

SWIMMING LESSONS ARE AN IMPORTANT EXPERIENCE FOR PRESCHOOLERS. ONE DAY THEY COULD SAVE YOUR CHILD'S LIFE – BUT NOT YET

In the **swim** *of things*

» You're on holidays at the beach or visiting a friend who has a pool. All it takes is one momentary lapse of concentration and your child wanders off. They don't understand the hidden dangers of water and they can't swim...

Scary fact number one: drowning is the most common cause of death for kids under the age of five in Australia. The most recent records from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that 229 children in this age group died this way between 1999 and 2003.

Scary fact number two: for every preschooler who drowns, Kidsafe Australia says another three or four children are admitted to hospital after nearly drowning.

But Ross Gage, CEO of Swim Australia, the national swim school body, believes the statistics could be changed by making swimming lessons an integral part of a child's upbringing.

"Swimming lessons aren't a substitute for [pool] fences, and they're not a substitute for constant parental supervision of young children around water. But they add another layer of protection," Ross says.

"We don't like to say that swimming lessons make children 'waterproof' or 'drown-proof' or even 'water-safe'. But kids who learn to swim are 'water safer'."

IN THE BEGINNING

Ross says that while parents can introduce their children to water from three months old, kids start to develop basic water safety skills between 12 and 24 months.

During their first weeks or months of swimming classes, children learn skills such as how to control their breathing in the water, how to float, and how to get to a safe area in the water.

"They learn to turn around and go back to the side of a pool, they learn how to do a back float and how to 'monkey' along the side of a pool to safety," says Ross.

"All these things give children a longer period of survival time in the water before help comes."

IT'S TIME TO START

The earlier you enrol your little ones in swimming classes, the easier the experience will be for them.

"The longer you leave it, the harder it can be for a child to settle. They may have heard people say things like, 'Don't go near the water, you'll drown' and start to associate potential negatives with water," says Ross.

"Then you suddenly say, 'Let's go to swimming lessons, that will be fun' but that doesn't equate with what your child has heard about water. When a child starts going to swimming lessons there is a period of gaining their trust so they can relax in the water."

CHEER THEM ON

Be aware of making negative comments about water to your

SURVIVING SWIMMING LESSONS

Arrive relaxed and early so your child is calm and can get used to the surroundings.

* Take your child to the toilet just before the lesson to avoid any little accidents or disruptions.

Have a dress rehearsal at home so your child is used to their swimwear and goggles.

* Keep your child away from the pool edge and make sure they don't run.

Choose a swim school with a well-maintained pool and good facilities.

* All teachers should have a nationally recognised swimming teaching qualification and a current resuscitation certificate.

All the students should have around the same level of experience.

* The activities should be varied and fun so your child remains interested.

child. Instead of warning them that if they go near the pool or ocean they could drown, calmly tell them not to go near the water unless they're with an adult.

Once they've started lessons, don't expect too much too soon – allow your child time to trust their swimming teacher, and don't expect a perfect doggy paddle or backstroke in weeks.

"Allow your child time to relax in the water because that's when they learn better," Ross says.

"One of the worst things you can do is push – they won't learn properly and that affects the learning of the next skill, and the next. If your child plateaus for a while, don't get frustrated. As with anything else, all children learn at different speeds."

BUT MY CHILD HATES IT!

So your little hates the water? You've just got to persevere. Swimming – or at least being able

to stay afloat and get to a safe area – is a non-negotiable survival skill. Swim Australia says children should be able to swim 300-400m, using a mixture of strokes, by the time they leave primary school. After reaching this stage, your child has an ingrained ability they'll be able to rely on at any stage in life.

"To enhance your child's first swimming experience, take them along to a class similar to theirs a week before they start lessons.

Be positive in pointing out how the children are having fun and how they're not forced to do things they can't do," says Ross.

"It's unusual for children not to relax in the water after a few lessons, but some children take to the water immediately while others are apprehensive and take a few weeks to settle down. Just don't give up." 🐶

HANDY CONTACTS

For summer safety tips, check out royallifesaving.com.au and www.kidsafe.com.au. For your local registered swim school, contact Swim Australia on 07 3376 0933 or go to swimaustralia.org.au.

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