



SENSATIONAL SWIMMING

If you think about it, swimming involves body awareness, upper and lower body coordination, breathing, timing, buoyancy, motor planning, and a plethora of sensations. It's no surprise that a number of our students have a bit more difficulty learning to swim than some of their same-age peers. Every part of their "fright/flight" mechanism is challenged.

How can we begin to make swimming less threatening, more calming and most importantly, more safe?

Here are some of the obstacles that your new swimmer experiences with intensity when the family embarks on a trip to the pool (let's not even start discussing the beach):

- The water is colder than that with which they're comfortable (i.e., the bathtub).
- The water is deeper than the bathtub.
- There is a lot of noise—music, talking, laughing, running, unexpected splashes, etc.
- Your child may have trouble judging the depth of the water and the proximity of other kids.
- They may even notice the smell and taste of chemicals (i.e. chlorine).
- Your new swimmer is set up to be in panic mode.

Your goal is to keep things calm—no forced activity, no negative comments ("scaredy cat" or "you did it last winter at Grandma's"). For some children, it will be starting from square-one each of the first few times they enter the pool. Each pool is a new mountain to climb and a new experience that takes some coaxing, some encouragement, and some places for you to take control.

TIPS FOR BEGINNERS AND MODERATELY EXPERIENCED SWIMMERS FOLLOW

For Beginners—Staying Patient is Key

- Gain their trust by promising them—and keep that promise—that the first few times visiting the pool you will not force them in.
- Encourage them to sit with you on the edge and put their feet in.
- Try to find a time of day when the pool is less crowded.
- Play “swimming pool” in the bathtub.
- Get a blow-up kiddie pool for your yard, and fill it with warm water.
- Spend time with water play outdoors.
- If your public pool will let you, fill mini-tubs with water and let your child play near the larger pool.
- Get some pool toys with texture and weight (i.e sponges, pool balls, squirt toys and weighted toys that travel downward). Sitting in the kiddie pool or sitting on the pool stairs with these toys will help introduce the sensory experience.
- Talk about the different sensations: wet, cold, squishing, etc.
- Have dry towels near by to keep eyes dry, bodies dry, tushies comfy.
- If they panic, stay calm by keeping your voice down and tone patient.

For Moderately Experienced Swimmers—Continue Reinforcing Patience (don't force anything)

- Offer goggles, noodles and other supports and give them rides around the pool. They may or may not be ready to hold on and go for the unexpected ride
- To work on extended breathing techniques, have your child make bubble volcanos with a shoebox-sized storage container, a few drops of liquid detergent and straws. Blowing out into the box takes extended exhales, and the bubbles will start to overflow the bin. After mastering that in the Tupperware, you can try it in the big swimming pool. Of course your child will not be swimming with a straw in their mouth, and you won't be adding dishwashing liquid, but it is a fun way to help them gain some control over their breath when in the water. It also leads to the lips, nose, eyes and eyebrows going in the water. Bring extra straws because others will want to join in!
- Practice with large straws blowing bubbles in the pool water. Remind them that blowing out through the straw will help them not suck in the water from the pool. After they blow through straws (in the kiddie pool and bathtub, too), they can be asked to put their lips in the water and blow. Remind them that if they sip with their face in, they will get water up their nose and in their mouth. Blowing out is very important to practice and drill.
- If your child is standing in the water, blowing bubbles and tolerating splashes, then swimming lessons can begin. Your goal is to transition them to this point while keeping it a calm and quiet experience. If they are panicking, swimming lessons will not go well.
- When seeking an instructor for your sensory-sensitive or motor “awkward” child, make sure the instructor is aware of your child's need for a step-by-step approach. If your child is going to a summer camp with swimming, speak with the head swimming

instructor prior to the child's first day to help them treat your child with more time, patience and tolerance.

- Group instruction can be daunting and following novel motor sequences can be very difficult for some children. They do much better with a hands-on approach with great patience, small goals and **NO PRESSURE**. The minute the child feels extra pressure, they will panic and give up. Swimming and water safety is too important to compromise with a child who is in a panic mode.

Specialized Swimming Lessons:

Laurie Kalb, OT does give occasional swimming lessons in her Morristown home. These lessons are geared towards children who are toilet trained and who are excessively anxious around a pool. If you are interested in discussing this with her, you can contact her by calling our office at 973-535-5010 and supplying your contact information.