

Teaching Kids To Swim: Safety First, Fun Later

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By Judy Heumann

Last summer, a two-year old stepped off a concrete path at the Botanical Gardens and slipped into a lily pond. His mother was stunned when she cleared away the foliage and realized he was going down, rather than coming up for a breath. More recently, an 18 month-old was running happily in a local park, when he darted down the bank into the creek. He was floating motionless, face down in the water when his mother jumped in to save him.

Both of these children had been through swim lessons. Neither knew how to swim. Drowning is the second leading cause of accidental death for children under the age of five in the U.S, and first in several states, including Texas, Florida, California and Arizona. The victims are frequently children who loved the water -- to death. This is because water is a hostile environment for humans.

Swimming is not a natural ability -- it must be learned. So it is prudent to examine the message that we parents unwittingly send our children about water. "Water Is Fun!" But is it? **Should a child who cannot swim perceive water as fun?**

Consider what happened to a 15 month-old boy last year. He was playing in a pool with his older brother. The two got out, but the toddler returned to the pool alone. He was found just a few minutes later, floating face down. Efforts to resuscitate him failed. This scenario repeats itself over and over every year and the details always have a similar ring-- the caretaker's back was turned for only a second. What is the solution?

Our society insists that children be happy and relaxed around water. But as a child begins to exhibit caution around water, it is a sign that he is becoming more aware of his environment and his own limitations; it means he is becoming SAFER. It makes no sense to play games in the water to make him feel safe, if he is not. First teach him to swim, to survive in the water; the comfort and enjoyment will follow naturally and safely.

Learning to swim does not have to be fun. It is knowing how to swim that is fun. The learning process is often difficult. And learning to swim is a process. It must involve breath control, propulsion, rotation, and floating and must provide each child with the survival skills necessary to save his life. **Teachers should be infant aquatic professionals.** You should screen your child's instructor as you would your pediatrician.

There is also no specific point at which a child is magically ready to swim; some may never seem "ready." There is absolutely nothing wrong with a preschooler who does not want to put his face in the water. Why would he? What is fun about not being able to breathe or see clearly?

Readiness is irrelevant; babies as young as six months can be taught to float, and all children over a year can learn to swim. However, many "fun" lessons are either terminated when the child seems uncooperative, or go on indefinitely without results. Often these lessons are inexpensive, but consider the cost over time, especially if the child takes 2-3 years to learn to swim. If you have water nearby, you do not have the luxury of waiting this long.

The ability to get a continuous supply of oxygen, regardless of the water's depth, determines who can truly swim.

Worse than a child who fails to master basic survival skills is a child who thinks he can swim. More dangerous yet is when the parents also labor under this delusion. Children who can only swim with 'floaties' or when they can touch the bottom CANNOT REALLY SWIM, and babies can drown in wading pools, buckets, toilets, hot tubs, and the like.

Many parents feel that lessons for very young toddlers or infants are not necessary because they are always watching. And although supervision is the most important deterrent to drowning, who can say they constantly keep their eyes on an active two-year old? Other parents rely on flotation devices: water wings, floaties, swim sweaters, and the like. These devices put the child in a vertical posture, opposite of the proper posture for swimming, they cause panic when removed, can interfere with learning an efficient swimming stroke, and may cause a false sense of security in both the child and the parent. They seem to sanction a lack of supervision. Even a life jacket is no substitute for supervision or for knowing how to swim.

Shouldn't we do all we can to make our children safer? Isn't it worth it? Look at your child when you answer this question, then pick up the phone and call your nearest Infant Aquatics Specialist.

Judy Heumann is a specialist in the field of infant swimming. After receiving a B.A. from the University of Texas, she developed a unique program for teaching young children to swim in the 1970's. She was a certified Infant Swimming Research instructor and Master Instructor for 16 years during the 80's and 90's. She has trained instructors in Texas and Colorado and has personally taught more than 2,000 children to survive in the water.

Judy has had countless children who were "SURVIVALS;" they learned enough to save their own lives. Currently she teaches a program called "Infant Aquatic Survival" and has joined other aquatic experts in a network dedicated to preventing aquatic tragedy through effective survival swimming instruction. The name of this organization is Infant Aquatics.