

Teaching Swimming: Fun and Effective Instruction

Swimming Ideas, LLC

<https://swimminglessonsideas.com>
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Swim Instructor Training Workbook

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Going Underwater

Joyful underwater attempts are the foundation of swimming

Provide a safe environment filled with fun

Aim for voluntary underwater attempts

You demonstrate; they learn

Parents and instructors should go underwater with the learning swimmer.

Get at eye level. Smile frequently. Laugh often. Go under too.

Demonstrate joyful, happy, laughing underwater examples and provide opportunities for learner to join.

Build into every activity a chance for learner to experience going underwater with their own agency and interest.



Get eye-to-eye

Loving underwater takes time

For a new learner to love being underwater takes time and many joyful experiences. We want to give swimming learners lots of positive experiences to remember when they confront the discomfort and pain of choking on water; inhaling water is uncomfortable, scary, and terrifying.

Play games! Sing songs!

Do things that build the learner's trust and comfort in the aquatic environment. Remember that the water is a vastly different place than the child's typical living. On land they can breathe without difficulty, issue, or pain.

Inhaling water teaches the learner to be afraid of going under. We want to build positive joyful experiences with going underwater that teach the learner they can hold their breath (or keep their lips closed) and enjoy swimming without the pain and discomfort it could have.

Focus on:

- Demonstrate every activity, challenge, game, and song. Do the things too.
- Smile, laugh, have fun, be involved as your joy and comfort will transfer to the learner.



Underwater Progression

Earn trust by being consistent, predictable, and safe

Follow the underwater progression step-by-step

Do the careful deliberate work first, then build on trust

Create trust

Build trust by never letting go of the swimmer to let them fend alone.

Always support the learner with no surprises.

Telegraph all of your actions: demonstrate clearly what will happen by doing it yourself or with another participant.

Fun now leads to joy later



Celebrate success



Blowing bubbles

Build smiling joy into every early swimming activity or challenge/ game.

The effort you put into the learner's positive experiences doing supported front glides will blossom into excited independent streamlines later.

All activities lead to bravery



Jumps from side



Joyful flops

All of the supported glides & jumps, challenges and games done in a beginner's swim lesson will echo into the future.

Build trust. Go slow.

The time you take now to be careful and loving will create bravery later.

Reach to the next step

Incremental improvements

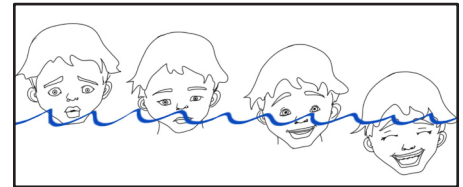
Going underwater is a slow progression where learners experience the unique feeling of being submerged.

Your role is to safely and gently teach a learner that the water is different, fun, and exciting while also potentially hazardous.

Go slow. Build step by step: 1 small step after another small step.

The Underwater Progression:

- Shoulders
- Chin
- Lips
- Nose
- Eyes
- Whole face
- Entire head



Progress Slowly. Step-by-step.



*Never skip a step of the underwater progression.

Avoid asking a learner to put their chin in the water and then their eyes. Skipping steps of the progression erodes trust. We want to build trust by being predictable and consistent.

Work on each step until comfort is consistent knowing each increment is important.

Front Glides



Focus on forward horizontal movement

Body, line, and posture are the three keys to gliding

Progress from support to position 11 to streamline

Teach body position:

Achieve good body position with these key elements:

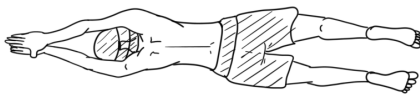
- Head/face aimed down
- Arms reaching forward above shoulders
- Body held straight and narrow kick moves person

Front Glide Script:

- Put your shoulders in water
- Put your hands out in front of you
- Put your face in water
- Push off with/to me

A great front glide is also Position 11.

This is “position 11.” We use this drill/position as a teaching tool. Every swimming stroke will flow through this position.



Streamline

All glides lead to streamline

SL = Streamline. Every supported glide, independent glide across benches, or forward horizontal motion builds towards the crucial swimming skill: streamline.

A good streamline is the ultimate goal, after we've established comfort gliding with the face in the water.

