each week for a year, that's only 26 hours of instruction to master a skill as challenging as running and with a whole new breathing pattern. Schedule lessons for a time when you can consistently attend to make the most of your time in the water.

Spend as much time as you can at the pool, in addition to your regular lessons. Practice the skills you learned at lessons, but don't forget to have fun. Make your water play a joyful, happy experience. Regular unstructured opportunities to play in the water will increase your child's confidence and accelerate progress.

It's important for your child to master different aquatic environments so be sure to spend time in other watery places such as playing in different pools and at the beach.





Trust

Keep your word and only do as you say you will do. Carefully read your child's expression and body language. Rely on the teacher's experience and your own best judgment to decide what's right for your child on any given day.





Allow Exploration

Babies use their senses to understand the world around them. They are eager to learn and will focus intently on objects--tasting, touching, smelling, feeling and listening-- in an effort to learn.

Balancing on objects, ducking under, reaching for this and that, learning to cope with falling off and climbing back up are all part of the learning experience.

Learning to swim is a wonderful sensory experience. Allow your baby time to touch and explore to make the most of this experience.





Stay Close

As your baby begins to understand that she is separate from you, she may become anxious when you're out of sight. This is a normal and predictable part of your baby's development and comes about because she does not yet understand that objects and people that are out of sight can return. Consider it a security device by Mother Nature to keep your adventurous little one safe.

This state of anxiety can last until your toddler is around three to three and a half years of age (and even longer for some children). Her inability to happily separate just yet does not mean that she is not well adjusted, in fact being securely attached to her primary caregiver is perfectly normal. In time she will have the confidence to interact with the world without needing you right there.

Depending on your child's age and the format of your lessons, you may be asked to stay in the pool with your little one. Stay in the pool or at least, within eye sight, if your child seems anxious. Give her the love and support that she needs and she will build the confidence to go it alone. Staying in the water with your toddler until she is emotionally ready to



separate from you and capable of taking direction from others will eliminate much stress and many tears. You will also reap the rewards of learning to safely guide your child in the water as well as prolonging this valuable time of bonding.

Once your teacher suggests it's time for your little tot to go it alone be sure to stay in sight, come back quickly at first, gradually increasing the amount of time you are standing back from the pool. Once she has settled in, sit back, relax and chat with the other parents in the class. Your child will pick up on your concerns so try to look calm and nonchalant (even if you don't feel that way). Your calm response lets your child know that everything is okay.

Sit near if she wants to see you. If she is still a little clingy, use very short term distractions that allow you to move back from the pool for a minute or two. Try comments, such as *"mummy's just going to get a tissue – I will be right back"* or *"Mummy's just going to dry her hands",* *"daddy is just drying his feet"* etc.





Encourage Independence

As baby grows and becomes more independent in her daily life, she'll seek more independence in the water, as well. As she heads into her second year of life, she may become more assertive and opinionated. This burgeoning independence can cause many a headache as you struggle to keep your tot safe. Young children long for freedom without having yet developed good judgement or the skills to stay safe.

When you see this yearning for freedom, loosen your hold and allow her the space to explore this new world. Be ever vigilant. Her desire to explore will be well beyond her ability. Without careful supervision, her lack of experience and poor peripheral vision can be a recipe for disaster in the water.

Part of managing her desire to explore will be gently and safely allowing her to experience the consequences of her actions. If, for example, she gets too close to the edge of the pool, she may fall in. Stay close to guide her back to safety until she acquires the skills to move freely through water. Allow your little one to make some choices and discover the results of those choices. For example, your little one may jump too far from the side only to struggle to return to the wall. Let her work at it for a second or two and then gently guide her back. You can bet that next time, she won't jump so far. Experience is the best teacher!

Above all else, view her struggle for mastery of her world as a healthy part of her development. Through this process, she'll learn that her actions have an influence on the world around her.

Promote Learning

As we discussed in the first section, swim lessons provide a wonderful setting for hands-on learning. Take advantage of this time to promote language, cognitive development and motor skills. Below are some of the skills your child will learn, as well as tips to increase learning.

