



**BABY & PRE-SCHOOL SWIMMING**

# **A PARENT'S GUIDE**





# Introduction

Welcome to STA's Parent Guide to Baby and Pre-school Swimming – this guide includes useful hints, tips and advice to help you start your journey into the wonderful world of baby swimming.



## About STA



STA is a national governing body for swimming and a UK-registered educational charity that since 1932 has worked to create and deliver the highest standards of swimming teaching in line with its charitable objective; 'The preservation of human life through the teaching of swimming, lifesaving and survival techniques'.

STA's objective is also shared by its 18,500+ members. STA, who won Education Supplier of Year at the ukactive 2022 awards, also works alongside a vast mix of swim school and leisure operators, both here in the UK and internationally, who deliver STA's International Learn to Swim Programme to participants of all ages and abilities.

Find out more at

[www.sta.co.uk](http://www.sta.co.uk)



# The Joy of Baby Swimming

As parents / guardians, we want to make sure our children are always happy, healthy and safe; making sure they are confident and safe in and around the water is an important part of this.

Introducing babies into aquatic activities from an early age and helping them develop this lifelong skill has always been, and continues to be, a key priority for STA. We believe the best way to do this is to create a safe, warm environment in which babies can be introduced to water.

Playing with baby in water helps them to feel safe and secure and helps to boost their confidence. This is thanks to skin-to-skin contact, regular eye contact and loving smiles.

Teaching babies in water relies very heavily on this empathy and awareness on the part of the parent. A calm, relaxed approach achieves far better results than an anxious, fearful one. Babies have no concept of fear, they accept every new experience they are introduced to by smiling or crying, relying on the empathy of their parents to guide them through the maze of discovery. Joining a baby swimming class can also help with this. It is important, however, that babies are taught by trained swimming teachers such as STA Level 2 Award in Aquatic Teaching – Baby and Pre-School Swimming qualified swimming teachers that use a recognised baby swimming programme.

Programmes such as STA's STARFISH learn to swim programme for 0 - 2-year-olds have been developed specifically for babies and will ensure that babies reap positive experiences in the water. They are baby-centred, and structured to help them to develop physically, emotionally, intellectually and socially - and most importantly at their own pace.

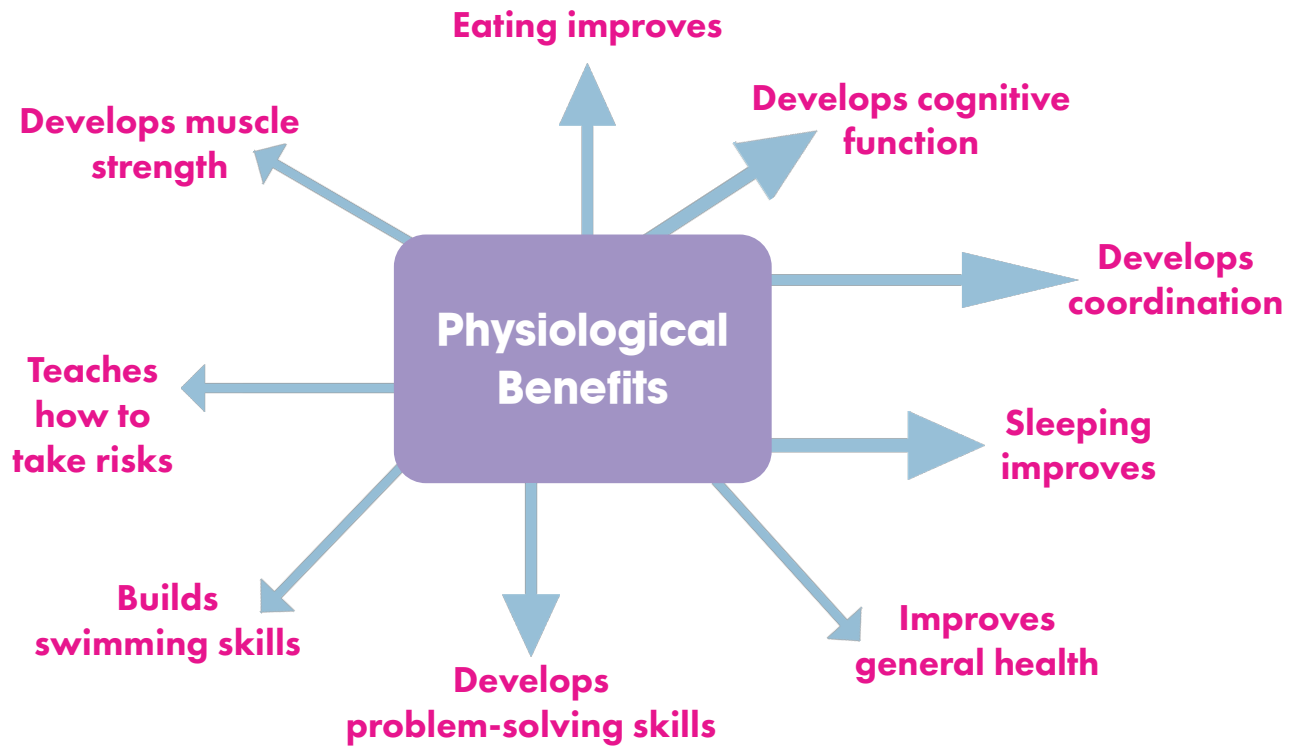
Swimming also keeps baby active, fit and healthy. Research has also shown that swimming can have a positive impact on baby's sleeping and eating patterns.

