Learning Plateaus in Toddlers

Every person will hit a learning plateau at sometime in their life, quite often a few times during high school years. Learning skills go hand in hand with physical and cognitive development and just like brain growth, the most learning is done in the first 4 years of life.

Children who participate in swimming lessons from a young age (under 12 months) will often have better physical coordination than those who have not. This aligns with the promise of cognitive development as brain synapsis connect faster, determine outcomes easier and helps your bub become a powerhouse toddler.

This type of learning fizzles a little as your child hits 24-30 months and this is often where you will see a change in behaviour during swimming lessons. They may seem more distracted than usual, almost bored with the lesson, or others may become disruptive and even cry before, during and after lessons for no apparent reason.

These are all quite normal and doesn’t mean that your toddler no longer likes swimming lessons. They have hit a learning plateau and they can’t move forward on their own.

What can parents do?

Change it up! Introduce a new sinky, floaty or reflective toy to bathtime, or if not already doing it, introduce a shower with mum or dad once or twice a week. Have them pick out some goggles from the shops and try using them at home – these don’t have to be just for water activities, think outside the box!

Taking your toddler to the local pool for fun family swimming is the best kickstart as it engages their emotions as well as their natural sense of exploration and voluntary imitation skills as they try to do what daddy did or follow mummy’s monkey monkey to the deeper water. Once children of this age begin to become aware of what they are capable of and how they can use their own limbs and bodies in the water, they can get more out of the skill-based lessons by doing things in between the activities.

What can instructors do?

In cooperation with parents, Instructors can extend children who hit this “wall” with extra activities to try in between the skill-based program. This may include more difficult skills or distances during the same programmed activities or an extra “roll” into a back float while swimming to the wall.

In times when the child is becoming disruptive or upset, regressing skills can be necessary to keep them safe and to have them feel more emotionally connected to the parent. There is nothing stopping us going back to basics, and often in older kids’ stages, this happens every 3 or 4 lessons to revisit the skill and refine it.

Stopping a standing jump and regressing to a voluntary sit-down entry but focussing on the hands in front lean forward technique is still beneficial for when this child learns about glides and torpedos. The important thing with this skill is that it is VOLUNTARY.

**This is the age where many people will stop lessons for their child as they think that they no longer enjoy the lessons. Unfortunately, we rarely see these kids back again until they are in Primary School and during this time their thoughts about lessons are more like bad memories meaning Instructors must build confidence skills all over again.**

**Taking a break for a term or 2 will not do any damage, especially if you can commit to taking them swimming on a regular basis as a family.**

Learning Plateaus in Pre- Schoolers (3-5yr olds)

Children in this age group who have learned basic skills in the parent & toddler classes will have a good understanding of how to listen to instruction, practice the skill and take feedback during a lesson. Sometimes you will see a plateau after their first term as an independent swimmer when they realise that they are no longer swimming with a parent, or, when their body growth, or lack of growth doesn’t allow them to progress.

The more common skill staller is physical development which we can often break down to specific elements in girls and boys. Girls tend to have (on average) shorter arm length in this age group meaning they can be restricted in free movement with their hands in front. Boys have (on average) longer arms but tend not to be as mobile in the shoulders as girls which restricts movement of hands in front. This hands in front skill is the basis of safe guided entries, glides, torpedos, freestyle, backstroke, breaststroke, etc.

Spatial awareness is also a difficult one to navigate as children of this age are only just experiencing formal learning in a classroom environment and therefore are ambidextrous. Playing movement games in parent & toddler classes and having children participate in self washing including hair, face, back, etc allows for better understanding of their own body in the pool. Back and front (horizontal positions), in front and behind (vertical positions) and left to right (vertical & horizontal lateral rotations) can be tricky for a mainstream child, let alone one with any learning delays or even those who have sinus/ear issues as balance and memory affect each other.

Children with no previous swimming lesson experience will generally fall into two categories –

Self-motivated – these children enjoy the water and want to be in it. Not necessarily to learn to swim but will do a lesson as long as they get to be in the water. Depending on the other issues above, these children will either learn quickly to get where they want or will take longer because attention to instruction isn’t as strong as the distraction of water (over excited).

Parent motivated – these children don’t particularly enjoy the water but will attend lessons with minimal fuss due to the parent’s concern. Depending on the other issues above, these children will either learn quickly to get it over and done with or will take longer because of lack of interest.

Have a look at your child in this age group and figure out what combination your learner is at a swimming lesson. As Instructors, we can see 4 different types in one class so you can understand why there is so much repetition in your weekly lessons!

Activities to promote perceptual & motor skills that will help in the pool are;

Child getting dressed in front of a mirror – this help the brain to figure out left and right hemisphere information as the reflection is mirrored

Hop scotch

Skipping rope “tightrope” walking – lay a rope down and ask the child to follow you as your jump sideways, forwards and backwards over it, walk along it trying to stay balanced, hop over it, etc. Shape it to give interest and make it more difficult

Any activity that encourages hands above head or behind their body – passing a ball left hand to right hand and vice versa around the body vertically and horizontally, etc.