

“How To Teach Infants to Swim Without Increasing the Risk of Drowning”

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How to Teach Infants to Swim  
Without Increasing the Risk of Drowning

*(Bearing in mind that aquatic programmes for infants may even increase the risk of drowning, focus should always be on promoting self-sufficiency from the very beginning, regardless of the goal or the philosophy of the programme. This is done by activating aquatic skills that infants are capable of performing on their own at that specific stage of their development.)*

We talk about educating the public but how do we go about it when everything that has to do with infants in the water is called infant swimming? Infant swimming, or baby swimming by which it is more commonly known, should not be the generic term for all the forms and variations of infant aquatic activity. With no distinction it is no wonder that an auspicious body such as the American Academy of Paediatrics is vague on issues regarding infant swimming per se.

Consider the following excerpt from the policy statement issued by the American Academy of Paediatricians (AAP) in 2000, “*Aquatic programs for infants and toddlers have not been shown to decrease the risk of drowning, and parents should not feel secure that their child is safe from drowning after participating in such programs.*” (Paediatric Vol. 105 No 4 April 2000 pp 868-870 ‘Swimming programmes for infants.’) Would it not give us a better chance to validate our profession if infant swimming was a category on its own in the broader category of infant aquatics? (‘Infant Aquatics’ implies multiple aspects of aquatic activity for infants.)

In this statement the AAP refers to the variety of infant aquatic programmes collectively, creating the impression that they are all the same or at least have a common goal. According to the statement title, “Swimming programmes for infants and toddlers”, the AAP evidently believes this goal to be teaching infants and toddlers to swim.

‘Aquatic programmes for infants and toddlers’ implies all activities for infants that take place in or on water. This would include the likes of water orientation, water play, swim-directed water play, gymnastics in water, exercising in water, music and rhythm in water, submerged reflex swimming, water safety, swimming lessons, and possibly even water therapy, with each category in turn having its own degree of variation especially that of swimming lessons. Although all these

categories of infant aquatics ultimately turn out swimming infants they can be remarkably different from each other.

Novel ways of teaching infants to swim have been the subject of presentations at World Aquatic Babies Conferences (WABC) since the first eye-opener in 1993. No matter how varied or imaginative the approach, or how far removed from the way we think swimming lessons should look, the reason that they all ultimately turn out swimming infants is that their common denominator is regular and frequent exposure to water. We as swim instructors know that the more regularly and frequently young children experience directed activity in water, the sooner they will be demonstrating simple motoric competence that we can call swimming.

So whether or not it is our intention to give the impression that the goal of infant aquatics is teaching swimming, we should constantly bear in mind that in our efforts to encourage familiarity and reduce fear of water, be it under the guise of play, gymnastics, exercising, song, music, rhythm or just plain straight teaching, we could simultaneously be instilling a false sense of security in both the child and the parent.

This very notion should be an indisputable message for all infant aquatic professionals to engender respect for water and safe behaviour in and around water regardless of their personal philosophy or approach to teaching. This could be an unrealistic demand depending on the nature of your programme. But nevertheless, look at yourself critically and ask if the child you teach is that much more or that much less vulnerable after each lesson session. The following eight steps are strategies to teach without increasing the risk of drowning.

**Step one** is to communicate the advantages and disadvantages of your philosophy and approach to teaching with the parents of the infants you have in your programme so that they understand the implications of signing up with you. We owe it to our profession to educate parents.

**Step two** is to take a close look at the categories water safety and swimming lessons for the simple reason that neither leaves any doubt as to their purpose. To align oneself with these categories it is important to understand what is meant by the terms 'water safety' and 'swimming lessons'. To date there is still no generally accepted definition amongst infant aquatic professionals for either of these terms in respect of infant swimming.

Water safety, according to my definition, "is the risk of being in and around water as much reduced as possible through aquatic education, skill training and preventative measures." While swimming lessons, on the other hand are "to learn to propel oneself through water from one point to another while continuing to breathe normally."

Water safety implies immediacy. In water safety it is the here and now that counts. It is concern of the present. It is not a goal to be reached in the future as it is with learning to swim. This implies that in water safety the risk element should be reduced from the very first lesson and continue to be progressively reduced with every subsequent lesson throughout the learning period.

