Liz Fowler owns Swim Mechanix in Success, WA and has successfully run aquatics programs for over 10 years for WA Babyswim, Lifecare Babyswim and Next Generation Clubs She has been teaching Infant Aquatics for 13 years with a focus on babies and toddlers (0-5 year olds). Since 2013 she has been involved in the design and delivery of the Royal Life Saving Infant Aquatics & Swim & Survive Programs to parents and Instructors, often training Teachers to be employed at centers around Perth. Liz has also delivered workshops at the Austswim King Neptune Conference and is in the process of producing a DVD on Water Safety and Progressions for young children.

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**1) Why is baby swimming so important?**

We know that the first three years of human life is the most important period of life especially in regards to physical and emotional developments. Providing babies and parents with an opportunity to be together and try to re-create the womb environment by being in clean and warm water, could bring a special sense of security and happiness to babies. Plus, scientifically it has been proven that swimming at a young age can help the overall growth of children.

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**2) Apart from providing ‘quality fun time’, do you think infant and toddler swimming lessons could actually help a child with becoming a confident swimmer? Why?**

I think the aim for swimming lessons for infants and toddlers should be to produce people who would enjoy being in and around water for a lifetime. An early start in swimming is not about producing Olympic swimmer; It’s about giving every child an opportunity to learn how to enjoy being in water for the rest of his/her life. Everybody needs to learn to love the water first before they can learn how to swim and for this reason ‘Parent & Child’ swimming lessons must be considered to be part of any comprehensive learn-to-swim program. “Parent & Child” swimming programs should be structured with experienced teachers and delivered correctly. Then these early teaching best practices can feed through seamlessly to the more advanced stages of learning to swim and stroke development.

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**3) With so many activities widely available these days for babies and toddlers, parents often ask whether there are any clear advantages of swimming compared to other activities. What do you think?**

A child who has attended swimming lessons as a baby or toddler would learn to have a trusting relationship with water. Building water confidence and teaching the fundamentals of swimming like floatation on a child’s back and front, breath control and kicking are the core of infant and toddler swimming. Kids start to swim independently (by swimming I mean travelling in the water in any form) when they are ready. This is normally between three and four years of age, when children have enough physical development to start learning proper techniques. Through early-years swimming lessons, parents could give their children a head start compared to children who start formal swimming lessons straight away around aged four. When it comes to technique, a water-confident four year old who knows the basics like how to float, kick and blow bubbles has a clear advantage over a similar age child who hasn’t done anything and needs to learn everything from the scratch. Therefore, children who have started swimming as babies generally progress much faster during the stroke development stages of swimming. This is due to the fact that foundation has been laid firmly before the age that learning competitive strokes starts.

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**4) Should the objective of ‘Parent & Child’ swimming classes be to provide fun water-based activity for parents and kids to have ‘quality time’ together or do you think these classes should focus on teaching basic swimming skills?**

We should aim to reach a happy medium. I think for babies, the classes should focus on providing a fun and happy time in the water with their parents and to instill a love of water through play. As children get older and especially for toddlers, we can put more structure in ‘Parent & Child’ classes and mix having fun and teaching the basic skills though play. We can still keep it fun with songs and toys for toddlers and introduce them to activities which are teaching oriented like kicking on their front and back and jumping in the water for brief periods of time in each class. Structured activities are best kept brief when teaching basics to toddlers and pre-schoolers.

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**5) Young children love repetitions and rituals, but sometimes parents say that infant and toddler swimming classes are too repetitive. What do you think?**

It has been scientifically proven that infants and young children generally love repetition, rituals and doing activities that they know they can manage. The focus of the classes should be keeping the children happy and secure. So, parents should trust and respect their children’s feelings. If kids are happy with the activities and enjoy what they do, there is no need for parents to be concerned.

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**6) What are the reasonable expectations that a parent should have after attending one or two terms of baby or toddler swimming classes?**

A child should be used to having water on his or her face without panicking or showing signs of distress. A child should be able to stay on a noodle as parents navigate them around the pool. A child should be able to get into the water from the edge of the pool or a mat into their parents’ arms. A child could be comfortable to put their face in the water voluntarily and to control their breathing.

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**7) How should babies and toddlers be grouped for swimming classes – by age or ability?**

For children who cannot swim independently in water (which includes a vast majority of under 3s), there is no need to differentiate them based on their abilities. In our swim school, we have separate classes for babies and toddlers and we put, for example, all 4 to 6 -7 months old babies together in one class as newcomers. But, if a child who was going to join us at the age of 19 months with no swimming experience, we would put that child with children who are the similar age not with the newcomers. We must work within the parameters of a child’s physical and cognitive developmental stages.

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**8) What is the best age to start baby swimming and why?**

I think babies can start swimming lessons from when they are three to four months old. Here’s why:

**a) Strong enough neck muscles to support the head**

A newborn doesn’t have any control over his/her neck and the neck cannot support the head. But by three to four months of age, most babies can hold their head up themselves.

