

# What to Look for in a Learn-to-Swim Program

According to the CDC, more children ages 1–4 die from drowning than any other cause of death except birth defects. Formal swim lessons for this age group have been shown to reduce the risk of drowning by 88%. The following is a guide developed by Water Safety USA to help parents and caregivers make an informed decision when looking for a good learn-to-swim program. Pediatricians are encouraged to share this important information with parents.

To summarize; **A GOOD learn-to-swim program WILL:**

- GROUP classes according to appropriate student teacher ratios, age, and ability level. Best practice for young or beginner level swimmers, without a caregiver in the water with them, is an instructor to student ratio of 1:4 or fewer and would be no more than 1 instructor to 6 students).
- ORGANIZE the teaching program and the class schedule well.
- ENSURE that their facilities are safe, staff are vigilant, and staff are prepared to respond in an emergency.
- LISTEN to you and the student! Your family's needs should be well addressed.
- NURTURE your students' diverse strengths and abilities. Bring out the best in them!
- ENCOURAGE your student with motivating awards and praise.
- PROVIDE an interesting, creative, and fun learning environment.
- FOCUS on the students and their needs.
- LEAD with inclusive, organized, and professional management.
- HAVE OPPORTUNITY for professional development, advancement, support and encouragement for diverse groups of swimmers wanting to compete and/or make swimming a lifelong activity.
- ENCOURAGE parental involvement. Best practice involves the parent/caregiver always being able to watch the lesson.
- EDUCATE participants on the learn-to-swim process and water safety.
- BE PROUD to show off their program, facilities and inclusiveness.
- SHOW OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE and PROFESSIONALISM with membership of the International learn-to-swim programs Association; and where one exists, their national learn-to-swim programs association. Additionally, where appropriate accreditation exists, the teachers should have the recognized qualification.
- MAINTAIN water, pool surroundings, access points, and safe facilities. Clean pools are healthy pools.
- QUALIFY their teachers well. Experienced and qualified teachers will give your child the best opportunity to learn. Check that they have a nationally recognized certification.

**A good learn-to-swim program:**

## **1 Focuses on safety at all times**

A good learn-to-swim program will always provide vigilant supervision of swim lesson participants under their care and use equipment wisely. Each program should have:

- a) Certified lifeguard(s) assigned to patron surveillance during swim lessons in addition to the swim instructor(s) and/or an acting program supervisor.
- b) An Aquatics Safety Plan that includes aquatic facility characteristics, a staffing plan, an emergency response and communication plan, pre-service and in-service

training plans for staff, a biohazard plan, and an infectious disease preparedness and response plan.\*

- c) Safety practices in place for child protection including: policies that require regular criminal background checks for staff and volunteers over 18, provision of mandatory training for staff and volunteers on preventing and responding to child abuse, and policies requiring staff and volunteers to report child abuse in accordance with applicable laws. \*\*

## **2 Teaches water safety skills**

A good learn-to-swim program will teach children, and all learn-to-swim participants, appropriate water skills, while acknowledging that no child, or person, is ever water safe or drown-proofed. Parents will be educated on appropriate water safety messages and taught that constant, adult supervision is the most important factor in drowning prevention. The responsibility of a child's safety in and around water is always on the parent/caregiver, even when there is a lifeguard present.

## **3 Offers well grouped classes**

A good learn-to-swim program follows best practice for instructor to student ratios (i.e. 1:4) to create an environment of safety for all participants. Classes should consist of participants that are at approximately the same skill level. By designing classes with safe instructor to participant ratios, instructors will be able to cater to students' individual needs. A good learn-to-swim program will give consideration to, and provide modifications for, instruction whenever possible, to serve children and participants with additional needs.

## **4 Maintains small class numbers for young children and beginners**

A good learn-to-swim program will ensure the environment, including water depth, allows the number of children and participants in a given class to safely and effectively be managed in a group. Best practice for young or beginner level swimmers, without a caregiver in the water with them, is an instructor to student ratio of 1:4 or fewer and would be no more than 1 instructor to 6 students. The ratio of students to instructor for more experienced swimmer ratios may increase based on skill level. A good learn-to-swim program will adhere to recommended guidelines and be willing to provide justification/clarification about class ratios to parents, caregivers, and communities.

## **5 Offers short lessons for learners**

A good learn-to-swim program will design lessons for maximum student practice time and foster a safe environment for learning. Young children, beginners, and swimmers with medical considerations may need shorter lessons to avoid becoming cold and/or tired (for example lessons in warm water may be longer than those in cooler water). Advanced swimmers will benefit from longer sessions to encourage repetition, and build fitness and endurance. In order to build skills over time, lessons should be attended at least once a week.

**6 Has a student-centered teaching philosophy**

A good learn-to-swim program will teach swim skills that are developmentally appropriate for each participant, with consideration of their culture, age, and ability. Participants should never be placed under toxic stress during a swim lesson (National Library of Medicine defines toxic stress response as what happens when a child experiences severe, prolonged, and/or frequent stress). Beginners will be reassured and gently introduced to new skills as they gain confidence. More advanced swimmers will be encouraged to develop essential water safety skills and encouraged that swimming is a lifetime activity i.e., competitive swimming, water polo, synchronized swimming, surfing, skin diving, scuba, Lifeguarding, Swim Instructor, Swimming Coach.

