



press clippings

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Tiny splashes

Infant swimming lessons can help babies socialise, gain water confidence and learn other skills useful both in and out the pool. **Lucy Atkins** reports

When two-year-old Elizabeth Jelley fell into the family swimming pool she managed to right herself, swim to the edge and hold on to the side. She spent about four minutes alone in the 4ft-deep pool while her mother, Amanda, was searching for her. Amanda, from Merseyside, found Elizabeth clinging to the side of the pool and calling her. She is convinced her toddler survived because of the swimming lessons she had had since she was eight months old. "Most children drown because they panic when they fall into water," says Jess Thompson, founder of Water Babies, a nationwide company that provides infant swimming lessons. "We teach children to become familiar with water."

More parents than ever before are enrolling their infants – some at just a few days old – in swimming classes. A 2007 survey by the Swimming Teachers' Association (STA) showed an 84% increase in the number of babies under the age of two having swimming lessons over the previous two years. They estimate that more than 300,000 babies and toddlers in the UK are now taking classes.

Billed as a way for infants to gain water confidence, meet other babies and have some fun, swimming lessons, like most baby-centric activities, can be pricey, not to mention time consuming. Is it really worth it?

Suzanne Matthews, an educational consultant from St Helen's, Merseyside whose son Simeon took a swimming course recently, says the benefits have been a huge surprise. "I never would have believed I would watch my nine-month-old swim up from under water by himself, take hold of the side of the pool and support his head out of water," she says. "The skills we have developed have been incredibly useful outside the pool too. We can wash his hair in the bath without getting soap in his eyes using the word-association commands, and after learning the



A Water Babies class in Newcastle

PHOTOGRAPH JIM GREENFIELD

command to hold on in the pool he understood the same command on land," Thompson says there are more subtle effects, too. "Most of our clients are first-time mums, who can be nervous. Having skin-to-skin contact with their baby, with an experienced instructor taking responsibility and offering guidance, is invaluable. You really see that confidence transfer itself on to dry land."

Classes can range from simple, relatively unstructured splashing around to more organised training schedules. In the latter, parents might learn how to hold a baby in the water without letting them drink it, and how to help them get used to lying on their backs. As the babies grow more agile they learn to "monkey monkey" along the side – cling on and move around on their own. "It's fantastic, seeing a line of tiny babies, all supporting themselves on the rail completely independ-

ently," says Thompson. They can also learn to swim through hoops, walk over wobbly rafts, use long swimming floats as horses, and even learn to "holiday swim" – hold on to their parent's back as they dive down and glide along the bottom of the pool.

Up to the age of about 18 months, a baby's epiglottis will automatically close over and block the throat when it is submerged in water. According to Ian McKinley, a paediatrician at Manchester children's hospital, this means that a properly supervised baby can be safely allowed to go under the water for short periods (for up to half a minute). However, some baby swimming experts fear that this involuntary action – sometimes known as the "gag reflex" or the "dive reflex" – is being misused by untrained teachers. "The slum-dunk effect is still going strong," says Thompson. "There are teachers who put babies under the water willy-nilly." This may be dangerous, not to mention traumatic for the baby. Good instructors place the emphasis on teaching babies to hold her breath and go under the water voluntarily – if pushed, they may develop new fears rather than gain confidence.

Some parenting websites advise waiting until your baby has had its first bout of immunisations (at two months) before setting foot in a public pool. However, says McKinley, "it is perfectly safe to take a baby swimming before their jabs, providing the water is warm enough – at least 32C for a baby under 12 weeks old or under 12lb, and 30C for a baby over 12 weeks or 12lb". A baby's early vaccinations protect against infections such as diphtheria, pertussis and Hib (Haemophilus influenzae type B). "These are transmitted in the air, so swimming pools do not carry a greater risk of infection than anywhere else," he says. Most public baths, however, are too cold for a small baby, unless there is a hydrotherapy pool. But, says Thompson, you can buy wetsuits even for tiny babies (try splashabout.net) which can keep a baby warm enough for short periods.

It is worth seeking out good teachers, says Matthews: "Swimming is such a positive experience for Simeon that singing the swimming songs to him calms his tears out of the pool, too" ●