

Water babies

Infant swimming lessons provide tools for aquatic safety

By Magdalena Wegrzyn
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LONGMONT — Four years ago, Cynthia Longo sat on the shore at Union Reservoir and watched her two sons play on an inflatable raft in the water.

Suddenly, 5-year-old James slipped off the raft and plunged into the water.

“The surprising part for me was he didn’t flail about like you’d expect. He just went straight under,” Cynthia said.

Cynthia sprinted into the water and scooped her son out. He was shaken, but otherwise fine.

Cynthia was not. Determined to prevent a repeat accident, she enrolled James and his younger brother, John, in Judy Heumann’s Infant Aquatics classes.

“It’s not easy to watch,” Cynthia said of the classes. “It’s not for every child, and it’s not for every parent.”

But the classes were a good fit for Cynthia; Heumann hired her as a swim instructor three years ago.

Although most parents enroll their children in classes before accidents occur, a few rush in after a traumatic incident, said Heumann, who provides classes for children 6 months to 6 years old.

In 2005, 3,582 people drowned in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More than one in four victims were children 14 and younger.

“No child, no adult is ever ‘drown-proof.’ Don’t ever think there’s such a word,” Heumann said after Wednesday’s morning class at the Holiday Inn Express’ indoor pool in Longmont. “What we’re trying to do is give them tools.”

During Wednesday’s class, Amy Roberts anxiously watched from the edge of the pool as in-

PREVENTING WATER ACCIDENTS

- **Whenever you’re around water, never assume someone else is watching your children.** Always keep an eye on them yourself.

- **Dress your children in lightly colored bathing suits** so you can spot them easily.

- **Avoid using air-filled “water wings” or floatation devices.** It creates a false sense of security, Heumann said. And sunscreen can make those floaties slip right off.

- **Enroll your child into a swim class.** For more information about Heumann’s classes, visit www.infantaquatics.com.

- **Wear a life jacket** when engaging in water activities.

— JUDY HEUMANN, DIRECTOR OF
INFANT AQUATICS

structors helped her son, 9-month-old Liam, dunk his head underwater for a few seconds and then float on his back.

Amy admitted it can be gut-wrenching to see your baby struggle, even if it is for a few seconds.

“It’s toe-curling,” she said while clutching a video camera to record the lesson. “But it’ll be worth it.”

The family lives in a condo in Firestone, and Amy said she’d like to take Liam to the complex’s pool.

Heumann divides the “little fish” into two groups: walkers and non-walkers.

If the toddlers can walk, instructors first teach them to close their mouths in the water and direct their bodies toward the edge of the pool. Basic swimming lessons follow, and eventually the toddlers discover how to flip over and swim to the edge. Non-walkers learn to close



Richard M. Hackett/Times-Call

Owen Scarbrough, 19-months, left, of Loveland and Eliana Monahan, 2, of Boulder sit on bench while preparing to jump in the pool.

their mouths and roll onto their backs in the water, a basic survival technique for babies.

Heumann started teaching infant swimming lessons in 1979 at her home pool in Texas. Her son, Derek, was the first subject.

“He was my guinea pig, and I’ve taught 6,000 kids since then,” said Heumann, who moved to Boulder in 1985.

Teaching infants and toddlers curtails accidents early on, but it’s also easier to teach children when they’re young, Heumann said.

“It’s much easier developmentally to teach a child to swim while they’re learning to walk,” she said. “They have no sense of fear. The older they get, the more fears they develop.”

Halla Vitullo started lessons when she was 9 months old. Now 15 months old, she doggy paddled between two instructors during her 10-minute private lessons.

“She even floats in the bathtub,” said her mom, Kate.

After a lesson in the pool, instructors lift Halla onto a towel

and roll her on her left side — what Heumann calls the “recovery position.”

If there is air in the baby’s stomach from crying, lying on their side will expel it, Heumann explained.

But Halla, a veteran of the infant swimming arena, doesn’t cry much during her lessons. After a quick snuggle from Mr. Bear, her brown stuffed teddy bear, Kate wraps her into a hug.

Most infants start with six weeks of classes, Heumann said. Toward the end of their sessions, they learn to swim in their clothes — both summer and winter outfits — to simulate what might occur during an accident.

At the end of her son’s lessons, Cynthia brought in the inflatable raft and instructors helped James recreate the incident at Union Reservoir.

This time, James floated safely to the top of the pool.

“It was just perfect,” Cynthia said.

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