

# TODDLER SWIMMING



**LILLI AHRENDT**

**MEYER  
& MEYER  
SPORT**

## Toddler Swimming

## Thank you!

A special word of thanks goes to my personal editor Mr. Gottfried Ahrendt, the photographer Ms. Mathilde Kohl, and the numerous parents and children who so willingly took part in the photo sessions.

*Dr. Lilli Ahrendt*

## Note:

In my first book, **Baby Swimming**, I deal with the development of a child in his first year of life, and the promotion of movement appropriate to this development. In this book, however, I look at child development and the methodical and didactic factors of swimming with 1-year-olds (young toddlers) and 2-year-olds (toddlers) together, seeing as there is no definite dividing line between these two age groups.

## General comment:

In this book, the term “parent” also applies to any other accompanying person who is important to the toddler.

The book has been written in the masculine form for reader-friendly reasons only. The feminine form is implied to the same extent where appropriate.

Lilli Ahrendt

# TODDLER SWIMMING

THE FUNDAMENTS OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND GUIDANCE THROUGH  
PARENT-CHILD SWIMMING DURING THE 2ND AN 3RD YEARS OF LIFE

With Photos by Mathilde Kohl



Meyer & Meyer Sport

Original Title: Kleinkindschwimmen  
© 2002 by Meyer & Meyer Verlag, Aachen  
Translation: Anne Lammert

Editor of the German Series: Prof. Kurt Wilke

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

**Lilli Ahrendt:**  
Toddler Swimming  
Oxford: Meyer & Meyer Sport (UK) Ltd., 2005  
9781841265940

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Aachen, Adelaide, Auckland, Budapest, Graz, Johannesburg, New York,  
Olten (CH), Oxford, Singapore, Toronto



Member of the World  
Sports Publishers' Association (WSPA)  
[www.w-s-p-a.org](http://www.w-s-p-a.org)

9781841265940  
E-Mail: [verlag@m-m-sports.com](mailto:verlag@m-m-sports.com)

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## Editor's Foreword

Although a child in his second and third year of life masters the majority of his world on dry land, the scope of movement offered by water is ideal for this age group, too.

As opposed to a baby's movements, a toddler's movements are controlled to a large extent by his own free will. Water, a pliable liquid element with buoyant force, offers a child unique methods of perception and control in his curious conquest of his environment, as long as he is faced with pleasant, fear-free, playful situations.

Water, and the feeling of one's body in water, then become an exciting adventure, encouraging deliberate effective behavior, binding parent and child through mutual experience, and paving the way towards confident, life-saving swimming abilities.

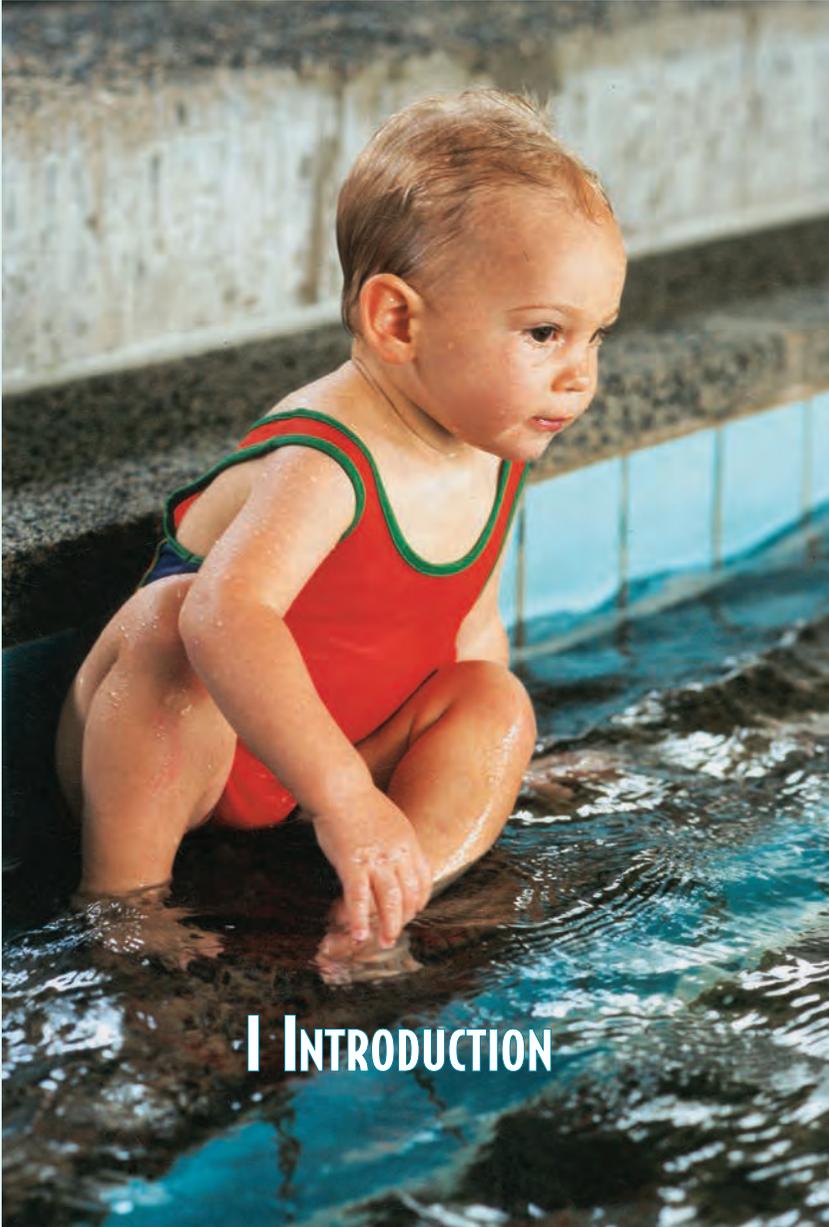
Above all, Lilli Ahrendt centers her work around the advancement and guidance of a child's development. Toddler development is thus the central theme in this book, as well as being the starting point for her methodical guidance of parents, course instructors, and all those involved with toddler swimming, whether on the planning, organizational or practical side.

