**Diving Deep into Baby Swimming |S4 EP99**

Yeah, and I think we've also got to remember that a lot of children aren't successful in these programs. For me, it's all about the lifelong connection of water. It's breaking down the love and the connection of water, which is what actually swimming and baby swimming should all be about.

Welcome to Sense by Meg Fora, the podcast that's brought to you by ParentSense, the app that takes guesswork out of parenting. If you're a new parent, then you are in good company. Your host, Meg Fora, is a well-known OT, infant specialist, and the author of eight parenting books.

Each week, we're going to spend time with new mums and dads just like you to chat about the week's wins, the challenges, and the questions of the moment. Subscribe to the podcast, download the ParentSense app, and catch Meg here every week to make the most of that first year of your little one's life. And now, meet your host.

Welcome back, mums and dads. Today, we have a very exciting episode, something that goes along a little bit more of the practical lines of parenting. And as you know, sometimes we have a mum or a dad who joins us and they talk about their own challenges with their baby and they get to pick my brain.

And sometimes I have fellow experts or really subject matter experts who join me and I get to pick their brain on behalf of you. And I get to ask all of the questions that I hope that you would be asking if you had time on a couch with somebody like this. And today is just such a day.

I am absolutely delighted to welcome Jo Wilson here with me today. Welcome, Jo. Oh, thank you, Meg.

Hi. Today, Jo is going to be unveiling all the mysteries behind baby swimming. And baby swimming is one of the things that I often get asked about.

Do I think it's important? When should we start? Do babies need to be vaccinated? What are the best methods? And these are all the types of questions that we're going to be touching on today as we pick Jo's brain. So, I'm going to let Jo introduce herself. But just suffice to say, the reason why Jo and I connected was because she's not, and I don't want to say simply a swimming teacher, because I don't think there's anything simple about that.

But she's gone a whole lot deeper and has really become an expert in baby sensory swimming. And she uses the baby's senses to unlock this amazing aquatic world. And so she is an aquatic educator, which means she trains other teachers on her methodology.

She supports parents and swim professionals. She has her own swim school. And she also, of course, has her own children.

So, Jo, I think I'm not going to say anything more because I think you'd probably do it much more justice. Maybe give our audience a little sense of how you came to become a swimming teacher and then why specifically baby sensory? Yeah, sure. Oh, thank you so much.

So, really, from a parent point of view, I had that moment in my heart that when I was taking my son swimming, so he's 21 now, I had the moment that it was just so beautiful. The water I found was so healing, relaxing. It was a time when I could really be present.

You know when you're a new parent and there is just so much to do? It was just our time. And I used to love swimming, so it felt so natural to introduce my baby to the water early. So I think that was the first thing.

I had an imprint that I absolutely loved going baby swimming with my son. And then I had a little bit of an unfortunate time where I was made redundant on maternity leave. When I say unfortunate, now connecting the dots backwards, I think I should say fortunate because it opened up my heart to say, well, what do I want to do? What will be able to provide a lifestyle really that, you know, wasn't just always about the corporate world now that I had my son and then I had my daughter.

So I really wanted to provide a service really to my local community and I loved baby swimming, so I trained to be a baby swim teacher. But something never really quite sat with me that the environment sometimes wasn't attuned to how I really wanted to present baby swimming and that could be as an example, I was hiring a hotel and the hot tub used to go on and off and it was so noisy. I was hiring another place and then the water temperature wasn't always that lovely warm temperature.

So I set out on my adventures to build our own family swim centres so we could provide a sense of sensory harmony and baby swimming to my local community. So yeah, that was over 10 years ago that we built our swim centres, but over sort of 20 years now of really absolutely loving baby swimming and just sharing my passion to my parents and then other swim professionals through my work, which is called Aqua Sensory. Lovely, well what a great story and I think many of our mums actually do embark on career changes when they have little ones and they find a new passion.