Language Skills

Young children have an innate ability to soak up and learn language. Talk with your little one throughout swim lessons about what you're doing, seeing or feeling. Use a calm, happy voice. Below are a few more tips to promote language skills:

- Use rich vocabulary to describe the water. Use words like tickly, soft, cool, warm and wet.
- Blow bubbles, splash and ask baby to imitate you.
- Name colours in your instruction "pick up the red ball" "catch the blue ring" to reinforce knowledge of colors.
- Sing silly songs like "Five Little Ducks" or "I'm a little teapot."
- Sharpen baby's listening skills by pointing out the noises she hears. Say, "Listen to the water splashing," or "hear the bubbles."
- Use animation and exaggerated facial expressions to attract interest and promote language learning.





I'm all attention!



Following Directions

Kids are mostly impulsive, with little experience. They haven't had a great deal of opportunity to discover that actions have consequences. Use your time in swim lessons to teach your child to stop, look and listen. Here's how:

- Hand signals and verbal commands are a great way to teach your child to always wait for your permission before entering the water.
- Stand close, catch your child's attention by making sure she has eye contact with you while you give directions.
- Be congruent; the expression on your face, the tone of your voice and your gestures all need to be sending the same message: "Mummy said "stop", her face looks like she means "stop" and the tone of her voice tells me that she means business!"





Social Skills

Swimming lessons are a wonderfully nurturing environment to provide lots of safe interaction for developing social skills. Very young children lack the language and self-perception to share or engage in conversations. Between the ages of three and four, though, children can begin to share, take turns and talk with one another. Here are a few ways to incorporate social skills training into swim lessons:

- Give specific directions. Show your child where to line up and how to wait for a turn. Give an auditory or visual cue so your child knows her turn is coming.
- Give your child specific strategies for sharing and taking turns. For example, when your child wants a turn with a toy, teach her to 1) say the other child's name to get her attention, 2) ask for a turn. If the other child hasn't finished playing, she can find a different toy or ask someone else.
- Model sharing and turn taking. How well do you do at taking turns at the supermarket, waiting for a red light or talking with another adult? Your child is learning from you even when you're not aware of it. Talk to children respectfully and use "please" and "thank you" when making requests.



- Monitor your child carefully. Because social skills are developing, there may be times when she feels tired or overwhelmed with the company. When she's ready, let her mix. When she's not, allow her a little space away from the crowd.
- Call attention to the fact that you take turns too. Don't be afraid to admit that even you sometimes have a hard time waiting your turn.
- Sharing and turn taking is hard for young children. Show empathy and patience and praise your child's best efforts. With your gentle encouragement, she will learn to work cooperatively with others and resolve conflict in a peaceful way.





Understanding about time, distance and space

Through play and exploration your tot begins to understand about time, distance and her position in space relative to other objects. Water is a wonderful medium to enhance this development, just watch as she works out how far to reach mummy, that toy or the pool edge?

Her thinking skills are tested over and over as she makes decisions such as *"If I jump in now can I reach that edge?"*

Understanding her position relative to other objects is an important part of learning about herself and to develop her positional vocabulary. Before she can follow directions such as *"stand over here"* and *"line up over there"* she must first understand where she is and how those directions relate to her.

As adults we take this ability for granted, but your tot will need time to process this information and work out how to respond. Be patient and supportive and allow her to make these discoveries rather than always directing her movements.

Your job is to offer encouragement, keep her safe and be there when she wants and needs you.





Discovering cause and effect

Babies and toddlers who have lots of time in the water gain experience in water. They learn how it feels to fall or jump in. With regular and consistent practice, they learn to respond by taking a breath, grabbing, pulling up for air, turning, floating or wiggling and kicking through the water.

Parents of babies and toddlers in swim lessons often have a greater understanding of the dangers of water and of how quickly their tot can find herself in trouble in water. They can also have a more realistic view of their child's ability than those who do not regularly see their children in water.





Have Fun

You're both going to be learning a lot during your time in the water, but don't forget to enjoy yourself. Take a playful approach and don't be afraid to be silly. Your child loves it when you make funny faces and do silly things. Sharing happy moments brings you closer together and increases intimacy. Laughter triggers healthy physical changes in the body, including strengthening the immune system and reducing stress.