In addition to pedagogical development, the author does not neglect to inform in practical detail about gripping and securing a small child's body in the water, and to offer advice on factors which might seem trivial, but are, nevertheless, important for the success of the course, such as temperature, hygiene, materials or swimwear.

Even with all these technical details, Lilli Ahrendt goes to show that toddler swimming is not a mere instruction of movement techniques, but rather is based on trusting and sensitive interaction in the water between parent and child.

*Cologne, November 2004*

*Kurt Wilke*



# I INTRODUCTION

This book is the sequel to the book **Baby Swimming**. Whereas baby swimming concentrated on parent-child swimming in the first year of a child's life, this book deals with *toddlers*, and therefore, also the development phases and methods of encouraging this development through parent-child swimming in the second and third years of life.

The term *swimming* for this age group refers to a child's oriented movement in water, supported by parents or buoyancy aids, as well as his independent desire to move within water. Swimming on his own<sup>1</sup> is a skill which a child can learn from the age of four, at the earliest. Apart from a child's mental maturity and motivation, this particularly depends on the growth of the limbs, as well as the related force-load relationship and the child's motor-coordinative skills.

As with little kids doing gymnastics, it goes without saying that the basic elements of movement in water with parental support must be tried out and tested under the course instructor's expert guidance. Water itself is an exceptional medium, and offers a suitable scope for playing and frolicking about.

The first steps toward learning swimming are set methodically according to age. The first hurdle is getting accustomed to the water, and coping with it. This is initiated within the framework of parent-child swimming, both integrally and interactively, i.e. the children are left to discover the pleasure of movement together with their parents, gradually and without any pressure of performance. They then experience this by moving around, jumping, dipping and diving, as well as with various games, gymnastic and relaxation exercises. Swimming can be carried out in one's leisure time as a *sport with perspective*, throughout one's whole life, and in all generations as a common family sport.

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<sup>1</sup> *Swimming* here refers to locomotion in deep water over a distance of 12 meters (*Penguin badge*), or 25 meters (*Seahorse badge*) with certain jumping and diving skills. These early swimming badges certify a child's first swimming achievements, carried out under supervision.

Successful toddler swimming calls for qualified instruction under suitable conditions in warm water (about 32° celsius) with the parents being able to stand up in the water. The groups should be divided up according to age and experience since a child's movement repertoire expands rapidly in the first few years.

The lesson is to be directed toward playfully enhancing movement in water in combination with pedagogical supervision, characterizing the intended and deliberate actions of both the course instructor, and the parents with their child.



It is possible to start parent-child swimming at any time. Those phases typical for the second year of life, e.g. *fear of being separated from his parents* (at about 13 months), *phase of defiance* (about 18 months), *fear of deep water* (about 24 months) or even the general orientation problems in unfamiliar situations or places (*fear of new experiences*) may affect the lesson at certain stages.

Toddler swimming consciously intensifies the parent-child relationship. What was once a waving and kicking baby becomes a clinging toddler or even a rebellious fighter wishing to get his own way; a child who has a completely different opinion than his parents in the water is suddenly afraid or no longer wants to be held up although he is not able to swim.

It is important to accept these stages of development as mere phases, and to patiently get through them with compromises.

Being able to play and splash around with his parents in the water is an activity which a child enjoys. Waves and splashes are a method of getting him used to the water which are fun for him, and are not something he is afraid of; jumping into the water and diving under become one of his favorite games as he is held in the familiar protective arms of his parents.