We use supported front glides as the next step in the incremental progression of skills.

They can be done with learners that go underwater and those that do not.

Your goal for supported front glides is to establish a good body posture, line, and balance at the surface so learners can adjust their head and arm position for better quality.

Streamline is the goal; front glides build to SL



*See Streamline section for specifics

Streamline

An excellent streamline is a habit; over-emphasize building it

Repeat the 3 things to a good streamline over & over & over

Speak in “streamlines:” “Do a streamline first, then do 3 free”

Weird without a streamline

Your goal is to make the swimmers feel “weird” if they forget to do a streamline. They should have such an ingrained habit of always streamlining well that whenever they push off the wall without a good streamline it should feel “weird.”

Focus all feedback on the 3 things to a good streamline.

The shorthand of “streamline” is SL. This shows up often.

SL = streamline.

Practice on land, standing, laying, and floating

- Help swimmers by squeezing their elbows together
- Focus feedback on the three elements of SL
- Comfort in SL comes with a LOT of practice

3 things for Streamline

Lock your thumb

Stack the hands and wrap the top hand's thumb around the bottom hand's palm.

See picture.

Lock in the thumb and press into the thumb to make the ear squeeze easier.

If the thumb is locked in this way the rest of the streamline position becomes easier.

Make sure this is a tight, strong, locked hand on top of hand.



Wrap the top thumb around the palm

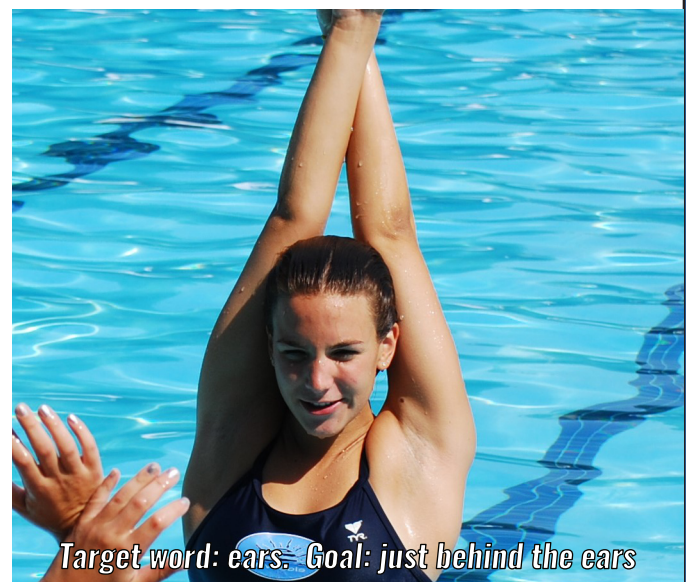
Squeeze your ears

At first talk about squeezing your ears with your elbows. We do this to target an easy and familiar body part.

Younger people think in relate-able targets: elbows squeeze the ears.

As mastery grows change this to "squeeze the back of the head with your elbows."

Shorthand: "squeeze your ears" or just press on your head with ears or arms.



Target word: ears. Goal: just behind the ears

Look down

The head should be aiming at the floor during most streamlines.

Tell swimmers to be Pinocchio and drag their long lying noses on the ground.

Put mirrors on the bottom of the pool to encourage swimmers to aim their face at the bottom.

Most incorrect SL body position is because swimmers want to see where they're going.

*Backstroke SL is "Look up."



Aim the face down; avoid looking forward

Feedback

Watch and direct

Teaching swimming well is communicating your knowledge about swimming skills and getting others to physically express your thoughts.

We improve our learner's ability through our language, and we call those words "feedback."

Feedback is telling a swimmer what they did, and then how they can improve their actions to closers resemble the skill they're working on.



Feedback formula:

[state swimmer action] + "next time" + [future alternate action]

"John, you did your streamline with your face aimed forward. Next time, lock your thumb, squeeze your ears, and aim your face down,"

"Sally, you kept your face above water. Next time, kiss the water when you move from this bench to the next."

"George, you didn't do a streamline and three arm strokes of freestyle. Next time do all three things for streamline and do three strokes of freestyle like this (demonstrate catchup drill returning to position 11)."