Learning to swim is a serious business, but always remember to have fun!



Teaching Basic Skills

Teaching a baby or young child to swim is a joyful, thrilling and sometimes frustrating project that can take many months or even years. Think of it as a two-step process. Step one is all about helping your child become comfortable with the water. You'll spend lots of time discovering how to take a breath, move through the water and respond to slip ins.

Soon, she can float, turn around and kick back to the side of the pool. Once she reaches the side, she learns to hold onto the edge of the pool and monkey along the edges to the steps. These skills are absolutely critical because in an emergency they might save her life.

The second stage of swim lessons doesn't occur until your child's limbs become longer and stronger. Typically, children don't enter the second stage of swim lessons until around age three or four. During this stage, children begin to learn formal strokes, while still building upon the previously learned skills.

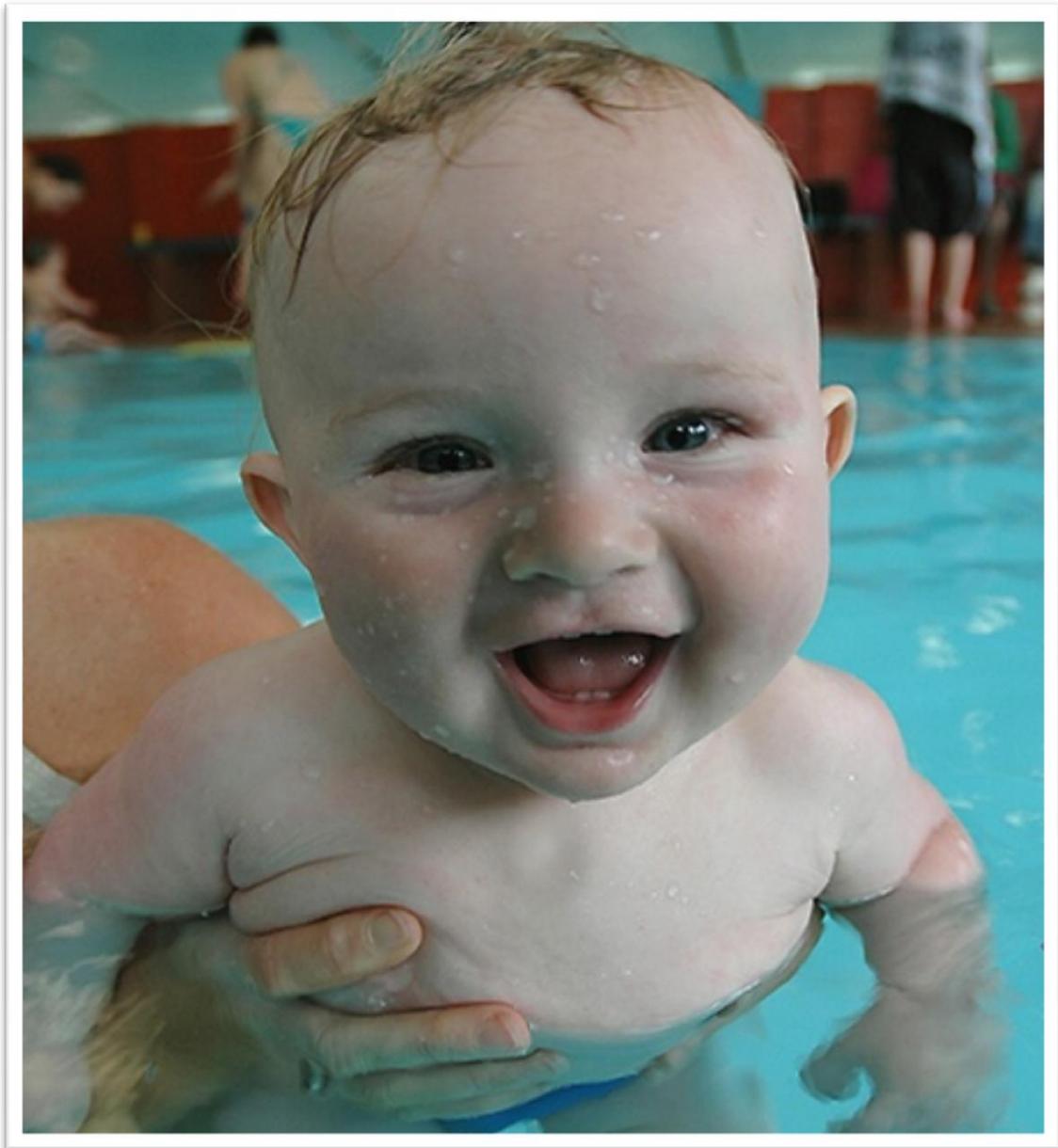
First Steps

Whether your child is a young baby or an older toddler, you'll want to make the first lessons as positive as possible. Stay with your child and talk about everything that is happening. Follow the teacher's cues and directions and don't be in a hurry to submerge under water. During the first few lessons, your baby is learning to trust you. All later success depends on building a strong foundation of trust.

Tips to avoid water phobias

1. Have contact with the water every day, at least in the beginning, even if this means daily bath time.
2. Make water fun, nothing helps us to relax more than having a good time, so turn bath and pool time in to fun time.
