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INTERVIEW



What started as a side project is now the biggest baby swimming business in the world and has saved the lives of two children.

Catherine Scott met founder Jess Thompson.

MANY pregnant women with a small child, living in the ruins of a part-renovated home, might not be too happy when their husband announces he has given up his job to start a new baby swimming business.

Not Jess Thompson. Jess and husband Paul are probably two of the most spontaneous people you could meet.

Having already packed up their life in London when daughter Imani was a few months old to live on a tiny undeveloped Caribbean island, taking on a new venture surrounded by builders' rubble with no windows or running water in a freezing Yorkshire winter was no trouble.

"When we set about creating Water Babies in 2002, little did we think that within six years we'd be in hundreds of locations across the UK, Ireland and Sydney," says Jess.

"In fact, little did we think about anything, other than trying to survive the winter when we first started out, working as we were in a house in the midst of some serious renovations, with no upstairs windows or running water, the top of a fridge for a desk and, to cap it all, a new baby on the way."

That idea amongst the builders' rubble is now the biggest and most successful baby swimming business in the world and recent winner of the Best Children's Activity Provider in the national Tommy's Let's Get Baby Friendly Awards.

But a global business was never really Paul and Jess's original intention. While living in London Paul, a fully training scuba diving instructor, had taken Imani to baby swimming lessons.

When the couple moved to Ilkley they realised there was nothing similar, so Paul, then a chartered surveyor, decided to set up a class in their new home town.

"Paul was born to teach

children to swim," says Jess, unable to hide the pride in her voice.

"He came from a water background and devised the courses himself.

"We were lucky that we got some really good publicity and the response from people was phenomenal. I don't think we could have done it anywhere else than Yorkshire," she says.

"Everyone just seemed to embrace the idea. "The phone never stopped ringing and by the time we started our first class we had 100 clients."

It was rather by accident that teacher Jess, Paul and Imani ended up in Ilkley.

Having spent six months on the Caribbean island, Jess was terribly lonely.

"It was really hard," she says. "Paul was teaching diving and I kept trying to get teaching jobs and then a hurricane came and wiped out the village. I said 'I've had enough.'"

The family returned to the UK, but their wanderlust meant they couldn't settle back into London life.

"We decided to head north. We'd never lived in the north of England before."

So that's what they did. Their first northern

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Taking the plunge helped baby business boom



PERFECTLY NATURAL: Fiona and Jacob Scott Bailey at a baby swimming session. PICTURE: AG DODD

home was a barge in Sheffield, but they didn't settle and considered going back south. "We decided to go a bit further north and see what

we found. We found Ilkley and we thought it was an amazing place and we decided to stay."

They bought a house that very weekend and then went backpacking for three months with one-year-old Imani.

The Thompsons are true believers in giving their children as many experiences as possible as young as possible, especially travelling to different countries and experiencing different cultures.

"It's interesting how very few ideas of parenthood are fully formed before having kids," says Jess.

"With the arrival of ours, we quickly realised that we both passionately believe in it's not too early as varied a range of stimuli for your children when they're under five as it is when they're older.

"After all, if 75 per cent of all



AWARD-WINNING: Jess Thompson receives Water Babies' Best Children's Activity Provider award from TV host Floella Benjamin.



FAMILY BUSINESS: Jess, Jay, Imani and Paul Thompson.

HOW WATER BABIES WORKS

Water Babies believes that using armbands can create a false sense of security in the water. Instead the parent acts as the child's temporary support as they begin to learn to swim. Infants lack the strength, co-ordination and motor skills to swim on the surface until aged about three. However, with careful supervision and

encouragement they can naturally swim short distances under water from very early on. The core Water Babies programme lasts one year, divided into four 10-week terms. Classes are kept small, with a maximum of 10 babies per session, with an emphasis on fun.

For information go to www.waterbabies.com

brain growth happens before the age of three, surely it's the ideal time to present them with as much as possible to learn from."

So even after baby Jay was born the backpacking continued.

Many parents would shudder at the thought of exposing babies and young children to backpacking in far-flung places such as Vietnam and Cuba.

It does seem a little strange that a couple dedicated to saving the lives of babies by teaching them to swim are happy to expose their own children to what might be perceived as even bigger risks. But Jess disagrees.

"Our children are so much more confident than a lot of their peers, and that is really what Water Babies is all about, teaching children one of life's core skills; confidence in the water."

Imani is now 10 and has already written 17,000 words of her first novel; Jay, six, has the confidence of a much older child.

"I am not someone to nurture them educationally," says Jess. "I believe in letting them experience things for themselves."

Both children have been around the world, with the only continent not visited being the Antarctic. India is also another place Jess says she is wary of taking them.

Water Babies is all about teaching one of life's core skills; confidence in the water...

Within a year of setting up Water Babies, the Thompsons were approached about launching a franchise in Scotland.

"We'd never really thought about the franchise model as a way of moving forward, but it seemed to make complete sense to us. Whichever Water Babies you go to, the experience will be the same.

"We are obsessive about quality control and health and safety. We know all our franchisees and instructors personally; most of them were clients first. It is like a massive family. Everyone, no matter what their job, is important and they know that."

They may have a global, award-winning brand, but what seems most important to Jess is that just last year, within the space of 10 days, two two-year-olds saved themselves when

accidentally falling into water. They had both been on the Water Babies course.

"That makes us immensely proud," she says in recent research which showed swimming with your baby can help reduce the onset of post-natal depression.

"Baby swimming offers you so much more besides. It's a chance for people to socialise with like-minded parents; a chance to do an activity together that you both adore.

"The confidence you both gain in the water will often then increase your sense of confidence on land and the stimulation of a completely different environment will see your child thrive."