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Infant Swimming Resource instructor, Sheri Phillips, helping Delaney Moon learn to swim

photo by Chris Fritchie

Cool, Wet & Safe

By Susan Mardele

THE TEXAS HEAT is upon us again and with it comes swimming pool season. Backyard and neighborhood pools are often a first line of defense against the sweltering heat and a kid-pleasing summer entertainment choice.

But along with the fun of water activities comes danger to small children. Parents are cautioned to continually supervise babies and toddlers near water and pool owners are required to fully fence their pool and install a locking gate. In spite of precautions, though, drowning remains the leading cause of death for infants and young children in 18 states and, nationally, is second only to automobile accidents.

Seventy-five percent of children who drown are missing from sight for five minutes or less and are in the care of one or both parents. Even a six-month-old can move fast enough to end up in the water before a parent notices the child is gone. This is where Infant Swimming Resource (ISR) comes in. ISR instructors train babies in the skills they need to save themselves if they fall in the water. If a

child can crawl, she or he is a candidate for ISR training.

BUT BABIES CAN'T SWIM!

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics website, "Generally, children are not developmentally ready for swimming lessons until after their fourth birthday." In an interview on *The Today Show*, ISR founder Harvey Barnett says, "As a scientist, I want the Academy to come and take a look at this program that works. While these are not necessarily swimming skills that are going to put them in the Beijing Olympics, they at least learn to roll over and float on their backs and have an opportunity to get to the side."

The program has been incredibly successful. Since 1966, ISR has delivered more than six million lessons to 175,000 babies and has 787 documented cases of children using ISR techniques to save themselves from drowning. According to Mr. Barnett, not a single former ISR student has drowned.

Sheri Phillips, a Plano-based, certified

ISR instructor, has taught ISR self-rescue techniques for 12 years to about 600 infants as young as six months old. Ms. Phillips learned about ISR in 1995 when her son was 13 months old and went through the program. She took him back the next year for refresher lessons and trained that same year to be an ISR instructor. "It is very rewarding to have a student come to me that is totally unskilled and leaves skilled," says Ms. Phillips. "Most students end up having a love for swimming. I also average one to two e-mails a year from former students' parents about how a child fell into the water and saved himself."

A CURRICULUM FOR LIFE

ISR instructors teach infants from six to 12 months how to hold their breath underwater and roll onto their backs to float while waiting for an adult to rescue them. Children older than one year learn to hold their breath underwater, swim with their heads down, roll onto their backs, rest, breathe and roll back over to



Delaney and her dad, Brad Moon, enjoying the water

photo by Chris Fritchie

continue swimming toward safety.

ISR lessons are different from traditional swimming lessons. “The main difference is that these lessons are teaching children to self-rescue in the water,” says Ms. Phillips. “It sounds funny, because anyone who knows how to swim can self-rescue. But we’re talking about infants and small children. We teach them to know what to do when they hit water – any body of water.”

“We’re teaching their muscles. It’s like potty training or a child learning to walk. You don’t do it once a week. It’s teaching muscles and muscles have memory,” she says. “If you were to sign up a one-year-old, an 18-month-old or a two-year-old through most organizations, it’s either a ‘mommy and me’ class, or they say, ‘This will help your child get comfortable with the water or near the water.’ We do it differently. Why would you want your child comfortable or acclimated to water? We skill them first, they get to be comfortable and acclimated through that.”

“There is nothing out of the ordinary,”

says Ms. Phillips. “But lessons are all about learning these skills. No game playing, no singing. We get down to the business of teaching survival skills. Unless a child has to leave lessons, no child goes away without becoming skilled in some way.”

EXPERT INSTRUCTION FOR SAFETY

Instructors are certified by ISR, but are independent practitioners, often teaching in their own backyard pools. They can be contacted by location through the ISR website at www.infantswim.com. Lessons are no more than 10 minutes long and are repeated daily for as long as it takes the child to learn the targeted skills. For the youngest students, Ms. Phillips says it takes about five weeks on average to master the skills, and for toddlers, about six weeks. Every child is different, though. She taught a pair of twins and one completed three weeks ahead of the other.

Before a child is accepted into the ISR program, ISR gives a careful health evaluation. Most children are accepted, but certain ailments like heart, bladder or kidney problems may delay or exempt

the child from the program. In addition, a behavioral evaluation is done before each lesson. The child’s eating, sleeping and general behavior patterns are discussed with the parent to determine if the lessons or other issues are affecting the child. If the child seems disturbed in some way, the lessons may be discontinued for a time.