3. Use your imagination. Pretend to be a splashy whale or a rainy cloud. Sing along to sprinkling and splashing actions, music is therapeutic.
4. Splash, splash and more splashes! Clap your hands under water to celebrate. Fill up container with holes to make rain. Fill the bath with pouring toys such as cups and plastic dishes.
5. Give dolly or a favourite toy a bath each day, encourage your little tot to play splashy games with dolly.
6. Start small and build up. Just little splashes and sprinkles to start with and gradually increase the amount of water and frequency as tolerance to water increases.
7. Know when to back off. If your little tot worries about the sprinkling the stop for today and play another bath game. But do start again tomorrow (or later this bath time). Remember start small and build up.
8. Use distractions between sprinkles. The routine may be: Sprinkle and clap then "look at dolly kick her legs" then sprinkle again and talk about a toy "this is a big yellow boat". The routine is, sprinkle – distract, sprinkle – distract.
9. Play first, soap later. Avoid soap stinging the eyes by playing your sprinkling games before you add the soap.
10. Don't be afraid to sprinkle water over the ears and face. It won't do any harm as long as it's fun. If you are concerned about ears you should first check with your own Doctor or Ear, Nose and Throat Specialist





Moving smoothly

Smooth, slow movements are important to help your child feel balanced and secure. Hold your child close to the armpits to help her feel safe. Holding her lower on the torso will give the sensation of toppling over.

If your tot feels insecure, she'll attempt to right herself by arching her back and neck and twisting her body around. If your child does this, offer calming words and hold her close so she feels more secure.

