

Should my child join a swim team or take swim lessons?

This question is often asked by parents who have young children who are interested in learning to swim, and there are 3 primary differences between Swim Lessons and a Swim Team. The 3 major differences are in the **STARTING POINT**, the **FOCUS**, and the **TEACHING METHODS** of each program.

Difference in Starting Point

Swim lessons and swim teams have different starting points. The starting point for a standard swim lesson program is usually for kids about 4-5 years old, or right as kids are beginning to develop "advanced" abilities to understand and communicate with adults. Any 4-5 year old that can understand and communicate with an adult is able to take swim lessons.

Some swim lesson programs have lessons for babies and younger children, but these often include the parents and are less about teaching kids to swim, and more about letting children learn on their own in a safe environment. They also help kids become comfortable around the water, which is a major hurdle for many young kids.

A swim team has a different starting point, though. The youngest children that join swim teams are typically 5-6 years old. While this is not much older than the starting point for lessons, every child at this age can take lessons; not every child at this age can join a swim team. Swimmers that are afraid of the water or frequently cry when they are placed into or under the water should take lessons before joining a swim team. They still need to become more comfortable around a pool before they are ready for a team.

Also, most swim lesson instructors will get into the water with the children. Most swim coaches do not get in the water often, even with younger kids. Most of the teaching that takes place is through auditory and visual instruction. This means that swimmers must be comfortable enough in the water to not need an adult within arm's reach.

For this reason, we require that all swimmers joining our team be able to comfortably swim 25 yards of freestyle with their face in the water & breathing, and 25 yards of backstroke before joining our team. It is not important *HOW* he or she chooses to swim, because we will teach the proper stroke technique, but it is important that the swimmer is comfortable enough to perform these basic skills.

Difference in the Focus

With young children and beginner swimmers, both swim teams and swim lessons are primarily focused on teaching swimmers how to swim, and those children are both going to learn to swim no matter which path they choose. The difference is that swim lessons are primarily designed to teach kids how to swim for the purposes of safety, while we are primarily designed to teach kids how to swim for efficiency—safety in the water is a byproduct of them becoming an efficient swimmer.

My response to this portion will be admittedly biased, but it is also because I truly do believe that our swim team teaches kids how to swim better than a swim lessons program is able to, and still offers so much more. That said, I do believe that swim lessons are a *very important* part of the swimming world and they are necessary for some children before they enter our program, and also necessary for every other child that has no desire to join a swim team.

The primary purpose of swim lessons is to teach swimmers how to be safe in the water and become just efficient enough to be able to survive in a life threatening situation. With a swim team, swimmers learn to become strong, efficient swimmers by repeatedly practicing and correcting stroke technique and specific skills necessary to gain efficiency in the water.

In swim lessons, the goal is to learn a skill to become good enough to survive. On a swim team, the goal is to constantly pursue perfection of a skill over the course of many, many years. As I said, for a young child, *what we do* will not be that different, but the *way that we do it* will be.

This pursuit of constant improvement is what separates swim lessons from a swim team, and in turn has many other positive effects for the participants in the sport. I will save a list of what I believe those positive effects are for another explanation, but basically the traits and qualities that swimmers develop by constantly pursuing improvement are the same characteristics that help children and people succeed in school, in work, and in life.

As I said, for this reason, I am biased towards kids joining a swim team, but I learned to swim by taking swim lessons for many years. I did not join my very first swim team until I was in 6th grade, and I am a firm believer that every child should learn to swim. Knowing how to swim is a lifelong skill and it saves lives every day. Swim lessons serve a very important purpose.

Difference in Teaching Methods

The last major difference between swim lessons and a swim team is the teaching methods used. Swim lessons typically, though do not always, have a smaller swimmer to coach ratio. This often allows for more individual attention per swimmer. The downside is that while some swim lesson activities are done together, the instructor will spend most of the lesson working for a minute with one child, then a minute with the next child, a minute with the next child, and so on until returning to the first child. This means that while the instructor is working with one child, the others children are just bouncing around in the water and blowing bubbles.

Now, in all fairness, as a swim coach I can assure you that this happens whether you are doing swim lessons or on a swim team. It is unavoidable--young kids just love playing in the water! However, the swim team teaching model keeps children far more active during their time in the water because all swimmers are working on the same skill at the same time. During this time, the swimmers are actually teaching the skills to themselves and training their bodies to perform the skills on their own, but under the proper guidance and constant direction of qualified coaches and teachers. Studies have shown that this method of learning has very positive effects on children's educational potential in the classroom as they get older.

Conclusion

If you are not sure whether lessons or a swim team is right for you, my suggestion is to let your future swimmer decide which one he or she thinks is more fun. For young kids, the best thing that either lessons or a swim team can do is help them learn while they are having fun. That is what it is all about.