The lessons are designed to be integral in content, promoting mental, motor, social and emotional skills to an equal extent. Creative lesson structure enables the parents and children to experience a variety of movements with sheer pleasure.

Toddler swimming can lay strong foundations for gaining confidence in the water, a healthy process which—for a child's own interest in health and sport—can be continued later with swimming. In general, a child can only consciously learn proper swimming technique from the age of three at the earliest, as he then has the necessary maturity in cognitive, physical and motor skills.

Parents who hinder their child from playing and experimenting in the water at an early age, who somewhat heteronomously allow a child into the water when fully equipped with buoyancy aids, and permanently warn him of the dangers involved instead of accompanying him and encouraging him to get familiar with this medium, run the risk of causing their child to have a phobia of water. This in turn may result in future swimming lessons being long, tedious, difficult, and anything but relaxing.



## II FUNDAMENTS OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND TODDLER SWIMMING

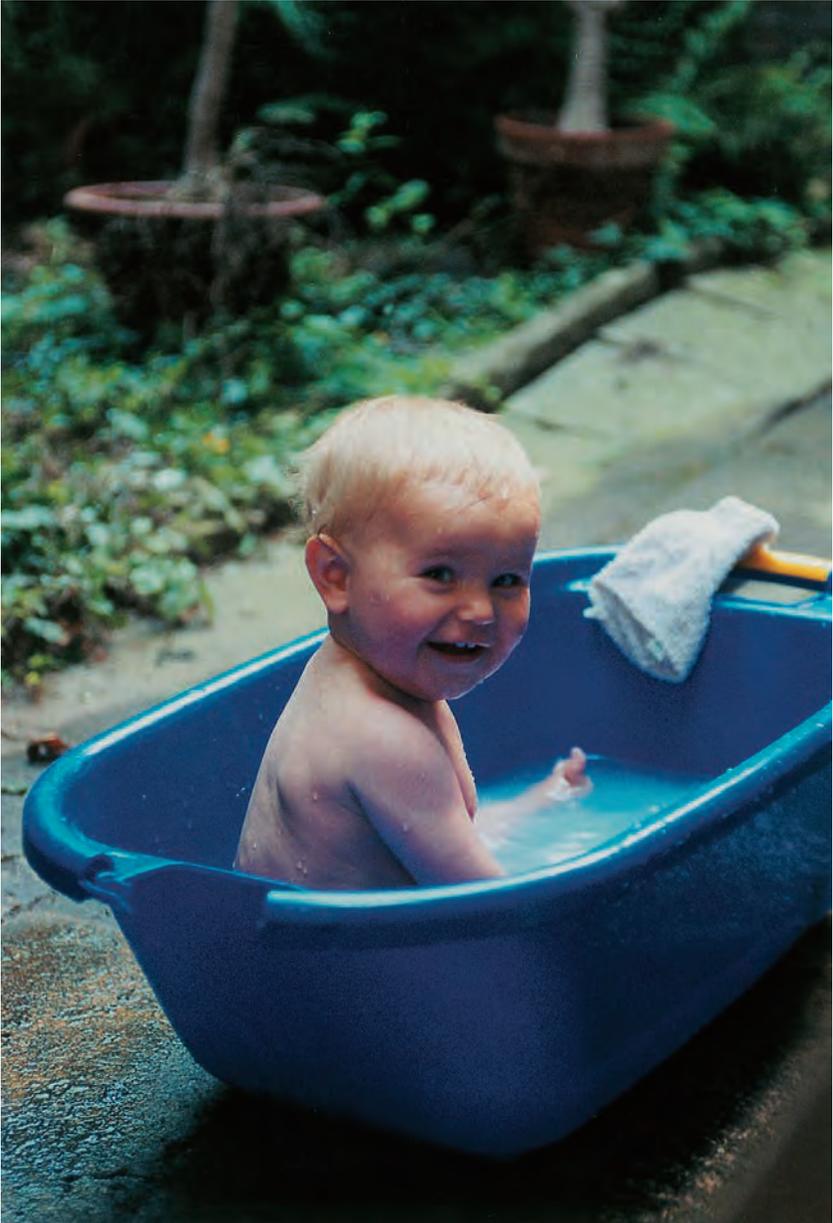
# 1 Water

Water, an element of movement in its own endless cycle, has a fascinating attraction on us. This is particularly visible in certain situations when people are drawn towards the beach, or to a roaring mountain lake. Even in our day-to-day life we love a shower; in the same way, we also feel reborn after swimming.

For a child in a discovery phase, water is a creative and exciting area of adventure and experience. Water binds together by enclosing both child and parent, allowing them to act and react very close to one another. Its distinctive permeable characteristic means that a child must be continuously supervised and supported. A child needs this assistance due to his inability to swim.

