



press clippings

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My local gym has a magic swimming pool. Really. Over the past year, I've watched a handful of non-swimming children – including my nephew and my youngest – barely take a deep breath before they plunge in like ducklings, one after the other, and swim like they were born to do it. My six-year-old LouLou told me how she did it. "You told me to take my armbands off, so I did. And then I swam."

OK, so it's not a magic pool. The truth is, of course, that any child can get into any pool and swim, if he kicks his legs and flaps his arms – it's just the belief that stands between him and the deep blue sea. It takes a bit of muscle development to get the smallest ones flapping and kicking effectively enough, but that's the same as sitting up, rolling over and learning to walk. It just takes time – and that means lots of trips to the shallow end, a few water toys and a happy, playful parent.

If anyone had told me that seven years ago, when I was dragging Elly, my eldest, out of the changing rooms, her in tears, me in those fetching plastic shoe wraps, I would have called the NSPCC. Children will drown unless you spend at least \$60 on a course taught by a qualified teacher, I thought.

"Teaching a baby to swim is a subtle, long-term process, which requires interpersonal sensitivity, altruistic motivation, insight, skill and joy," says Babyswimming.com, a website dedicated to the art of teaching little ones to swim. "Patient parents who are able to enjoy the moment, and at the same time stay the course, will rediscover the virtue of water and its ability to nourish their baby's entire being." I was with them.

I should have trusted Elly. She had delivered herself in the birthing pool, with the midwife only guiding her head out and upwards, from

where she swam directly to the source of her first meal. I'd hoped to remind her of this when I took her to Water Babies at three months old, but by that time the earth mother in me was already a bag of new parent nerves, and I projected them onto my fretful daughter as effortlessly as if I were breastfeeding them direct. It was the acoustics, I decided, that had reduced her to a banshee as we hopped around the un-chlorinated pool singing *Here We Go Round The Mulberry Bush*.

No way was it anything to do with my intense discomfort at singing in public for the first time since primary school – in the company of my super-confident pop-star pal and her easy-going six-month-old.

Finally, at age three, I got Elly into the pool, and handed her to a pretty tongue-pierced athlete called Bec, who brought out some flippers and transformed what had looked like a school of fish leaping towards a bucketful of leftovers into a calm lagoon of mermaids and mermen. My heart sang. Elly swam, her confidence catapulted into the deep end by a neat trick and a pair of black plastic feet.

Strip all this back, and you've got parental anxiety mixed with a splash of consumer spin. Swimming teachers must have watched the rise in hothousing, their eyes cashing up like something out of a *Tom And Jerry* cartoon. Now every child has swimming lessons as a matter of course, and if yours isn't swimming by the age of seven, you might as well admit that you didn't take him to baby music classes either.

As parents, most of us know that the brain grows more rapidly in the first year of life than at any other time, that every action a baby makes stimulates his growth, strengthening nerve fibres and making him function more efficiently. "In fact, recent research has shown that some

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Text Gilly Smith & Amanda Squire
Photography Patrick James Michel

babies who fail to acquire certain simple physical movements in their first year can demonstrate later difficulties with reading, spelling and concentration," Jess Thompson of Water Babies told me, quoting *The Institute For Neuro-Physiological Psychology*.

Water Babies is the company that trains teachers all over the country to teach babies to swim underwater. "Babies are born with a natural reflex (the mammalian dive-reflex), which means they instinctively close their vocal chords to prevent water entering their respiratory tract when their face is immersed in water," says Jess. "This reflex is particularly strong at birth and diminishes as the baby gets older, although through learning to respond to voice commands (on which the programme is based), children of all ages quickly recreate this response."

Children don't have the strength or coordination to swim on the water's surface until they are about three or four, but, says Jess, with careful supervision and encouragement they can happily swim doggy-paddle under water from very early on.

Although early swimming can help ward off future breathing complaints like asthma, and helps babies with Down's syndrome or cerebral palsy improve their muscle development and coordination, it's splashing around with their parents that promotes the most confidence, and if you don't believe me, ask your parents if you had lessons.

