

Water Babies

How important is it that you know how to swim?

By Katie Lawlor, Editor

Is it natural that we swim? Were we born to swim or be in water? The answer is yes. Throw a one year old child into a swimming pool and they will be able to stay afloat. Then this begs the question why do only 45% of people in the world know how to swim?

According to FINA, the international governing body for competitive swimming, people have been swimming for at least 6,000 years. Julius Caesar, Charlemagne and Louis XI were all known for their skills in the water. It was first introduced to the Olympics in the 1800's, with the oldest stroke, breast stroke. Swimming however, wasn't part of the original Olympic Games as it was considered a basic skill and not a skill that had to be developed.

There are many different reasons why people swim. For some, enjoyment is a big factor but for others health is the motivator. Swimming for one hour can burn up to 650 calories. This is much greater than cycling or walking. It builds muscle and cardiorespiratory fitness and is proven to be one of the few sports that use the most muscles in your body. Most importantly however people learn to swim to have confidence when they are around water. This can then broaden their range in the different sports they can take part in. Think of all the sports you can take part in if you know how to swim; sailing, rowing, canoeing and even fishing. You're not going to get very far in any of these sports without knowing how to swim.

Believe it or not there aren't any disadvantages in knowing how to swim but there are some risks to swimming. If you swim for over 30 minutes in

the Irish Sea you are at risk of developing hyperthermia. Hyperthermia is when the temperature of your body, which should be around 37 degrees, drops below 35 degrees. While swimming in the Irish Sea you should also be aware of the different currents that can bring you out further than your depth. So although you may know how to swim you must also be conscious of the environment you are swimming in.

I remember my first experience with swimming I thought 'why do people want to splash around in water? Why not chocolate or milk?'. At the age of five I was very confused by this and I was nervous. Looking down at the water from the bank felt at a holiday in Florida felt like I was about to jump out of a moving aeroplane. If I didn't know how to use the right technique and equipment, I would very quickly die. After that holiday in Florida, my Mam realised it was time to pursue in the daunting milestone of every child's life 'swimming lessons'. She decided to send me to swimming lessons not only so that I would feel comfortable around water but so that she could have as much peace of mind as a parent, knowing that if I ever got in trouble in water she could have some confidence in me.

Everybody is afraid of something and everybody has a coping mechanism. For me that something was water and my coping mechanism was running away from water. Children aren't born with the fear of water; they develop this anxiety within the first six months of their life. The Irish Water Foundation has said that the tension children have around water may be developed simply just by having the daily bath in your younger years. You may have felt too enclosed in you bath; the temperature mightn't have been right or even how your parents acted around water.

The philosopher Plato once said that "a man who doesn't know how to swim lacks a proper education" and I was going to be educated! After my Mum literally dragged to my first swimming lesson, I met my swimming teacher Anne. The first thing she ever told me was to jump into the intimidating pool. To a six year old girl who took showers instead of

baths to avoid having my head under water, this seemed like the most terrifying thing in the world!! I stood there in my new pink princess togs for what seemed like forever. I felt all eyes on me, chills running up and down my spine and the blood rushing to my cheeks causing me to blush. I'll never forget the moment; my toes over the edge of the pool bank, my heart in my stomach and finally gaining the strength to walk away from the pool. When my menace of a brother ran up behind me and pushed me in to the pool. Embarrassed wouldn't even begin to describe how I felt.

To this day my Mam hasn't stopped thanking my brother because I have never looked back since. I continued swimming lessons until I was 14. Ten years later from that traumatising day I'm now a life guard, I teach swimming and I teach water safety.

29% of the earth is land which must mean the other 71% is water. Most people have a dream of travelling the world and exploring new places but how do they expect to travel the world if they are restricting themselves to only 29% of it by not being able to swim? I'm not saying that somebody that can swim is going to swim 71% of the world but they can embark on new experiences like swimming with the dolphins, snorkelling and white water rafting.

A recent study has shown that 65% of the United States cannot swim. I'm sure you would agree that these figures are far too high. Let me make this clear that water rides in Disney Land does not count as swimming. Water parks like the profound Disney Land are so aware of the alarming amount of people that are unable to swim that Health and Safety make it almost impossible for you to drown in these parks. They attend these water parks to experience that feeling of water splashing on their face but the reality is that there is no better feeling than diving off a pier into the great Irish Sea. Those first 30 seconds of shock as the icy water hits your skin and the adrenaline rushes to your heart to keep it beating. While you're swimming under water, whether it's in your swimming pool,

the sea, or even the “lazy river” in the National Aquatic Centre you’re body works completely differently and there’s no other words to describe that feeling other than overwhelming bliss.

45% of Irish people know basic first aid. People believe that first aid is important because if someone they know and love was injured they would want to do everything possible to help. Swimming is the same. If you saw someone slip and fall into a pool or lake you would want to know how to help them. The only way to do this is to learn how to swim or attend a water safety course.

I’ve taught swimming now for the last three years and can honestly say I feel sorry for the child who struggles to sit comfortably at the side of the pool and kick their legs. For the child who will kick, scream and do just about anything to avoid putting their head under water. I remember when I was that child. Swimming has really changed my life. I now swim every week, teach swimming. I didn’t get there by being thrown into a pool, I became a teacher by holding my breath a little longer when I thought I couldn’t and by kicking my legs when I thought my muscles couldn’t continue.

To answer the question ‘how important is it to be able to swim?’ the answer is very important. It opens so many opportunities never mind that you will feel more safe and comfortable around water, even when someone pushes you in!