Your feedback must be **ACTIONABLE**

Giving high quality feedback is the MOST important thing the swim instructor should do.

Craft your words with care; be deliberate.

Use the formula and focus your instruction on those 20% of changes that will yield the best improvements.

1. You did this.

2. Next time....

3. Do correct action.



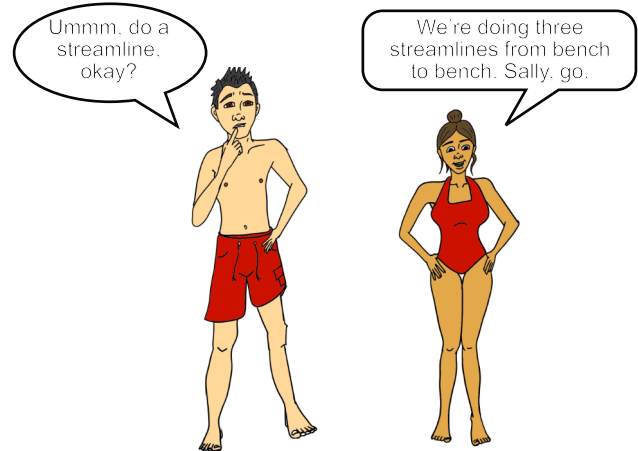
Command language

Remove trailing “okay”

Avoid saying the word “okay” at the end of your instructions and feedback.

Most people do this because they really wanna say something like “do you understand,” “will you do it,” and “do you have any questions?”

Speak in sentences that end in a period.



Speak and demonstrate

Put excessive effort into also demonstrating what you're telling a swimmer to do.

Telling someone to streamline? Demonstrate a good streamline while standing doing all three things correctly.

Alternately, show pictures or other examples of excellence; videos, swimmers, other instructors.



Speak with confidence

When you don't know what you're doing you'll speak with a lot of filler words like, ummm, ahhh, or like.

Combat incompetence and poor delivery by being prepared. Learn the terminology in the blue section. Reference lesson plans and understand the words used. Train yourself with skill sheets. Be prepared and giving feedback becomes easy.



Class setup

Adapt to your space, leverage shallow water

Every pool is different. The depth and layout will determine how many classes you can run at one time and how you'll run each class.

Will you use the wall, shallow ends, benches or platforms, or other aids to help get non-swimmers safely in the water.

Your primary goal is safety. Then your goal is organizing your lessons so that every class can maximize the amount of time they spend doing things.

Where you put your level 1 classes and how you teach them is just as important as knowing what skills to focus on.

Setup your classes for success.

- Zero depth water is awesome for teaching. Use it for Guppies, Level 1, Level 2.
- Ideal depth for swimmers of all abilities is chest deep; comfortable standing, easy to stand up.
- Without deep water, use benches or platforms to adapt depth.
- Deep water should only be used for swimmers that can move independently without support and without touching the wall or bottom.
- Strategically position swimmers and instructor to maximize time spent doing swimming.
- Lane lines provide natural separation for ability and levels.

Your facility will dictate how you organize your classes and how you teach different levels of ability.



Benches & Walls

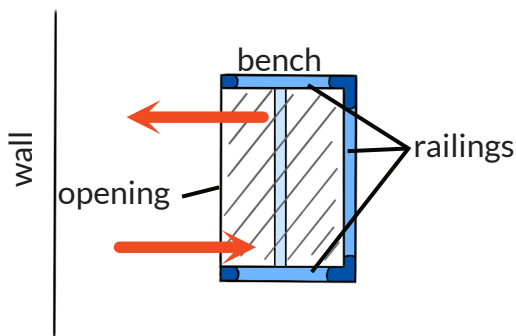
When you don't have shallow water, adapt with benches or strategic instructor placement. Priority is supporting the swimmer while providing maximum opportunity to do things.

Bench to wall; Levels 1&2

Aim the bench at the wall and use the wall space as a teaching tool.

Reduce the gap between the wall and bench as needed and increase it to provide a greater challenge.

Instructor should be on the bench, in space between, and in arms length from beside.

