



## Help Your Kids Learn to Love Swimming!

Thinking about introducing your child to the fun of water play? Before hitting the pool or the beach, be sure to read our tips for helping your child feel comfortable.

### Get In the Swim!

Ready for some water fun? Read on for step-by-step plan for helping babies, toddlers, and preschoolers learn to love swimming, plus expert advice on the right time for starting classes and how to pick the perfect program.

### Step One: Test the Waters

The best way to get your child familiar with the water is to start in the bathtub or kiddie pool once he can confidently sit up on his own (typically around 6 months). "Having this experience in a calm, happy place will help your child stay relaxed in the more chaotic environment of a public pool or beach," explains Connie Harvey, project manager for aquatics technical development at the American Red Cross. To help your baby grow comfortable with getting his face wet, gently squeeze a sponge or a washcloth over his head, letting the (soap-free) water trickle down his forehead and into his eyes.

### More Ways to Make It Fun

**Turn the tub into a playground:** Bring in his favorite playthings like floating toys, watering cans, and plastic balls. Having the stuff he loves around him will make the water a welcoming place for your child.

**Play peekaboo:** Submerge your face in the water, then come up with a bright smile. Children are natural mimics; if you show that it's fun to get your face wet, your little one will be more willing to try it later on.

**Blow on it:** Put your lips to the water and make some bubbles. If your child is up for it, you can then have him copy your moves with his mouth and nose submerged too.

### Step Two: Get Your Feet Wet

The pool can be overwhelming for little kids. "To make that first dip less scary, take your toddler to a family-swim period so she can observe the action without pressure to join in," suggests Kay Smiley, who oversees swim-program development for the YMCA of the USA. On your next trip, sit together on the side of the pool, letting her feet dangle in the water. Then go into the shallow end together, holding your child with one hand underneath her bottom, and the other one around her back. Ease in gradually, and act relaxed. Once she's comfortable, get her used to moving through the water by front towing: Hold her under her arms, facing you, allowing the water to support her weight as you walk slowly backward, chatting with her the whole time.



## More Ways to Make It Fun

**Go for a ride:** Hold your child by the armpits as you walk backwards through the water, chanting, "Motorboat, motorboat, go so slow." Pick up the pace, then say, "Motorboat, motorboat, go so fast. Motorboat, motorboat, step on the gas." In time, encourage her to kick.

**Walk it off:** Get her used to being in the water without you supporting her completely by holding her bottom as she grasps the ledge of the pool and walks hand over hand along the side (to make it more fun, call it "monkey walking" and have her make silly monkey sounds).

**Make a wish:** Work on bubble-blowing and breath-control skills by pretending your finger is a birthday candle. Have your child blow on it, gradually moving your finger closer to the water until she makes a few bubbles.

## Step Three: Start Splashing!

Around age 3 or 4, when your child feels at home in the pool, you can begin to prepare him for formal lessons. First, practice floating: With your child's stomach in the water, position yourself so you're cheek to cheek, then have him extend his legs behind him and take a "nap" on the water with his head resting on your shoulder (the "pillow"). Have him do the same thing on his back once he's ready. You can also have him latch on to your neck, using your arms to straighten his legs out behind him and help him kick.

## More Ways to Make It Fun

**Sound off:** Encourage him to put his face in the water if he hasn't already; the first time he tries it, have him close his mouth and hum to prevent water from going up his nose.

**Talk to the fishies:** Prime your little one for learning the rhythmic breathing that goes with strokes: Prompt him to blow a few bubbles by suggesting that he put his face in the water and ask an imaginary fish a question. Then have him turn to the left or the right, keeping his ear in the water so he can listen to what the fish has to say. Keep up the pattern of bubble blowing and then side breathing by feeding him questions for the fish, such as, "What do fish like to eat?"

**Sneak in some practice:** Play a few rounds of "Simon Says" in the shallow end, and instruct your little one to kick and blow bubbles -- in addition to goofier commands for splashing (just a little) and shaking his hands while tapping his feet.

*Originally published in the June 2010 issue of Parents magazine.*

*<http://www.parents.com/baby/safety/outdoor/help-your-kids-learn-to-love-swimming/>*

