



What should children learn at swimming lessons?

Learning to swim should follow progressive teaching and learning systems. Skills should be broken down into small and achievable steps and then built upon. Children

should not be rushed to progress or advanced up into a higher level until basic individual skills such as floating or kicking are mastered. Children should be made to feel good about their progress however slow it may be. Ideally during the very early learn to swim stages parents should give their children regular exposure to water and time to play outside of the formal swimming lesson. This will help to build their confidence and speed up the formal learn to swim process. Learning to swim technically well will take years to accomplish, so have patience and enjoy the journey with your child as swimming is a skill that will last a lifetime.

The first step in the swimming lesson should be building independence and relaxation in the water. Infants experience independence by the way the parent holds them in the water. Parents should always hold baby gently and allow them to feel the water's buoyancy. Furthermore if parents learn a variety of ways to hold and manoeuvre their baby through water, they themselves become relaxed. This relaxed feeling will rub off on the child. Older children experience independence by being exposed to a variety of water depths. Shallow water where children can stand is recommended during the learn to swim stages. This allows the child to remain in control and builds their confidence.

The second step in the learn to swim lesson should be learning breath control. Children should not be forcibly submerged without warning. Infants are taught breath control on command by a method called conditioning. In conditioning, the parent pours water smoothly and evenly over the baby's forehead after using the trigger words "ready go." A parental demonstration, where Mummy or Daddy submerges their own face is ideal to encourage this. Older children must be encouraged to participate in voluntary breath control activities. It is most important that parents and swimming teachers never force or hold a child's head underwater.

Free floating is the basis of all learn to swim and therefore should be the most practiced swimming activity. Always remember the building block approach and only attempt floating activities once children have happily mastered breath control and underwater submersions. Children must learn natural body buoyancy to become relaxed and confident in the water. For this reason floaties and back bubbles are not used in formal swimming lessons. These devices can be used for safety if supervising more than one child but can give children a false sense of security as well as placing children in a vertical position. It is important to establish a good horizontal body position in the water from a very young age.

Establishing the float is essential to develop great freestyle and backstroke technique. For this reason, propulsive movements should not be taught before floating patterns are established and mastered. Encouraging children to use their arms and legs before they can float, results in them thrashing and struggling in the water as they endeavor to keep themselves afloat. Once children learn to float it is much easier to teach them a relaxed, slow and natural feel for the water.

Parents ask yourself these questions.

- Is my child relaxed in the water?
- Is my child given regular opportunities to play outside of swimming lessons?
- Can my child float independently?

If you can answer "yes" to these questions, then your child will learn swimming and water safety skills quickly and easily and they are well on their way to developing a skill which will stay with them for a lifetime.