A child's fundamental mental attitudes are shaped in the first few years of life in particular. If a child is offered a playful encounter with water during this time, and a good relationship develops between himself and the water, he will continue to retain this positive attitude to water in later years.

Water does not only symbolically seize us in its entirety, but physically and mentally, too. Being able to cope with water, and hold one's own in the water gives a child psychological strength. Such experiences boost his self-confidence, courage and enthusiasm, which he can then pass on to his day-to-day situations. Movement in water has also been a recognized and valued method of personality advancement for a long time now.



## 1.1 An Everyday Element

Water is not just there for drinking; it's also necessary for our daily body hygiene. From the second year of life onwards, a child can already take a bath by himself, i.e. not just together with his parents, when the water is no higher than 30cm, and an anti-sliding mat is on the tub bottom. Toys, such as sponges or beakers of various sizes encourage the child to stay seated for a little longer while all the time playfully discovering water.

In order to work on their body scheme, it helps when children learn in a playful manner how to wash different parts of their body with a wash-cloth. An older brother or sister, or a doll can bathe at the same time, so as to give a good example, too. A quick shower before a diaper change can also be introduced.

Washing hair at this age proves to be trickier. As the children are still a bit unsteady in regards to keeping their balance, they are not able to stay in upright position, and lean their head backwards.

For the same reason, the supine position is also generally unfavourable for this procedure. It is better when the child is able to hold on to something in either sitting or standing position, and to close his eyes. His parents should use a mild children's shampoo and rinse it out again quickly with the shower jet.

## 1.2 An Element of Play

Water is a particularly exciting element for toddlers. Here they can make their first experiments in physics, i.e. buoyancy, resistance, pressure and temperature. They also get to know the three-dimensional possibilities of moving their limbs. They use water on the beach as a binder for building castles and ditches. In the bath, they use foam to wallpaper the tiles and wet feet leave footprints.



The consistency of water makes it possible to put it in one's mouth and spit it out again, to blow in it and blubber, to spoon it up and pour it out, to dribble and sprinkle, to watch it flowing, and observe it on our skin. A child satisfies his curiosity with these experiences, and is challenged to continue with his creativity.

### 1.3 An Element of Danger: Teaching Safety

A well meant word of warning should make all readers aware of just how vital it is for small children to learn the skills of swimming for their own protection, particularly when we harmlessly encounter water in every day-to-day situation, such as when brushing our teeth, bathing ourselves, walking alongside a river, leisure time at a lake, observing pond activities etc.

All people who are involved with children should be alarmed when e.g. The German Federal Office For Statistics (VIII A1 Health 1999) reports that the number of deaths caused by drowning alone among children of 1-5 years of age (58 in total) was almost twice as high as for children of 5-10 years of age, and almost 15 times higher than for babies (< 1 year). The statistics of the German Life Saving Association for all of Germany in the first six months of 2001<sup>2</sup> showed 181 cases of drowning, 10% of which (18) involved children under the age of five.

Most accidents occur in natural waterways or there is no further explanation for the accident. In comparison, accidents in the bath tub or the swimming pool make up a minor part of the total accidents. Nevertheless, it is clear from the statistics that a toddler as a non-swimmer represents a target group that is in serious danger, both due to his strong urge to move around and explore, as well as his lack of experience. His physical abilities are also a considerable hindrance to rescuing himself.



<sup>2</sup> Personal advance information, official publication in 2002

It is important for parents to be sensitive to the dangers in and around water, and to learn to estimate their child's abilities. In a questionnaire of parents with and without regular participation in toddler swimming courses, it became clear that parents with course experience indicated better safety behavior toward their child when on vacation.

Thus, toddler swimming is a form of safety training through education along with the parents' practical hands-on experience with their child in water. Dangers can be estimated more realistically when parents have real practice in tackling the situation, and with the help of playful training of certain rules of behavior, the course instructor can educate both children and parents in a true-to-life manner.

A spontaneous experiment brought a further aspect to light—the parents' own experience with water.

In baby and toddler courses, they are given instructions on how to look after their child in a proper, expert way. Many parents gain access to water again through their children, and with regular course visits they strengthen their belief in their own personal skills; they learn to be confident with their child.

These experiences ensure a more realistic assessment of real-life occurrences, even outside the course, and are useful for both children *and* parents in mastering leisure and vacation situations. It is, after all, the parents who hold their child and watch over him in the water, and in the case of an emergency, should be able to save him.

As long as a child is unable to swim, he requires constant supervision. Overprotective parents, with endless warnings of the dangers lurking, hinder the child from making his own experiences with water and learning how to protect himself. I would like to point out here that persistent use of swimming aids (e.g. wings) does not guarantee the child's safety, no matter how near one is.

Accidents which occur as a result of slipping in the bath can be prevented with an anti-slip mat on the floor of the bath. The baby should never be left alone while bathing. For this reason towels and other necessary utensils should be laid in place beforehand.