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EARLY SWIMMING LESSONS AND THE CONNECTION TO IMPROVED LEARNING

What parent doesn't want their child to be safe in and around water? Ask any parent in Australia why they go to swimming lessons they will most likely reply "so my child doesn't drown".

STORY Christine Dellit

Ask any parent if they want their child to do well at school and the answer is of course YES.

A study recently undertaken by the Griffith Institute for Educational Research has confirmed a fact that I have observed after teaching swimming for 35 years and addresses both of the above.

The findings have surpassed expectations and indicate that children who are involved in swimming lessons from a young age show better physical development and are more confident, but it is the results in literacy and numeracy that shocked even the researchers.

The children are anywhere from 6 to 15 months ahead when it came to cognitive skills, problem solving in mathematics, counting, language and following instructions.

As well as achieving physical milestones faster, the swimming children scored significantly better in visual motor skills such as cutting paper, colouring in and drawing lines and shapes.

The most amazing difference was in story recall (17 months ahead) and understanding directions (20 months ahead).

"This is mind blowing stuff because it confirms the importance of swimming lessons beyond water

safety alone. It proves that swimming truly does provide added capital to children's lives by helping them socially, physically, cognitively and emotionally," Renowned Australian swim coach and personality Laurie Lawrence said.

In light of the evidence in relation to early swimming and education, Swim Australia has formed a special interest group, SwimTots Futures, to look at the future of baby and toddler swimming in Australia. I am honoured to have been asked to be involved with this group along with five of my Australian peers. It is through this group that we aim to improve the teaching curriculum and educate our industry on up to date knowledge in relation to baby and toddler swimming.

Of course many parents are at a quandary when it comes what age to start, where to go, and how often.

It is important to attend an industry accredited swim school that places emphasis on quality and one that has extensive knowledge on child development. Small class numbers of three or four children maximum in water of 32 to 33 degrees are ideal so that each individual child and parent can be assessed and assisted. Small classes ensure your child is safer, faster. While it can be a little more expensive for a small class size initially, in the long run it is actually less expensive as goals and milestones are reached much quicker.

How young do I start lessons? Never too young!

At both Little Snappers Swim School Smithfield and Essential Skills Swim School Bentley Park there is a Infant Aquatic Education and Swimming Program for two and three month old babies that educates parents on the Learn to Swim journey and covers subjects such as Inborn and Learnt responses, Aquatic Readiness and when is my child ready to submerge, what to do at home and some of the more concerning issues such as "dry drowning". The children are then placed in age and ability assessed small classes that cater right through to stroke development and squad groups.

It is never too late to commence lessons. Even if you start your child prior to attending prep you will see some educational benefits as proven in the Griffith University study.

What other activity can you and your child do, that as well as being a life saving skill, can also have all the other associated educational benefits?

Christine Dellit is Co-Director at Little Snappers Swim School, program developer for Essential Skills Swim School, Delegate for Swim Australia SwimTots Futures Special Interest Group and a Swim Australia National Teacher Presenter of Excellence recipient.