

FEATURES

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Learning to swim is, for many children, one of the key steps of growing up. It is widely accepted that swimming is a useful skill to acquire, like riding a bike, but in the eyes of some parenting professionals, it is very much more than that. Sally Lomas, an instructor with the UK-based group Birthlight who was in Taiwan last week to conduct instructor certification classes for the Birthlight program, believes learning how to swim it is invaluable for more than just the health benefits.

"It helps build a bond of trust between the parents and the child," she said, keeping an eye on a class made up of young mothers, fitness instructors and healthcare professionals, some working with their own babies, others with baby manikins, who are learning the Birthlight technique of handling infants for activities such as swimming and yoga.

While both swimming and yoga might be easily associated with children of a slightly older age, Birthlight believes the essential qualities can be taught through these activities even with the youngest of infants.

With the breakup of the extended family, Lomas said, many young parents simply have no experience of handling children, especially the very young. Birthlight's infant aqua program aims not just to get children comfortable in an aquatic environment, but also to allow parents and children to interact physically as they enter a new world of experience together.

In the training pool of the National Taiwan Normal University, Diana Chendana, a certified Birthlight instructor, spends much of her time reassuring nervous parents. "It is as much about teaching parents as it is about teaching children," she said. "In our modern world, kids are getting less and less physical contact with the parent. Kids get up and play with their toys. When they go out, they are in the car seat. Or they are pushed in a stroller. There isn't much physical contact and interaction," she said.

For teachers like Lomas and Chendana, the actual swimming is a byproduct of something much more important that can be developed between parent and child.

Birthlight is the creation of Francoise Freedman, and was based on her experience doing anthropological fieldwork in the Amazon rainforest, where she had the chance to observe the close relationship between Amazonian Indians and their children in the forests and rivers that were their home. Lomas, an active birth instructor back in 1960s Britain, a time when the movement away from highly regimented forms of childrearing began to gather momentum, discovered Birthlight after she had children of her own and was looking for suitable ways of introducing them to the water.

Chendana, a keen swimmer and yoga practitioner who moved to Taipei four years ago, discovered Birthlight online, and having now qualified as an instructor, has been teaching professionally since last summer. "There is quite a lot of interest, both online, and through word of mouth," she said.

Interaction between parent and child is what drew her to Birthlight, and she reacted with horror at a story from one of her students, who had formerly been based in China, who told of classes in which the children learned to swim purely through the medium of an instructor, the parents watching from the poolside.

"Some parents do not know how to interact with their kids. They just keep buying toys ... Kids get bored of toys, but if you play with them together, swinging them, moving with them, they will never get bored. You may get tired, but they will not get bored," Chendana said.

Although infants may not get bored, the process of introducing infants to the water is not without its hazards. Ho Yi-chian (何依倩), chief instructor of the O-Win-1 Swimming School (應萬游泳學校), which now offers eight infant swimming classes, as well as classes for toddlers and older children, said the key to infant swimming classes is training the parents.

Instructing a class of first-timers at O-Win-1's Taipei facility, a clearly nervous mother hugged her child so tightly that it was uncertain whether he was crying because of the unfamiliarity of the water or the tightness of his mother's grip. "Often the child is fine with the water, and the problem is with the parent," Ho said. Much effort is put into making the whole class a light-hearted experience for both parents and children.

O-Win-1, a swimming school based in Hsinchu, has been offering infant classes in Taipei for close on six years, and is the only local swimming school to have developed a comprehensive infant swimming program.

During a visit to the school's Taipei complex, O-Win-1 general manager Huang Cheng-chang (黃正昌) pointed out the facilities specially designed to cater to young children, which include a completely heated pool area, and a spacious shower area to permit the bathing of infants.

Even in winter, the poolside area was almost uncomfortably warm for anyone not stripped down to their swimming costume. "In winter, we heat the whole complex, and the water is slightly above the norm for a

It's not about the bathwater

Swimming classes for babies offer more than just health benefits. They're also a great way for parents to bond with their children

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
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heated pool, higher than you'd have it for a regular swimming pool," Huang said. "This makes it more comfortable for the students." It certainly provided a level of comfort for both parents and infants that even the relatively modern facilities at National Taiwan Normal University, geared primarily for training and exercise, could not.

Huang said that even with all the infrastructure O-Win-1 had installed, many parents were still fearful of the health risks of swimming in winter, or would not allow their children to swim during Ghost Month, when hungry ghosts on parole from Hell are supposed to add to the risks of drowning.

Ho said that when parents first bring their children to class, a major factor is correcting traditional notions. "Many mothers are even unwilling to get the child's head wet. Even in the bath, they avoid this. So we have to set homework, encouraging them to sprinkle water on the baby during bath time, to get them used to it," she said. Located in the highly traditional Datong District, Huang said the Taipei facility drew a minority of its students from the local vicinity, with many coming in from much further afield. "Many of the parents who come here have more modern views, or at least are willing to try new things. Our job as teachers is to give them the tools to persevere over the longer term," Ho said.

O-Win-1 has a highly structured series of classes, taking children ranging in age from 5 months to several years old. "We have adopted a membership system to encourage students to see learning to swim as something they can do over a number of years," Huang said, adding that in the infant classes, overanxious parents sometimes need to be advised that learning correct swimming and water safety techniques are things that require more than just a couple of lessons.

FOR YOU INFORMATION:

Birthlight certification program:

>> Birthlight will be holding Part 1 of an "Infant Aquatic" (baby swimming) certification training program in Taipei from April 8. The program lasts four consecutive days. During the training, a live translation from English to Mandarin, training manual, PowerPoint presentation, lunch and snacks will be provided.

For further information visit www.birthlight.com.tw, send an e-mail to contact@birthlight.com.tw or call 0938-160-143.

On the Net:

Birthlight (Taiwan): www.birthlight.com.tw
Birthlight (International): www.birthlight.com
O-Win-1: www.owin1.com.tw



Children and their parents learn correct swimming and water safety techniques at O-Win-1's Taipei facility.

PHOTOS: IAN BARTHOLOMEW, TAIPEI TIMES, AND COURTESY OF O-WIN-1