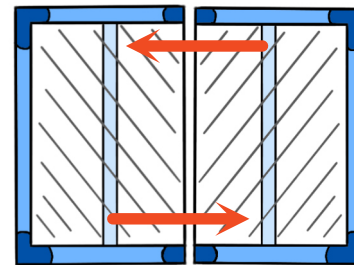


Bench to bench: Level 1

Push two benches together facing each other to create a closed in space of shallow water.

Move around the inside in circles with different objectives at corners or crossing benches.

Instructors can be inside with swimmers or outside directing behavior. Empower independent movement on benches.



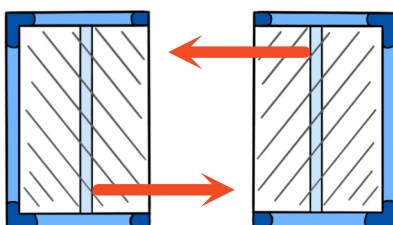
Two benches facing each other

Bench to bench; Levels 1-3

The gap between benches should start close, and then grow further apart over time.

The distance should be one inch further than a swimmer is comfortable doing on their own without support.

Build trust by swimmers successfully making attempts across the gap between benches.

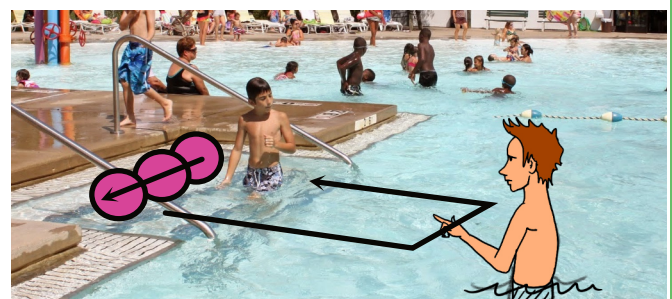


Wall/stairs to instructor

All levels appropriate.

Swimmers move one at a time to the instructor, receive feedback, move over slightly and return.

Focus on keeping swimmers moving quickly and minimizing the time swimmers wait for their turns.



Parent Tot

Ages 6months - 3 years

The Parent Tot class introduces infants and toddlers to water in a safe, fun, and welcoming environment with a parent present. The goal is water comfort—not swim skills—but the building blocks of swimming begin here.

Repetition, songs, and games are crucial tools to help young children enjoy being in the water while forming positive memories.

Swim instructors must be confident, outgoing, and prepared to lead both adults and babies. This includes confidently explaining and demonstrating how to hold children (football hold, palms up, head on shoulder), how to do supported glides, and the importance of cues like “1, 2, 3!” before going underwater. Instructors should model energy and joy—dancing and singing are part of the job!

Be ready to speak to parents about their goals. Many parents enroll to bond with their child and to learn how to help them become comfortable and safe in the water. Instructors should guide parents with specific directions, demonstrations, and encouragement. Remember: repetition is comfort, and every activity can be tailored to different ability levels.



You are the expert

Parents are paying you to lead a swim lessons for them and their infants.

Rest comfortably on your training and knowledge. The parents have not spent the time and effort learning that you have.

Be confident. They crave your insight and instruction.

Be Bold

Fill yourself with confidence and bravely tell parents how they can work with their kids in the water.

Boldly tell them how to hold the child and offer to demonstrate.

Give clear directions on time and repetitions and interrupt to lead songs and activities.

Sing! Smile!

Your smile and behavior will help your confidence grow. Smile often,

Sing with volume and embrace dancing and laughing.

Perform and be outgoing and strong.

You set the tone for the class.

Key Instructor Points

Confident Demonstration:

Show how to do football hold, scooping, supported front and back floats. Use a doll or demo with a swimmer.

Cueing is Crucial:

Teach and model cue systems (e.g., “1, 2, 3, go!”) before submersion and before every activity. Important for child.

Adult Communication:

Speak clearly and directly to parents. They want your guidance. They crave direction. You are the expert.

Games + Songs + Education:

Repeat songs and activities. Predictability = comfort.

Engagement:

Be in the water, be loud, be fun. If the instructor doesn't sing, parents won't either. Be overly enthusiastic and outgoing.



