



for more information about water babies please contact head office on:
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FRANCHISE FOCUS

A FAIRY TALE STORY

The baby swimming sector has increased by an incredible 85 per cent in just two years.

Alison Ledger talks to the couple that pioneered this trend and two of their franchisees who have chosen to take the plunge with Water Babies

Investment level: £21,000 + VAT

Phone: Paul Thompson 01297 20757

Franchise classification: Baby swimming

AFTER A tropical storm destroyed their home in the Caribbean, Jess and Paul Thompson returned to London to start afresh. Rather than continuing as a chartered surveyor, Paul opted for a more rewarding route, and trained as a baby-swimming teacher. He explains: 'When we moved to Yorkshire in 2002, we realised that outside of London and the South East, there were very few structured classes around, so we decided to launch Water Babies.'

The pair hoped to have 30 clients in their first few months. However, within just two weeks, more than 100 had been enlisted. Paul says: 'Ever since [we started], we have been bombarded with calls. We never thought that the business was going to become the animal it is now.'

Interestingly, Paul, now 40, only had a vague awareness of franchising and first considered this option when family and friends asked if they could set up franchises in their home towns. Before he knew it, two pilot franchises were being trialled in Edinburgh and Bristol. Since 2004, Paul has recruited 13 franchisees, making it the UK's largest swim school with more than 60 instructors teaching more than 6,000 babies a week.

Water Babies is different from traditional swimming classes. The teaching methods used help the children to feel at ease swimming both above and below the water's surface from a very early age – one instructor's child was just two days old. Very young babies have a natural reflex enabling them to hold their breath under water. They also have a real affinity with water, having spent their first nine months suspended in fluid. As time progresses, this familiarity decreases and babies can develop a fear of water if not exposed to it regularly.

Paul says: 'Children cannot swim on water until they are three or four, but they can

BUSINESS Franchise

BRITISH FRANCHISE ASSOCIATION MAGAZINE



doggy-paddle short distances under water. We teach them water safety and breath-holding techniques through word association. Our chief goal is to make the babies feel confident in water.'

However, as with all great business ideas, there are of course a growing number of competitors, so how can Water Babies keep ahead of the game? Paul answers: 'We've professionalised the industry. Baby swimming is unregulated and we have worked very hard with the Swimming Teachers' Association (STA) to devise a national curriculum and establish some standards in the industry.'

Water Babies is a home-based franchise where franchisees hire local pools, which they pay for at the end of each term. Clients' pay upfront, allowing franchisees to remain cash positive. The model has a low start-up cost and within six months, most franchisees have earned their franchisee fee back.

The franchisees

You might think that no job could be better than working as a graphic designer for Prada – however, Steph Girard, 33, will tell you otherwise. She explains: 'My career now is

far more rewarding than any previous jobs I've had. It's a whole different ball game.'

Steph attended her first baby swimming class with her son Antoine when he was four months old. She says: 'I was so excited during the class, more excited than Antoine! I made some enquiries into becoming an instructor and the idea of franchising was mentioned to me. Initially, I thought don't be ridiculous! But it planted a seed.'

Steph and her husband knew they wanted a better quality of life and after a lot of research, the couple moved to Devon to operate Water Babies in the West Country.



Steph Girard



While Steph runs the business, her husband works part-time and looks after the children.

On a typical day, Steph teaches four lessons back to back over two hours. The rest of the day she spends doing administration work, such as preparing newsletters or photo shoots. She says: 'I now have taken someone on board to help me with the admin and I can always work in the evenings while my children are in bed.'

Sometimes taking on a franchise can leave franchisees feeling out of their depth, but Steph emphatically praises the professional training and support she received. She says: 'The training is excellent as we practice and practice every technique until everyone has nailed it.'

To become a teacher you must attend a 10-day intensive course, and a flexible training programme which approximately takes three to four weeks to complete. Many Water Babies franchisees are new mothers, but it is a full-time job from the word go.

Steph continues: 'Paul and Jess warned me of the onslaught of work that I would face in the early months. They were extremely realistic and stressed that I would be swamped with work. Because the franchisors



Paul Thompson with Water Babies franchisees

WHY WATER WORKS

- The emphasis is on strengthening the bond between parent and child.
- German and Finnish studies have found that babies who attended swimming in their first year had advanced intelligence, motor development, social skills and muscle control.
- The classes are also a physical workout strengthening the baby's heart, lungs and respiratory system, which in turn aid development of the brain.
- Regular swimming can improve eating and sleeping patterns and ward off future breathing complaints, such as asthma.
- The course is also ideal for those with special needs, such as Downs Syndrome and Cerebral Palsy.



Paul Thompson

are so fantastic, I felt fully prepared when we launched the franchise.'

A prime example of how the baby swimming market has rocketed is Bryony Johnstone's franchise. For the regions of Bristol and Bath, she has 900 babies on her books, and currently 550 on a waiting list. 'It's a phenomenal amount, but it's a great position to be in,' says Bryony, 37.

In 2003, Bryony took on the franchise because she was enamoured with the idea after seeing Paul teach. She says: 'The initial set-up process was very easy because of the package my sister Jess and her husband Paul offer. They practically give you a piece of paper, tell you to go and copy it and adapt it to your market. Together we are always reviewing and thinking of new ideas on how to improve the business.'

However, the process wasn't always so easy. Bryony admits: 'I'm a single parent and many franchisees have partners to help with the business, so it has been unbelievably hard work. It is difficult to juggle my work/life balance but that's what makes me tick.'

As the business has expanded, Bryony teaches less and manages more. 'I love running my own business and also teaching a few hours a week. It's still important to be in the water to stay in touch with what your teachers and clients need. I love teaching, it's a skill I didn't realise I had.'

Bryony considers: 'What is the best thing about my job? I love it all! I love the challenge and the satisfaction I get when I see toddlers swimming. It's still a moving moment. I'm very proud of what we've achieved and I see that my teachers genuinely love their jobs. I'm very lucky to have been given this opportunity.' ■