

Swim Wales Safety Guidance

Teaching in the Water and the Handling of Children

Swim Wales staff are frequently asked by Learn to Swim providers and teachers, “Can I teach in the water?” and “Is it alright to handle learners?”

The UK wide recognised guidance document, “Safe Supervision for the teaching and coaching of swimming” states:

“In the situation where the teacher has responsibility for groups comprising more than two learners the recommended teaching position is from the side of the pool as this provides the best position to oversee the whole group in terms of safety and to provide appropriate feedback on the performance of each person in the group. This does not preclude a teacher being in the water to assist learners either on a 1:1 or 1:2 basis or as an assistant to the class teacher. In fact for groups of more than two learners a fully qualified teacher on the poolside supported by an assistant in the water may be ideal. It is recognised, however, that in some circumstances the teacher will have assessed the risk and may feel it is more appropriate to teach from within the water. This practice should only be considered after carrying out a risk assessment giving careful consideration to all the potential factors.

*Factors to take into account include pool depth, age and stage of development, size and ability of learners and the use of fixed floatation aids. **At all times the teacher must be able to clearly see all learners** and be close enough to provide physical support should this be required. In this way it may be practicable to supervise between two to six learners depending on the previously mentioned safety factors, ratios greater than this should not be considered unless additional helpers are available in the water.*

If the qualified teacher is teaching in the water an additional observer should be on the poolside, who has the responsibility for that class to enhance the swimming teacher’s span of supervision that teaching in the water inevitably diminishes.”

There may be a greater need to teach in the water with younger learners under five years of age. Children of that age range, although possibly attending nursery school, do not have a fully developed ‘class’ mentality and may find it difficult to function in a larger class where the swimming teacher gives instructions from the poolside also the teaching of special needs and lower ability learners from in the water is common practice.

One benefit of teaching in the water with younger groups is the reassurance this provides to young, nervous children. Another more controversial benefit is that it allows the swimming teacher to provide physical support to the beginner.

However, this intervention can be fraught with difficulties and the swimming teacher is placing themselves at risk especially if a parent/guardian or swimmer is not comfortable with the physical contact and chooses to complain. It is important that the swimming teacher demonstrates



exemplary behaviour and good practice at all times in order to protect themselves from false allegations.

For this reason, understandably, many teachers refuse to handle children in swimming lessons and this decision should be respected and not penalised by swimming pool operators.

Nevertheless, there is considerable evidence that a significant number of Learn to Swim providers deliver 'Active Start' swimming lessons (Splash and Wave 1/2) where they expect the swimming teacher to be in the water with the children AND to handle them to assist the teaching process and it is often what the parent/guardian in most cases want!

For these reasons swimming teachers that are required to undertake swimming lessons in this manner need to observe certain protocols and Swim Wales recommend that the following should be in place:

- Ensure there is a system included within the Pool Safe Operating Procedure which includes the parent/guardian of the learner giving permission for the teacher to handle the children for the purposes of supporting them in the water. Parents/guardians should be made aware of this at the commencement of lessons.
- The swimming teacher should always wear a distinctive top so that they are easily identifiable.
- Preferable support would involve utilising aids (floats, noodles, fixed buoyancy aids (active aids)).
- Ensure that any handling and supporting of learners is necessary to support building confidence and skill development and within clear sight of parents/guardians and others in spectator areas.
- Always explain to the learner that you are now going to hold them and why. Swimming teachers must never support learners in such a way that their hands cannot be seen by the spectators (i.e. beneath the water).
- Never support a learner by handling the swimmer's torso.
- Only support swimmers by holding their head, shoulders or hands.
- Teachers and coaches should **NEVER** teach or coach or be in changing areas alone with a swimmer without other adults being present.

It is recognised that on occasions small children who are nervous may cling to the swimming teacher but this is an action that is instigated by the learner not the swimming teacher, nevertheless these circumstances must be dealt with by the swimming teacher with utmost care.

Swim Wales believes that competent swimming teachers should be friendly and approachable and by following these simple guidelines a swimming teacher can satisfy the customer's needs without placing themselves at undue risk.