Most importantly, it teaches young children to be water safety aware. Baby swimming lessons will equip them with key safety and safe hold skills in the water; teaching them a key life skill that could one day save their life.

**This quality time with baby is the start of a lifelong enjoyment of the water.**



# Benefits of Baby Swimming





# STEP 1 - Getting Started

## Fun in the Bath

The bath is a great place to help babies and young children get used to the feeling of the water. Bath time will help them acclimatise to the water in their own comfortable surroundings, and is the first natural step towards swimming lessons.

Below are some fun activities you can do with your baby to make bath time even more beneficial and enjoyable.

### SAFETY FIRST

Babies already have a natural affinity with the water, having been in the womb for 9 months. However, for new parents, handling a wet baby might be a bit daunting at first, so it's always good to be prepared and be safety-ready.

- Never leave a baby or child unattended in the bath
- Always make sure to check the temperature of the water before a baby / child gets in - around 36 / 38°C is a comfortably warm temperature, but if unsure, use a thermometer to check, or test it with an elbow for hot patches
- Keep the water in the bath shallow, about 20 - 30cm
- Be very careful with hot water taps while handling baby in the bath - they may protrude and often remain unexpectedly hot
- Look out for clues that baby is getting cold or wants to get out - shivering, crying or lip trembling
- Make sure there is a soft towel to hand for when a baby / child comes out of the bath, and dry them as quickly as possible.

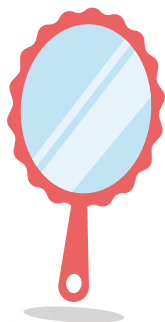


## BATH TIME ACTIVITIES

- Support baby and make eye contact to ensure they feel secure - encourage them to splash their hands and kick their legs
- Encourage baby to splash their hands and toes - to encourage them, use the rhyme: "this is the way we splash our toes", "this is the way we splash our hands"
- Sit in the bath with knees up, and hold baby close to you and facing you
- Lay them on their back against your legs and talk to them and gently splash their tummy - let them experience being in the water with you
- Lie back with them on your chest, with their body submerged so they can feel the sensation of the water - massaging their legs and arms will help keep them relaxed
- Always maintain eye contact and talk reassuringly to them.

