

WATER BABIES

Classes get even the youngest kids in the swim

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, July 8, 2007

BY RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Swimsuit season is here, and Gavin Holmes looks good in his green Hawaiian-print trunks.

Never mind that he's only 7 months old. Or that he doesn't know how to swim.

He's learning. That's why he's here. That's why they're all here.

Sort of.

Several times a week, the indoor pool at the Francis Family YMCA in Temperance is sprinkled with water babies. They float around and splash while their parents carefully hold them in the pool, comfortably heated to 89 degrees.

It would be a big stretch to call it swimming, but that doesn't matter to Gavin.

"He loves it," says his mom, Amy, of West Toledo. "He is a fish in the pool, just an absolute fish."

The YMCA is one of several area facilities offering infant aquatics classes for young children and their parents, starting with kids as young as 6 months.

"Basically, all we're trying to do with the parent-child class is get the child used to the water so that they won't be scared when they get older," explains Ashley Williams, 20, an instructor at the Francis Family YMCA.

The idea is to get the kids used to being underwater, floating, jumping in from the side of the pool, kicking, things like that. During a recent YMCA class, nine children did their best impressions of motorboats as they flailed their legs in the water and their parents kept them afloat.

MULTIMEDIA

[See and hear more about infant aquatics classes](#)



Gavin Holmes, 7 months, enjoys a swim with his mom, Amy, at the Francis Family YMCA. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

"At first, most of the time the parents have to actually take their arms and move them around or take their feet and really kick them, but by the end of the lessons, they're really doing them by themselves," Ms. Williams says.

Many parents say they come to the class because they care about water safety. They believe the sooner their kids learn to swim, the safer they'll be. The sight of their kids' mouths gaping wide with joy as they jump into the pool is just a bonus.

"We feel it's so important for kids to have water safety ... The earlier you start them, the less afraid they are of the water," says one mom, Jennifer Hemry, of Temperance. "If you wait longer, I've seen children, they're 2 or 3 years old and they scream because they just don't understand what the water's all about."

Her son Zachary is only 17 months old, but he was first exposed to the water more than a year ago. He takes part in one of the YMCA classes.

Statistics show that there is much to worry about when it comes to kids and water. In 2004, drowning was the cause of death for 26 percent of the children ages 1 to 4 who died, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Of course, there are limits to how much about swimming one can teach the youngest infants.

"Anybody that you put in the water will automatically hold their breath, but to teach them some of the skills [for swimming], you need to have some gross motor skills," says Jim Beeson, who directs the parent-child swim programs at the Collingwood Center in the Old West End.

The optimum age for starting the center's 30-minute lessons is 18 months, he said.

"They're more responsive to requests," he said.

Even for the youngest water babies, though, there are reasons to try these kinds of classes. Some of them aren't even related to the water.

"I think that the main benefit is the bonding experience between the parent and the child. ... They're exploring new things and discovering new things and the parent is right with them," says Jeff Witt, assistant director of the Student Recreation Center at the University of Toledo, which has fall and spring classes at its Health Education Center.

Bill Hayes, of Point Place, says infant aquatics classes give him valuable time with his son Christopher, 2 1/2, who enjoys them greatly.

"He likes to play a lot more than actually take time learning to swim, so it's a bit of a struggle, but he's done well, and he's getting more and more comfortable jumping in and practicing kicking and reaching," Mr. Hayes says.

And just as importantly, it usually comes with a smile.

"Most of the time, the kids really do have a good time in the water," Ms. Williams says. "I have more kids that have fun than kids that sit and scream."

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

[< previous](#)

[next >](#)