



The Forgotten Secrets of Teaching Older People to Swim

Over the past few years I have specialised in teaching older people to swim or very weak swimmers to be able to swim better with much less effort. By older I mean generally people over 30. Many have done the rounds trying to learn or they have tried to teach themselves to swim from books and videos. Many do find good swim teachers, but these are not the students I see as they have learnt to swim.



I call these following points the “Forgotten Secrets” because so often I have the student swimmers ask me, “Why didn’t anyone show me this before?”

These points help adults learn to swim much faster.

Teach the Mind to Swim

Many swim instructors spend a lot of time trying to teach the body to swim when what is holding the person back is the mind.

Learn-to-swim adults often come with a lot of doubts and bad experiences. These need to be addressed as they learn to swim. I break the swimming down into small parts so they experience some successes that slowly changes the mind from thinking that they 'cannot swim' to 'I can swim'.

Many start the session by saying, "I am a hopeless swimmer" and they work hard to live up to that thought. I ask them to change the negative thought and start telling themselves over and over, "I am a good swimmer".

Understanding Swimming

One aspect of learning to swim that is often overlooked is helping people to understand the science of swimming. I have found that doing simple experiments that help people with the principles of swimming goes a long way in helping them know why they are doing, what they are doing. When they practice by themselves, they understand what they are trying to achieve rather than just repeating a motion.

Some experiments are:

Floating with no air in lungs vs a full deep breath

Streamline glide vs wide arms and legs glide

While standing, pull through the water with a knife hand vs flat hand and pulling through the water slowly vs slightly accelerating the hand through the water

Tensing their muscles and moving their arms vs relaxing and moving

Kicking with foot at a right angle rather than toes pointing away or kicking vigorously vs kicking gently

Before and after each one I discuss the science behind it.

Most People Can Only Focus on One Thing at a Time

If the brain is trying to focus on more than one thing it splits its attention.

If an instructor is telling a new swimmer to kick harder, keep your head down, roll to breath and pull harder it just confuses the swimmer and they don't do any of them properly.

For each lap pick ONE thing, and one thing only, to focus on. The rest of the swimming may go to pot, but that is okay and it will slowly improve as the items focused on improve.

This stops the confusion and 'brain fry' that many adult learn-to-swim people experience.

Become a Floating Master

Many people are trying to learn to swim before they know how to float. I have come to appreciate that floating is a learned skill. Many people are naturally good at it, but some come to me claiming that they are 'sinkers'.

The biggest things to convert a 'sinker' to someone who can float are:

- 1) Get them to take some really deep belly breaths before they try and float
- 2) Spend time getting them to relax. Get them to tell their body to relax.
- 3) Convince their mind that they can float. Tell them everyone can learn to float
- 4) Get them to gently use their hands and feet as little paddles to help keep them up
- 5) Practice floating on the front, back and sides with a glide

When they are comfortable and can float okay, I get them to 'water play'. They get to roll and play and float in the water. This not only helps their floating, it also helps their body awareness in the water.

Kicking Test

Approximately 25% of learn-to-swim people I see actually go backwards when they float in a streamline position and kick. This is because they have been told to kick hard and they have the 'riding a bike' style. Often these people have been trying to swim a few laps and really struggled because their kick is pulling them backwards and their stroke is trying to pull them forward.

Kicking to move forward is quickly learned when they practice gentle kicking in the streamline position. It is not about the energy put into the kick but the technique.

Practice Technique Not Laps

Poor swimmers need to spend most of their time improving their technique. Swimming more laps with a poor technique does not make them a faster or better swimmer, although it can be great for fitness as it is exhausting.

Pool Standing and Walking Practice

Trying to put all the pieces of swimming together at one time is difficult for many. Getting people to stand holding onto the side of the pool with one arm and then practicing the stroke / breathing with the other arm helps lock in the proper technique. Once they are comfortable with this you can get them to practice the full stroke / breathing while walking in the pool. Swimming is all about getting the correct technique into the muscle memory.

Practice Extremes

Rather than have people just do what is comfortable and natural, get them to try extremes. Have them kick very softly and then very vigorously. Have them try the strokes very slow and then very fast. Have them stretch out in the stroke and then try with a very short stroke. This experimenting helps them to understand swimming and find what works best for them.

Bilateral Breathing

Many try to learn bilateral breathing by attempting bilateral breathing. They have a good side and a poor side that often results in people only getting a proper breath every six strokes. The best way to learn to bilateral breathing is by breathing on one side on one lap and then breathing on the other side on the next lap. When you can breathe on both sides comfortably you can start practicing bilaterally breathing.

The Best All Round Drill

Single arm freestyle. Isolating the swimming to one side helps people see and feel what is happening on one side. It helps greatly with floating skills, strokes and learning to breath.

Home Practice

Two things people can do at home can really help them to learn to swim.

- 1) Once people have been shown how to do the strokes, they can practice the strokes in front of a mirror.
- 2) Gentle stretching, especially the arms and shoulders. This improves flexibility and strength.

How Much Practice?

People often ask me how much practice they should do. I suggest that they practice for an hour, three times a week for three weeks. If they are prepared to do this then they are well on their way to becoming a swimmer. If they don't want to do this, they are not seriously interested in learning to swim well.

Booklet

I have put together a booklet on teaching adults to swim in one three-hour session. It has been remarkably successful. It is especially useful for people who have little access to regular sessions with swim instructors, people who need to learn to swim in a hurry, as well as very weak swimmers. If you would like a copy, email me at grahamdietrich@bigpond.com

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