## USING TOYS

- Use sponge toys and watering cans to get baby used to having water sprinkled over their body. This is also a great way to build confidence and to help baby get used to the touch, feel and sensation of water running over their body. This can be built up gradually initially starting on their shoulders and back to ease them into it, gradually increasing it to the arms and legs, providing the baby shows no signs of distress
- One of the hardest parts for adults during a baby swimming lesson is getting the baby's head wet, so it's always best to try wetting their heads first in the safety and security of their home, at bath time with you close, next to them in the water
  - Start off slow by sprinkling a very light trickle of water over the back of the head, and very gradually increase the amount of water over time - keep eye contact, and keep reassuring them through words and songs. Blowing bubbles in the water is also a good way for helping older babies have confidence in getting their face wet in the water. If they cry, stop and cuddle them, and try again at the next bath time. Once baby has experienced this feeling of water on their own face, it will make the experience far less stressful when it's time for splashing during swimming lessons
- Use a mirror to play peek-a-boo. Try putting bubbles on top of baby / child's head, this may amuse them and help them relax
- Using toys that light up, are colourful or make a sound are also fun, and will bring positive associations with water. When ready to go to the pool for baby swimming lessons, bring those same toys used at bath time - the familiarity of those toys will give baby a feeling of safety in the new setting and can make the first transition to the pool much smoother
- Add some sinking toys into the water and encourage them to look and reach for them
- Place floating boats in the water and encourage baby / child to blow the boats along. Adults could join in and have a race as confidence grows. Encourage baby / child to kick their legs, pushing the boats out to sea with the big waves they are making.





## SONGS AND RHYMES

An essential part of the learning process is to have lots of FUN with baby. Children learn through play, which means lots of fun, game-led songs and rhymes. Here are three examples:

### Wheels on the Bus

Sing the wheels on the bus using different actions for the different verses:

- Wheels on the bus go round and round (*move hands around in the water*)
- Wipers on the bus (*move baby / child side to side*)
- Rain on the bus (*using your hands make droplets onto baby / child's head*)
- Horn on the bus (*splash hands, like beeping a horn*).



### If you're happy and you know it....

If you're happy and you know it, make a splash (*splash splash*)  
If you're happy and you know it, make a splash (*splash splash*)  
If you're happy and you know it, then your face will surely show it  
If you're happy and you know it, make a splash (*splash splash*).

If you're happy and you know it, kick your legs (*kick kick*)  
If you're happy and you know it, kick your legs (*kick kick*)  
If you're happy and you know it, then your face will surely show it  
If you're happy and you know it, kick your legs (*kick kick*).

If you're happy and you know it, shout "Hurray!" (*hoo-ray!*)  
If you're happy and you know it, shout "Hurray!" (*hoo-ray!*)  
If you're happy and you know it, then your face will surely show it  
If you're happy and you know it, shout "Hurray!" (*hoo-ray!*).



## Incy Wincy Spider

Sing the Incy Wincy Spider rhyme. On the line 'down came the raindrops and washed the spider out', use a watering can to act as the raindrops falling on the baby's body. Alternatively, scoop the water with hands and let the water droplets drip from the fingers.

Incy Wincy spider went up the water spout  
Down came the rain and washed the spider out  
Out came the sun and dried up all the rain  
And the Incy wincy spider went up the spout again

The teeny tiny spider went up the water spout  
Down came the rain and washed the spider out  
Out came the sun and dried up all the rain  
And the teeny tiny spider went up the spout again

The big humongous spider went up the water spout  
Down came the rain and washed the spider out  
Out came the sun and dried up all the rain  
And the big humongous spider went up the spout again

Incy wincy spider went up the water spout  
Down came the rain and washed the spider out  
Out came the sun and dried up all the rain  
And the Incy Wincy spider went up the spout again x2



The joys of sharing bath time with baby will establish the idea that water is enjoyable. The earlier they feel at ease with the water, the easier it will be to get them swimming and enjoying water.

Change baby's position in the bath from back to front and front to back in order to provide different sensations, perspectives, and to exercise different muscles. In both positions, gently sprinkle water on your baby's tummy or back; most babies love the sensation of water trickling down on their skin.

**Note: Do not get put off if baby's first experience in the bath is not pure bliss. Many babies are not totally happy when introduced to water and some will cry. Cuddle baby and try again later, checking all the variables in the environment carefully. Some babies need cradling in the water at first; having their arms held securely along their bodies will help them relax in the warmth of the water.**





# Step 2 – Planning baby's first visit to the swimming pool



Many adults may be nervous about taking baby swimming for the first time and will have lots of questions. This is completely understandable and here we have compiled some of the most frequently asked questions.

