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Water babies

IT'S a fantastic sight – a newborn moving through the water as if to the manner born – which of course they are.

Having so recently emerged from a fluid-filled world, new babies come complete with an affinity with water which means they naturally hold their breath when they go beneath the surface.

It's a sight Paul Thompson sees regularly for he has been teaching babies to swim for several years and is now setting up classes in Yorkshire. Instead of stepping timidly into the water at the more conventional age of four or five, Paul's pupils are doggy paddling under water before they can even sit up on dry land.

His youngest ever pupil was just five days old. He said: "For a tiny baby swimming is exhilarating and has beneficial effects far beyond the fun of the classes. Babies are generally confident and unafraid in water."

They can learn vital life-saving skills such as turning onto their back or swimming to the surface following a sudden submersion.

Most babies are brought to the classes after they have had their vaccinations but, says Paul, parents do not have to wait until then.

He said: "Thousands of babies across the world have been taken swimming prior to being fully immunised with no harmful effects. Experts say children can be taken swimming at any age in a well managed, chlorinated pool that is warm enough for them."

Babies do not have the strength or co-ordination to swim on the surface of the water until they are aged about three but doggy paddling under water gives them a complete physical workout and studies say it can improve eating, sleeping, and co-ordination.

Paul said: "It is not about producing the next Olympic swimmer, it is about teaching water confidence and safety. At least one parent is in the water with their baby and in the first lesson I teach them how to hold them in the water."

We also teach the babies a word association which they pick up very quickly. We say 'ready, go' before the children are submerged. Within a very short time they recognise the words

When should your child learn to swim? How about at five days old? Jayne Dawson reports



● **STARTING YOUNG:** Six-month-old Finn Hollingworth and his mother Amanda Hollingworth from Ilkley

FACTFILE

- Classes begin at various venues, including Leeds, Ilkley and Wetherby, in June and July. Call 01943 431 490 or 0779 6934 974 or e-mail waterbabies@swimbaby.co.uk for more details.
- Each weekly lesson lasts half an hour and a block of five costs £40.

and usually get very excited at what they know is about to happen." At the end of the first lesson each baby swims under water for a few seconds. Paul said: "During one of the classes we also get a photographer to come along and take pictures of the babies swimming underwater."

The principles of baby swimming were pioneered more than 30 years ago by a Russian who successfully raised his daughter in a warm water tank after she was born two and a half months prematurely, though most parents would probably not want to go that far. Paul, who lives in Ilkley with his wife Jess and daughter Imani, 4, turned to teaching swimming after originally qualifying as a surveyor and working as the development director of a housing association.

He and Jess, also a teacher, decided to give up their jobs after Imani was born and went to live on a remote island in the Caribbean where Paul, also a

master scuba diving instructor, taught diving.

Jess said: "We did go swimming an awful lot. Imani would cling to my back and occasionally we would swim to the mouth of the bay to greet Paul's dive boat when it came in."

Eventually their village was destroyed by a hurricane and the couple moved back to England. They lived in London for a while and Paul looked after the baby while Jess worked.

He said: "I took Imani to swimming classes and became really impressed with the effect it had on the babies so I began to think about teaching it myself."

Paul worked as a teacher for a London company before the family moved to Yorkshire.

Jess said: "We just decided we wanted to live in this area. We saw Ilkley and thought it looked just right for us."

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