You know, I'm absolutely obsessed with baby swimming and the reason that I'm obsessed is, I mean, this is a story that will probably not sit very comfortably with a lot of people, but when I first graduated, I left UCT in Cape Town and I went to work in a paediatric rehab facility in New York and it was a very luxurious paediatric rehab facility and I had a cohort of patients that ranged between three weeks old and 17 years old. It was all paediatrics and they were all children that had some sort of insult or injury and then were on a rehabilitation pathway and I will never forget one of the saddest cases I dealt with was a boy of about 13 or 14 years old who was in because he'd had some, he was spastic, really, really very tight spastic muscles and he had had his tendons cut because he was so tight and when I asked the parents about how he had come to be like that at 13, 12 or 13 years old, they said that he was a two-year-old who'd fallen in a swimming pool and drowned and, you know, drowning produces the most horrific type of long-term cerebral palsy or spasticity. It's extreme contractures and that was what I was witnessing and based on that, I became absolutely fastidious around swimming pool safety, so any pool in any home I've lived in has not only had a fence but a net as well.

My children learned to swim early because I prioritised that specifically for that reason and even though they could all swim very early, I still had a swimming pool fence and a net and they were never left unmonitored ever, so I feel very, very seriously passionate about the fact that children do need to swim. It is a life skill like learning to run or walk, it is not an optional, it is not a nice to have, it is something that is completely, you know, the parents have to impart to their children. Now, of course, you are the person who then makes that happen and I'd love you to just go through a couple of the key benefits, one of which of course is safety, to swimming lessons and to getting your little one to swim.

Yeah, sure, wow, what a story, I'm really sort of feeling into that because you're so right that, you know, water is a life giver but it's also a life taker, so always, always, even in the home, supervise little ones around water, but there are so many benefits. There are the obvious benefits of confidence and water safety but there's invisible benefits as well too, so I like to really think about like the whole child and all the brain domains, so there is the social emotional, so really, really connecting into both us as parents as well, understanding our children and for them as well, and then the physical, again, not just the swim skills but really, really developing their gross motor skills, giving them the opportunities because there's so much more freedom of movement and then going down even to the sort of fine motor skills, are skills that you probably wouldn't really think of but they really do set them up for school. Speech and language, when you think about the opportunities of really being at eye level and really focusing in on words, really simple words like for babies, these are your hands, this is how you splash, really breaking it down, and then the cognitive as well, so there are so many more ways of movement in the pool to really create new pathways, so we've got the cross patterning, we've got the bilateral integration, all of the things in the pool that actually happen naturally as well, so, so much is happening and there's been lots of studies actually that children who have been introduced to swimming early are actually, on their key milestones at school, are actually better as well, so I have a little bit of a, a little sort of caption, I always say baby swimming creates brainy babies.

I love it, I love it, and you know, I think you and I really explored this in a lot of depth in terms of all the benefits of swimming in the podcast that I was on with you and Mums, if you want to hear more about that because that was where Jo was asking me about the sensory benefits and so on, do go and listen. Jo, just tell us the name of your podcast again. Yeah, sure, it's called Aquasensory.

Okay, excellent, so do go and listen to that one, Aquasensory, and I was on with Jo just recently. So Jo, one of the questions that always comes up and I get asked, it's probably the most common question about swimming, is when can I start, and you know, there's quite a big fad globally, I think, to have little ones start as early as a couple of days and weeks old in swim baths with little kind of tubes around their neck to suspend them, and that feels to me to be quite early. I know that's not swimming lessons, but it's still water exposure, but maybe let's break it into two pieces, maybe, you know, water exposure and public water in terms of health, safety, and then recommended age for starting actual swimming lessons.

Yeah, sure, well, there's so many different rules all around the world as well, so internationally, but in the UK, there isn't any guidelines to say when you can take your baby to swimming and even baby swim lessons actually can be from birth, and I think that's the scary thing that we're introducing babies, and when we think about, you know, their world and their sensory world with their skin, I mean, it's strange, isn't it? The midwives at the hospitals will say only use water, really protect their umbilical cord, and then you're on the other side, you've got, you know, public pools that are chlorinated as well. It's just, you know, so as a parent, I think really feel into your own intuition. There's no rush, and there's so many things that you can do at home.

You don't necessarily have to wait for their vaccinations, but I think, you know, between six and eight weeks, that's still very, very young, but it is an age. If I was thinking about taking baby into the pool, that would be the minimum that I would recommend. Yeah, I think really two, three months, again, it's still very young, but I think, you know, build up slowly, 10 minutes at a time, and then 20 minutes, 30 minutes.