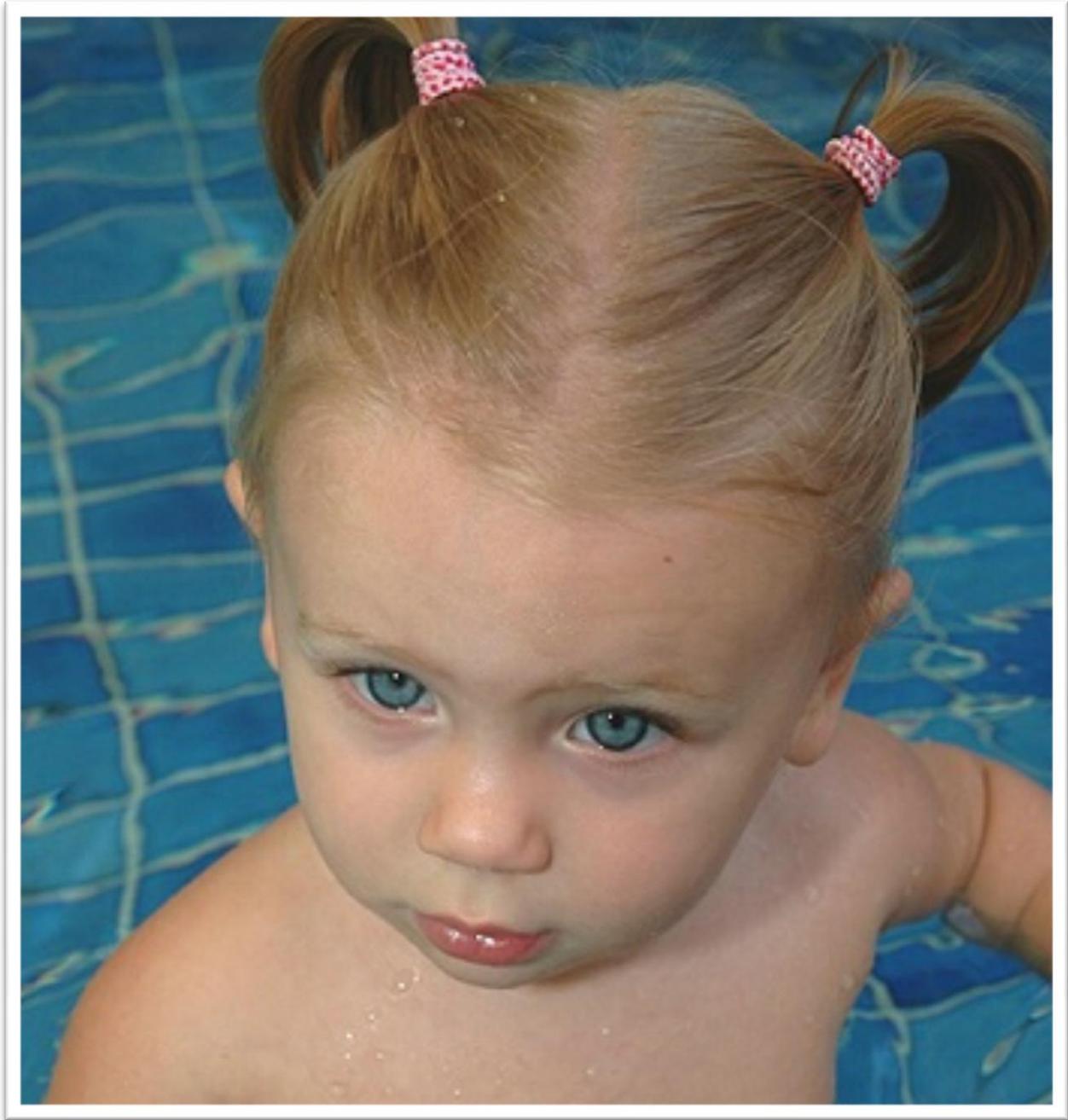


Learning to balance in water is fun

Throughout her first year of life, most of your baby's physical growth occurs in her torso. As her muscle tone develops, she will have the strength to first support her balance in a sitting position, and eventually stand, walk, run and jump.

Good balance is essential for daily tasks, sitting, crawling, standing and walking. Use the motion of the water to enhance your baby's balance. Place baby on a "wobbly mat" if your pool has one. Hold her gently with one hand and allow her to experiment with the movement. If baby falls over, smile and gently help her back up. These activities offer vestibular stimulation and encourage problem solving.





The water can be over stimulating for some children

Of course, every child is different. While most children love balancing on wobbly mats, some might feel insecure. Respect your tot's need to be on solid ground. If she seems frightened or insecure, don't force mat activities. Instead, move to a different activity and slowly desensitize her. Intersperse other activities with a quick touch of the mat, then remove your tot before she becomes upset. Aim for lots of small, quick contacts, gradually building her contact time until she is happy to touch, sit, climb through and walk on the mat.





When Should My Baby Submerge?

Having spent the first nine months of life floating in your tummy, babies under six months are usually very comfortable under water and can happily submerge. Most of your baby's early movements are random, a result of primitive reflexes that will help her to survive. Over time, these primitive reflexes become integrated with conscious movements.

For the first few months of life, the "gag reflex," a reflexive contraction of the back of the throat can stop water entering her airway when submerged. By around six months of age, this reflex is usually not as strong and offers less protection from swallowing water.





