

Pool Activities for Very Young Children

By Jane Wilson, Swimming Development Officer for North Wiltshire Leisure Ltd.

If you prepared your child for swimming while at home, using the advice from the first article, you need some ideas for what to do at the pool as he or she develops.

Supporting baby. You can use various methods to hold baby. A normal hold, cheek to cheek, baby vertical your arms around; hands under baby's arms, face to face; baby lying on its back, you at its side supporting under the back/head and hips; all work well. Keep both your own and baby's shoulders under water for warmth and keep eye contact for security.

Use armbands only when baby can hold up its own head. Always be in a position to see baby's face. Be sure any buoyancy aids are in good condition and fit well.

Drinking too much pool water is dangerous as baby only has tiny kidneys! Remember to drain his/her ears gently after swimming by tipping gently to the side.

Floating and being able to relax and float builds confidence.

- Wearing armbands, use songs and games that encourage keeping still; there is no incentive in keeping still otherwise.
- Wearing armbands, support underneath the shoulders and talk to him/her to encourage looking up into your face.
- Gradually reduce support so that child is floating. Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star is useful for floating.
- Pushing from the wall, keeping still and flat on the front and on the back!

Breathing! There is no escape from it, we cannot breathe under water. Breathing in at the right time is easier if blowing out is under our control.

- Turn a kiss into a gentle puff of air on to baby's face.
- Blow a feather across a tabletop to baby and encourage baby to blow it back to you. As always start at home.
- Blow a small floating toy towards baby and encourage baby to blow it back to you.
- Hold your breath with your mouth closed so that baby can see you clearly then puff hard into the water through your mouth. Use '1,2,3, now' to reduce the surprise.

Jumping In is fun when your child is used to splashing, going under, and blowing out! Proceed at the child's pace and do not rush this. The side is the safe place, the nearest side is the one they left – if they fell in you would want them to turn back and hold the side.

- Begin with lifting and lowering baby up and down, add going under when baby has mastered blowing skills.
- If the water is shallow enough and your toddler can stand, do lots of jumping up and down. Always encourage bending knees when landing.
- Practice jumping at home, landing on something soft! Encourage looking ahead, not at the landing point.
- Sit child on side of pool, hold around child's body and lift-in to you, and use the trigger words 'Look at me. 1,2,3, jump'. Repeat the lift-in holding both hands instead of trunk when child is confident. Later do this from a standing position.
- Be ready to praise and reward with a cuddle. Stand back, child must jump out to you. Every time you swim revise jumping in and turning back to the side.

Swimming purposefully a few metres to you or to the side, on front or back should be encouraged.

- Try swimming for specific coloured toys. Red and yellow are easiest at first; green and blue are harder.
- A small ball to throw, blow, chase, catch, spin, push under and pop up is an excellent toy.
- Throwing toys is popular; use this to encourage movement towards a toy thrown.
- Travel towards others. Visit, say hello.
- Use calling your child's name to encourage changing direction, turning around to you as you call the name.

Stay Vigilant! With no sense of danger toddlers like escaping! Whether through an open door or into the no-go areas of the pool, you will need to stay alert. Toddlers become interested in their surroundings and may investigate without fear. The desire to escape will increase your opportunities to build travelling skills. Swimming away from you will be exciting, allow some safe freedoms.

Other play ideas:

- Play with toys that sink. If there is a very shallow area look for toys from a kneeling position as was done in the bath.
- Encourage climbing out independently for the older child. Even babies should learn the easiest place to get out.
- Use activities that are familiar. Washing is particularly appropriate. Head, hands, feet, nose, toes, eyes etc. can be used in songs and action rhymes.
- Play hand games such as 'Pat a cake' with the water.