**Many parents ask when is the best age to start my baby swimming.**

**The answer is as early as possible!!**

The earlier you can start your babies swimming journey the earlier they will learn to swim and be safer in and around water. A baby that starts lessons under the age of 6 months and attends consistently can usually swim around the age of 18 months or sometimes earlier!

The benefits of an early introduction into an aquatic environment do not just stop at water safety! Studies have shown that there are many physical and mental developmental advantages as well.

**FIRSTLY, INFANTS CAN HOLD THEIR BREATH.**

When you tip your baby forward so their head is lower than their hips (dive position) they will hold their breath. This is called the **‘dive reflex’** and can be used for submerging infants. The dive reflex will diminish around the age of 4 months.

Studies have shown that the dive reflex is initiated even by immersing only the face (particularly the forehead) in cold water. The whole body doesn’t necessarily need to be submerged.

The dive reflex can also be initiated by blowing in the babies face. Many people have noticed that a baby ‘holds their breath’ when someone blows on their face, however the baby actually takes a quick breath in. This is why it is commonly cited as a means to calming a distressed baby who is crying uncontrollable. It is also referred to as the **‘breathing reflex’** and is commonly used whist conditioning babies to submerge in swimming,

Babies also have what’s known as the **‘gag reflex’.** This involves the epiglottis blocking the passage to the lungs which further prevents the inhalation of water. (The epiglottis is a small, movable ‘lid’ just above the larynx that prevents food and drink from entering the windpipe.

The **‘swimming reflex or amphibian reflex’** is responsible for the baby displaying a swimming action. Water is a great medium for babies to have freedom of movement as they do not have to fight gravity in order to move. They can use muscles in their arms, legs, back and torso in ways they are unable to do on out of water. We can use the reflex to promote co-ordination, muscle development and to get the babies to kick on cue. When a baby is placed in water on their tummies, they will start to move their arms and legs in a swimming type of motion. This reflex will begin to diminish around 4-6 months of age.

The 4 reflexes we have discussed; the breathing reflex which initiates a baby to take a quick breath before submerging, the dive reflex which prevents the baby from breathing under water, the gag reflex which helps prevent the baby taking in more water, and the swimming reflex which allows the baby to develop strength in their swimming muscles by mimicking a swimming action, along with a qualified swim instructor, babies are able to take part in reputable swim classes, designed to develop their muscular and cognitive function and assist then in developing water survival behaviors. It is important to realise that these reflexes should not be relied on to save a baby from drowning and parents SHOULD ALWAYS REMAIN VIGILANT WITH THEIR SUPERVISION WHEN THEIR BABY IS AROUND WATER.

Other facts to consider:

**BABIES UNDER 6 MONTHS FLOAT REALLY WELL.**

Not only do they have a high fat content in their body to help them float, they have also been surrounded by amniotic fluids for 9 months in the womb. This makes the feeling of water in their ears quiet natural and they will be happy to relax on their backs for the float. Under the age of 6 months, you will only need to support your baby lightly with your fingertips if at all when performing a back float.

**BABIES CAN GRIP AND HOLD ON.**

Babies are born with a reflex called the Palmer Grasp reflex. When you press in the palm of your babies hand they will grip on very tightly. We can use this reflex to promote a strong grip for swimming, grabbing and holding on which are all lifesaving skills. The Palmer grasp reflex will diminish around 3 months of age.

**INFANTS CAN WALK.**

Babies are born with a stepping reflex. We can use this reflex to promote muscle development, movement and co-ordination. The stepping reflex will diminish around 5 months of age.

We mention the age they diminish their skills (such as 4-6 months) to indicate why it’s important to start Swim Lessons for infants as soon as possible, such as 3 – 4 months old or younger, so that they continue to develop theses natural reflexes.