Rather than rely on reflexes, it is preferable that your baby learns to take a breath on cue before submersions in a safe and controlled environment. Teaching your baby to take a breath on cue is as simple as one, two, three. Here's how:

Each day in the bath, take a little cup of warm water. Say "ready go". On go, say your baby's name as you gently sprinkle water over her face. In no time, she'll blink her eyes and take an inward breath in anticipation of water sprinkling over her face. Don't overdo it, though, or you'll potentially turn her against the water. Remember, *just three times through and that will do.*



Cues and Submersions

Once your baby can take a breath on cue, it's time to begin submersions. Timing is tricky here: It's important that the time allowed between the cue and the submersion is just right for baby. Take too long and she may not associate the cue with the submersion. On the other hand, moving too quickly might startle the baby and not leave enough time to take a breath.

Watch closely to ensure you're allowing exactly the right amount of time between the cue and the submersion. Move smoothly and slowly. Jerky movements can startle baby, setting off the Moro reflex, which causes baby to inhale water and choke. Rely on an experienced teacher to help you manage the first submersions. With practice, you'll soon be an old pro.

Babies are Nose Breathers

From birth until around six or seven months of age, babies prefer to breathe through their noses rather than their mouths. At this age, babies have yet to gain full muscle control in their mouth and their oral airway is comparatively smaller than the airway of an adult. The size of the infant's tongue in relation to the cavity of the mouth is larger than an adult's and generally occupies most of the space in the infant's mouth. All of these factors contribute to baby breathing through her nose, rather than her mouth.

Some babies are ready for submersion and will not swallow water even though their eyes and mouth stay open. If your baby keeps her mouth open, listen for a breath and watch the chest rise to ensure she's ready to submerge.





Teaching Your Baby to Lie on Her Back

As your baby becomes more upright, usually at around six months of age, primitive forces will drive her to roll over on her tummy in preparation for crawling, standing and walking. Once happy to lie still on her back, she now twists and struggles whenever you try to change her nappy (diaper).

Just as you use lots of distraction during nappy changes to keep baby happy, you'll need lots of gentle distraction to convince her to lay still on her back in the water. Provide plenty of head support when you attempt back floating. Start by placing her head on your shoulder. Ever so gently, smoothly and slowly lower your body until the back of her head lies softly in the water.

As she relaxes, allow her to lie out in the water. At the first sign of tension or struggle, gently raise her into a more upright position until she relaxes again.

Show baby toys, sing songs or gently swish her back and forth or from side to side to distract her. Slowly, she'll learn to relax on her back. Repeat the process five or six times through, two or three days each week. Soon, she'll enjoy lying on her back.





5 steps to back floating

Once baby is comfortable with lying on her back, you can begin teaching her how to float. Follow this five step process:

1. Support both the head and shoulders against your body.
2. Gradually lower your body until water trickles into your tot's ears.
3. Slowly and smoothly slide your tot off your shoulders and into the water, all the while supporting the head with both your hands.
4. If your tot remains relaxed, slowly and gently remove one hand and support her head with just the other hand.
5. If she is still relaxed, change support from hand to hand, gradually leaving more and more unsupported time until your little tot is happily floating on her own.

Be prepared to move back a step or two every now and again if baby shows signs of stress or discomfort. Two steps forward and one step back will soon see your tot back-floating!



Diving under

Once children learn to submerge and float, a natural step is diving under. Start on the stairs of the pool. Set brightly colored rings or toys on the stairs. Place them so your child must go under the water just a few inches to retrieve them. As your child gains confidence, slowly place the rings deeper into the water. Show her how to kick her legs to go deeper.

If your child is struggling, ask her if she'd like a little help. Place your hands gently on her back or side and give her a slight nudge. Never push down on a child's head or force her under, which will frighten her and slow progress. Always follow your child's cues and put safety first.

Safety

High-quality swim lessons for young children have been shown to effectively reduce the risk of drowning. However, even a young child who is a very good swimmer can still get into trouble. Below are a few tips for keeping your child safer in the water.

Safer Supervision

- An adult should always stay within arms-reach of children, even if your child can swim, stay close by.
- Monitor children vigilantly. Don't talk on the phone, walk away or read a book.
- Take a break from swimming at least once each hour with older children. Younger children should rest every 30 minutes.
- Teach your child to wait for an adult before entering the pool. Home pools should have regularly checked pool fences and self closing gates.

