



Make Swimming Fun and Safe

Pools can create different visions for us. Some of us look at a pool and imagine our child will one day be the next Michael Phelps. Others automatically see a hot summer afternoon with happy kids splashing the day away. And for some, pools evoke fear: What if my child falls in? What if my child can't swim and panics? What if my child doesn't understand the dangers associated with water? How do I even get my child interested in getting near a pool? If you have more than one child, you might experience all three of these scenarios. At age six, I'm delighted my daughter is doing flips off the side. For my seven year old, my goal is simply that he doesn't drown. So how do we ensure that our kids will feel comfortable and be safe around the water?

Starting out

We don't want that first experience to be overwhelming, because we know when that happens, "first" can also mean "last". Consider having the first trip to the pool be during a quieter time of day, to allow for "easing" into the experience. For the first few visits, consider explaining the pool and the layout of the pool facility:

- ▶ Take a walking tour
- ▶ Discuss where it is deep and where it is shallow
- ▶ Point out the lifeguards
- ▶ Explain that they should know where the lifeguards are at all times
- ▶ Explain that if they need assistance, they can ask a lifeguard

Tip toe through the poolips

Yes, I know - it's a bad pun on Tiny Tim. But it will help you remember to just dab those toes in the first time. Enter slowly into the water, giving your child time to adjust to the experience of the water. Hold her hand or hold her close at first so she feels secure. We ultimately want to build comfort, confidence, and a feel for the water. (I bet you have that song in your head now, don't you?)

Think tropical paradise

Think about who takes your child to the pool or beach and whether they are they comfortable around the water. If that person feels uneasy, so will your child. You want to model calm. I know - you don't think "calm" is in your vocabulary. Picture that peaceful beautiful ocean - even if you're at the public neighborhood pool surrounded by screaming, splashing kids.

Safety First

We want swimming to be a fun experience, but safety must be the #1 priority. Always know where your child is AT ALL TIMES. A child can go under in the blink of any eye. And what most people don't realize is that children sink - they don't splash around and yell for help. They just quietly sink to the bottom. Do not assume the lifeguard is watching your child. In the time it takes for the lifeguard to be distracted by another swimmer, your child may have already made it to the bottom of the pool. Know when your child is getting tired and suggest moving on to new activities. And consider enrolling in a learn-to-swim program. Even if your child never perfects a single stroke, just focus on skills to keep from drowning.

"Look mom - I'm a dolphin!"

Give plenty of time for free swim and water exploration. Allow your child to experiment, but be there for support. You want your child to enjoy the water, and not associate pools as just one more place for instructional lessons. Don't tell them this - but all that fun splashing around is also good practice.

Water water everywhere and not a drop to drink

Stay hydrated! The sun gets hot, and although you are IN water, you may not be getting enough water IN YOU!

Slip, slop, slap

Slip on a shirt, slop on sunscreen, and slap on a hat. Ok, I stole this from an Australian health campaign. But it's good advice in any country. Wear sunscreen. Preferably a high SPF that is also waterproof.

Additional Resources

SOSecure Containment Swim Brief
www.discoverytrekking.com/containment-swim-brief

We would like to thank the Michael Phelps Swim School for their contributions to this article. For information on exclusive rates for families impacted by autism, visit www.mpswimschool.com or call 410.433.8300.



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