ISR maintains a scholarship fund so every child whose parents want him or her to have these lifesaving skills can participate. A portion of the proceeds from the organization’s online Seal Store goes to their Community of Caring Scholarship Program and the corporation also sets aside funds on an annual basis for this purpose.

The cost of lessons is set by the instructor. Sheri Phillips charges a \$105 registration fee and \$80 per week for the five 10-minute lessons per day.

HOME SAFE

Brad and Kelly Moon decided to take their daughter, Delaney, to Ms. Phillips for ISR lessons because they have a

backyard pool and wanted to make sure she would be safe at home if she escaped supervision. She started in the program at six months of age. It took her six or seven weeks to complete the targeted skills.

“It’s very structured one-on-one instruction,” says Mr. Moon. “It’s like endurance, what their bodies are able to do. It’s a safety thing too. The instructor may pull her out before 10 minutes, based on how she is reacting. They go until they graduate - until the instructor says the child has the skills they’re looking for.

“Once she proved she could perform the skills, the graduation is a three-day process, where the child puts on clothes. Each day more clothes are added and the final day is coat, shoes, and pants, loaded down with as much clothing as a kid might wear. They make sure the child does a sequence of tests, that they respond and do the right thing when they go into the water by themselves,” Mr. Moon says.

NOT ONE MORE CHILD SHOULD DROWN

When Mr. Barnett was an 18-year-old lifeguard, he came home from work one day in 1966 to find that a neighbor’s infant had drowned in a drainage ditch. That incident inspired Mr. Barnett to create ISR. He vowed to do everything possible to make sure not one more child would drown.

Mr. Barnett studied infant development. He began teaching young neighborhood children to swim. He observed how the children responded and what types of communication worked best. He filmed the lessons and developed a technique to communicate with non-verbal infants. Over the years, Mr. Barnett developed ISR as a comprehensive infant swimming education and self-rescue skill instruction method revered in the fields of healthcare,



Flip, flip, flip!

photo by Chris Fritchie

psychology/behavioral sciences and anatomy and physiology. Forty-one years and a Ph.D. later, Mr. Barnett today has developed the first and only drowning prevention strategy with a 100 percent safety record.

Babies are ready for self-survival lessons as soon as they can crawl. It’s a motor activity and it’s better for the babies to learn the skills before they become verbal because the body is then hardwired to the brain for physical learning. The lessons are progressive. As the child masters one skill, instructors change the approach, even turning babies upside down. “The sensation of water over your face means close your mouth, open your eyes, don’t breathe, float, rest until help comes,” says Mr. Barnett. “The distance from life to death is three inches, face down to face up.”

Mr. Moon says, “It’s hard for a parent to watch your child going under the water. Our instinct was to rescue our child. But Sheri kept us informed. When

you first start seeing them do it on their own, you understand that they know what to do. Some say babies swim naturally. That’s false. If you put a baby in the water face down, they stay that way. At the end of the first week, watching her roll over, we said, ‘This is good.’ We knew we were doing everything we could to keep her safe.”

The *Today Show* video points out that Mr. Barnett is very opposed to floatation devices for small children. It gives them a false sense of security. They tend to orient vertically in the water when wearing such devices. If they don’t have the devices and fall into the water, they sink very quickly.

PEACE OF MIND, NOT COMPLACENCY

ISR’s program gives parents an extra level of confidence that, if in spite of traditional safeguards and constant vigilance, a child should unexpectedly be immersed

in water; she or he would have the skills to survive.

When asked whether Delaney has had any incidents where she has had to self-rescue, Mr. Moon says, “Yes and no. On a couple of occasions she has fallen into the pool while playing around the edge. I was right there and watched it happen. I stood and watched making sure she was safe and sure enough, she responded as I’d hoped. She rolled over into a float, rolled over again and swam right up to the step and got out on her own.”

Mr. Moon now has that extra peace of mind for his daughter’s safety, but he doesn’t let it lull him into a false sense of security. There is no substitute for vigilance. “It’s not like we would ever leave her in the backyard by herself, though. What if she were to fall in and hit her head?”

Susan Mardele is a freelance writer living in Princeton. Website references are also listed on page 94.