Be alert for signs of water drinking

Even once your baby is happily taking a breath and submerging, always stay alert for signs that she is drinking the pool water. Choking, spluttering and vomiting are all signs that baby may be drinking water. A distended tummy or very wet nappies can also signal water drinking.

This is unhealthy, and while there are few if any recorded cases during swimming lessons, could lead to water intoxication. **Water intoxication, or water poisoning** happens when the normal balance of electrolytes in the body is thrust outside of safe limits.

An imbalance of electrolytes in the cells can happen when too much water enters the body. This imbalance can cause irregular heartbeat, allow fluid to enter the lungs, cause seizures, coma and ultimately death.

Baby swimming is safe as long as parents and teachers are alert to the signs of water swallowing. Avoid putting baby underwater repeatedly in a small space of time, and reduce or stop submersions if water swallowing is suspected.

Enjoy the Process

Watching a young child or baby swim is such a gratifying experience. Your baby will grow to love her time in the water. Learning to swim is a huge confidence builder for young children. As baby learns to swim, she's also learning so many other skills. Be patient, move slowly and follow your baby's cues. In no time, she'll be an expert swimmer!





Don't forget the dads

Learning to swim often becomes an activity for the child's primary carer, a person who may have an abundance of time with the child. Consider how valuable swim lessons can be for the parent with the least contact with your child. Many swim schools offer weekend or evening lessons for this very reason.

Frequently Asked Questions

Below you'll find the answers to questions parents commonly ask about developmental swim lessons.

At what age can my child start in a swim program?

Babies can join a water awareness program from four to six months of age, provided you are comfortable with the quality of the program and teaching, as well as the quality and temperature of the water (see "what to look for in a good swim program" for more information).

How many lessons per week should my child have?

The more time you spend in the water, the faster your child will progress. Remember, though, that children can only do in water that which they can do on land. For example, a baby who is not yet walking does not have the motor development to kick efficiently. They will however benefit from the exercise of trying.

How long will it take for my child to learn to swim?

Every child is different so there is no hard and fast rule. Temperament and personality play a part. Children who are naturally fearless usually progress more quickly than those with a more timid personality. A child's motor development, focus and attentiveness also play a role. To help your child along, attend lessons consistently and provide gentle, supportive encouragement. In general, children who start swimming at a young age progress more quickly than those who start later. By age two and a half, many young swimmers can move through the water well enough to get back to the edge (of course, this doesn't reduce the need for adult supervision).

Does it matter if I take a break from lessons?

Your toddler's long term memory is still developing so it is important to attend lessons regularly, she can only learn to swim if she has plenty of time in the water. Besides, think of all the developmental and bonding benefits she will be missing from her swim experience.

When is my child's swimming good enough?

When placed under stress or pressure, we tend to forget skills. The more skilled children are, the more likely they are to survive an emergency. The ability to paddle or kick around a backyard pool is not nearly enough. And, swim lessons offer many benefits besides water safety so children can continue lessons indefinitely. As well as learning to swim you are helping your child set a healthy habit by participating in regular exercise.

Does it matter if we use floatation aids and goggles?

Much of learning to swim is about your child understanding how her body reacts in water. "If I jump in I go under", "If I lay still on my back I float", "If I stay calm my eyes will soon become comfortable in the water" etc. Floatation aids can be fun and if used sparingly can help to build confidence. However floatation aids can also give children and parents a false sense of security. Young children do not necessarily understand the difference between swimming with and without a floatation aid or goggles. They do not know that just because they were having fun wearing an aid with mummy and daddy in the pool yesterday, that today they can do the same without an aid and when no one is watching.

Most people who drown were not dressed for, nor intended to go swimming. It makes sense that all children learn how to respond in water without the assistance of floatation devices or goggles. Have fun with aids but be sure to allow plenty of time in the water for your child to learn how to respond without the use of an aid.



Resources

From Birth to Five Years - Children's developmental Progress-
Mary D. Sheridan

The Baby Swim Book - Cinda L. Kochen, PhD and Janet McCabe, BA

The Family Virtues Guide - Linda Kavelin Popov

The Human Mind - Robert Winston

Human instinct - Robert Winston

A Mind at a Time - Mel Levine M.D

How Babies Think - Alison Gopnik, PhD, et al.

