



## First time at a swimming lesson

Try and remember what it was like the first day you went to high school or tried anything new. See if you can recall the strangeness of it all. The feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. Going to swimming lessons for the first time can be a very emotional time for your child, especially if they have had a bad experience in the water. The term water also means the bath or the shower.

Quite a lot of children associate having their hair washed and getting soap in their eyes, with swimming lessons. The association is easily recognized. Water over my head, water in my eyes, my eyes sting, therefore water over my head makes my eyes sting. Most little children are too young to realize it is the soap that stings not the water.

So here we are, first time, at a swimming lesson. If your child is of an age where you go into the water with them, then during that first lesson they have you as security, and provided your instructor is experienced and guides you through the first lesson and you listen to the instructor then your child normally has a good experience and is willing to come back for more lessons. You have established a solid base to work from.

If children are to come in to the water by themselves then, depending on the temperament of the child, this has the potential to be a traumatic experience for the child, mother, other children in the class and the instructor, if the situation is not handled professionally. Experienced instructors are essential in this situation. We pride ourselves on providing these types of instructors.

There are a lot of things that you can do at home that will prepare your child for swimming lessons. The first thing is not to make a big deal over coming to swimming lessons, in fact it is a good idea to tell your child that you are taking them to a pool to play in the water. Mention this once and then leave it at that. Start to make bath and shower time fun. Play lots of games in the shower/bath. Games like pouring water over the head of a favorite toy, doll animated character etc. Play some splashing games where tiny amounts of water splash on your child's face. If your child gets water in their eyes, and start to get upset, see if you can distract them by drawing their attention to some other activity in the bath. Over the last 30 years I have found that children who have showers are more prepared for swimming lessons than children who only have a bath.

Try and distance washing their hair from having fun in the water, by making hair washing a completely separate time to having a bath.

So far I have dwelt on children who are apprehensive of the water and do not like having water over their heads. Your child may love the water and if your problem is one of trying to stop the bathroom floor from flooding then be thankful that your child is confident in the water. Chances are your child will adapt to swimming lessons fairly quickly, but that first lesson will still be critical, and your child may still be apprehensive.

Be patient during the first couple of lessons. The first thing an instructor has to do is develop a trusting relationship with your child, and sometimes this can take a long time. Learning to swim is about learning to trust. Trust the instructor not to make you do things that you are scared of until you are ready, trust the water to hold you up when you float and trust parents to always be supportive no matter how frustrated they may feel. With trust comes confidence, and with confidence comes an accelerated learning phase. Shatter that trust and confidence during the initial stages of the learning process and it takes a long time to regain it.

Put yourself in your child's place for the first lesson. This is a relatively new experience for both you and your child. Driving to a new place, calling into the office to take care of the administration work, watching the class in the water from the observation room, having to walk out on to the pool deck and meet the instructor and then having to cope with getting into the water and suddenly feeling the change in the gravitational forces acting on your body. On top of all this your child, if they are apprehensive in the water, will be thinking, "I don't want to go under the water", or "I want my mummy". On the other hand if your child is very confident in the water they may be thinking, "Come on let me go under" or "sitting on the step is boring".

Either way the first lesson is a time where your child will be assessing the experience, and the instructor will be finding out your child's current water skill limit. Be patient and supportive because we are all working toward the same goal, which is to make sure your child is having a positive experience while they learn the skills that will enable them to swim.

Chris Shapland