**b) Babies have a more developed vision**

It takes up to three months for a baby to develop the necessary visuals to enjoy being in a swimming lesson environment. Newborns have a blurred vision and colours are undefined. However, between 3-6 months of age, they should:

i) Have a wider field of view ii) Have the ability to focus their attention almost across the room iii) Like looking at reflections (there are plenty of reflections in swimming pools) iv) Move eyes independently from their head (like adults)

**c) Babies have a self-awareness and an ability to express themselves**

Babies under three to four months cannot express themselves accurately because they lack the skills needed to identify the cause of distress. For example, if a baby’s stomach is rumbling and there is also noise of thunder storm in the background, a baby cannot differentiate between the external and internal noises and figure out where the discomforting noises are coming from. Swimming pools are challenging environments. Even some adults find swimming pools too noisy. Now try to put yourself in a newborn’s shoes: blurred vision and unidentified noises from various directions. This is a potentially frightening situation for a baby to be in. There are plenty activities that parents/carers can do at home. Introducing newborns to water at home during bath time is the best approach, since this is where babies feel safe and secure. When babies are developed physiologically and psychologically enough to be relaxed in a swimming pool, then they can start attending baby swimming lesson with confidence.

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**9) How can a parent prepare a young child for putting face in water?**

By using trickle exercises (introducing water to a baby’s face by running just a few drops of water at a time over it) we can best prepare a baby or a child for water. Start off by doing only a few drops and then build it up. Use bathtime to do trickle exercises consistently and gently. Prepare them for what’s coming with cues such as ‘ name, 1, 2, 3’ so the water becomes a game and not a shock.

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**10) What are the signs to watch out for showing a baby is ready to happily put their face in the water and be able to control their breath in the water?**

Babies who have learnt how to control their breath through trickle exercises, normally show positive facial expressions like closing their eyes and bringing their chins down when their faces are close to the surface of the water. Parents and teachers need to understand and read babies facial expressions which could indicate that they are not distressed by immersing their faces in water. There are 4 signs of readiness that our Instructors look for before attempting submerges.

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**11) Why do you oppose forceful submersion in baby swimming lessons?**

Submersion does not mean swimming, and in some programs it’s there to develop a “fight or flight” survival skill. Swimming is about the ability to travel in water whilst maintaining your balance and staying afloat. Even if a baby or toddler is happy to be submerged during swimming lessons (without showing any sign of distress like shouting or crying), later on when it comes to teaching them to swim properly, those children have to learn the skill while on top of the water, face in, but not totally submerged. The reason being, if a child has learnt repeatedly that every time he/she is free in the water in order to travel, he/she has to glide under the water, rather than through or on top of the water, then that is all they want to do when they start being taught how to properly swim by a teacher. We call these kids FISH and swim teacher has a huge task of helping a child to de-learn the habit of automatically going under the water and ‘swimming like a fish’ before teaching the very basics of swimming which are floatation and an ability to travel on the top on the water. In my experience, those children who have started with a gentle approach to baby swimming being taught the basics like how to stay afloat and travel on the surface rather than gliding under the water, learn swimming with proper stroke technique at least one year earlier than children who learned to swim with submersion as the core. In general, forcefully submerging an infant could do more harm than good. Over the years I’ve seen Instructors completing forceful submersions of babies and toddlers and have witnessed the trauma this causes first hand. Parents are often then left with a child that refuses to participate in lessons so they leave it till they are 5 or 6 years of age. In WA, with our Education Department swimming program in schools, children will then be sent off for lessons with their friends only to discover that most of their peers are leaps and bounds ahead in confidence. Other parents refuse to place their children in lessons and I have to admit, I currently have 15 students learning to swim in Level 1 & 2 who are over the age of 8 years.

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**12) What age should a child start having swimming lessons in order to learn technique?**

Between the ages of three and four years children can start to learn the basics of strokes like Front crawl and Backstrokes. This is the age at our swim school in Success when kids start moving out of our ‘Parent & Child’ classes and move into having lessons with a teacher independent from their parents. Learning will obviously depend on physical and cognitive development in all ages, even once at this stage.

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**13) Can anyone teach baby swimming lessons? What are the characteristics of a good baby swimming teacher?**

**a) Having a big smile is a must.**

Babies and toddlers read the facial expressions of adults and for them they are the main source of communication. A smiley face would provide a sense of reassurance and security.

**b) Knowledgeable about child development and swimming**

Good baby swimming teachers never just rely on the information which they were given out during their teacher training courses. They must always be seeking to gain more information in relation to teaching swimming (i.e, by observing other teachers) and the topic of ‘child development’ in early years (0-5 years old), by going on to further training programs and workshops.

**c) Be able to be interactive with both parents and children**

A good infant swimming teacher should be capable of reading the babies and toddlers. Young children rely so much on communicating with adults through their facial expression and their body language. An infant swimming teacher should be very good at reading different messages that babies and toddlers communicate through their faces and bodies. For example, when a baby arches his back and turn his face away, normally this is a sign that something is distressing him/her and (avoidance sign).

**d) Able to modify the lesson plans quickly accordingly to the mood of the class**

Good teachers generally can think on their feet. All healthy babies and toddlers have mood swings. It is completely normal for them to feel happy one minute and sad the other. Children don’t have the cognitive skills to regulate their own moods and their moods could change very quickly. Simple factors like lack of sleep, fear of unknown places and teething pain are commonly known to affect a baby’s mood. Also, little children transmit their moods to other children very easily. If a baby starts crying in class, within a minute other babies start crying too. Since a child’s mood has a huge effect on how engaging they are with others in the class, a good swim teacher should know how to handle a class when things don’t go to plan. An ability to keep clam and make changes quickly in a lesson whilst thinking creatively are must have skills for a good baby swimming teacher.