

Does swimming make kids smarter?

Early results from a major research project indicate early-years swimming does in fact make kids smarter, more sociable and more confident. A continuation of these results could help direct many thousands of children to learn-to-swim schools – and hopefully encourage their parents to buy swimming pools.

Over the years, many learn-to-swim teachers have noticed that young children in their classes seem to be more confident, smarter, more social and interact better with their peers than children who don't swim

Could this really be the case? Is there any hard evidence that this is true? Does swimming offer extra potential for young children?

Acting on what is clearly more than a hunch, Laurie Lawrence and Ross Gage [Swim Australia] approached Professor Robyn Jorgensen at Queensland's Griffith University in 2007 to test the theory. They wanted an Australia-wide large-scale research project set in motion to test whether swimming in the early years had benefits for young children

The only previous study of this type was conducted in Germany three decades ago

Yet here, half a world away and entering the second decade of a new century, no major research project had looked at the impact of swimming on young children. And that's in a country where nearly 90 percent of the population lives close to a large water mass, in a climate that practically demands participation in water activities – you could even say being in water is part of the Australian way of life

So, while parents want to ensure the safety of their children and encourage their participation and enjoyment of the water, what are the other benefits of participating in learn-to-swim classes?

Professor Jorgensen and her team have launched into a major study to find out

(a) The physical, emotional, social and intellectual benefits of learning to swim in under-5s; and



Children enjoy the social aspect of learning to swim, and it also helps with their language development

(b) What factors enhance the benefits in different learn-to-swim contexts

Approximately 45 swim schools across Australia, New Zealand and the USA have contributed funds to enable the research to be conducted by the team of researchers from Griffith University in Brisbane and the Gold Coast.

Professor Jorgensen leads the team of researchers that includes Associate Professor Peter Grootenboer and Dr Bob Funnell

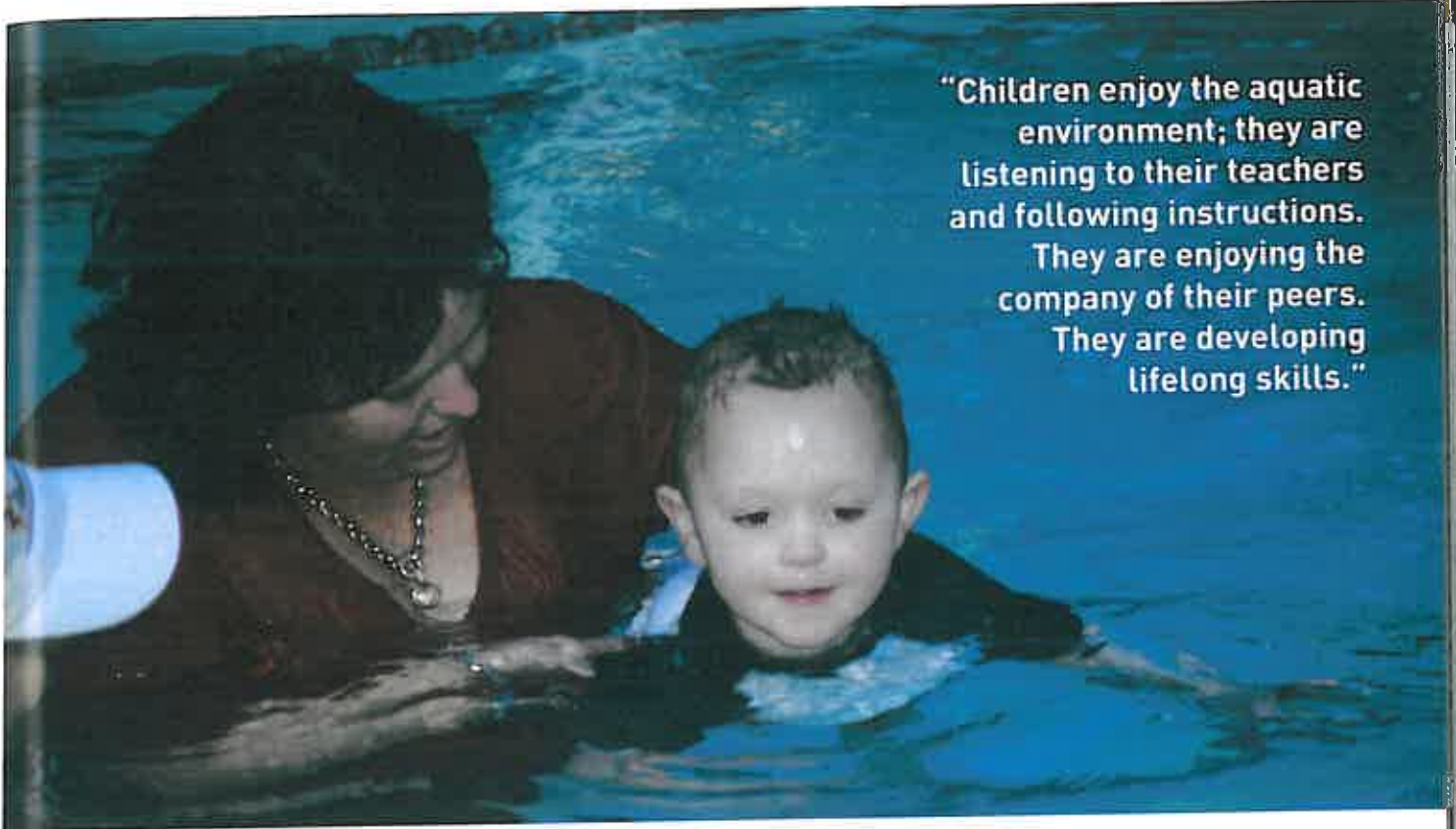
It is anticipated the study will take three years. It draws on a wide range of methods to test how, and to what extent, early years swimming adds benefits to young children

