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## *Information for You from Your Health Care Team*

### **Swimming Programs for Infants and Toddlers**

After a long, cold winter, Syracuse parents and children look forward to summer and swimming activities. This is a good time for parents to refresh their knowledge of water safety because drowning is a leading cause of accidental death of children. Other water risks to infants and toddlers include hypothermia and water intoxication.

Infant and toddler aquatic programs are popular throughout the United States. An estimated five to ten million infants and preschool children participate in formal aquatic instruction programs. It is important for parents to understand that without specific training, children can make simple swimming motions sometime around their first birthday. However, it takes children younger than four longer to learn swimming skills because their coordination isn't fully developed. For any water safety or swimming class, children learn better if they are developmentally ready, properly motivated and if the experience is enjoyable.

Programs that claim to make children safe in water or safe from drowning are misrepresenting what is possible and are giving parents a false sense of security about their child's safety in water. It is important for parents to understand that there is a difference between swimming skills and water safety skills. Swimming skills are the ability to perform standard swimming strokes. Water safety skills include survival flotation, energy conservation "swimming" and poolside safety behavior.

Until more clear-cut scientific evidence exists on the effects of infant and toddler aquatic programs, the following recommendations are a good guide for parents:

- Children are generally not developmentally ready for formal swimming lessons until after their fourth birthday.
- Parents should not feel secure that their child is safe in the water or safe from drowning after participation in an aquatic program.
- Whenever infants and toddlers are in or around water, an adult should be within an arm's reach or able to touch the swimmer at all times, providing "touch supervision."
- All aquatic programs should include information on the limits of what infants and toddlers can understand and do, the inherent risks of water, the strategies for prevention of drowning and the role of adults in supervising and monitoring the safety of children in and around water.

For more information on children's water programs from the American Red Cross, log on to [www.redcross.org/hss/aquatics](http://www.redcross.org/hss/aquatics). You can review "A Parent's Guide to Water Safety" produced by the American Academy of Pediatrics at [www.aap.org/family/swim.htm](http://www.aap.org/family/swim.htm).

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