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THE WORLD'S FINEST PARENTING MAGAZINE

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in the swim

TAKE THE PLUNGE AND GET YOUR BABY SWIMMING:
IT IMPROVES SLEEP PATTERNS, STRENGTHENS
THE HEART AND ENHANCES AWARENESS

If the words 'baby' and 'swimming pool' spoken together fill you with dread, fret not. Long gone are the days when – so myth would have us believe – parents chucked their babies in at the deep end to see if they would sink or swim. Now it's all about bonding, says Amanda Walker, who teaches Infant Aquatics for Birthlight, which offers a holistic approach to yoga and water exercise for pregnancy, birth and baby. "Parent and baby are learning together and building confidence in the water," she says. "Most of all, we focus on enjoyment, rather than trying to get quick results."

The principles of baby swimming were pioneered in the 1960s by Igor Tjarkovsky, a Russian who actually raised his daughter in a warm water tank after she was born prematurely. His theory was that time spent in water enhances a baby's development dramatically. Swimming babies, he claimed, learn to crawl and walk much sooner than non-swimming babies, and by three months of age his subjects were at the ability level of a normal one-year-old. But Tjarkovsky's methods were widely criticised as being too forceful and taking babies to extremes.

Today, teachers combine some of his ideas with much gentler techniques. It is never too early, they say, to introduce your baby to the joys of water. Not only is she already familiar with an aquatic environment (she has been living in one for the past nine months after all), she is also equipped with something called a 'mammalian dive reflex', so for the first few months of her life, she will automatically hold her breath when underwater.

"We have had some parents bring their babies along when they are only days old," says Jess Thompson, who co-runs Water Babies with her partner Paul. "But most mothers prefer to wait until after their six-week check. We'd say the optimum time is when your baby is around two to three months old."

Research shows that swimming from birth promotes physical development, strengthens a baby's heart and lungs, enhances awareness and improves sleeping and eating patterns. Many parents of swimming babies claim they seem more lithe and muscular. Henry Williams has been swimming since he was three months old and, according to his father Guy, has a great physique for a 22-month-old. "He looks like a swimmer, with broad shoulders and long legs," says Guy, who plans to bring new arrival Finlay along in a few weeks' time. "And it's a lovely way for fathers to get involved with their babies when they are tiny."

Babies cannot swim as such – it is not until they are at least three years old that they have the strength and co-ordination to swim on top of the water, and even later that they learn specific strokes. But with supervision and encouragement, they are able to swim under the surface for very short periods. "For a tiny baby, dependent on others for every aspect of its life, this is both exhilarating and empowering," says Jess Thompson.

Fear only sets in as children get older. Baby swimming school Little Dippers ►



aims to introduce babies to the joys of water before that fear develops, by teaching them extraordinary life-saving skills – such as how to get onto their backs, turn around and get back to the side of the pool. “We don’t teach our babies swimming as such,” says founder Lauren Heston. “We teach them that if they do fall into the water, they don’t have to panic, because going underwater is part of their week.”

Parents who swim with their babies can also be confident they are laying down the foundations of a lifetime’s enjoyment of exercise. “These days babies are left in car seats and baby bouncers and don’t get much opportunity to flex and move their limbs,” says Amanda Walker. “Being in a weightless environment frees them up to do a variety of three-dimensional exercise, such as twists and stretches.”

What’s more, all this movement is having a positive effect on their developing brains. Neuroscientists now know that for the development of the higher functions of the brain, it is important to acquire a range of movements in the first year.

If you choose to take your baby to an infant swimming class, expect to follow a structured programme, which will involve some underwater work from the start. “We know parents only want to do things where both they and their baby are having a nice time. So there is a bit of playing, a bit of training and lots of singing,” says Lauren Heston.

Babies are never forced to do anything they object to. But just because your baby isn’t crying or visibly distressed doesn’t mean they’re happy. Be sensitive to more subtle signs. “If you can’t make eye contact with your baby, or they keep trying to look away, that is a sure sign they’re tired and have had enough,” says Amanda Walker.

For parents, it can be quite scary when your baby goes underwater for the first time, even though it will literally be for one second. “It was nerve-racking,” says Guy Williams. “The teacher asks you to be gentle and not to snatch them out of the water, but your instinct is to grab them and run.” The first time his son Henry went under, he came up looking a little bit shocked, says Guy. “But he seemed happy to do it the following week. And it really does seem to have built a sense of confidence and trust between us.”

