



By Justin Norris

Retaining & Improving Water Skills for Your Toddler

Swimming is a wonderful activity. It brings a sense of achievement, independence, tranquillity and relaxation. Knowing how to swim can open many doors for participation in other sports and activities.

Some of the principles mentioned here are specific to swimming, and some also work very well in all aspects of development and learning for your child. So there are some great points to keep in mind for new situations or just in general.

Factors that Help in the Retention of Swimming Skills

1. Exposure

The water is a different environment to what we experience every day, so some sort of exposure to this environment is critical. You can't learn to swim if you never go near the water. You can't learn it by talking about it. Because of this factor, time away from swimming has a huge impact on the retention of previously learnt skills. People will often find their child's swimming has 'gone backwards' after even a small break. Unlike many other land-based activities, there is no real substitute for the water, so if kids aren't in the water at all, their memory of how to move through it will fade.

2. Natural Ability & Strength

Your child's body composition will determine how quickly they progress through different stages of their

swimming. Just like on land, some children hit milestones early and some later, but this has little relevance to their end result. For instance a baby that walks at 9 months is not more likely to win the Olympic 100m sprint than the next baby.

3. Practise an Appropriate Distance

It is important to keep distances achievable so they are attempted. If a distance is perceived too great for a child, they will not attempt it independently, therefore will not get any independent practise. It is far more important to do many repeats at an achievable independent distance, than is it to do one assisted or forced at an unachievable distance.

4. Practise with Independence

It's important to set up the arena around the child in a way where they can practise without assistance. Look for ways to make your child feel comfortable and safe in the environment. Things like shallow water, close range handrails, ledges, steps, and walls will help with this. By positioning them correctly, this will allow your child to practise without heavy assistance. The more kids do themselves, the more they work out for themselves. Their knowledge of the water and how to manipulate it increase. If the child knows what will happen in the water, it takes the mystery out of swimming which leads to confidence and awareness of their own ability.

5. Consistency

If you can maintain consistent exposure and practise over a long period of time, your child will be more likely to retain skills.

Points to be Aware of:

You want to help them help themselves: for maximum learning, your child needs to feel settled. Help them only as much as they need it, while making sure your child is not unsettled. If children are fearful, they are protective and not receptive to new information. Assist enough to make them comfortable but don't do it for them. Try taking them closer to the wall or side, to shallower water or take them near a ladder or something they can hold onto so they feel more in control. Children are more likely to trust solid objects they can touch. They will be more comfortable in shallow water, close to the side. Let them feel in control and they will practise more with independence.

Try not to make your job harder: Never force your child underwater or take them from where they are comfortable. It will make your job harder next time, as they will be less likely to trust you. Be conservative. If you want your child to improve, a good rule of thumb is to double your practise time and consistency and halve your expectations. Let them choose. If you push too much and get angry, it will most likely make your job of getting them in the water harder next time. It will take you further away from your goal.

If your child is too unsettled and you are unable to settle them, just stop for the day and come back another day.

Awareness of our ability: If a child has an unrealistic awareness of their ability, it can lead to trouble. For instance, they may put themselves into a situation that they think they can handle but they cannot. If children are fully assisted in the water, such as being fully supported by floats like back bubbles, they do not know what to do in the water does without these things.

Too much physical assistance: Your child will need your help and support if they are upset. If they are settled however, you need to be light with your assistance. The problem with too much assistance for instance, is if a child is being 'floated' through the water, they will automatically disengage their muscles, they relax and are not required to make any small adjustments themselves to balance in the water. Therefore, their brain won't have had any practise in telling the muscles how to adjust in the way that would help move through water. They can't get any better at swimming if they cannot practise these adjustments on how to manipulate water. There are some swim schools out there that can quite easily make it appear that your child is swimming or floating, just by dragging or drafting them through the water but you can do the same thing with a rag doll.

Increased age equals increased risk perception: People will often say that their child used to be more of a daredevil in the water when they were 2 years old, but now they are 4 they are scared of it. This is because as they get older they can better perceive risk in situations. Of course, this is an important life skill that makes it less likely for an older child to run blindly across the road, put their hand on the stove or fall down stairs than a toddler.

The most important thing is consistent exposure. If your child is in water consistently all year round, once a week or more, they are much less likely to become 'scared' of the water because they have been exposed to this in a comfortable way. They have 'grown up with it' as their mind has developed and sees more danger. If they hit any hurdles in progression they can be dealt with quickly to put the course right again before they become big problems. They are confident in their own ability, whatever that may be, and they are aware of not putting themselves, in a situation they cannot get out of by themselves which means they are much less likely to have a 'scare' in the water.

You are stuck with the children you have: your children are their own people and they have their own personality. Parents who pull their children out of swim lessons because they think their child is not progressing or "doesn't listen" often come back with the same problem later. Swimming is not the same as other activities a child may do as kids will no longer be getting any exposure to water. People who stop lessons for an extended period of time often come back with an older child with the same problem who is a worse swimmer than before, making the task harder and the parents more anxious.

Remember

- Make sure your child is settled and feels safe - give them a hug
- Be conservative with your expectations but take them as often as you can
- Set up your arena so they feel in control
- If nothing is working, then stop and come back another day
- Swimming is important - don't give up on them!

- Remember the most important thing with any water activity is full parental supervision which means being within arm's reach of a child in your care.

If you feel your child is not up to speed with where you think they should be with their swimming, contact a reputable swim school that should be able to help you.

Biography

Justin is a dual Olympian having represented Australia in the 2000 and 2004 Olympics. He is an Olympic medalist in the 200 Butterfly and a finalist in the 400 Individual Medley.

In his career Justin has broken the Commonwealth and Australian records in both the 200 Butterfly and 400 Individual Medley. In Manchester, 2002, Justin won three individual Commonwealth titles in the 200 Butterfly, 200 Individual Medley and 400 Individual Medley.

Justin is the director of the Justin Norris Swim Academy in Thornton.

More Information

Justin Norris Swim Academy

6 Sandringham Ave
Thornton NSW 2322

P: 02 4966 1411

www.justinnorisswimacademy.com

Hunter Wetlands Centre Australia



A haven for wildlife and people

- School holiday program
- Picnic/BBQ • Playground
- Canoes • Feeding Talks
- Café Nourish and much more...

Off the roundabout, Sandgate Rd, SHORTLAND
Phone 02 4951 6466
Email hwca@wetlands.org.au Web www.wetlands.org.au

✈ Education ✈ Conservation ✈ Ecotourism