

for more information about water babies please contact head office on:  
tel 01404 548 348 email [info@waterbabies.co.uk](mailto:info@waterbabies.co.uk)

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your **health**

Pictures: JIZ DION; MARIA PLATT-EVANS

READY TO CRAWL: Little Billy feels at home in the water



## THE REAL LIFE WATER BABIES

Swimming can improve an infant's co-ordination and muscle development as well as strengthen heart and lungs. **JESSICA BOWN** reports on the underwater skills of the tiniest tots



**SURGING AHEAD:** Billy with parents John and Caroline

**H**E MAY be only nine months old, but little Billy Pinder loves swimming underwater, unaided by his mum Caroline. "I first took Billy swimming when he was three months old and he took to it immediately," says Caroline, 30, a bonds analyst from Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire.

"It's a great form of exercise and it is also teaching him to communicate with and trust me. "I have a mantra that I repeat when he's going to be submerged: 'Billy, ready, go' and when he hears it now he immediately shuts his eyes and holds his breath, which is very useful for bathtime as well."

And for good causes. Last month little Billy, who lives with Caroline and his father John, 31, raised £360 for the baby charity Tommy's by taking part in an underwater swim.

Infants lack the strength, co-ordination and motor skills to swim on the surface until they are about three years old. However, with careful supervision and encouragement they can swim short distances underwater from very early on.

Indeed, Water Babies, the nationwide swimming club, which Caroline and Billy attend, welcomed its youngest client at just two days old.

The idea of babies being able

to swim independently was established in the Sixties in Moscow. This was when Igor "Jarkovsky, a Russian swimming instructor, claimed to have saved his daughter's life by frequently submerging her in warm water after she was born more than two months premature. He went on to pioneer waterbirths.

There are significant physical benefits to swimming at such a young age. Research has found that babies who swim have advanced motor development, social skills and intelligence and are likely to walk earlier due to their excellent muscle control.

Health expert Dr Miriam Stoppard says: "Getting your baby into the water from an early age helps to improve co-ordination, balance and core muscle development, giving them a full but gentle physical work out and strengthening the baby's heart, lungs and respiratory system."

Studies show that safe swimming and skin to skin contact also help boost the bond between parent and child.

Figures from the charity Tommy's, which funds research into the causes of miscarriage,

premature birth and stillbirth, reveal that one in five parents feels more connected with their offspring after swimming together. One in four says their children seem happier after a session in the pool.

However, taking young children swimming can be a daunting prospect for both parties and should be approached with caution. "You certainly shouldn't just slam dunk your baby and rely on the gag reflex, which automatically shuts babies' vocal cords when they are under water, as that could be extremely traumatic," says Jess Thompson, co-founder of Water Babies.

But, when handled sensibly, parents may be surprised at their baby's natural skills. Tamsin Brewis, who has taught swimming for 10 years says: "Parents can underestimate their baby's capabilities in the water, when they can do so much more than float."

● Tommy's Splashathon is a sponsored swim for babies and young children. For more details visit [tommys.org/08707707669](http://tommys.org/08707707669). For information on Water Babies, see [waterbabies.co.uk/01404548348](http://waterbabies.co.uk/01404548348).

### TIPS FOR SAFE SWIMMING WITH TIDLERS

● Check out the facilities, water and air temperature at your local pool before your first swim. The water should be at least 32 degrees for babies of up to 12 weeks and at least 30 degrees for older babies.

● Invest in some baby swimwear. Water Babies suggests swimming in a normal nappy with a waterproof nappy from Splashabout ([splashabout.com](http://splashabout.com)) on top.

Huggies Little Swimmers nappies are also specially designed for the pool.

● Babies feel more secure in smaller environments, so spend more time in the bath if they are unhappy in the pool.

● Bring a favoured bath toy on your first few visits to the pool to make your little one feel more comfortable.

● Keep trips to the pool relatively short until your baby gains

enough confidence in the water. About 20 minutes is enough at first.

● Be as encouraging and reassuring as possible. Sing your child's favourite nursery rhymes and make up games to make pool time even more fun.

● If you want to join a swimming class, look for a teacher with Swimming Teachers Association or Amateur Swimming Association qualifications.