There's no rush. I think that's my message to parents. Use the bathtub, use your home environment, water environment first.

Yeah, I would certainly agree with that, and you know, I mean, just on a sensory level, the neurological system is so immature and so susceptible to overstimulation that just the trip to the pool, the getting undressed, the getting into water, the getting out, another sensory change, getting changed, it's probably too much for the neurological system in terms of staying calm. So I definitely think those first 12 weeks probably would be a little early. What age, if I was a mom calling you up, and I had a 12 week old now, and it's just occurred to me that maybe I do want to start with swimming lessons, at what age do you think the ideal age to start with actual lessons to learn to swim is? Three to six months is a bonding opportunity, but we're not really teaching from a traditional point of view skills.

And in actual fact, I don't really even say the word teach, because when babies are in the water, they can actually move themselves. So I like to really guide parents and facilitate handling in the water and moments to bond and moments to really be together. So it's actually a lesson that is almost about co-regulation and swimming together rather than a traditional, right, now we're going to dive, now we're going to jump, now we're going to do this.

It's much more, it feels more of a, maybe like an aqua nurture flow in the water, almost like dancing, really. I love that. So, I mean, anybody who's listened to any of my work before knows that when you start talking about self-regulation or co-regulation, there's always two people involved in it.

There's the baby who's learning the skill, and there is the caregiver and the nurturer who is imparting the skill and co-regulating with the baby. So that says to me that what you're talking about when you talk about your swimming lessons is that the mum or dad or the caregiver is actually in the water with the baby, as opposed to lessons where the baby's handed over to somebody to teach them to swim. And I love that.

I mean, that is what you, how your lessons go, isn't it? Yes, it is. Yeah. The parent or the grown-up, you know, it can be any caregiver, key caregiver in the water.

And we show them really so much gentle holds and moves. It's almost like principles of baby massage, really, of introducing water's touch into the pool. So it's really looking and being sort of really aware of your baby and the cues that they're presenting and then responding to them.

So, you know, being really curious as well. And it's okay if they, you know, don't like something or a little bit unsettled. It's working out, well, maybe they just need a change of position or, you know, a little bit more support, a little bit less support.

So, yeah, it's really nice to be together. So it's almost like a Gymboree or Mums and Tots or Clamber Club or Top Tots or whatever the different classes are that mums go to. It's really like a class like that, almost like a stimulation class, except it's in a different medium.

It's in the medium of water, which is lovely. So there's a different type of swimming. And I unfortunately was one of those mums.

I mean, I've made so many mistakes and I'm always very free at telling parents exactly the mistakes I've made and hopefully they learn from them. But I can remember going back to when my firstborn, I never did it with my other children, but my firstborn, I decided he had to learn to swim for the reasons that I'd said earlier on in the episode. I was quite obsessed with not having children safe around water.

And I had heard about this thing called drown proofing. And each week I would take James off and I would hand him over. So it wasn't me in the water.

I would hand him over to somebody who would get him to launch himself into the water and basically, pretty much half drowned, but learn to swim type thing. And it was absolutely traumatic. He cried from the time we got in the car to drive there.

He cried the whole way through the lesson. He would come up and kind of, I can't believe I did it. And I like to say I didn't do it very often.

I mean, I probably did a few sessions, but it was a disaster. Can you tell us a little bit about your thoughts on drown proofing? Because looking back now, it goes against everything that I believe in really, but I mean, what do you think? So I think first of all, it's based on the theory of fear that if children, you know, have to, to learn very quickly to self rescue. So that's the first thing.

And it takes the responsibility almost away from us as parents and sort of almost just puts it straight on the child. Whereas actually, you know, supervision and just knowing your child and just really, as you say, like you'd said with the, with the borders of the pool. So it takes away almost like sometimes, you know, responsibility, but drown proofing itself is almost like, so we wouldn't teach road safety of almost like pushing a child.

Yeah. Pushing a child. Well, here's a car, push you in.

You've got to really, you know, know how the speed, know the distance and get out the way. That's, that's almost like drown proofing. They, they throw babies in and teach them how to self rotate and lie on their back.

