



# Water Safety..... ..... **Information**

August 2004

## **Taking Children Swimming**

Children can benefit enormously from learning to swim and being confident in and around water. This factsheet aims to give child-minders, nannies and people involved with child-care on a professional basis, as well as parents, some advice on keeping children safe whilst at the swimming pool.

If you are going to take a child or group of children swimming on a regular basis, it is worth checking out the facilities that are available to you before embarking on the first trip. You may be lucky enough to have a choice of pools to visit and should decide on which would best meet your requirements. This will depend on the number of children you are accompanying, their ages and swimming ability. Leisure pools with slides, flumes and rapids etc. will provide a more stimulating environment for children but generally will be more suited to older children who are confident in the water and have some swimming ability. Supervision of children at leisure pools is more difficult, particularly during busy times with a lot of children engaging in different activities.

If you are taking very young children swimming find out whether your local pool offers a 'parent and toddlers' session. Pools that offer toddlers a separate swimming area or shallow paddling pool are also worth investigating. It is probably easier to build up a youngster's water confidence if there are not older children splashing around them and jumping in and out.

Consider the timing of your visit. If taking young children, you may want to try and choose a time when the pool is quieter and ensure that you avoid 'lanes' sessions. Generally do not take children swimming after they have had a main meal, wait at least an hour before allowing them to swim, as you would with another strenuous physical activity.

If you are unhappy about any of the facilities provided at your local pool or their policies, talk to the pool manager and find out whether things can be improved or a compromise reached.

## **Deciding the age at which to take infants swimming**

Exposing babies to water early is to be encouraged. Contact with water encourages the desire to swim and reduces the chances of a child developing a fear of water. However it is important to remember that a baby is vulnerable for a number of reasons:

- Babies lose heat more quickly than adults so the pool temperature should not be too cold and the baby should not remain in the pool too long.

- Swimming pools use chemicals to sterilise the water, a baby's skin is more delicate than an adults and the chemicals may have an adverse effect.
- Although the chlorine or ozone used in pools makes the likelihood of transmitting infections unlikely, it is a good idea to wait until a baby has completed the standard course of three injections against diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough, plus the oral polio vaccine.

The Amateur Swimming Association advise taking a baby swimming to an adequately heated and maintained public pool from the age of six months. Before this age, preliminary swimming skills and familiarisation with water can be taught in the bath at home. Further information is available at [www.asa.org.uk](http://www.asa.org.uk)

### **Hygiene**

Practice good hygiene when taking a baby swimming, a swim-nappy is essential to prevent faecal contamination of the water. If by accident this does happen, or the baby vomits, contact a member of staff immediately. Do not take a baby swimming if they have a tummy upset or are suffering with a cold or virus.

Ensure that children shower before going in the pool to remove any sweat and dirt. Children with long hair should have it tied up and preferably wear a swimming cap. Any jewellery should be removed. Do not allow the children to chew gum or eat in whilst in the pool area.

### **Supervision**

Constant supervision of children whilst at the swimming pool is essential. Although drownings in pools are extremely rare, evidence suggests that children under the age of 11 years are most at risk and toddlers are the most vulnerable. It is not sufficient to rely solely on the supervision of the lifeguard at the pool-side.

Ensure that you are familiar with the pool environment, recognise particular hazards, like changes in depth and check out where the points of help are and the location of rescue equipment. Be particularly vigilant in 'leisure pools' where there may be a number of features within the pool, like flumes, fountains and waves.

If you are supervising more than one child, do not leave one child in the pool whilst taking the other into the changing rooms, unless you are confident of their swimming ability and maturity. Whether you need to be in the pool with the child/ren you are supervising will depend on their age and swimming ability. Generally it is better to support non-swimmers by being in the pool with them. Younger children who are out of their depth in all, or most of, the pool will need physical support. Because supervision does need to be constant recognise that you will not have the opportunity to swim and exercise yourself.

### **Child Admission Policy**

Find out in advance what the child admission policy is at the pool you are going to use. The Institute of Sport and Recreation Management (ISRM) have guidance on this and many pool managers will use this guidance. Further details about the guidance are available at [www.isrm.co.uk](http://www.isrm.co.uk). Some parents have found the standard ratio of adults to children advised by the ISRM and used by pool managers, to be restrictive. The guidance issued by the ISRM does allow for flexibility based on the

risk present at individual pools so it is worth discussing this with your local pool. Find out if they offer, or are willing to offer, toddler sessions with a higher staff level.

Also, many pools operate a changing-room policy, find out what this is before you go so that you can ensure it is not going to cause you difficulties with supervision of children of different ages and sexes. The ISRM offer guidance about this in relation to changing for school groups, which may assist.

### **Buoyancy Aids**

Swim jackets that contain floats are helpful in giving children confidence in water whilst learning to swim. A buoyancy jacket also offers an extra layer of warmth to the child. Some jackets have removable floats so that the level of flotation can be decreased as the child's swimming ability increases. Ensure that your child is wearing the correct size as the amount of buoyancy in each aid will vary according to size.

Armbands are also a good training aid, again ensure that you have the correct size for your child, this will reduce the likelihood of them slipping off and will provide the correct buoyancy for your child.

Rings and inflatable animals that require a child to hold onto them for support are only suitable for children that have some swimming ability. Generally these should be used as toys to encourage water confidence and their use should be supervised.

Be wary of swim seats for very young children. Like bath seats, these can engender false confidence in the supervisor. They still require constant supervision as they can tip over, or the child may wriggle out of them, do not leave a child unsupervised in such a seat.

BS EN 13138:2003 is the number of the British standard for buoyant aids for swimming instruction, look for this number on any flotation aid that you buy. The aid should also carry the following warnings:

- “Use only under competent supervision”
- “Will not protect against drowning”
- “To be worn on upper arm only” (for armbands)

These warning emphasise the fact that you should not rely on flotation devices as a substitute for supervision. Children can remove jackets and armbands and slip into the water very quickly.

### **And Finally**

If you do not already have first aid training, consider taking a basic first aid course and learning resuscitation techniques. Contact St John's Ambulance ([www.sja.org.uk](http://www.sja.org.uk)) or the Red Cross ([www.redcross.org.uk](http://www.redcross.org.uk)) for further information.

### **Further Advice**

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority have launched a website about safe swimming which contains advice for teachers, parents and children. It is aimed at encouraging swimming whilst offering safety advice. There is advice about how to

encourage children to act responsibly at the pool as well as games and puzzles about safety for the children to enjoy. Go to [www.nc.uk.net/safeswimming](http://www.nc.uk.net/safeswimming).