**Step three** is to recognize that an infant swim teacher is as different from a regular swim teacher as the primary school teacher is different from the high school teacher. According to my definition “an infant swimming teacher is a teacher who teaches infants to swim according to the way infants learn.”

As infant swim teachers we should not be trying to teach infants the way older children are taught. By teaching them in the way they learn, we can expect their safety level in water to match up to their safety level on land bearing in mind the hazardous nature of water. Accordingly, infant swimming becomes water safety, and water safety becomes infant swimming particularly as this applies to toddler age-span of infancy.

**Step four** is to accept the fact that in infant swimming the terms ‘water safety’ and ‘learning to swim’ are interchangeable. This is because swimming is more than a complement of primary swimming skills. Swimming involves as many complementary actions that are swim-related as there are primary swimming skills. These complementary swim-related actions, or secondary swimming skills as I call them, are simple behaviour patterns adapted to water. Infants master these behaviour patterns in the normal course of their development and happily adapt them to water. Once adapted to water they become valuable life-saving skills. And remarkably, in the process of adapting these skills to water, swimming ability actually evolves spontaneously with infants.

**Step five** is to know what to teach. It is a common misconception that teaching swimming is about kicking, pulling, blowing bubbles, getting the face wet, and adult propelled submerged glides to a shallow ledge or step. Infant swim teaching should be about focusing on teaching secondary swimming skills, and expanding on these skills to the extent that infants are swimming. The ability to perform primary swimming skills emerges naturally as a result during the course of development from infancy to early childhood.

The way to identify secondary swimming skills is to imagine someone swimming and to picture how that person entered the water, what he did in the water, and how he got out of the water.

**Step six** is to teach according to the principle of natural learning. Natural learning is the way the young in the animal kingdom learn. It has to do with natural curiosity and the principle of the discipline of survival. Infants are as naturally curious about their environment as animals. Natural curiosity is the driving force of learning. By allowing infants to explore the qualities of water in relation to

themselves you are on the best track to teaching behaviour that keeps the child safe and alive. The principle of natural learning is the formula for teaching infants to swim. It should be the infant swim teacher's mantra!

Teaching this way is much the same as how one goes about helping infants master new situations in their natural everyday environment. Infants learn to cope in their ever extending environment by using existing behaviour patterns and accommodating these to new situations. Existing behaviour patterns are readily adaptable whether in the natural or the aquatic environment. By introducing aquatic ability (skills) that infants are capable of performing **on their own** at that specific stage of their development, you promote self-sufficiency from the first lesson.

The key words here are '**on their own**'. That would imply they are not carried or held in water out of their depth. They learn in water that is shallow for them and while holding onto the sides of the pool. They are never further than within reach of the side. All activities are directed so as to create a return-to-the-side mind-set.

**Step seven** is the routine of practicing each of the six secondary skills (entries and exits; orientation; holding on; shallow water play; leverage; rotation) in a predetermined manner.

1. Entries & exits (approach the pool in a safe manner; climbing in and climbing out; climbing down; climbing up)
2. Orientation (familiarise; accommodate; assimilate)
3. Holding on (to the side; hand-walking along the sides; to objects that stay afloat)
4. Play in shallow water (tumbling & falling; bouncing & jumping; picking up objects from the bottom)
5. Leverage (push offs; bouncing)
6. Rotation (flipping; rolling; spinning; returning)

**Step eight** is to allow primary swimming skills (breathing control; submersion; buoyancy; propulsion; back-float; prone-float) to emerge without interference during the course of development from infancy to early childhood.

### **Conclusion**

The need for definition and categorization of different approaches to teaching is crucial and long overdue. Attention was drawn to this in my presentation at the WABC 2001. It is encouraging to note that the comment on the AAP Statement 2000 issued the following year by the National Executive Director of the YMCA

/USA (Paediatrics Vol.109 No.1 January 2002, pp.168-169) pointed to relevant terminology in the full statement that was “not sufficiently well-defined to prevent serious disagreement and misunderstanding among medical and aquatic professionals and misinterpretation by the public at large”. This more than validates what I have said here. Unless we define our terminology and categorise our programmes, damaging publicity will continue to influence the general public in a negative direction.