And of course, every single time, as you say, it's not natural. Babies are presenting themselves with, with fear and trauma. They're often sick.

You see very, very fearful, moral reflex, and it's breaking down trust actually. And for me, it's breaking down the love and the connection of water, which is what actually swimming and baby swimming should all be about. Absolutely.

I mean, it makes me think about, I mean, taking a step far out from this, but controlled crying, which a lot of moms will know that I am also quite anti just, you know, kind of the crowd of, of just close the door, walk out the room and the baby will teach themselves to fall asleep on their own. They'll eventually, you know, extinguish method of sleep training. And the reason is that they're not really learning a skill.

They're ultimately just giving up and are not crying anymore. Whereas when I do sleep training and I do believe in sleep training, it's very much a co-regulation process where we're imparting a skill to a little one. And we're sitting with them.

We are with them. We're taking them through the journey. And yes, there is some crying, but a parent is present.

And it makes me just think that actually that drone briefing was pretty much like that. It was, you know, kind of, there's no co-regulation there because there's an opportunity for co-regulation. They're on their own and really not ideal.

So moms, you know, I mentioned this because I think I've been there. I am you, I have been you. I know what it's like when somebody says, this is great.

It's a fix all, it'll get your little one water safe. And so you latch onto it because water safety you feel is so important, but it just is probably not the right approach. And I think that's, that's the message that both Jo and I, you know, kind of believe in, which is good.

Yeah. And I think we've also got to remember that a lot of children aren't successful in these programs and in actual fact, it's the intention isn't to teach the child to swim. So it is very short periods on the back.

So yeah, for me, it's all about the lifelong connection of water. Absolutely. Now, having said that, I mean, as I mentioned with sleep training, there's sometimes some crying, even when you are with your little one.

And sometimes you get little ones who really don't love the water. And so if I'm a mom who's listening to this and I'm going through the whole wonderful process of getting in the pool with my little one, but every time I get in, they're crying and they're distressed. Is your suggestion to leave it for a couple of months, or is your suggestion, I mean, how do you manage those situations when little ones are just not loving the water? Yeah, well, it's a great question.

So first of all, I would suggest. This episode is brought to us by ParentSense, the all-in-one baby and parenting app that help you make the most of your baby's first year. Don't you wish someone would just tell you everything you need to know about caring for your baby? When to feed them, how to wean them and why they won't sleep? ParentSense app is like having a baby expert on your phone guiding you to parent with confidence.

Get a flexible routine, daily tips and advice personalized for you and your little one. Download ParentSense app now from your app store and take the guesswork out of parenting. First of all, I would suggest to be almost like a cue detective and to have a curious mind and think, I wonder why, and just to go through the basic needs of the baby.

So is the baby hungry? Are they cold? So we know, first of all, that their needs are being met. And then to think about the time of day as well, you know, are they overtired? Think about even their journey and what you've done in the daytime. So when I ask this question to my parents, perhaps they've gone on a shopping trip or they've done something else before the swim class.

And that can just be too much stimulation for the baby on that day. But also, I think it's important for us to not make really quick responses as well. And quite often, if our baby is crying to say, oh, they don't like it.

I'm sure you're the same when babies are weaning, you know, they might spit broccoli out, for example, at the first time, but that doesn't mean to say that they won't ever like, you know, green. So it's the same with swimming. What can we do as parents to perhaps, you know, handle our babies in a different way? It might be as simple as turning them around to face us, because there are so much stimulation in the pool that we could be their almost like anchor.

We can be their point of reference. So offering them easy eye contact, reassuring words, really that beautiful parentese voice. And maybe look at the handling as well.

Often baby might be on their front and they're just really challenged on their tummy time, their neck control or on their back. And they really want to sit up. And these are really, really small cues that we can be actually really sort of looking at our babies.

They will be telling us something, even though obviously they can't talk. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, very interesting and very aligned with the things that I say, even when I'm not talking about water.

So lovely. Now, you said at the beginning, you know, we talked about how some people are wanting to get their babies into the water kind of two, three, four, five, six weeks, and you said something interesting. And that was that there's lots of opportunity for water play or water activities in the home.