Watch for and teach:

Parent Skills:

- Football hold
- Palms up belly support
- Cheek-to-cheek back floats
- Scooping with breath cues

Swimmer Skills:

- Comfort with face in water
- Fun and comfort doing different games and songs
- Relaxed body in supported floats
- Attempts at going underwater

Class Goals:

- Build positive water memories
- Teach basic holds and cues
- Encourage parent-child bonding
- Ensure everyone is having fun
- Adapt holds and expectations to each child's comfort



Parent Tot: Activities

Sitting on side



Games and toys while seated:

Put lots of toys on the edge of the pool. Let the infants play.

Practice splashing water with feet, throwing toys, and growing comfortable with the water.

Enforce child asking to enter the water.

Falling / Jumping in



Cue and pull into a hug:

Build up to jumps. Start by pulling swimmer in the water to a hug without going underwater using the football hold.

Make it fun, smiling, and a game.

Only allow underwater to comfort.

Glides



Frequent front and back glides:

Go somewhere in the pool? Do a front glide.

Every movement around the water or activity should include one of the glides.

Chain together jumps, glides, and songs with toys.

Movement



Travel though the water:

Encourage your parents to move around the water location you have. Use different parts of the wall, the water. Go to different depths or water features as available.

Get toys, sing songs, and do glides to visit new locations and do activities.

Throw a toy and get it



Use floating toys; chain activities

Encourage child to throw toys, do a fall or jump into a front glide, go to the toy, pick it up and do a back glide back to the wall.

Exit water with support and repeat.

Excellent chain of activities!

Bucket-head



Pouring water game for laughs:

Let the child pour water over the instructor's head, and yell "bucket head!"

Have the child pour water over the parent's head. Do it to the child.

Adjust by pouring water over shoulder.

Pour & float toys

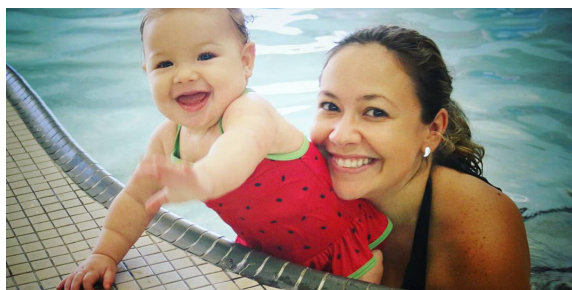


Provide lots of floating fun:

Floating toys are awesome fun for infants and can be used strategically for toddlers.

Throw them, chew on them, play with them, and use them in all manner of ways. Chain with other activities.

Exiting water



Let swimmers struggle out:

Parents and instructor should provide total support, but let the child struggle and figure out how to exit water.

Two hands on the wall, throw a leg on the wall, and boost or roll out.

Provide support and push as needed.

Thank you!

Thank you for supporting Swimming Ideas. My goal is to provide everyone with fun and effective tools so that they're swimming instruction is the best it can be.

Swimming Ideas is an online resource filled with courses, documents, and training materials for aquatic programs, aquatic professionals, and individual private swimming instructors.

Whether you're coaching a swim team or teaching swim lessons out of a backyard pool swimming ideas provides a full range of games, challenges, and solutions so that your parents and swimmers come back enthusiastically year after year.

Thank you for being a part of better swimming.

Jeffrey Napolski is an Aquatic Professional and master swim game and challenge creator. He has been involved in aquatics and teaching swim lessons for and master swim game and challenge creator. He has been involved in aquatics and teaching swim lessons for 30 years. Jeff started teaching swim lessons at 15 at his local high school and outdoor pools where he served as a lifeguard, swim, instructor, and eventual pool manager. He started the summer league program that still exist to this day. In 2009 Jeff joined a Level 4 USA Swimming club where he was the Head Developmental Coach. In his spare time he enjoys drawing, yoga, running, and spending time with family.

Join www.swimminglessonsideas.com for all of the following benefits and tools!

Tomorrow, we can teach better swimming together.

- Online courses
- Lessons plans for all skills and levels
- How to Create Fun and Effective Swim Games
- How to Create Fun and Effective Developmental Swim Practices
- Mentorship
- Lesson Coordinator Handbook
- Evaluations, tracking forms, and administrative tools.
- Much more!