

Useful Swimming Equipment for Very Young Children

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

This is the third article on swimming with baby and gives some practical advice on useful equipment.

To allow independence, some sort of Buoyancy Aid is essential. Various types are available; armbands, floatation suits and jackets, floatation belts and rings, Woggles or Noodles and all manner of sizes and shapes of floats. Whichever support you choose, it is essential that it is in good condition and if it is something that baby has to wear, that it fits correctly.

Nearly all baby aids keep baby in a fairly upright position, to become more horizontal baby has to be encouraged to lean forward, by following toys or trying to reach something interesting. (See *previous articles*.)

Armbands are practical and relatively inexpensive; the small amount of restriction in movement is easily compensated by the amount of freedom they allow. Stop baby turning his/her head and chewing armbands, a small hole can have disastrous consequences to confidence. Check that the safety valves are working before use every time. Squeeze gently against your cheek to feel for any slight leakage of air.

To fit already inflated armbands onto baby, put your hand fully through the armband and encase baby's whole hand and lower arm. Hold the armband in place with your other hand and gently ease your hand back out of the band leaving it as high on baby's arm as possible. Alternatively, position while deflated and then inflate, a slight disadvantage is that this can be awkward and can unsettle baby when you want co-operation. There are several shapes and sizes, try for a pair that fits above the elbow as much as possible. Be advised by the manufacturer's guidelines for appropriate age or weight suitability but be cautious if baby is very heavy or has very thin arms, stay close.

Suits and jackets can be costly and are quickly gawn out of but allow freedom for both arms and legs. Do not buy a larger size for baby to 'grow into', as it will not do the job. Anything worn on the body must not ride up under the arms and potentially cover the face. Using a suit to encourage movement but floatation needs to be adjusted for movement on the front or back which makes rolling over difficult.

Woggles are long buoyant cylindrical shapes that a child can lean across and are useful for developing slightly older children but not very suitable for tiny babies. However, some are very long and difficult to manage for even quite big children and some children cannot get their hands around them. So – check for suitability with your child first. They are found in many supermarkets in summer months or from specialist retailers.

Rings and sit-in rings need careful attention but are quite inexpensive so attractive to parents. Babies can slip through rings and sit-in rings can turn over. Keep one hand on all types of rings and seats. Little discovery or learning results from just sitting in the water but they can be social and relaxing. The upright position is so unlike the swimming position that little advantage can be seen in using them over armbands. Never double up armbands and rings, baby will just bob about feeling nothing.

Try using no aids at all for a short period every time you go swimming, just holding baby and walking around, and extending this to towing when baby has gained some confidence. This shows baby that aids are 'tools' not essential to enjoyment.

Slowly reduce the amount of support from the aids but never as a challenge or as a test. Babies don't understand testing and it only satisfies your curiosity without adding any learning or enjoyment benefit for baby. Never reduce support to such an extent that baby has to struggle to keep its face out of the water. Struggling will only be off-putting and will not create the fun environment that will make baby happy to return. As stated in earlier articles, drinking too much pool water should be avoided so support with a finger under the chin may be needed even with some other buoyancy aid.

Remember none of these aids are designed as life saving equipment and all have to be used under close supervision.

Toys offer an incentive for baby to try to move; encourage turning, rolling, moving while blowing.

Floating toys and sinking toys are needed. Egg flips, shaped floats, colourful balls that can be pushed with different body parts but especially ones that can be blown along. Colourful toys that sink encourage looking into the water. Place them just under the water, perhaps on a step, but eventually going fully under to find them will develop.

A small watering can can first of all be used to pour water over hands and eventually to pour over heads and faces. Baby pouring water over Mummy should come before Mummy pouring water over baby!

Goggles, earplugs and nose clips are often seen at swimming pools. These items are unsuitable for babies, they can cause damage if wet fingers fiddle with them, they prevent full aquatic learning and are an unnecessary distraction.

Notes on Baby Swimming 3© No material can be copied without permission of Jane Wilson.