And I have heard somebody told me the other day, and I can't remember who it was, was that there are things you can actually do in the bath and in water play at home that actually prepare your little one for enjoying swimming later on. Like, I think it was like, you know, having allowing them to splash so the water splashes on their face, that type of thing. And what do you think? Are there things that parents who are preparing to take their child to swimming in the next few months? Are there things that they should be doing at home? Yeah, definitely.

So bath is absolutely amazing. And if you haven't got a big bath, then a paddling pool, even a plastic tub, you know, there's always something around the home. And to really think about water and bath time, not just as a hygiene wash, but to create it much more within your baby's rhythm as well.

So to know when they're ready. So they're calm and alert for their bath time, not necessarily always at the end of the day as well when they've had enough. And use it as an opportunity as playtime, together time.

So I think, first of all, just having that shift of intention can really, really help of how we set up our water time with our babies. I'm a big advocator of not putting too much in the bath. So just the water, not too much.

And not, yeah, not too many toys either. So not too much water and not too much toys. So in terms of not putting too much in the water, so I'm not a big fan of like lots of bubble baths and different things in terms of, or you can get, the reason why I say that is because you can get even like colored different things that turn, you know, the water different colors.

There's all sorts of things now that I've seen, you know, people popping in the baths for babies, glow sticks and all sorts, but for babies, small babies, it's good just to use the water. But in terms of water levels, that's a good thing. Some babies prefer a deeper bath so they can float and some babies prefer a shallower bath so they feel more grounded on the bottom.

So my top tip is to use maybe a towel or a little fleece blanket at the bottom to cushion baby. Yeah, that's my first thing. When we're introducing the water, not necessarily straight in front of the head, but to have a really nice gentle loving hand from the back and then have a sort of, I always say, you know, water kiss.

So that's what we're allowing the water to do is kiss the face. So little simple sprinkles and then just gently guiding down and then just watching. So what happens next is that we're really tuning into our babies and their reactions and then that will actually help us to know what we should be doing next in our actions.

So if baby's receiving the water and really loving it and exploring it, then of course we can have a little bit more. If they're not too sure, then that's fine. They can just have a little bit less, but we don't stop.

We're just really making sure that, you know, that they're, you know, we're being introduced to the water in a really nice loving way. So, yeah, and I am a big, big fan of, if possible, parents actually being in the bath with their babies as well. Lovely, lovely, lovely.

Yeah, and it's such a lovely opportunity to bond and connect. So, I mean, one of the things you mentioned there was to have things around, you know, like opportunities for them to be to engage with water that isn't part of the bath. So things like those big clams or the little puns or buckets or whatever.

Obviously that comes with the risk that if they're unsupervised or if you've left it out, you know, that they could drown. So let's talk a little bit about the safety measures. First of all, the safety measures in your pools and then we can also talk about safety measures around the home.

Sure. So I think first of all, for the babies and small children to let them know what's happening and to talk them through like a bit of running commentary, like, you know, and it allows them to really tune in. So we're going to the pool, we're having a bath time.

So first of all, there's that excitement. So they know what's happening. But for example, even when we're at the pool and we've got little ones, we always say that, you know, there's a line, but no, no, we wait and we always have to be invited in.

So very, very simple rules to start with. So we don't just run in, you know, and just sort of like jump into the pool. And the same as the bath that, you know, you can use really simple language, simple signs as well, that we stop, we wait, must test the water.

So we're going through and even in babies, you know, we can talk through what we're doing and it becomes a routine and they get to, you know, to know our language as well. So it's very important that we use very, very simple commands as well for our little ones to understand. So only coming into the water with a one, two, three, so they all have always have to wait and stop.

Yeah, very important. And out of interest, do the little ones in your groups use any assistive devices or floating devices like armbands or belly bands or anything like that? I'm pretty much a natural swimmer in terms of, I don't use a lot of equipment. If I was going to use and help guide parents, it would be those long tubes, which I call woggles or noodles, which can then allow to be put on the side and off again.

I think everything's got a place and particularly if you've got two children and, you know, it's the only opportunity that you've got to sort of swim together and, you know, making sure there's two people, but yeah, armbands and things like that. I think with their fixed devices, so they skew the arm position and they take away the child's natural buoyancy and balance. And that's the glorious thing that when babies are in water, they actually can self-propel themselves.

