

Swim Lessons for Young Children



Learning to swim is an important milestone for young children. Knowing how to survive in water is a critical life skill. Swimming builds strength, endurance, and flexibility. It is fun, relaxing, and enjoyed by individuals with and without disabilities.

Choosing a swim lesson provider

Swim lessons are available in many communities, often found at a YMCA, park district, or local college. Some programs may provide financial assistance. Caregivers who don't know how to swim may benefit from taking adult lessons.

What to look for in programs

- Programs should welcome parent observers. Instructors should be patient and encouraging; they should not force a child to do anything or embarrass them.
- Instructors should be experienced and certified in a nationally recognized curriculum (e.g., American Red Cross). Lifeguards on duty should have CPR and first aid certification.
- Programs should emphasize good safety habits (e.g., asking for permission to enter water, not running near water) and what to do in unexpected situations (e.g., seeing someone fall in the water, or falling in themselves).
- In addition to teaching strokes, programs should emphasize competencies such as getting back to the surface from underwater and getting out of the water. A structure of gradual lessons allows progress over time.

Age-level specifics

- Classes for children ages 1–2 should focus on splashing, singing, and games while held by a caregiver. Infants should not be submerged in water.
- Parent-child lessons for ages 2–3 should introduce swimming readiness skills, basic safety, and fun in the water. Lessons may include kicking, throwing a ball, and floating with support.
- Swim lessons for ages 4–5 should focus on floating independently, submerging their head in water for 5–10 seconds, gliding through water, treading water, and using coordinated kicking and arm movements.

Swim safety is a multipronged approach

Swim lessons don't make a child "drown proof." Adults should explain and model desired behavior in and around pools. Important safety measures include:

- **Supervision:** There should be close, constant attention by an adult, even when a lifeguard is present. Assign a "water watcher" to monitor the swimming area for group gatherings near water. Adults should be able to recognize signs of distress and know CPR.
- **Clothing:** Properly fitted, Coast Guard–approved life vests should be worn in natural bodies of water, on docks, in large pools, and in water parks.
- **Clean and comfortable water:** Properly fitted swim diapers keep pools sanitary. Water temperatures of 87 to 94 degrees Fahrenheit are appropriate for children.
- **Surroundings:** Home pools should be enclosed by a locked fence with no toys left on the pool deck or in the pool because a child may be tempted to retrieve them later. No running should be allowed near the pool.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
Telephone: 217-333-1386
Toll-free: 877-275-3227
E-mail: iel@illinois.edu
<https://illinoisearlylearning.org>



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