



## The Importance of Water Familiarisation

Making children feel relaxed, happy and comfortable in the water is essential before structured teaching and learning can occur.

Apprehensive, nervous or frightened children will have a barrier to learning, and will often not even attempt some of the simplest learn to swim activities. It is important that some time is spent establishing a comfortable and secure learning environment. This acclimatising period is often referred to as **water familiarisation** and is best done in a fun way in shallow water.

Having shallow water allows the child to feel safe and to be in control as they practice basic water familiarisation activities such as walking, jumping, turning, splashing and attempting breath control activities like pouring water over their face or even attempting self-submerging.

In the bath at home some simple activities can help, such as lying on the back in very shallow water with the ears submerged, tipping and pouring water over themselves together with lots of splashing – and without even putting the face in or under the water.

Beginner swimmers are often frightened of the water, and the parent or caregiver may have unintentionally frightened the child in their attempts to keep them safe around water. For example by saying, “Come away from the side of the pool you’ll hurt yourself,” or “Don’t go near the pool its deep,” will be ingrained into the child’s psyche and is remembered by the child as they go to their first swimming lesson.

Around 2 years of age and above, if children have not been regularly exposed to the water, they may show signs of discomfort, apprehension or fear. It will not be easy to condition these children for submersion, and they will need to be handled quite differently and must initiate their own submersions and never be forced. Regular fun “practice” in the bath can help develop confidence.

Early experiences in the water will determine children’s future attitudes, so these experiences need to be positive, safe and pleasurable. Teachers need to find fun ways to encourage children to perform swimming activities voluntarily.

It is important that teachers don’t rush the water familiarisation stage. Basic skills like pool entry and exit, breath control, submersion and floating skills are all vital to a child’s progressive learning.

Simple floating skills, established early, will form the child’s base for learning to swim and stroke development. Floating is the basis of all learn to swim and must be mastered before trying more complex swimming skills. If children learn to relax and float independently on their front and back for up to ten seconds, then once propulsion (kicking and arms) is introduced a more relaxed stroke will be developed.

Good stroke development requires perfecting a streamline body position. Beginners may need to perfect their balance and body position in the water by floating with a kickboard before progressing slowly to less support as they build confidence.