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# THE WEEKLY NEWS



## THE WATER BABIES!

by Hazel Crossan

**A**LL over the country, tiny babies are taking to a new type of swimming lessons like ducks to water!

They're learning to feel at ease both above and below the surface, having fun, and even picking up potentially-lifesaving skills.

Last year, three "graduates" of the Water Babies classes survived what could have been tragic accidents.

One fell into a canal, another plunged into a family swimming pool, while another was found in a swollen stream.

Rather than panic, the children did what they'd been taught to do and turned themselves over, made for the edge and held on until they were spotted and rescued.

One mum said afterwards she was absolutely convinced that without Water Babies classes, her daughter would be dead.

### Have fun

"A lot of children drown when they fall into water because they're paralysed with fear," says Jess Thompson, who founded Water Babies with her husband Paul in 2002. "Drowning is the third-largest cause of accidental death for children in the UK."

The aim of the classes is to teach the little ones

to enjoy the water and feel confident in it, but also to have fun.

It's good exercise for them, and a sociable event for both the babies and their parents.

In the last seven years, Water Babies has become the largest baby swimming company in the world, with 16,000 clients in the UK and Ireland, and now a branch in Sydney, Australia.

The couple came up with the idea when Paul, a quantity surveyor and trained diving instructor, took their daughter Imani for swimming lessons as a toddler.

Since then, they've devised a course that's very different to traditional swimming lessons, as youngsters don't have the co-ordination to learn swimming strokes until they're at least three years old.

The classes operate on a franchise system — "But this is very much a family business," says Jess.

"Most of the people running Water Babies classes are either friends, family members, or ex-clients who enjoyed it so much, they decided to train as an instructor."



### Confidence

The standard course consists of 40 lessons split into four 10-week blocks, and while there's no minimum age to begin — their youngest pupil was only two days old! — youngsters have to be under one so they can start before the fear factor sets in.

"The younger a baby starts, the better," says Jess, "though the average age is around six weeks."

"Babies have a real affinity with water, having spent months in the womb suspended in fluid."

"So, floating in a bath-tub-temperature pool will, at the beginning, actually feel much more familiar than being on dry land."

"However, this innate confidence can diminish as babies get older, possibly leading to fear."

"This is one of the main reasons why we believe in starting swimming so early."

"The temperature of the pool is also important and has to be heated to 30 degrees C or above."

"Babies under 12 weeks old or weighing less than 12lbs need an even higher water temperature to be comfortable, as they can't regulate their body temperature."

"Taking part isn't just a learning experience for the babies."

Some of the adults who become involved take their babies along because they themselves

have a fear of water and don't want their children to be the same.

"One of our mums was petrified of the water until she started coming to classes," adds Jess.

"Eventually, she became so much more confident, she began taking lessons herself."

### Splashathon

In March, Water Babies was named as Best Children's Activity Provider in the Tommy's charity Let's Get Baby Friendly Awards.

Now, there are plans for babies around the country to dip their toes in the water to do a spot of fundraising for a sponsored Splashathon event for the charity later this year.

