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What Age Should My Child Start Swimming Lessons?

Parents are often drawn to the obvious benefits that swimming lessons can offer their children, but many feel unsure at what age they should start. It is natural to feel some caution. Parents might question how children learn to swim when they are so young and what type of activities they will be involved in. Relating swimming to the process a child goes through when learning to walk can help us to understand. Walking is a complex, physically demanding activity that requires intense coordination and balance, yet children learn how to walk at a relatively young age and, for the most part, teach themselves. Learning to swim happens in very much the same manner with parents and teacher there to assist at each step of the way.

While swimming lessons may help to address safety issues, lessons will also continue to refine the strokes helping the child to become a safer more efficient swimmer, and of course lessons are a fun, healthy activity for children.

It's important to remember that before birth, infants were immersed in a fluid environment inside their mother's womb. So, we aren't really talking about when to "introduce" a child to the water, but rather, when to "reintroduce" them to the element that they called home for close to nine months.

For most parents, the family bath is probably the best and most convenient place to continue developing the affinity that many newborns have with water. This can begin once the baby is home and the umbilical cord has healed. Often newborns are bathed in a sink or counter top tub. The bathtub is another option and should be used at every opportunity. Fill it up with warm water, get in with your child and let them enjoy the full benefit.

The baby doesn't even need to go under water at this early stage. Using a secure and gentle hold let them feel the buoyancy and the movement of the water over their skin. These early bath experiences should be free from stress and a lovely way to build rapport with the water. This is a special time for parent and baby and can allow additional bonding, even for dad! Mums may choose to breast feed their child in the tub to associate the water with a calm and relaxed feeling. Using a flannel and eventually a cup, the baby can be introduced to the sensation of water on their face. Starting from just a few months of age, lays a great foundation for joining a regular swim program later on.

So, when should 'formal' lessons start? There are a few different guidelines and opinions. However, the recommendation of the Australian Swimming Coaches and Teachers Association is that infants can start a formal program at 4 months of age. Some of the reasons for waiting until 4 months are to allow a medical history to develop, allow the infant's immune system to strengthen and allow bonding to occur with the primary caretaker. After 4 months, lessons in a gentle and developmentally appropriate program can, and should, be started right away.

Once a lesson program has begun, how long should it go on? Swimming lessons are not an event, but rather a long-term process. Attending lessons as a regular part of a child's weekly routine through their infant, preschool and early school years is a great plan to ensure proper development of their aquatic skills.

Starting early and continuing long term will allow your child to fully experience all that the water and the swimming lesson experience has to offer.

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