## AT WHAT AGE CAN A BABY START SWIMMING?

It's never too soon to introduce a baby to water. With regards to immunisation, the current directive from the Department of Health is "your baby does not need any immunisations before they go swimming". There are many benefits and hardly any risks from introducing your baby to water if parents adopt a gentle, sensible approach.



An early introduction:

- Encourages the development of a newborn baby's natural swimming reflex in water - if these early reflexes are not strengthened by regular stimulation they will disappear in most babies after five or six months. However, when babies are introduced to water before this age then through regular and repeated instruction, a baby can be taught to use their arms and legs
- Sustains and builds these reflexes which then leads to the natural development of voluntary arm and leg movements, or what we know as swimming
- Is a sure way of avoiding fear of water – some children are frightened of the water and their fear, whatever the cause, is often difficult to overcome when they become adults.



The policy of STA, with regards to introducing babies to aquatic activities is as follows:

- Babies should only be introduced to water in line with the most recent recommendations from the Department of Health. The current recommendation, at the date of publication, is “Your baby does not need any immunisations before they go swimming” and “You can take your baby swimming at any age, both before and after they have been vaccinated. It does not matter if they have not yet completed their course of vaccinations.” <https://www.nhs.uk/common-health-questions/childrens-health/can-my-baby-go-swimming-before-or-after-vaccinations/>
- A teacher should ensure that a midwife, a health visitor or a doctor is happy for the baby and new mother to be introduced to a public swimming pool. A signed statement by a parent / guardian provides some assurance that it is appropriate to introduce the child to the aquatic environment
- Teachers need to be aware, the immune system of babies born prematurely does not develop at the same pace as that of full-term babies
- Babies aged 0 – 3 months are highly sensitive to sensory stimulation. Their introduction to public pools at this time requires special skills from a baby and pre-school swimming teacher, to lower the risk of age-inappropriate stimulation that can be damaging in the short or long term.

Parents / guardians of babies with general infections, sickness, asthma, skin irritations (eczema), or ear infections should consult with their doctor prior to swimming. Similarly, babies who get skin rashes or acquire infections after swimming should take advice from their GP.





## HOW SOON WILL A BABY LEARN TO SWIM?

Baby swimming lessons will not teach a baby to swim; they are far too young for that. The emphasis will be on making baby relaxed and comfortable in the water, and on making sure baby can turn onto their back and hold onto the side of the pool. We recommend teaching baby as much free movement in the water as possible; not in a formal way, but through play and encouragement. This will lead to swimming when baby is physically and emotionally ready. The focus should always be on having fun in the water without any pressure for achievement. Expecting quick results and pushing a baby will often be counterproductive.

## WILL MY BABY BE SUBMERGED?

Submersion is likely to occur as part of aquatic activities when adults with babies and pre-schoolers move together in the water. When submersions are carefully introduced by specially trained teachers, they can be beneficial towards creating the best foundations for swimming, as well as helping develop water confidence and water safety skills.

Submersion is only one part of introducing babies and pre-schoolers to the aquatic environment. It should never be the dominant focus as it can be counterproductive to both the aims and objectives of adults and babies enjoying being in water together. An excessive number of submersions can be averse to setting good foundations in swimming.

The policy of STA relates to intentional submersion as a practice that takes place as part of the communication between baby, accompanying adult and the teacher in a structured session. Submersion is not something done to a baby but with a baby. Any submersion practice that does not take into account the readiness of the baby as demonstrated by 'baby cues', irrespective of the consent of the accompanying adult, amounts to a forced submersion and is contrary to best practice.

This policy does not include accidental submersions which may happen during a session; these submersions should be avoided as much as possible. Teachers should make sure adults are informed of correct holds and observe all adult and baby pairs carefully.

STA places the willingness and acceptance of the baby or pre-schooler at the forefront of its submersion policy. Submersion practices which are carried out on a baby or pre-schooler without their obvious willingness is likened to enforced behaviour and is not ethically acceptable. Moreover, these practices can compromise healthy brain development of babies.



