

learning to

Keeping your child safe, in and around water, is an essential job of a parent and with the kiwi lifestyle centering around beaches and water sports, learning to swim is a life-saving skill, along with many other associated health and brain benefits. Here's what the experts say.

water safety

Are you ready for some shocking statistics? According to Philip Waggott from Dash Swim School, we have every reason to be concerned about water safety in our country. "New Zealand has one of the worst drowning rates in the world and it is the third leading cause of accidental death in this country," he says. "It is vital that children learn to swim to survive at an early age – as young as 6 months."

At Dash Swim School, like in other swim schools around the country, the emphasis is on teaching the baby what to do if they accidentally fall into the water, be it a swimming pool or a river. Essentially, the idea is to teach the children how to survive before teaching them how to swim. There are two basic survival skills being taught in New Zealand's swim schools: the roll-and-float technique and the swim-to-the-side technique.

Philip's school favours the roll-and-float technique that teaches babies to get to the surface of a pool if they fall in, roll onto their backs, and float with their faces out of the water until help arrives. "Swim to survive can be as simple as learning to float on your back and kick, and it is essential that our children learn this basic skill or the drowning rate will continue to rise."

Lisa Cross from Paddletots swim school has a preference for the swim-to-the-side technique. "We teach the children to turn back to the side of the pool and hold on." At their school, they start to teach it to babies as young as 9 months. "I personally can confirm this works," Lisa says, "as my 12-month-old fell into a pool and did just this and all was good and didn't even cry."

development

Safety is the main reason many people enrol young children in swimming lessons. But, as with any other skill, there is much more to baby and toddler swimming than merely the safety aspect. Research confirms that learning to swim as a baby has the potential to increase intelligence, concentration, alertness, and perceptual abilities, as well as improve social, emotional and physical development.

Child brain development specialist, Douglas Doman, lists numerous benefits that arise from teaching your baby to swim. "As a baby develops these mobility functions," he writes in his book, "breathing will become deeper, more regular, and more mature. This enhanced respiration helps the baby to be able to make sounds, which improves communication and overall language development. When the baby can move better, and breathe better, health also improves. When the baby is able to communicate better with mother and father, baby is happier. It is easy to see that these are all valuable side-effects of swimming."

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By Yvonne Eve Walus *



Swimming also helps the progress of speech, brain development and neural wiring through combined movement such as the kicking of arms and legs together. As a baby grows into a child, research suggests, regular exercise such as swimming helps stimulate the mind, causing further brain development and an increase in cognitive ability (the ability to process information).

fitness

Of course, the physical benefits of swimming are enormous, too. It is a valuable form of exercise because it gives the child an aerobic workout, builds the large muscles of the body, tunes gross motor skills, and improves coordination. Many children feel good after a swimming lesson because swimming has been shown to reduce stress, raise the level of mood-boosting chemicals in the brain, and increase blood flow to the brain thus providing it with nutrients. If your child's swimming class falls in the evening, you may also notice improved sleeping patterns throughout the night.

School children who swim regularly (at least once a week) are generally very good at other physical activities such as hiking, biking, and cross-country running. This is attributed to the children's elevated fitness levels. They also seem to be good at learning new sports, such as kayaking, which uses the same muscles as freestyle swimming.

open-water safety

Please remember that even if your child is a champion race swimmer, it does not mean they are safe in open water or on boats. Swimming-pool swimming is different from swimming in choppy ocean water, with its swells and currents and lower temperature. Most swimming lessons don't teach open-water safety, i.e. what to do if there is a rip tide, or if the boat capsizes, or if the ferry starts sinking. Ask your primary school whether they can get involved in the Be WaterWise programmes, designed by Water Safety New Zealand to teach safety around aquatic activities.

winter swimming

Should you stop swimming lessons during the colder months? On one hand, regular lessons help your child retain the skills they've acquired, plus letting your child swim all year round is said to increase their immunity to disease. On the other hand, if your child is prone to wintertime viruses, it may be wise to discontinue swimming until the weather or their health improves, even if the swimming pool is indoors and heated.

red flags to watch out for

According to the swimming expert Rob McKay, "Children should be excited and happy about going to class, being in class and about learning to swim." Before committing to swimming lessons, visit any swim school you're considering enrolling your child in. If you see unhappy faces or children crying, go somewhere else.

competitive swimming

As your child progresses through primary school, the annual school and interschool swimming competitions will begin to feature in your life. If your child shows potential, you may want to consider intensive swimming programmes or swimming clubs. While it's awesome to have your child do well in sport, it's probably a good idea to discuss with them the amount of time they'll be expected to commit when they're part of a club. 3–4 lessons a week plus attendance at monthly competitions will usually be expected at club-level swimming.

special needs

Warm pool water provides an engaging, soothing, and tactile environment for children with special needs. Many autistic babies and toddlers experience swimming lessons in a positive way, particularly if the pool is not overly noisy or crowded. As their swimming progresses, their coordination, strength, endurance, and lung capacity will improve. Some students may learn to swim before they learn to walk. Latest research confirms that regular exercise, including swimming, can actually cause injured neurons in the brain to regenerate.



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