



Water babies

BY CARMEL SPARKE

They may not love 'em, but they've got to do 'em. Here's why swimming lessons

have to

As my kids raced each other in a friend's backyard pool recently, I was suddenly struck by the huge investment that had gone into their backstrokes, butterfly attempts, breast strokes and various freestyles. The result of thousands of dollars worth of swimming lessons was thrashing up and down that pool and I wasn't sure it was showing such a good return!

At a conservative estimate, we could have bought a small car with the money I'd spent on my three kids' weekly pool sessions over the past six years. Not to mention the cash on lost goggles and the energy spent debating with them about why they go to lessons.

"But why do we have to go to swimming lessons, mummy?" is the standard gambit from my youngest, eight-year-old Isobel.

"Because you live on a massive island.

All Aussie kids have to learn to swim," I reply.

"But I can swim already!"


"Well then, you're going to lessons to learn to swim better."

"But I can swim better already."


She does have a point. Now that all three have completed, without the aid of any flotation device or pool attendant, a 50-metre freestyle race at their school carnival, they would argue they'd arrived at the swim lesson terminus. In fact, my 11-year-old clocked 44.75 seconds for the 50 metres, which surprised and, later that day, slightly worried me, when I realised I was now fighting off a challenge to my own modest swim times.

BIG FISH

For I too, do my own swimming squad sessions. There's a group of us, and a coach, and we churn up and down the pool together for over an hour a couple of times a week. Our three lanes are divided into top, middle and bottom. Middle and top are almost exclusively occupied by those who used to do squad as kids, and they glide and power their way through the laps. Bottom lane is taken up by people like me, whose swimming education began and ended with Saturday morning lessons over the



Finding focus: Reece Aquilina, 11, and (opposite) his sister, Marnie, 7.

A swimmer in a dark swimsuit and goggles is swimming in a pool lane, viewed from an underwater perspective. The water is clear blue, and lane lines are visible.

be borne by the young... and it's not all to do with survival!

school summer holidays. All I recall doing in those classes was a lot of holding onto the pool wall and kicking and blowing bubbles; no torpedoes, big arms or Popov moves in those lessons.

We in the bottom lane have improved over the years, and get through all the drills, sprints and longer sets, but we don't look very pretty doing them. And the last time we swam timed 50-metre sprints, coincidentally on the same day as my son's swimming carnival, I completed my lap in 44 seconds. Admittedly it wasn't my best performance, but it still put less than a second between me and my second son, Christian, who's not even a teenager.

Which is why my kids are all staying in the pool – winter and summer! Nobody gets out until they can pay for their own swimming lessons!

LITTLE FISH

Swimming isn't a natural state for humans and that's partly why it's such a tough skill to master: you're trying to learn something highly technical in an environment filled with water, rather than air. Some kids dive in and take off like little wind-up toy boats, while others start screaming in the car park.

But if children struggle with the idea of swimming, adults can find it even harder. As Sydney swim coach, John Thompson, says, all those fears and

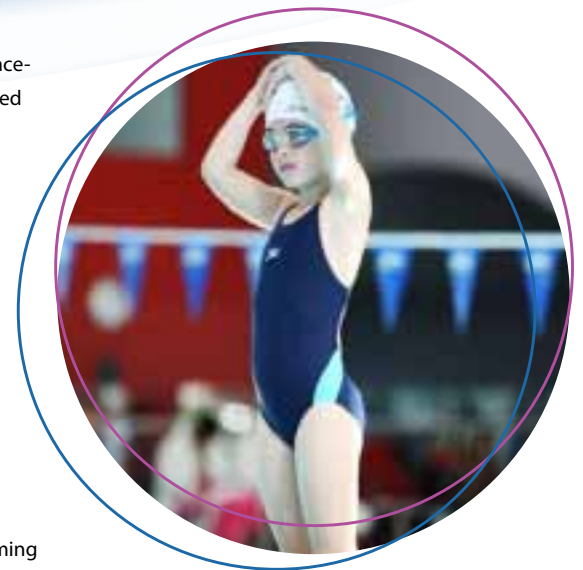
phobias about being immersed face-down in water are more entrenched in adults. Add in the issues of not being as flexible as kids, nor having a fresh young brain wired to pick up new skills, and most find staying afloat is a steep learning curve.

"When you are smaller, your body has not yet fallen into certain habits, it's still malleable and flexible and developing, so you can develop good movements easily," says John, who runs Thompson Swimming and coaches kids, adults and elite young swimmers at Lane Cove in Sydney's north.

"When you are older, your body becomes set in its ways and loses its flexibility, so it just becomes harder to learn to swim.

"If you get in early, if you can get all those neuromuscular patterns bedded down early, then you've got it for life."

