



## Dreading Water

What do you do about swim class when your daughter won't dunk?

BY JOANNA NESBIT

**To Leah's dismay I spot her immediately,** crouched in the fetal position under the bed with dolls and dust bunnies, her tangled blond hair fanned across her face. When I order her out, she edges toward the wall and screeches, "I'm not getting in the pool!"

It's the first morning of swim lessons.

Leah's reaction doesn't surprise me. Now 6, she's a child who at age 2 refused to wear clothes she didn't pick out herself, and who refused to play recreation-league soccer because she didn't like other parents watching. Sometimes I admire her wild stub-

bornness (no fretting about Leah going along with something because she can't say no), but it's less than pleasurable on days like today.

And on the subject of swim lessons, I'm just as stubborn, partly because of safety, partly because all her friends can swim and I worry that she's behind. But mostly because I never had lessons myself—never learned proper stroke technique, how to dive gracefully, how to cannonball without swallowing water. I want Leah to develop the skills and the confidence I didn't. ►

Another mom cajoles her: “Look at the kids having fun. Don’t you want to join them?” Leah shoots her a withering look. “No.”

### Why Are Kids Afraid to Dunk?

According to psychologists, this stems from our instincts; we naturally panic when something threatens our breathing. We overcome this instinct if we slowly and calmly learn that by holding our breath, we can submerge our heads without inhaling water. If kids are traumatized instead—say by being tossed in the pool—they can develop a fear of water.

“You can come out or I can pull you out.”

Leah screeches again, and I grab her heels, drag her out on her belly, noting with relief that she’s got her swimsuit on underneath her clothes. Some part of her wants swim lessons too—or at least knows they’re inevitable.

In the car, she reveals the true reason for her aversion: “They’ll want me to dunk, Mom, and I won’t do it.” She’s recalling two weeks of lessons the previous summer, when she made little progress and was afraid to put her head underwater. I’m hopeful about the advice I got then from a perky, tanned woman whose boys are accomplished swimmers. “Four weeks,” Pool Mom said. “My boys

didn’t progress until the fourth week.” So this year, four weeks it is.

The outdoor pool, 15 minutes from our house, is bordered by hills and giant Douglas firs, full morning sun making the blue water glitter. Smiling teachers in red suits greet new arrivals. Even with kids splashing, it feels peaceful here, uncrowded and friendly. But not, apparently, to Leah, who curls on a deck chair and watches sullenly, the only child not in the water. Another mom cajoles her: “Look at the kids having fun. Don’t you want to join them?”

Leah shoots her a withering look. “No.”

She never does go in. She sits in her chair looking cranky, while I watch her little brother, Ty, splash ▶

## To Make It Go Swimmably

Some things that help kids feel comfortable in water.



**TYR Youth Flexframe Goggles.** Help kids to dunk—and feel like superheroes. These last longer than most. (\$10, [tyr.com](http://tyr.com))



**Speedo Flotation Suit.** No substitute for a life jacket or life-guard, but it helps kids feel more buoyant. (\$19, [speedousa.com](http://speedousa.com))

For more swim products, see Resources, page 141.

through his toddler lesson without complaint. But the next morning she smiles and hikes her T-shirt to reveal her swimsuit. I smile back, allowing myself a smug mental note about motherly instincts but saying nothing. It's not unusual for her to put her foot down about something one day, then comply the next. At the pool she goes straight in (but still won't dunk). Maybe Pool Mom was right and this really will work.

Or not. For three weeks we trek across town, and I never know until her lesson begins whether Leah will participate. Some days she sits in the chair. She hates diving-board day and the idea of jumping. On others she willingly practices "windmills" and "ice cream scoops." But throughout, she refuses to dunk.

The fourth week arrives and holds no more magic than the others. Leah still won't go under. I feel alternately let down by Pool Mom's promise and silly for believing it, for subjecting Leah to my need. The following summer we skip the lessons at her request, which feels to me a bit like failure.

That July we drive from Washington down to California for a vacation. The ride back is hot, 104 degrees in the shade, so when we finally stop in Redding, CA, the motel pool is a clean, sparkling antidote. Apart

from a short dinner break, we stay there all evening.

"Like this?" says Leah, now 7. Pinching her nose and puffing her cheeks, she disappears below the surface, then bobs up to grin at me, hair plastered to her head.

I grin back. "Like that."

"Like this?" she repeats, and goes down again. About 10 times. Extending her arms, she torpedoes dolphin-style through the water, her face submerged, and comes up laughing and proud. The lessons took, I see now, but remained submerged until the time when Leah felt

swimming was her idea, or when her fear of dunking had sufficiently abated. I cheer her on. I wish I could have seen more quickly past my own ambitions, fears, and the advice of others. But we're learning—her to swim, and me to follow her lead. ●



Joanna Nesbit, of Bellingham, WA, is trying to stay

relaxed about her younger child, Ty, now 6, who—guess what?—refuses to dunk.

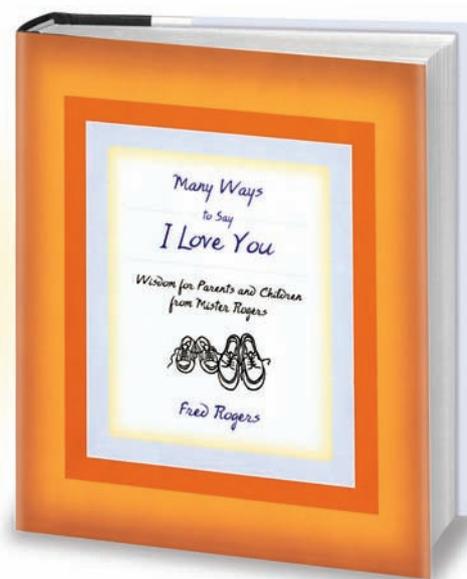
## Fun Facts

### Why do we float?

The human body seems big and heavy, but is less dense than the water it displaces partly because our bodies contain fat, and partly because our lungs, like balloons, are full of air.

Take your inspiration from Mister Rogers.

"One of the most essential ways of saying 'I love you' is by careful listening—listening with 'the ear of the heart.'"  
—FRED ROGERS



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## Getting Their Toes Wet

Taking your kids swimming early and often is the single biggest factor in helping them love water, says Lance Romo, program coordinator at Arne Hanna Aquatic Center in Bellingham, WA. Additional tips:

- Warm water, 85 degrees or more, is especially important in helping kids to relax.
  - Join in the fun. Young children progress more quickly when parents play with them in the water. "Get your hair wet," Romo says. If you're afraid of water, you'll likely convey that to your kids, so consider taking lessons yourself.
  - Praise your kids' baby steps and trust that they will progress when the time is right. It's normal for kids to repeat lessons multiple times, then suddenly leap ahead.
  - Life jackets and swimsuits with built-in flotation make kids more buoyant and help them feel comfortable in the water (but, of course, are never a substitute for parental supervision). Kids move beyond flotation aids when they're ready. Experts discourage the use of water wings, which move kids' center of buoyancy away from their midsections and make it harder for them to use their arms.
- J.N.



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