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Columnists

Helping Your Child Overcome Their Fear of Water

by Alisa Ruby, M.A.

Summer vacation is the time for relaxing and enjoying life to its fullest for every member of the family. But, what do you do when you have a child that is too afraid to participate in one of the summer's most popular activities?

Although the average ages for children to learn to swim ranges between three to six years, many pools, schools and aquatic centers around the country have parent/infant swimming classes that start when the child is as young as six months. Private lessons can be great for children who are extremely fearful of the water, but most experts believe that the natural competition of group lessons help children to progress much faster.

It is crucial for a child's first experience with swimming to be with their parent or someone they trust. The most important tip for helping children to overcome any fears of the water is to use lots of positive reinforcement. Never criticize a child who is having trouble learning or who is afraid. Swimming is a metaphor for life. We all have the innate ability to swim. With a parent's positive reinforcement, a child develops the confidence to blossom and develop their swimming skills.

Try to encourage your child by going into the water with them and making the experience fun with games and laughter. Holding the child and teaching him how to blow bubbles is usually the first step. Just make sure the water is warm when they are exposed for the first time. Next, teach your child how to take a big breath and stick their face underwater. Learning how to breathe properly in water and to relax and float while you hold them will help the child feel much more confident before even beginning any structured lesson. When they are ready, make sure your child has sturdy “water wings” as you begin to show them how to hold the wall and kick.

Reward them for their accomplishments every day while they are learning with affection and/or a small treat. It is important to give the child lots of love before, during, and after their early exposure to water so that positive associations are made. Never take your eye off your child when they are in or near water until they are extremely competent swimmers. Also, don't rely on older siblings to watch young children while they learn to swim. It is probably a good idea to keep children swimming in pools or calm lakes for quite some time before taking them into an environment with waves, unless you are holding them tightly in a shallow part of the water.

Learning how to swim should be a slow and enjoyable process. Most children can only learn a couple of skills, such as the doggie paddle or basic kicking, per day. The most important factor in a child's ability to learn to swim is the way he or she feels about the water. If the child learns to enjoy the water, swimming skills will develop naturally.

Enjoy your beautiful summer and fill it with joy as you create the memories that will last for your children's entire lives!

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