

SWIMMING WITH INFANTS

There are many that would say taking your baby or toddler to the pool is an ordeal and not worth the effort or time spent. However, those of us that have made swimming with young children a regular part of our life would beg to differ!

At an international level there is much interest in the proposed benefits of infant swimming experiences. The positive impact of regular swimming for infants and toddlers spans physiological, social and developmental domains. Swimming with a young person is fun for both the child and adult. It is a discrete period of one to one contact between the caregiver and the child in a relaxing environment.

The bonding experience is enhanced by close physical contact, trust in each other and a sense of joy and excitement. From a very early age babies can be seen to recognise their regular swimming environment and eagerly anticipate their entry into the pool and sense of physical freedom as those little arms and legs flap about madly without the restraints of gravity. Families participating in regular classes benefit from the development of social bonds with other similar families and enjoy their mutual support through the different stages of development and learning.



Physically, swimming also has many benefits. Early swimming with babies in their first year of life provides much close contact in a warm and calming environment. Babies enjoy the freedom of movement in the water and almost always sleep well after their exciting outing. Toddlers experience an excellent aerobic workout. They progressively learn control over their respiratory function and lung capacity whilst underwater and ultimately their ability to autonomously surface for breath. Swimming at any age promotes muscle development and enhances coordination and balance. Early physical experiences aid cognitive development and sensorineural integration. There has been much attention in the literature about the impact of swimming in children with asthma. Recent articles have reinforced the suggestion that regular swimming reduces bronchial hyperactivity in known asthmatics. Other research demonstrates positive emotional responses of babies during and after swimming is associated with low levels of adrenocortical stress activation.

Early aquatic exposure in a controlled and educational environment is one of the cornerstones in the development of water awareness and safety for the growing child. No aquatic skills can replace adult supervision, but never the less, a credible infant water program will encourage basic survival skills and the development of a child's intrinsic knowledge of their own limitations in water. Early exposure to water helps the child develop self confidence in the water and also confidence in their relationship with their parent or caregiver.

I have taken my 3 children to weekly swimming lessons with Oceanic Waterbabies (OWB) over the last 5 years. My children all started swimming before the age of 4 months and have continued to this day. The wonderful program at OWB promotes the learning of swimming with caregivers and children sharing the pool until the age of 5. The learning process occurs together as a duo as opposed to something thrust upon the child. It is gentle, receptive to the child's body language and style, and joyful. My kids, now aged 2, 4 and 5 years, enter the pool with a grin from ear to ear. They have all swum independently around the age of 3, and have all propelled themselves underwater several metres towards my smiling be-goggled face well before the age of 2. For our family, swimming is rated as an awesome bonding experience. And as we live in such a sun kissed, water worshipping land- I wouldn't have it any other way!

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