

# My Journey through the *Learn to Swim* Industry with Babies and Toddlers

By Christine Dellit  
ASCTA Course Presenter

This article provides an overview of my observations and experiences during my journey of 42 years involvement in swimming, including over 30 years in the 'Learn to Swim' industry.

My involvement with the industry still continues and I actively support my two sons, Peter and Mark who, with their partners, respectively operate the Essential Skills Swim School, Edmonton (South Cairns) and Little Snappers Swim School, Smithfield (North Cairns).

At the outset I acknowledge that there are sometimes very different opinions with regards to some aspects of the industry. I can only comment on what I have experienced during my direct involvement in the introduction of many thousands of young children aged from 4 months onwards to swimming throughout Queensland. This includes having the privilege of playing a small part in some of these children going on to become top 10 Australian swimmers, as well as one who went on to represent Australia at the Olympics and become a World Record holder. Some may not agree with all of my views and that certainly is their prerogative.

In preparing to write this article I re-read the article by Bill Sweetenham published in this magazine in December 2011. It took me back to those early days from 1970 to 1974 when I was fortunate to be a member of the Mt Isa Swimming Club, being coached by a then very young Bill Sweetenham in his first coaching role.

It was evident to me, even as a 12 – 14 years old, that Bill was a visionary and certainly well before his time. The fact that we did weight training and 14 x 2 to 3 hours sessions a week amazingly seemed 'fun'. It was even more 'fun' when Christmas holidays meant that my friend Tony Byrne and I had the privilege of also doing a 2 hour midday session in Bill's parents backyard 10 metre fibreglass pool. This complimented the other 2 sessions of the day at the local pool.

In his article, Bill gives thanks to his mentors. In turn, I give thanks to him for what has been a tremendous influence on my 'Learn to Swim' career that has now led me to another passion; that of training teachers.

So how did I become involved in this wonderful industry? After a stint at the Queensland Police Academy followed by marriage at the age of 18, I commenced working in the small North Queensland town of Ayr as a teller in the Commonwealth Bank. Boring? Extremely! One day in 1978 the local swimming teacher came to me to do her banking. She had an amazing amount of \$2 notes to bank. Over a period of time I came to realise that you could actually make a living out of something that you loved.

Fast forward to 1982 and 2 children later. I decided to install a small fibreglass pool in my yard and asked a few friends if they would like me to teach their children to swim. I loved it and was hooked. I placed a small advertisement in the local paper and could not believe it when I found myself teaching 480 lessons a week in a small 10 metre pool. I decided that I needed a bigger pool so brought a crane in and took out the small pool. I then dug a bigger hole by hand and built, once again by hand, a 14 metre x 6 metre pool out of Besser bricks.

Fast forward again to 1990 when I purchased the local squash courts and built a 17 metre indoor pool, once again by hand, as an addition to the complex and found myself teaching 750 lessons a week.

To say that I had a very busy work day in an understatement. My normal workday was:

6.00am – 7.30am Squad  
8.00am – 9.00am Aqua Aerobics  
9.00am – 1.00pm Learn to Swim  
1.30pm – 6.00pm Learn to Swim  
6.00pm – 7.00pm Squad  
7.00pm – 8.00pm Aqua Aerobics  
8.00pm – 12.00pm Squash fixtures

In 1982 I attended a Queensland swimming course at Ron Coleman's Swim School in Townsville. I attended that course and my Teacher number became Q000059.

In those days the popular school of thought, by the then well known coaches, was that you could not teach swimming to children under 5. Of course, I realised at the time that they must have meant strokes because I was observing that many of the children I was teaching in Ayr were swimming independently by themselves by the age of 2 years old.

With North Queensland being so hot, it was not unusual for children to be in their own pools for up to 6 hours at a time and for at least a couple of hours every day.

Because of this massive exposure to water my youngest son, at 13 months of age, was swimming independently up and down the pool by himself.