## HOW LONG DOES EACH SESSION LAST?

This depends upon the age of the baby and the pool water temperature. They may be as short as 10 minutes for very young babies increasing to 20 or 25 minutes for older babies.

### Length and Pace of Lessons

Age of Learner	Recommended Lesson Length	Maximum Time in the Water
0 - 12 weeks	10 - 20 minutes	35 minutes
3 - 6 months	20 - 30 minutes	35 minutes
6 - 12 months	20 - 30 minutes	45 minutes
1 - 4 years	30 - 40 minutes	45 minutes

## DO I GET IN THE POOL WITH MY BABY?

Babies will learn best from adult support and so an adult will need to be in the water where they can help the baby to move on their own in the water, offering physical support, steady encouragement and constant praise. If an adult cannot swim or is afraid of the water, talk to the swim school and they can provide buoyancy aids and baby lessons are also generally conducted in water between 0.9m and 1.3m deep where an adult can stand up.

## SHOULD I FEED MY BABY BEFORE GOING IN TO THE POOL?

It is recommended that babies are fed a light meal about an hour before swimming, however if they do become hungry within this time, a light top up feed can be given. A hungry baby is likely to become upset which may affect their enjoyment in the water which could be counterproductive.

Toddlers who are eating solid foods, should not be fed immediately before swimming as this may cause them to bring it back up in the water. To avoid upsets and distractions, it may be best to feed them something light about an hour before swimming so that they do not become hungry in the water.



# About the Pool

## WHAT SHOULD THE WATER TEMPERATURE BE?

The water and air temperature will need to be higher for babies than for general swimming - at least 30°C (or 32°C for babies 3 months or younger) with air temperature being 1°C above the temperature of the water.

## WHAT DEPTH SHOULD THE WATER BE?

It is important that the water is shallow enough that the adult is able to stand comfortably to support baby effectively.

## ARE BABY CHANGING FACILITIES AVAILABLE?

Make sure there are suitable changing rooms for both adult and baby. There will also need to be somewhere safe to place baby while the adult gets changed.

## CAN I FEED MY BABY WHILE AT THE SWIMMING POOL?

Pools will have a policy as to whether eating snacks, breastfeeding or bottle-feeding are permitted on poolside. Many pools will have a designated area for this.

## HOW DO I GET IN THE POOL WITH MY BABY?

The adult can ask a friend or partner to hold baby whilst they get into the water, or alternatively they can take a towel or a water-proof changing mat to place on poolside at the start (and end) of the baby swimming lesson. Lie baby on the towel / changer whilst the adult climbs in. Baby can then be lifted into the water when the adult is ready.





# If you are looking for baby swimming lessons, there are some additional questions you may want to ask:

## IS THE TEACHER APPROPRIATELY QUALIFIED?

Check that your teacher holds the STA Level 2 Award in Aquatic Teaching - Baby and Pre-School or equivalent.

## IS THE TEACHER APPROPRIATELY INSURED?

Don't be afraid to ask your teacher for details.

## DOES THE TEACHER COME RECOMMENDED BY LOCAL PARENTS?

Often personal recommendation is the best way to find a good teacher, or you can search for a Swim Star Swim School via [www.sta.co.uk](http://www.sta.co.uk)

## IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE I NEED TO KNOW?

- Pools can be very noisy and this may disturb baby. To minimise this, come early and bring along some of their favourite toys. Let them play quietly on the poolside to acclimatise them to the new environment. Bring plenty of towels; a hooded baby wrap is very good to have on the poolside to warm up them up as soon as they leave the water. You may need to bring a changing mat as not every pool provides them
- Remove watches, bracelets and large rings to avoid jewellery scratching baby
- Make sure that baby's face and mouth is held above the water
- Do what you would do naturally at home; relax, smile and praise baby. A gentle 'Rock a Bye Baby' in the water is a good calming technique
- Baby swimming is normally carried out in water at a higher temperature than a normal swimming pool; if baby cries it might be because they are cold. It may be beneficial to purchase a specially designed baby wetsuit to help keep baby warmer for longer.



