



*Laurie Lawrence's*

# Instructing the Caregiver Successfully in Parent & Child Swim Classes





# Welcome

This article provides swimming teachers useful tips to successfully communicate with caregivers attending parent and child swimming classes.

It highlights the benefits of parental involvement and shows how effective communication is vital for water safety education and keeping parents engaged and attending lessons.

# About

## Laurie Lawrence

Laurie Lawrence is unique in international swimming because he has taught children to swim, progressed them through stroke development and advanced these swimmers to the highest ability level as medallists at the Olympic Games.

Laurie's coaching achievements saw swimmers he has directly assisted break a combined 23 world records and win 10 Gold, 11 Silver and 12 Bronze Olympic Medals.

The majority of international experts are either learn-to-swim teachers or swimming coaches. Very few have the experience and insight across all swimming levels from babies to Olympians. His outstanding achievements saw Laurie inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in 1996 to recognise his efforts. He has been honoured by the International Swimming Hall of Fame for achievements in coaching and infant Aquatics.

When queried on his success as a coach, his fondest achievements always centre on those that include his role as a learn-to-swim teacher. Laurie believes he has developed a recipe for success and has identified certain learn-to-swim principles which will progress raw beginners to efficient quality swimmers.

The World Wide Swim School platform has been specifically designed to share these techniques that represent more than 40 years of successful swimming teaching and coaching.



# Parental Involvement

Having parental involvement in the swimming lesson is a great asset. It creates an opportunity for special parent and child bonding, ensures a safe and secure learning environment and allows for maximum practice time in the swimming lesson. Educating parents on swimming and water safety is essential for drowning prevention.

Swimming lessons provide the perfect opportunity for face to face parental education which can mould safe attitudes and behaviours for aquatic recreation. For these reasons, parental involvement in the swimming lesson is particularly important for children under four years of age. After all the parents are the ones who will be taking their children to water-based activities outside of the formal learn to swim lesson and they need to be well educated to keep their family safe.

**Similar points have been raised with me before e.g. the parents don't listen, the children muck up with their parents or the parents don't do it properly. These scenarios all get back to how successful the teacher is at communicating with the parent.**

I understand that communicating with parents can be challenging and therefore I have put together 5 tips to help in the delivery of parent and child swimming classes.

- 1 Build relationships and make them feel comfortable
- 2 Give good explanations with demonstrations and use key words as reminders
- 3 Don't be overly critical, choose what's most important to correct
- 4 Recap the class activities to help parents retain important information
- 5 Be mindful of your body language and gestures

# 1

## Build relationships and make them feel comfortable

Make sure you introduce yourself to parents, get to know them and their child and let them know that they can approach you with any questions they might have. It's important that parents feel relaxed interacting with their child in the water.

Social referencing where children look to their parents to determine their reactions to new situations will play a role in how comfortable the child will be in the water. Spend adequate time making the parent comfortable handing their child in the water. Great teachers have got soft hands and allow children to feel the water's buoyancy and the floating sensation. Parents must also become skilled with this because this will set up all future interactions in the water.

Children need to learn early to support their own body weight in the water and perform independent recoveries after submersions rather than being picked up out of the water. It's easy to encourage this by having the parents wear a t-shirt in the water. Encouraging this type of independence in the water is the first step in teaching children their capabilities in the water.



**2****Give good explanations with demonstrations and use key words as reminders**

It's important that the parent understands the reason behind drills and activities. This will maintain their interest in attending lessons and also increase their knowledge on the benefits or importance of swimming and water safety skills.

Combine your verbal explanation with a clear visual demonstration to help parents understand what's expected. I like to use a child from the class, but you could also use a doll in your demonstration if you haven't yet established a good connection with your students.

Remember everyone has a different learning style, some are auditory, visual or kinaesthetic learners. It may take the parents a few goes practicing a skill before they execute the correct assistance for their child.

During the activity, teachers should use simple key words to remind the parents of what is expected or simply cues to perfect their execution. For example, saying simple things to the group like, stay low in the water, use soft hands, let them grab your t-shirt will help keep them on track. It's also a good idea to stop the group and point out a good one.



**Make sure that you select a parent with a personality who would be comfortable with this type of attention.**



3

### **Don't be overly critical, choose what's most important to correct**

Sometimes parents will have a lot that they need to improve on in order to help their child progress in the swimming lesson. For example, they may be holding their child too tight, using the wrong cues to submerge their child and not manipulating the kicks correctly. It may take them a number of weeks to get all of these things right.