At this time I was undertaking a lot of research on others teaching this age group and found that most were using some type of swimming aid. My experience was that we had many children being able to swim independently by the age of 2 without any aids and I often wondered why this was the case. I also observed what had been called the 'drown proofing' method, which in my opinion is the most horrendous thing I have ever seen. This was where the children were taught that if they fell in to a pool they would roll onto their backs and float till someone could get to them.

In my opinion if a child will float happily on their back there is absolutely nothing wrong with back floating. It is the forcing of this skill that I have issues with. I have even observed one poor child projectile vomiting on his back whilst performing this skill for 15 minutes. Of course, I now know these teachers did what they did because they had not had the opportunity of being able to observe babies teaching themselves to swim naturally. Some teachers were under the impression that the means justified the end. This being that if the child was ever in the situation that they fell into a pool unsupervised the trauma inflicted on them in lessons was worth it and justified if it saved their life.

Based on my observations and experience I decided that I would create a program that followed how a baby would develop swimming skills naturally.





I observed that, once very mobile in the water, children would then lift their head to breath, exhale, inhale, then put their head back into the water and keep swimming. I observed that initially when not very strong their body would drop whilst obtaining their breath. As they became stronger this was not as pronounced. Some would be quite happy to be on their back but not many. I found it was not a position that they would naturally go to and trying to 'teach' it was only successful with some. I believe that more often than not these children who appeared comfortable on their back had their own pools or access to a pool and were very comfortable and strong in the water.

It was in these early years that our wonderful Ambassador of 'Learn to Swim', and water safety, Laurie Laurence was living in Townsville (100km north of Ayr) and was also starting to promote baby swimming. I suspect that he also observed with his own children what I had observed with mine - that they just start swimming with a little bit of help when they are exposed to the water.

The biggest change I have noticed in the teaching of swimming to babies and toddlers over the years is that more people have access to child development information and particularly the invaluable information that our colleague, Julie Zancanarro has shared.

Through organisations such as Swim Australia, the opportunity to attend conferences and the willingness of people to share their knowledge we are now seeing more teachers create programs that are fun and based on child development principles.

So, after building swim schools in Ayr, Townsville, Gold Coast and now Cairns are there differences in the teaching of swimming to this age group?

Well, yes there are. The North Queensland children in particular, due to the hot weather and availability of pools in which to swim means that the majority of this age group are already very good in the water at a much younger age than their Southern counterparts. After observing this age group at swim schools in Sydney and Melbourne more of the Queensland children have better skills at a younger age. What does this mean? It just means that to accommodate for this difference we need to be able to provide classes that take this into account. For example, if a 2 year old can already swim laps of the pool then don't put floaties on them because that is what you do with other 2 year olds that can't swim. Consideration should be given to having an advanced group so these children can be extended.

It is important that class sizes for this age group be small enough for you, the teacher, to be able to create a rapport with every child and parent and be able to assist each one individually. I personally believe a maximum of 4 children to a class allows the teacher to do this.

I also believe the children should not be in the water by themselves with a teacher until they are socially and emotionally ready.

Teachers need training in relation to behavioural and developmental progress and problems that children may have and thereby have a repertoire of strategies available to deal with them and assist their development as swimmers - and as individuals. Whilst children may have their 'off days' there is absolutely no reason why crying at lessons should be the norm.

Of course as teachers we are also faced with the fact that due to the ways of our modern life many of our young children are not developing skills that 30 years ago were a given. I find it amazing how many of our children are not actually moving as much anymore - they simply don't engage in the physical activity that of their counterparts engaged in 30 years ago. It affects their developmental milestones and has a very big influence on their progression as swimmers.

Besides the life saving aspects, this is another great reason for us to encourage parents to give their children more access to swimming so they can develop physically, emotionally, socially and mentally to their potential.

I look forward to the day when 'Learn to Swim' receives the recognition and support that government provides to the Child Care industry both to mitigate that terrible and needless loss of life by drowning in this age group but also because swimming is a skill for life.