John says even though kids need to start lessons as early as possible for safety and survival, they also have to keep going past lessons and into the squad years, if you want the skill to last a lifetime.



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Lap after lap:
Kelsey Aquilina, 13.

“Half-hour swimming lessons once a week over summer aren’t going to be enough,” he says. “If you want the skill as an adult, you’ve probably got to get to squad and keep going for a couple of years.” It’s that lap after lap consolidation which hardwires the skill, even if you’re not going to swim for Australia – which is another reason kids are better placed to learn to swim well.

CRAZY FISH

One dad of an exceptional little swimmer was telling me how he’d asked his son, 11, how squad had gone that day.

“Oh fine, Dad, it was really good,” he’d answered. “First we did 200 metres of kicking, then we did 400 metres of butterfly and then after that we did drills, 1000 metres of freestyle, some sprints and then we finished off with some backstroke.”

“And you really liked all that?” the dad asked incredulously. “Yeah, it was great!” his son replied.



Ready for action: Isobel King, 9.

SUPER FISH

When we sign our kids up for swimming lessons, usually around the age of three or four, it’s a level playing field. The classes are similar in structure, (bubble, bubble, breathe!) and aside from having a backyard pool, there’s little anyone can do to accelerate learning in the pool.

So why do some kids charge from Starfish through to Marlin, barely stopping on the blocks for Swordfish, before landing in Dolphin squad, years ahead of their peers who are still splashing around in Goldfish?

Matthew Sutton and Reece Aquilina are two such kids, normal, bright 11-year-olds – but with the exceptional ability to swim 50m in 32 seconds. They both train with John Thompson and started lessons aged four, were in squad at about the age of seven and now train three to four times a week, up to five kilometres a session. They’re the swimmers you watch with envy, carving through the water with an arch in their back, rather than a dip in their tummies like the rest of us.

Matt and Reece are great mates and have been pushing each other for years, training together and racing in carnivals, where they do similar times. Their brothers and sisters are all good swimmers too, so genes must have something to do with it.

Photographs by Alison Aquilina; main photograph by Getty Images



Diving in: (from left) Reece and swimming mate Matt Sutton, 11.



What a team: (from left) Bonnie, 11, and Eliza Almond, 9, with Isobel and brother Christian King, 11.

Over years of watching kids progress through swimming lessons and squad, their coach John Thompson has come to believe that children possess something called a “physical quotient”.

“It’s like we talk about kids having an IQ and an EQ [emotional quotient]. Well, I suspect there’s also something we should call a PQ, or a physical quotient,” says John.

“There are just some kids who, when they play tennis, could be the next Pat Rafter, or when they dive in the pool, you’re looking at the next Eamon Sullivan. And they’re often the same kid!”

Some are better at coordinating their legs and arms. With swimming, elongation is good, so taller kids have a natural advantage. If they are flexible and able to get into the right position for certain strokes, as well as have a healthy competitive streak to get their arms and legs moving faster, they’ve got an edge as well.

“I think it’s probably like anything in life. Some kids have that special gift of spatial awareness, of knowing exactly where their legs and arms are, of an innate sense of the water,” says John.

And for we poor old sinking adults, there’s some good news. John says some of us definitely float better than others – those of us with dense bones, or

lots of muscle tissue, will tend to sink more readily than others with lighter bones or less densely muscled bodies!

FUTURE FISH

So there are kids who happily swim four or five kilometres three times a week, and there are plenty of others, like mine, who turn up at their swimming lessons and squad with resignation that turns to enjoyment, once it’s all over.

But the reality is, in this country of beaches and backyard pools and rivers, becoming a good swimmer is something that’s just got to be done. As Australia’s legendary swim coach, Forbes Carlile, says: “To swim well is an asset for life”.

See kids, I’m giving you a gift. You may not actually open it until you’re a 44-year-old with a mortgage and three kids to put through swimming lessons, but one day, when you’ve got the bung knee and you can’t stand the treadmill anymore, the pool will be waiting for you. My investment will have been a good one, and with any luck, you won’t be stuck in the bottom lane! In the meantime, think of how good it’s going to feel when you leap from the blocks and leave your mum in the whitewash over 50 metres, a day not too far away... (gulp!)

ON YOUR MARK...

Almost one in five Aussie kids aged 5 – 14 take part in swimming, making it the most popular sport in the country, according to recent figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. That’s over 500,000 who regularly strap on goggles and swim caps and dive in every year.

Aquatic centres usually have swim schools and squads; many also offer adult classes and squads. For affordable swimming lessons, check what programs are offered by your state government. Most run lessons during school holidays. For example, the NSW Government runs Swimsafe (see www.dsr.nsw.gov.au/swimsafe/about.asp).