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TEACH YOUR CHILD TO SWIM

Any parent can instill the confidence that leads to fun and skill in the water.

by Jean Komaiko

IF YOU LIVED on the island of Manus in the South Pacific, you wouldn't need to read this article. You would belong to a water-oriented people, and your child would learn to swim simply by imitating his elders.

Since you don't paddle over to chew betel nuts with the neighbors, you can hardly expect swimming to come so naturally to your child. You'll have to give some thought to his water education.

Teaching a youngster to swim may sound like a big order, but it shouldn't be. You can give the basic lessons yourself, with results in a matter of weeks. By following a few elementary rules, and by borrowing from the Manus some of their healthy attitudes toward water, you can insure your child a lifetime of fun and wonderful exercise.

The first thing to remember is that swimming is about 90 percent confidence and only 10 percent technique. This means that long before you start your formal teaching, your child's feelings about water will be set.

Whether he regards water as friend or foe will depend on how you handle him in his bath, how you react when he first goes wading, and what you do when he ventures into deep water or rough waves. If you are cool and collected, yet there to protect him, he'll probably proceed with the enthusiasm of a porpoise. If, on the

other hand, you are frightened or full of cautions, he'll react accordingly.

The Manus parent, a water-lover himself, sees that his child enjoys his first water experience, but he makes sure also that he develops respect for its dangers. He doesn't push his child, but he encourages him to try new skills by applauding success, ignoring failure. Above all, while the child is a water novice, this parent watches his every move. American parents can take a lesson from the Manus who know that water confidence comes with familiarity and familiarity comes with early, happy, protected experience.

When you give your child his first swimming lesson will depend on your nearness to water, your own enthusiasm, and your child's interest. If you own a boat or have a cottage at the beach, you will probably want to start your child's education early. Many children of two and three learn to swim with flotation devices such as water wings or life jackets if a parent stays close at hand to help.

The great majority of children learn to swim between the sixth and eighth year. At this age they are tall enough to stand in the shallow end of an adult pool with head above water, or to paddle about comfortably in the shallow waters of a graduated beach.

The first problem the swimming instructor faces is getting the child sufficiently relaxed to put his head under water. Be sure the water you start in is

shallow enough for your youngster to touch bottom. Then by playing tag and games like ring-around-the-rosie, or by imitating the motions of a whale, you can banish his fear.

Don't prod him to try too much too soon. Your lessons should last no longer than 25 to 30 minutes. He'll lose interest after that and be fatigued.

After he's "at home" in the water, ask him to duck his head. At first he will hold his nose, shut his eyes, and submerge about cheek-deep. With encouragement from you, he'll gradually attempt more. Once he can bob down his whole head, hold his eyes open, and bubble through his nose, he'll be well on his way toward becoming a swimmer.

WHEN HE'S CONFIDENT and has learned to see and to release air under water, you can begin teaching him to float. In recent years, young swimmers have often been taught the Georgia Tech floating method.

The child lies face-down with all but the back of his head submerged. His arms are extended below but near the surface. His legs, also below the surface, kick occasionally to give him power to raise his head for snatches of air. This below-surface type of floating is ideal for thin children who in the past struggled unsuccessfully to master the above-water float so simple for their well-padded friends. Moreover, in survival experi-

ments, the Army discovered that a man could take eight to ten hours floating just under the surface, emerging periodically for air.

Over the years, instructors have learned that a great deal of time is saved when the teacher stands in front of the student, rather than at his side. This means that right from the beginning your child learns to count on himself; it also means that he can watch your face.

If Johnny bobs up for air and gets a mouthful of water instead, he will watch your reaction. If you show fear, he may give up then and there. If, on the other hand, you follow the example of the Manus, you will encourage your child to move ahead, to forget momentary discomfort, and to avoid panic.

Now that your child is floating, take both his hands and pull him about while he practices kicking his legs. He'll enjoy this and will quickly pick up an arm motion to accompany the kick. A proficient dog paddler, he is now ready for more advanced instruction than you can offer. You've given him the fundamentals, and now a skilled teacher must help him develop form, style, speed, and stamina.

Swimming classes are relatively easy to find in most parts of the country. You can write the American Red Cross about free swimming programs in your community. You can check with the YMCA or YWCA, which run hundreds of public classes at a nominal fee. If you happen to live near a university, inquire about lessons for children, for many college pools are available for community instruction on week ends and in the Summer. If your town or county has a public pool, learn when instruction is given.

A number of waterfront cities have developed excellent swimming programs in recent years. Chicago, the most water-conscious of them all, has the largest. Each year between July 4 and Aug. 15, some 100,000 youngsters are given basic instruction. By the end of the season, these beginners can float, tread water, and control themselves in deep water without panic.

Their older brothers and sisters go on from this point perfecting swimming strokes, learning boatmanship, lifesaving, and water skiing. Chicago is rightfully proud that in the last decade not one drowning has occurred on a guarded city beach, and that thousands of youngsters have been taught to feel happily at home in the water.

You probably want your child to be as water-sane and water-safe as a young Manus or a young Chicagoan. But no child is ever really at home in the water until he develops respect for its potential dangers, and until he learns and applies its rules of safety. If in addition to giving him confidence, you can help him develop a mature and realistic attitude toward the sea, you can be assured that his water education is complete.

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