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Like baby classes



LOVELY BUBBLY: A young swimmer and his mum put in some pool practice

NEWBORN babies are perfectly happy splashing about in a warm pool with their parents. Swimming doesn't require a baby to have any skills other than the ones already honed after nine months in the womb. Baby swimming is taking off in Scotland, largely thanks to an organisation founded in 2002, by Jess and Paul Thompson, called Water Babies - a network of family-run businesses with 27 franchises across the UK. Today, it has some 13,500 children on its books.

They take babies from birth - the youngest to date was two days old - but most first-timers are between three and four months.

In 2003, Hugh and Ailsa Davidson, both 42, started classes in Edinburgh and are now teaching a total of 1,050 clients across central Scotland.

The classes are highly structured and no child is ever forced to do anything against his or her will. The lessons are, principally, about empowering the child and ensuring they feel confident in the water.

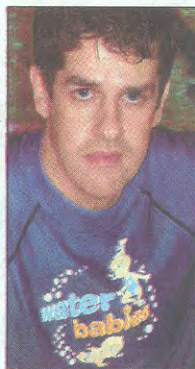
The first class, last Wednesday, at Dalmahoy Country Club, near Edinburgh, was for eight beginners, all under 12 months.

Teacher, Debbie Kelso, 42, was putting them through their paces. The lesson took place mainly on the surface with mothers holding their infants and moving them gently around the pool while Debbie sang nursery rhymes and showed them pictures on swim cards.

The classes have a range of verbal, visual and



MAKING A SPLASH: A quartet of first-timers take to the pool in Edinburgh, and right Hugh Davidson



to water

A swimming pool might not seem like the safest place for a newborn baby, but, as NICOLA BARRY discovers, this environment is hugely enriching for parents and their young children alike

tactile stimuli, which all reinforce what has been learned. For Water Babies, hygiene and the purity of the pool water are paramount and all babies have to wear two pairs of waterproof nappies with an optional progress waist.

First, the parents, mothers in this case and one grandad, are taught to help the babies balance in a swimming position and kick their legs.

Debbie teaches the babies to hold onto the side of the pool and encourages them to take their first duck underneath the water.

This is an amazing sight as the babies all, without exception, have their eyes and mouths wide open, below the surface. They go under and bounce back up with a look of mild surprise on their faces, smiling at their mums almost straight away.

"Newborn babies are natural swimmers," says Hugh, the instructor who owns the Scottish franchise.

"Most babies are fine in the water. Sometimes, when they are older, they go through what the organisation calls The Wobbles, usually between nine and 20 months when they can suffer from a little separation anxiety."

Hugh is former electronics engineer, became involved in the business when he was looking for swimming classes for his own children, Pippa, five, and Beatrix, three. He was unable to find what he wanted so decided to train as a swimming teacher and started one of the first Water Babies franchises.

"Babies love the sensation of warm water," he says, "and the chance to have one-to-one time with a parent. How often do we get the opportunity for half an hour's full-on skin-to-skin contact?"

In fact, there are a number of advantages for mums and dads.

"The class gives them a really good work out," Hugh says, "as they move round the pool, holding their babies, lifting them out of the water and holding their hands to keep them afloat."

Also, the intimate environment and the warm water enhance the bonding experience.

Lorna Funnell, mother of Kirsty, two, and Adam, seven months, confirms this. A swimmer herself, Lorna says she never felt particularly nervous and her children love attending classes.

However, while babies take to water like the proverbial ducks, the same cannot always be said of their parents. Lorna Davidson, from East Lothian, admits she was uneasy in the class with her son Matthew, now four, at just a few months. To see her now with her second son, Elliot, who is eight months

old, you would never believe she once harboured a fear of the water.

Lyme, 46, is grateful to Debbie. "She is so calm," she says. "I she kept saying 'You'll do this' and 'You'll do that'. I'd be worried, but her approach is very reassuring."

There is homework and, one of the most important exercises takes place in the bath at home. A mother will say her baby's name, adding "Tummy Up" and the infant will learn to hold his or her breath as she splashes a little water over their face.

To see babies who are only a few months old responding to instructions beggars belief. "Babies learn by repetition," Hugh adds. "We are really teaching the parents how to teach their babies."

After four or five weeks, the parents will let go of the babies and watch them swim a short distance. During the lesson, the mothers also learn to show the babies how to blow out air through the nose and mouth.

An activity the infants then repeat. "As our babies increase the amount of time they spend underwater," Hugh says, "we ensure the parents are down there, keeping an eye on them and knowing when it's time to come up - usually when bubbles come out of the baby's mouth or nose."

The vast majority of babies only ever hold their breath for the few seconds they are under water and the number and length of any submersions they do in a lesson is carefully prescribed and supervised.

"As babies grow older and become more used to submersions," Hugh says, "they can happily enjoy underwater for six or seven seconds."

Considering the number of times infants are harnessed to chairs or inside playpens, the pool experience is often the first time they have been allowed to move totally freely.

"We spend a lot of time letting our babies do a controlled fall into the water, so that they work purely should they fall in," Hugh explains.

As an organisation, Water Babies maintains that, if a child who isn't used to being submerged, falls into water unexpectedly, he or she is often paralysed by fear. Their faces will remain submerged, water will enter their lungs and they can drown.

This summer three children aged two fell into water: one into a family pool, another into a canal, the third into a flood-walled stream bed. Due to their Water Babies classes, they were able to save themselves, despite no adults initially being present.

As the class comes to a close, the babies are waded around the pool once more by mums then lifted out, purring and giggling into the nearest fluffy towel. Two things are clear: swimming is essential to every child's development and the babies love these classes who determine their enjoyment of water for the rest of their lives.

Classes cost £10. Water Babies can be contacted via email at: info@waterbabies.co.uk or telephone: 0121 554 6651 or for more information, go to: www.waterbabies.co.uk