

## **TIPS FOR PARENTS**

### **Starting water familiarisation**

The following sections of this Unit have been developed from materials produced by Dave DuBois.

Caregivers are often drawn to the obvious benefits that swimming lessons can offer their Children, but many feel unsure at what age they should start. It is natural to feel some caution. Caregivers might question how Children learn to swim when they are so young and what type of activities they will be involved in. Relating swimming to the process a Child goes through when learning to walk can help us to understand. Walking is a complex, physically demanding activity that requires intense coordination and balance, yet Children learn how to walk at a relatively young age and, for the most part, teach themselves. Acquiring water mobility and swimming skills happens in very much the same manner with Caregivers and the Teacher of Babies and Toddlers there to assist at each step of the way.

While water safety lessons may help to address safety issues, lessons will also continue to refine the strokes helping the Child to become a safer more efficient swimmer, and of course lessons are a fun, healthy activity for children.

It's important to remember that before birth, Newborns were immersed in a fluid environment inside their mother's womb. So, we aren't really talking about when to "introduce" a Child to the water, but rather, when to "reintroduce" them to the element that they called home for close to nine months.

For most Caregivers, the home bath is probably the best and most convenient place to continue developing the affinity that many Newborn have with water. This can begin once the Newborn is home and the umbilical cord has healed. Often Newborn are bathed in a sink or counter top tub. The bathtub is another option and should be used at every opportunity. Fill it up with warm water, get in with your young Child and let them enjoy the full benefit.

The young Child doesn't even need to go under water at this early stage. Using a secure and gentle hold let them feel the buoyancy and the movement of the water over their skin. These early bath experiences should be free from stress and a lovely way to build rapport with the water. This is a special time for Caregiver and young Child and can allow additional bonding, even for males! Mums may choose to breast feed their Child in the tub to associate the water with a calm and relaxed feeling. Using a flannel and eventually a cup, the young Child can be introduced to the sensation of water on their face. Starting from an early age, lays a great foundation for joining a regular aquatic program later on.

## **What age for formal lessons?**

*So, when should 'formal' lessons start?*

There are a few different guidelines and opinions; however the recommendation of ASCTA is that Babies can start a formal program at 4 months of age. Some of the reasons for waiting until 4 months are to allow a medical history to develop, allow the Newborn's immune system to strengthen and allow bonding to occur with the primary caregiver. After 4 months, lessons in a gentle and developmentally appropriate program can, and should, be started right away.

*Once a lesson program has begun, how long should it go on?*

Swimming and water safety lessons are not an event, but rather a long-term process. Attending lessons as a regular part of a Child's weekly routine through their Baby, Toddler, Preschool and early School years is a great plan to ensure proper development of their aquatic skills.

Starting early and continuing long term will allow your Child to fully experience all that the water and the aquatic lesson experience has to offer.

By way of summary:

- (Understanding) It is natural to feel some caution or have uncertainties about when to begin
- (Perspective) Newborn are in a fluid environment for close to 9 months inside their mother. So, we aren't really talking about when to "introduce" a Child to the water, but when to "reintroduce" them to the water
- (Starting in the bath) The family bath is probably the best and most convenient place to begin working with a Newborn – getting in the tub, supported floating, getting comfortable with water on the face. Once lessons have begun, the bath can assist with skills practiced in class
- (Starting Age) 4 months is a generally accepted age for starting a lesson program - allows a medical history to develop, allows the immune system to strengthen, allows bonding to occur.
- After 4 months, lessons in a gentle, developmentally appropriate aquatic program should be started as soon as possible.
- Swimming and water safety lessons for young Children under 6 or 7 years of age should be a consistent, year round activity building toward a lifelong skill of proficient and safe aquatics

**More than just swimming lessons**

Water familiarisation, learn to swim, water safety and survival lessons, call the lesson what you like, but the major motivating factor for the majority of Caregivers choosing to take their Children to formal aquatic lessons is so the Child learns how to “not drown”

The Swim Australia™ Teacher Course Theory CD ROM provides detailed information about Child drowning rates in Australia and overseas.

The main “at risk” age group is young male Children, 15 to 30 months of age with 9 out of 10 drowning events occurring in backyard swimming pools, with others occurring in and around home water sources such as bath tubs, fish ponds, nappy buckets and dams near houses on farms making up the bulk of the remaining 10%.

## **A checklist of items for a Teacher of Babies and Toddlers**

Please consider the following sections when reviewing your approach to teaching water safety:

Do you provide comprehensive safety information to Caregivers?

- Guidelines for Caregivers about the layers of protection (Kids Alive – Do the Five!, Safer 3, etc. fence the pool, shut the gate, learn how to resuscitate, teach your kids to swim, always supervise, tell someone else when you go swimming, sun safety etc)
- Communicate expectations of behaviour around the swim school environment (unbroken chain of supervision, etc.)
- Does your swim school demonstrate the “best practice” standard of how to act around the water?
- And encourage extending that behaviour to the backyard pool and family time around the water?

## **Always Supervise**

Here are some guidelines about supervision that are very specific and address the issue of “always supervise”:

- “A young Child who can swim needs the same supervision as one who has not had lessons.” (Water Safety New Zealand)
- “The Royal Life Saving Society Australia recommends that all Children be constantly supervised whenever they are in, on or near water. This even includes public swimming pools where lifeguards are on duty.”
- Also from Royal Life Saving Society Australia “Supervision is defined as constant visual contact from within a distance of 3-5 metres. For Children aged less than 4 years, Caregivers should be in the water “within arms reach” of the Child
- Supervision does not include an occasional glance at the Child while reading or snoozing. Neither should supervision lapse in response to a distraction. If a distraction such as another Child or telephone ringing demands attention, the Child should be removed from the water and secured in a safe location where access to the water is restricted until supervision can recommence
- Swimming pool fences, flotation aids or water familiarization lessons are not a substitute for supervision

## Tips for Caregivers at home

- Keep a phone nearby when supervising (to use in emergency, not to answer in case it rings)
- Let the phone ring, when supervising (don't be distracted by answering it)
- Inflatable aids are not a substitute for supervision
- Are you CPR trained and do you know what to do in an emergency?

NSW Health Department - Home safety check list (Questions to ask when at home):

- Is your child being supervised?
- Have you emptied the bathtub?
- Is the lid on the nappy bucket?
- Have you made sure that your Child cannot gain access to the pool or spa? (Is the gate self closing mechanism operational?)
- Have you checked for other water dangers such as open drains, garden ponds, creeks or dams?

Consider who is supervising your Children:

- Are they capable of acting in an emergency?
- Are they drinking? Alcohol, even in small quantities affects someone's ability to supervise
- Are they physically capable of affecting a rescue if they inadvertently fall in the water or running after a young Child who suddenly runs off?
- Think about who is being asked to supervise your Children