# Step 3 – Ready to Enter the Pool

## The first swim together – what should be in baby's swimming bag ...

- Swimming costume / shorts, swim nappy and nappy cover\*
- THREE towels – one for poolside, one for the changing area and one for the adult – even consider a baby poncho
- Shampoo, hair brush and any toiletries needed
- Extra set of clothing for baby
- In the winter, a warm baby jacket with a hood
- Healthy drink and snack
- A coin or token for the locker.



## Top Tip:

If might be easier for the adult to come to the pool with their swimming costume / shorts already on under their outdoor clothes.

### DOUBLE-NAPPY SYSTEM\*

Most baby swimming schools will stipulate a double nappy system – what's that? So as to avoid little accidents in the pool, a baby wears a reusable nappy cover over a reusable / disposal swim nappy.



# Step 4 – Your Baby Swimming Lessons



## The Importance of Play

Baby swimming lessons provide a playful learning environment and this means having lots of FUN.

Play is an essential part of learning and development; it contributes to the cognitive, physical and social and emotional well-being of babies and toddlers. Through play, children engage, learn and interact with the world around them.

Play influences the development of gross and fine motor skills, language, socialisation, personal awareness, emotional well-being, creativity, problem solving and learning ability.

In baby swimming lessons, through play, we can nurture water confidence and help babies learn key lifesaving skills in a fun way – skills that will help keep them safe in and around water, until they are able to swim independently.

## What is Child-Led Play?

Child-led play means following a child's interest through play rather than directing it, or worse forcing it. In a swimming lesson environment, this child-led approach can help strengthen the bond, and the trust between adult and baby / child.

It is therefore important to read a baby / child's cues.

Reason	Signs	Suggested Response
Feeling insecure	Clinging, tight gripping, body tension, refusal to make eye contact.	Slow the pace of the session Encourage closer contact with adult and talk more to the child between activities. Offer more praise and cuddles.
Bored	Fidgeting, refusing more active enrolment, whingeing.	Use more toys and teach by playing games.
Tired or overstimulated	Yawning, switching off, inactive, clinging, quiet, relaxed, easily irritated.	The adult should hold the child gently in a supportive hold and sway in the water with them Regularly tired babies may need their nap times adjusted to fit in with the session times. Children who are overstimulated may need to stop the activity and change to a relaxation or floating practice.





## When in the water

As we've said, baby swimming is a brilliant way to bond with baby. The skin-to-skin contact, dedicated time to focus on just you and your baby by singing songs, playing and interacting with baby in a relaxed environment.

Armbands, floats or a baby seat are not needed as these do not fully support baby and can restrict the movements - holding them and supporting them as they explore the water is preferred.

Make sure baby's body is in the water at all times; holding them out of the water will cause them to get cold.

## Holds

The Cradle Hold is where the baby is cradled in the adult's arms so they can see the adult's face and the water is level with their chest, but their head is well above the water. In this hold songs can be sung as baby is gently rocked. Rock a bye baby, row row row your boat work well in this hold.

Another hold for older babies is the Safety Hold; where baby is facing away from the adult, and the adult brings an arm around their chest and under their arm so that baby's chest is supported on the forearm. The other hand can support baby under baby's bottom. This is good for babies to chase toys or gain confidence by splashing hands, doing little bounces with them, whilst facing them.

### Cradle Hold



### Safety Hold



**AND FINALLY**, remember not all Swimming Sessions will go swimmingly! If baby is going through a development change or is learning a new skill, they may become unsettled or not wish to take part in an activity. This can happen from time to time, however, don't become disheartened, just stay relaxed and calm.

Go back to close holds, cuddles, singing and activities which they enjoy.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

For more details on baby swimming and lessons, please contact your local baby swimming school, and use the information contained in this booklet to help make sure your journey into baby swimming is a fun one.

Go to [www.sta.co.uk](http://www.sta.co.uk) to search for your nearest STA Swim Star Swim School



The **STA Swim Star Swim School Programme** is a unique scheme that enables independent swim schools to demonstrate that they work to the highest industry standards.

# Happy Swimming!