In the first phase of the study, a large survey had been administered to parents of early-years swimmers seeking informa-

tion about their children's development. The questionnaire – available on paper and online – seeks to determine if children have met, or surpassed, developmental milestones

To date, more than 4000 surveys have been completed and by the end of study, it is hoped that there will be more than 10,000 responses. This will make it one of the largest (if not the largest) study of its kind to be undertaken internationally

Results from this first phase indicate that children involved in learn-to-swim are ahead of the game – that there are benefits to cognition (intellectual development) and physical development as well as marginal benefits to social and language development. Parents have reported that their children are often well ahead on develop-



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mental milestones compared to same-age non-swimming peers.

If this data continues to show marked improvements in the ways in which children's thinking and learning can be enhanced, then the study has considerable implications for the swim industry and families.

But the researchers are going beyond the self-reporting of parents – who may have been tempted to over-estimate the achievements of their children.

In the next phase – to be undertaken over the next year – Griffith University's researchers will further test their findings. A large number of children will be assessed by psychologists using internationally recognised tests for child development. Matching between the tests and parents' reports will help to check whether or not development is really being enhanced.

The early data has also shown that an important consideration in the achievements of children is the type of swim school they attend.

Educational research has shown that the quality of the teaching and the learning environment itself are important factors for learning – and this appears to be true, whether in the context of a swim or general classroom environment.

To this end, another aim of the research team is to determine which features of swim environments contribute to enhanced learning. Over 2011, the Griffith University re-

searchers have been developing tools to identify the features of quality swimming lessons. Using the refined profiling tools, they will be visiting a wide range of swim schools to assess both the quality of the learning environment and the teaching approaches adopted.

These assessments will be supplemented by interviews with parents, teachers and administrators of swim schools.

Collectively, these methods will help to assess whether or not, and in what ways (if any) early years swimming is beneficial to young children in terms of their development.

“We are entering an exciting phase of the project now,” says Professor Jorgensen. “The early results have certainly shown us that children undertaking early years swimming classes are ahead of the game.”

“If children develop more quickly in their language, or appear to be smarter in how they think about things, or if they are more sociable with peers and adults, or if their physical development is better – these are important questions for most parents and teachers.”

“This could have wide implications. It could mean that children who have been swimming may have a higher level of school readiness than their non-swimming peers,” she says.

Swimming has advantages over other activities

“We have been asked by a lot of people –

what about other types of sport?” says Jorgensen.

“The interesting thing here is that children can participate in learn-to-swim before they can walk. No other ‘sport’ offers the same scope for the participation of young children. We have parents in the water with their kids from the time they are six months old.”

“And, yes, lots of parents are initially introducing their kids to the water for safety, and that's important,” she says. “But what we're finding is that the benefits of involvement in learn-to-swim are quite substantial.”

“Children enjoy the aquatic environment, they are listening to their teachers and following instructions. They are enjoying the company of their peers. They are developing lifelong skills.”

“The study is in its first two years and results are beginning to emerge but it is still early days and we are cautious about making too many claims from these early results.”

“We are utilising a wide range of methods to ensure that the claims we make will be accurate. However, we are quietly confident that some very interesting results will be reportable in the near future.”

For further information about the study, email Professor Robyn Jorgensen's research team at Griffith University at early-yearsswimming@griffith.edu.au 