As the parent is introduced to new skills they will need continual education and feedback just the same as the child. Try not to be overly critical and slowly work towards educating them on best practice. Remember it's better to improve performance using positive praise when people are doing well.

Of course, it will be necessary to provide constructive feedback to keep parents and their child on track. There may even be safety concerns that you will need to address with parents immediately. However, keep in mind that positive praise is best and choose what's most important to correct and slowly work on the others.

**Remember you can provide one on one feedback to individual parents and also general feedback to the group. Be mindful of how parents respond to your feedback.**

A 2004 Harvard research study conducted by Losada and Heaphy suggested that individuals require a feedback ratio of 1 negative to 6 positives to perform at their best. Positive feedback also motivates people to continue what they are doing. This is particularly important for swimming lessons because you want parents to be motivated and happy to bring their child to lessons week after week.

**4****Recap the class activities to help parents retain important information**

Many teachers put the main emphasis on how important the start of the swimming lesson and leave the end of the lesson to fizzle down. It's true it's very important to have a happy and successful start to the lesson where everyone feels welcome and ready to learn. However, the end of the lesson is particularly important because it leaves the lasting impression. Swimming lessons are generally very busy and active and there is always a lot to take in.

The recap at the end provides teachers an opportunity to emphasise the most important things learnt during the lesson. For example, "today we focused on extending breath control and working on our underwater skills where children retrieved rings from the bottom".

Teachers can also use the recap to gauge what the parents are taking in from the lesson. What did you learn today? You could pose the question, the recap can also tie what was learnt in class to the outside world. For example, "This activity will help your child at the beach because they will need good underwater skills to go under the waves.

Remember to swim between the flags". Teachers can also set home tasks. For example, "keep up your cup conditioning during bath time to maintain baby's breath control between lessons". The recap is also a good opportunity to remind parents of special events happening at the swim school or excite them for next week's lesson.


Remember to leave adequate time for the recap and final activity so that there is a smooth transition into your next class.

**5****Be mindful of your body language and gestures**

Your body language and gestures are just as important as your verbal communication. In fact, most communication theories suggest that nonverbal communication is by far more important than what is being said. Therefore, having a warm and approachable personality will be very important in parent and child swimming classes. Avoid unwelcoming postures like having crossed arms or placing hands on the hip.

Don't lose concentration and let your gaze wander off. Try to control any nervous habits like fidgeting, playing with hair or touching the face. Instead use eye contact and smile. Create an open posture by keeping your head up and shoulders square, not slouching. Pay a genuine interest in each and every one of your parents and little swimmers.





You will also need to use body language and gestures to effectively instruct and control your group. The tone, pitch and speed of your voice will be important. Make sure to slow down your body movements and speech.

Talking too fast will make you seem nervous or like you're rushing the group through the activity. Hand signals like the thumbs or clapping will be useful to show your approval. Also using your hands to wave the group forward or a hand signal to stop the group will also help in conducting the class.

Try to put yourself in a position of strength and central to the action when communicating to the entire group. Everyone needs to be able to see and hear you clearly. After giving your instructions, you can show your interest in each parent and child by moving between each parent and child therefore effectively working the entire teaching space.

**Effective communicating in parent and child classes is essential for teachers to provide quality swimming and water safety lessons. Effective communication between teacher and parent, not only keeps families attending lessons each week but plays a vital role in education and drowning prevention.**

While communicating with parents can be challenging at times, simple things like building relationships, giving simple clear instructions or demonstrations and perfecting your body language, can be extremely useful to help in the effective delivery of swimming lessons. Remember parental involvement in the swimming lesson is a great asset and will help keep preschool children safe in, around or on the water.



# Where to From here

**Swim Schools, Swim Teachers and Coaches can benefit from ongoing professional development content through Laurie Lawrence's World Wide Swim School (WWSS).**

WWSS is an online and interactive training program, that has been developed using the philosophies and teaching practices of Laurie Lawrence to benefit Swim Schools, Teachers and Coaches. Known for being Australia's water safety guru, Laurie developed the World Wide Swim School in order to educate the swimming industry about safe water practices and to improve swimming standards on an international scale.

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