So what we need to be mindful of is enhancing their natural movements rather than, you know, creating activities that actually stop and hinder their movements. In the pool, the biggest mistake that we don't mean to make, but we're helping our children just too much. So an example would be we're helping them climb up when actually, you know, elbow, knee, knee, they can climb up themselves.

They're just about to jump in, but we hold the hands and we pull them in. We're holding them around the pool and maybe the little one's feeling a little bit more pushed and pulled. Whereas if we're just tuning in, when are they kicking? When do they want to move?

Very, very subtle differences, but from a child point of view and them learning, absolutely massive.

Amazing. You know, I did exactly what you're saying. I mean, I had my kids had a little assistive devices when we were swimming.

I mean, we'd go off to resorts or whatever it was and they would all have their little assistive devices on. And then as soon as my husband or I could actually be hands-free focused on them, we would be in the water with them and then obviously devices off. Now, if you were going to choose a device, so for those parents who have got more than one child, they're going to a resort, whatever it is, would you recommend armbands or would you recommend the kind of inflatables that go down inside a costume or an actual tube that the arms rest on top of? Are there any that you do recommend? I think they've all got their place and I think it's worth finding out what suits you and more importantly, what suits your child, because some of them are big and, you know, if you're going on holiday, you want something that is easy to pack and, you know, to use little and often.

I think what happens is the mistake is that the child becomes reliant on these devices. So, you know, some children don't mind things on their arms. Other children find them so uncomfortable and they pinch.

Some children don't mind things around their waist and other children really feel quite restricted. So, you know, try different things that still allow some freedom of movement and enjoyment as well. Swimming and the learning process should be really great fun, but don't just leave the device on the child and then think they're really, really learning to swim because as soon as you take them off, that's it, you know, they won't have those fundamental movement patterns and they won't be learning their own buoyancy in the water.

Yeah, and it can also give them false confidence, I'm sure, you know, that I'm actually fine in the water and then they actually take that step into the water and they don't have it on and then suddenly, you know, they're going down. So you've really got to be hands-on and I think that speaks to the whole safety aspect, you know, we've absolutely unbelievable for stimulation on so many levels and for development. Number two, it is a critical life skill, but number three, you need to be on it, parents.

You need to be very conscious and involved and you can never leave a little one around water. And for me, it's until they're four years old, you know, they really need to be supervised because little accidents can happen even in preschoolers. Yeah, definitely.

I think one of the things that we have to be just mindful that we are now growing up in a new world of screens and, you know, you've only got to go to sort of look around a pool and on holiday and, you know, we don't mean to be, you know, looking at screens or reading books and that's the thing, it's that supervision level that we need to always make sure that we take it in turns, that someone is having those moments on eyes on children or hands on children and the other one's relaxing and then swap. Yeah, absolutely. Well, Jo, it's been absolutely fabulous chatting.

Thank you so much. It's just been a great enlightenment for parents and I think that a very practical session, mums and dads, where we've learned so much around everything from ground proofing to swimming. What I love most about the way that you talk is the way that you bring in attachment theory, Jo.

It struck me again and again that you were talking about attachment, you were talking about connection, you were talking about sensory, you know, it just is that the vehicle that it happens to be happening in is water and that makes it amazing. So, mums, I know that most of you can't get to Jo's school because it is in England. Whereabouts for our English listeners, whereabouts is it, Jo, for people who do want to find you? Yeah, I'm in a place called Warwickshire.

Okay, I know it. Well, so mums in Warwickshire, you're in luck. Is there a website that people can get more information on? Yeah, sure.

So, Swimworks is my swim school and Aquasensory is my parent and swim teacher education site. Excellent. So, Aquasensory is probably the one that most of us will be going to access and certainly if you're listening and you are a swim teacher or you want to change your career direction, then Jo's your person.

So, Jo, thank you so much and thanks for the work you do and it's so aligned with what I do. It's just been absolutely awesome to chat. Oh, thank you so much.

Thank you. Thanks to everyone who joined us. We will see you the same time next week.

Until then, download ParentSense app and take the guesswork out of parenting.