**7 Offers a progressive approach**

A good learn-to-swim program will base all classes on a sound progression of developmentally appropriate water safety and swimming skills. The program will provide parents with information explaining the program's philosophy, levels, and skills progression. For example, the goals for a water experience for a child under one year of age should be water acclimation and parent bonding.

**8 Focuses on maximum "time on task"**

A good learn-to-swim program will use strategies to ensure participants are consistently engaged. For example, children need to repeat skills many times to learn and remember them. A good learn-to-swim program will provide repetition, positive feedback, and "perfect practice" – these are key to developing good swimming technique and water safety skills. In a good learn-to-swim program this will be achieved within the readiness and physical and emotional comfort of the learner, keeping in mind that young children learn best through play, explanation and engagement, and that all students are more successful with encouragement.

**9 Offers a motivating system of recognition**

A good learn-to-swim program will ensure an environment in which all students will be confident and happy to participate. A good learn-to-swim program will have a system in place to recognize and reward participation, effort, achievements etc. Programs may be formal, with a certificate system or the like, and/or informal with smiles and laughter the norm and praise given in large doses. A good learn-to-swim program will take care to ensure that such systems do not create fear and/or demotivation.

**10 Includes interesting and challenging activities**

A good learn-to-swim program will include activities that are varied, stimulating and at an appropriate level of challenge that motivates each child and maintains good progression in skill attainment.

**11 Takes pride in creating an inclusive culture of kindness and community**

A good learn-to-swim program will be warm and welcoming, open to observing their program before enrolling, inclusive of all community members, and will reflect their community with families prepared to show and tell you about their experiences and children's success. As a provider of educational services, staff will strive to meet your family's needs, answer your questions and address your concerns.

**12 Includes water safety education**

A good learn-to-swim program will actively educate the parents and caregivers of students' learn-to-swim process (e.g., explaining skill development progressions), educate them on important principles of water safety, and share the programs philosophy to create an environment that supports a safe, diverse and inclusive community.

**13 Encourages parental involvement**

A good learn-to-swim program will ensure young children are allowed the security of having a parent or trusted caregiver close by. Where parents/caregivers participate in the water with the student, particularly in the case of lessons for babies, a good learn-to-swim program will factor in socio-emotional and developmental readiness when deciding to promote the child to the next level that doesn't include the parent/caregiver. Best practice involves the parent/caregiver always being able to watch the lesson. A good learn-to-swim program will educate parents/caregivers on the benefits of their positive involvement – encouraging the same.

**14 Offers a comprehensive and professional program**

A good learn-to-swim program will provide a variety of programmatic offerings to cover the needs of beginners through more advanced swimmers of various ages and capabilities. For example, programs may be ongoing, providing a range of programs from beginners through to more advanced swimmers. In the broader context, the learn-to-swim program should be inclusive for all learn-to-swim participants and have an evidence informed curriculum in place.

**15 Has a commitment to swimming as a lifelong activity**

A good learn-to-swim program will be able to recommend a pathway of aquatic activities for continued student participation. A good learn-to-swim program will encourage an inclusive community of diverse swimmers, to pursue continued participation in competitive programs, aquatic recreation programs, or other aquatic activities such as life-saving, coaching or swim instruction.

## **16 Maintains industry Involvement**

A good learn-to-swim program will strive to achieve high standards through meeting standards set by the local authority who has jurisdiction, as well as standards and practices set by their applicable national body, where one exists, maintaining national membership where appropriate.

## **17 Has well qualified staff and ongoing training**

A good learn-to-swim program will ensure all swim instructors are appropriately trained to teach to the level of all students in their class. Swim instructors should hold and maintain certifications in CPR (appropriate to the ages of swim lesson participants) with AED, first aid, swim Instructor, and lifeguarding, where applicable. Additionally, a good learn-to-swim program will have a core of experienced swim instructors with specialist training, inclusive of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the aquatic workplace. The program will have consistency of philosophy and methods throughout the learn-to-swim program. Ongoing professional development of their staff and their programs should be evident.

## **18 Uses well maintained, clean, accessible, pools and facilities**

A good learn-to-swim program has 1) pool water that is clear and well sanitized, reflecting water treatment, circulation and filtration systems, and 2) facilities that are compliant with the American Disabilities Act (ADA), appropriately designed and fit-for-purpose for programmed use. Their facility will also be regulated by a local governing body that includes testing their water quality at regular intervals throughout the day, conducting periodic ADA Compliance Audits, and always being willing to share the results.

Babies, young children and all learn-to-swim participants respond well to warm water and warm air. A good learn-to-swim program will adjust lesson length and closely monitor learners to ensure they remain comfortable and relaxed throughout their lesson.

\*Section 6 of the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) [Model Aquatic Health Code](#)

\*\* CDC: [Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth Serving Organizations](#) or Praesidium: [Abuse is Preventable](#)

### **Where to find a learn-to-swim program:**

[Find a School - USSSA | United States Swim School Association \(usswimschools.org\)](#)

[Swim Lessons | Take Swimming Classes | Red Cross](#)

[Water Safety for Kids - YMCA – Find your Y | YMCA of the USA](#)

[learn-to-swim \(usaswimming.org\)](#)