





# sassy swimmers

Is your child ready to hit the pool? *Laura Miller* chats to some of Hong Kong's top swimming coaches for the low-down on swimming lessons.

**L**iving in Asia, where almost any body of water is an inviting playground for most of the year, parents spend a lot of energy planning swimming lessons for their children. This focus on learning to swim is completely understandable. According to the World Health Organization, children under five years of age have the highest drowning mortality rates worldwide. In China, drowning is the leading cause of death from injury in children aged one to 14 years, and even in Australia, one of the most swim-savvy nations in the world, drowning is the leading cause of death from injury in children aged one to three years.

Yet we don't want our children to learn to swim just for their own safety: Swimming is a fun, exhilarating and healthy pastime, and the more confident and competent a child is in the water, the more enjoyment they get out of it.

After a recent holiday in Sri Lanka however, I realised that

confidence and competence do not always go hand in hand. With a swimming pool and lagoon to choose from, my almost-three-year-old gained confidence in the water at a rapid rate. By day five, she was throwing herself in from the top step shouting, "Cannonball!" This was extremely entertaining to watch. What wasn't so entertaining was on day eight when she didn't want to wear her inflatable armbands any more so she could "go underwater more easily" – and discovered she could remove them herself.

We arrived back in Hong Kong determined to capitalise on her confidence in the water, and to get her swimming unaided as soon as possible. Chatting to Hong Kong's swimming experts – Andrew Cox of Innate Fitness; Katie Heyring of Dragon Swim Centre; Sharon Wrobel of Platypus Aquatics; and Karen Robertson of FloatPlus Swimming – couldn't have been better timed.

#### How young is it possible for children to swim unaided?

**Sharon says:** It depends on what you wish to classify as "swim". We have many children who, at two years, are able to independently swim using an underwater dog-paddle for about two metres to get to the side and climb out of the pool. Even some of the toddlers as young as 18 months can manage a small dog-paddle from the parent to the wall. If you mean formal swimming with strokes, then we have some three-year-olds who are able to swim breaststroke and crawl for short distances, some up to about five metres.

#### When should lessons start?

**Andrew says:** The earlier the better. Before six months, babies still have an innate affinity for water as a result of life in the womb. Build on this to generate enthusiasm for water: In the bath, pour (soap-free) water over your baby's head to get him comfortable having his eyes and ears in water.



“

Children enjoy water more when they learn at their own pace, experience success, practise repeatedly and receive praise for their efforts.”

**Katie says:** Once a baby has had his first immunisations he can start lessons. If you have your own pool, I'd feel happy putting him in from six weeks. For public pools, I'd recommend three months.

**Sharon says:** Infant Aquatics recommends beginning formal lessons in a class situation from six months old. We teach “formal” strokes when children are developmentally able to complete the gross motor movements required – around four to five years.

**Karen says:** Actual stroke work is introduced around four to five years when children have the necessary confidence and balance on the front and back. We work on front crawl and backstroke at the same time. Breaststroke is next, and finally, butterfly.

**What do you think about buoyancy aids?**

**Andrew says:** Use what works to create confidence in water. If children are unhappy without armbands, use them and slowly wean them off by progressing to a noodle under their arms, then to a kickboard held out front. Find the child's threshold of success and aim to expand that each time they enter the water.

**Katie says:** Armbands have their place, as they can give children independence and keep them upright in water. They do restrict arm movement however, and for lessons they are a no-no. Children must recognise that swimming unassisted is their goal.

**Sharon says:** Attached aids can hinder the natural development of aquatic skills and give parents

a false sense of security. Around water, parents should always have the “Layers of Protection” recommended by Swim Australia ([www.swimaustralia.org.au](http://www.swimaustralia.org.au)) in place. (“Layers of Protection” is a system of checks which may save a child's life – they include supervision, barriers, swimming and water safety skills and an emergency action plan.)

**Karen says:** If you're looking after more than one child, floatation devices are essential. I prefer buoyancy suits over armbands as the latter can restrict arm movement. However, any buoyancy aid should not take the place of adult supervision. In our swimming programme, we work on buoyancy so children learn to float unassisted on their fronts and backs. These skills can save a child's life.

**What should parents do when their children are nervous around water?**

**Andrew says:** Create a “play state” for the child. Help them fish for floating toys from the top step with a foam roll. Eliciting playfulness changes a child's fearful experience to one of exploration and growth.

**Katie says:** Never force a child to do something in water. Children enjoy



water more when they learn at their own pace, experience success, practise repeatedly and receive praise for their efforts.

**Karen says:** Be gentle and positive and practise as much as you can in the bath – swishing through the water and moving legs/arms in kicking/paddling actions, keeping it fun.

#### What should parents do if their child is too confident around water?

**Andrew says:** Let them experience a small amount of fear in the water, with the parent/coach immediately on hand. Be calm and confident as the child will feed off your reaction.

**Katie says:** Lessons on water safety are vital (for example, never running around a pool, checking depth before diving, etc.). And kids should always be supervised by an adult who can swim.

**Sharon says:** Parents must establish rules with their children and constantly reinforce them. Basic rules such as asking to enter the water need to become routine.


**Karen says:** It is a balance between encouraging children's skills as they naturally challenge themselves

(sometimes exploring beyond their capabilities), and making them aware of potential dangers. Setting boundaries is crucial.

#### What are your top three water-safety tips?

**Andrew says:** 1) Teach kids that the side of the pool is their saviour. Children need to reflexively look for the side, rather than another swimmer. This is only achieved through repetition: Jump in the water, turn around and grab the side. Repeat. 2) Teach your child the respect that water deserves. 3) Teach them confidence in going underwater. If children can remain calm if they fall in, there is a higher likelihood they will save themselves by getting to the side.

**Katie says:** 1) Start young. 2) Don't skimp on the safety measures: swimming lessons; putting up barriers (fencing, pool alarms, pool covers); becoming CPR-certified; and practising "touch" supervision – always staying within arm's reach. 3) Find a water-safety class for your child. He will be taught to hold his breath underwater, flip onto his back to float, and swim to the side in case he falls in.

**Karen says:** For children: 1) Never go near water without an adult. 2) Always wear a life jacket on a boat. 3) Always listen to the life guards. For parents: 1) Know your own swimming limitations – if you cannot swim, then learn. 2) Always have your child in sight. 3) Be aware of potential dangers. 

## Learn to swim

If it's time for swimming lessons for your family, check out one of these:

FloatPlus Swimming: [www.floatplus.hk](http://www.floatplus.hk)

Platypus Aquatics: [www.platypusaquatics.com](http://www.platypusaquatics.com)

Innate Fitness: [www.innatefitnesshk.com](http://www.innatefitnesshk.com)

Katie Heyring: [heydings@yahoo.com.sg](mailto:heydings@yahoo.com.sg)