

for more information about water babies please contact head office on:
tel 01297 20757 email info@waterbabies.co.uk

The 2 Minute Guide

www.scotsman.com



Water babies

- Meet the babies who are natural born swimmers **PAGE 15**
- Jack McConnell has ordered in an advertising agency to overhaul Scotland's image. But will it work, asks Stephen McGinty **PAGE 14**
- Joyce McMillan reviews *The Slab Boys Trilogy* **PAGE 16**
- Stanley Baxter is a class act on the radio, Robert McNeil finds **PAGE 17**

Like ducklings to water

Babies are natural swimmers – just time your pool visits to suit them, writes Kate Tregaskis



We both had colds and so spent the first lesson on dry land watching the others take to the water. It felt like basking off PE.

Although Hugh the teacher seemed nice, I wondered if I should have brought a sick-note from my mum – until I remembered that I was the mum (it can be confusing being a new mother).

Our second lesson started better. At least my son Ben and I made it into the water. At five months I was worried that maybe he was already too old (babies have been brought along just days after birth) but Hugh reassured me. Things seemed to be going well. However, by the end of the class – when the other babies were floating contentedly on their backs, their mothers warbling *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* – Ben was spluttering with indignation.

By the third class I feared we might be stretching even Hugh's infinite patience. We steered clear of any fancy stuff, keeping our heads well above water – but Ben voted with his lungs, vetoing further involvement. We left the pool early, under a blaze of sympathetic smiles. Where were we going wrong? All the other mums and babies were clearly having a ball.

An enthusiastic, if not exactly accomplished, swimmer myself, I thought that taking Ben to the pool would be, as the literature put it, "healthy, rewarding and fun". I'd seen the photographs of babies, their eyes wide open, limbs flung outwards, smiling blissfully, liberated from the disabling effects of gravity.

We enrolled with Water Babies, the first organisation of its kind in Scotland, which has been run from Edinburgh since the summer by Hugh and Ailsa Davidson. Water Babies is a family-owned business (with a parent company in Leeds) that is currently encouraging about 200 babies a week (and their mothers or, increasingly, fathers) to swim.

Babies have what's called a "mammalian dive reflex" which means that they automatically hold their breath underwater.



With a little encouragement they are able to swim under the surface for short periods of time. Given that babies spend their early life in the aquatic environment of the womb, a pool should be home-from-home.

Baby swimming was pioneered in the 1960s by Igor Tjarkovsky, a Russian male-midwife. He became convinced of the benefits of water, both for childbirth and for child rearing, after saving the life of his daughter – who was born prematurely – by looking after her in a tub of warm water. Freed from gravity, she could move her weak body more easily and developed surprisingly rapidly. Tjarkovsky went on to train numerous other babies to swim, maintaining that like many other mammals we can all swim naturally; what holds us back is fear. By introducing babies to swimming young enough it is possible to bypass that fear so that they can become happy and confident in water.

We all know that exercise is good for us. More recently discovered is the crucial importance of particular movements in the first year of life to the development of the higher functions of the brain.

ABOVE: The mammalian dive reflex in babies means they hold their breath underwater automatically.
Picture: Phil Wilkinson (main)

Sally Goddard Blythe from the Institute of Neuro-Physiological Psychology in Chester has been conducting extensive research into a condition called Neuro-Development Delay (NDD).

Simply put, babies gradually acquire different kinds of movements and physical abilities. Failure to acquire certain simple physical abilities in their first year can result in difficulties with reading, spelling, concentration, "impulse control" and social skills later on. As Blythe says, "a child not getting enough stimulation and movement is missing out a piece of the jigsaw important for later functioning".

Of swimming for babies, she says: "It's great. It is easier to have free movement and so it will sometimes give a child the opportunity to develop movements they wouldn't have otherwise."

The research has come about at a time when many babies get far less opportunity to crawl and exercise their whole body than previous generations because they are confined to baby walkers, bouncers, specially designed chairs and car seats for long periods of time. Even the practice of lying babies on their backs to sleep – introduced in order to reduce the risk of cot death – means babies often have less opportunity to develop their arm, back and neck muscles by pushing themselves up.

Swimming is an ideal exercise, particularly underwater swimming, as it allows a baby to move freely – relatively unhampered by gravity and their own body weight – and, importantly, to move the four quarters of their bodies in different directions.

What's appealing about Water Babies is that, aside from the many other benefits it offers parents and babies, the emphasis is on having fun.

Sara Keane, one of the first mothers in Edinburgh to take her baby along, is still attending classes with her son Daniel. Sara is convinced that he is "stronger, more lithe, fitter and more muscley" than his non-swimming peers. What really keeps her going back, however, is that Daniel enjoys it

so much. "Swimming has been fantastic for him," she says. "He lights up when we go near the pool. If he has been in a bad mood – it's over. It's lovely to see him having a lovely time."

So what were we doing wrong? The problem, I suspect, was not the swimming but my timing. For a two-hour window Ben is Mr Smiley Chops; much beyond this and he emits whimpers: it's a pre-detonation warning. If he is not permitted to sleep immediately, he explodes – and that is exactly what he was doing. The window of opportunity was banging shut somewhere between the changing cubicle and the pool. Hugh suggested we try switching to a class at a different time of day and Bingo! – we were in business.

It's our graduation class, the end of our first block of five lessons, and Ben is chortling. He splashes his hands in the water to impress Suzy, a hefty wee lass he has taken a shine to. Their mutual adoration is broken off as our turn at the front of the short queue arrives. Hugh gives us instructions. In the swimming position Ben grins, showing off two new teeth.

We make our way up the pool, his legs kicking like an outboard motor. I say "Ben, ready, go" and pull him gently under. I can see the top of his head below the surface of the water and his eyes scanning the pool. After a few seconds he emerges, looking a little startled as if he's just woken up. He smiles again as he catches sight of Suzy. When we get home he wolfs his tea and then sleeps like a baby.

I've already enrolled for more lessons. Water Babies can be contacted via their website at www.waterbabies.co.uk or by email: hugh@waterbabies.co.uk or tel: 0131 312 7520. New classes start in Edinburgh in mid-January and there are plans to begin classes in Glasgow in the spring. Further information about Neuro-Developmental Delay can be found on the Institute for Neuro-Physiological Psychology website at www.inpp.org.uk.