If you wish to take your baby swimming, the main proviso is that the water is warm enough: at least 32°C for babies under three months or weighing less than 5.5kg and 30°C or higher for older babies. For this reason, many parents enrol for special classes, which take place in hydrotherapy pools or small private pools with extra-warm water. If you do use your local swimming pool check the temperature and keep the sessions short if the water is cool – about 10 minutes is plenty. “The time can be lengthened if you put your baby in a special baby wetsuit,” says Jess Thompson.

Before you go to the pool, it’s a good idea to get your baby used to the feel of water. Amanda Walker suggests lying in the bath with them and helping them float on their back and sides. Make sure the water is deep enough so that your baby can feel what it is like to have nothing but water cushioning their legs, feet and back. “If they want to, let them feed in the water,” says Walker. “This will have a very calming effect.” You can also take showers with your baby to get them used to the feel of water on their face – although you should ensure there is another adult in the house whenever you shower or bath with a newborn.

Remember that the pool environment is going to feel alien to your

NEED TO KNOW

- Think ahead. If you want your baby to swim very soon after birth, you may need to book a course of lessons while you are pregnant.
- Your baby will be expected to wear a swim nappy either on its own or under a swimsuit. Check requirements with the pool or group.
- Try to feed your baby one or two hours before the lesson. Expect them to be hungry afterwards.
- The Department of Health says you can take your baby to the pool before they’ve had all their immunisations. Visit www.immunisation.org.uk
- Although it is unusual, the chlorine in the water can irritate some babies’ skin. If the reaction is mild, try coating your baby’s body with a barrier cream, and then putting a babygrow on top. Alternatively, special ‘eczema’ wetsuits are available, such as Splashabout’s BabyGrip (www.splashabout.net)
- If your baby is unwell, with a cold or viral illness, don’t swim.
- Keep sessions short. If the water is warm enough, you can stay for up to half an hour but never leave your baby in the pool for longer. If the water is cooler, 10 minutes will be enough.
- If you are using a public pool, choose a quiet time.
- It is normal for babies to go through a phase of hating water any time between 12 months and two years. Persevere, says Jess Thompson – they will get used to it again.

baby – long, echoey corridors, odd smells and loud voices. Leaving the changing room and rushing straight into the pool is not a good idea. “Hold your baby close and walk around to get a feel for this new place,” advises Lauren Heston. “Enter the water slowly and let it rise up your body, chatting all the time.” Have with you a familiar bath toy or ball. Keep your baby’s face close to yours and make lots of eye contact.

“Relax your shoulders and your holding so that your baby experiences your support in the water rather than the feeling of being held,” says Françoise Barbira Freedman, who founded the Birthlight courses and is the author of *Water Babies*. When you are ready, lower yourself and your baby so the water rises up to your baby’s neck. “Being immersed invites your baby to experience buoyancy from the start,” says Freedman. “Developing water confidence will make floating and swimming with your baby bliss for both of you.”

Rob McKay, who teaches baby swimming at the Lifestyle Swim School in Boca Raton, Florida, agrees it’s a very special experience. “In what other medium,” he says, “are you able to bond face to face, skin to skin, and share the joy of learning together?” ●

RESOURCES

- BIRTHLIGHT Tel: 01223 362288; www.birthlight.com
 LITTLE DIPPERS Tel: 0870 758 0302; www.littledippers.co.uk
 WATER BABIES Tel: 01943 431490; www.waterbabies.co.uk
 SWIMMING TEACHERS ASSOCIATION Tel: 01922 645097; www.sta.co.uk
 LIFESTYLE SWIM SCHOOL, Boca Raton, Florida, USA;
www.babyswimming.com – for details of the *Diaper Dolphins* videos
 WORLD AQUATIC BABIES CONGRESS Tel: (727) 896 7625;
www.waterbabies.org – global network of aquatic programmes for babies and children
Water Babies by Françoise Barbira Freedman (Lorenz, £12.95)
Water Babies: Teach Your Baby to Love Water (Little Dippers Films, £18.99 DVD; £14.99 video)