The confidence they need to take the armbands or buoyancy vests off comes from knowing that swimming is about joining in with the bigger children, just as running around the park is to a toddler, that it's about play rather than competition. Your child will tell you when he's ready to take the plunge himself. It may not always be in words, but watch and you'll know. Just like you did when you stopped giving him a bottle at bedtime, when you replaced the trainer cup with a beaker and as you will when you let go of his bicycle saddle in the next couple of years.

TEACHING CHILDREN TO SWIM BABIES

At this age, 'swimming' simply means 'harmonious movement through the water', according to Rob McKay, who runs swimming schools for children of six months upwards in Florida. Although the American Pediatric Association (APA) says children under four are too young to start swimming, this really refers to 'proper' swimming, using recognised strokes and techniques.

Most baby swimming involves classes but there is no reason why you

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RESOURCES

FURTHER READING

- *Teach Your Child To Swim*, Usborne Parent's Guides, £5.99.
 - *Going Swimming* by Sarah Garland, Puffin Books, £4.99.
 - *Sally Goes Swimming* by Petrina Griffin, Roly Poly Books, £1.50.
 - *Teaching Infant And Preschool Aquatics*, Human Kinetics Europe Ltd, £11.95.
 - *Froggy Learns To Swim* by Jonathan London and Frank Remkiewicz, Puffin, £5.84.
- To buy any of these books, visit our website at www.juniormagazine.co.uk/books

USEFUL WEBSITES

- www.waterbabies.co.uk Great website with details of Water Babies classes in Yorkshire, Bristol, Edinburgh, Milton Keynes and South Wales.
- www.babyexperiences.co.uk Go to the Baby Swimming section for information on places offering courses. You can also buy DVDs, books and worksheets on the subject online.
- www.nc.uk.net/safeswimming/parent/learning Practical advice and tips for parents.
- www.splashabout.net Good site for ordering swimming nappies and baby wetsuits.
- www.britishswimming.org Website for the Amateur Swimming Association with information on clubs, facilities and qualifications.
- www.swimmingnature.co.uk Excellent site with information of lessons and courses for children from six months (all year round including school holiday-fast-track tuition sessions).
- www.rospa.com/waterandleisuresafety/factsheets/children_swimming.htm For a factsheet on safety from The Royal Society For The Prevention Of Accidents.

should not take your baby into the pool, and doing so can be an extremely positive and beneficial experience. "During the first year of life, the brain is rapidly growing and developing, and movement in the water stimulates the balance system in the brain," explains Paul Thompson of Water Babies. "Swimming also exercises every muscle in the baby's body, and the water supports them so they are not fighting against gravity. It gives them a complete physical work out and strengthens the baby's cardio-respiratory system. The benefits of skin-to-skin contact (the kangaroo care method used with premature babies) is extremely beneficial."

Babies, however, are quick to pick up on fear so you need to be confident in the water yourself. It is also important for babies of six to 12 months that the pool is at least 32°C. Some local authority pools may be cooler than this, in which case your baby should wear a wetsuit.

According to NHS Direct, you no longer need to wait until your baby has been immunised before you take him swimming. However, it is wise to check with your doctor first.

TODDLERS, PRESCHOOL AND YOUNG CHILDREN

"No child has the physical strength to swim on the surface of the water until they are three or four years old," says Thompson, echoing the APA advice. "At this age it's more about water confidence." Some children will inevitably be anxious about swimming. In order to avoid this, make sure your child is fully prepared. Talk about swimming and read stories; emphasise fun rather than pressurising. It may help to let your child choose his own swimming gear, as he will enjoy this process of involvement. It is important not to leave too long between sessions; at this age twice a week is recommended.

Follow these simple techniques and tips to get your child confident in the water and start basic swimming:

- Thompson doesn't advocate the use of armbands, but says they may be beneficial for some children. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) says, it's fine for your child to wear armbands when she starts swimming, and over time, as she gets more confident, you can start to decrease the air in them, so that the support is less, before eventually removing them altogether.

- At this age, the emphasis should be on having fun in the water, which is the key to instilling confidence. He suggests blowing bubbles and making funny faces in the water, and making up fetch-and-chase games to get him to 'swim' to you, gradually increasing the distance over time. ▶