



Kirby Swim Presents: **Bill Kirby's Swim Tips #6**

Learning Freestyle...how it happens

Learning freestyle is one of the harder skills we can learn in swimming but one of the most basic, and one which most parents (and swimmers) measure their progress upon.

Freestyle is difficult as it involves a series of movements that are almost completely 'unnatural' when put together. Moving your legs independently from your arms, which are both moving in different directions at the same time, as well as endeavoring to coordinate when to blow bubbles then turn the head to breathe so that it is in time with the arm movement! Phew! Add to this we try to do it all while moving forward in a direction we are not actually looking towards. So how do we do it? Like any skill, mastery takes time and repetition.



Kick

Learning freestyle starts with developing a strong kick. Children will automatically 'cycle' kick as youngsters, and it takes some time to develop the correct scissor kicking action, with balance, and power enough to create propulsion.

Arms

After the swimmer can demonstrate a competent kick action we begin to introduce the arm movements. The first thing that usually occurs when the arm action begins is that the leg kicking action stops. Coordinating the two at the same time is the next challenge, as well as ensuring the arm movement is large enough in range to allow 'grab' of water.



Breathing

Bringing in the breathing is the next goal, using the preferred body and head position is the key. When blowing bubbles we encourage looking directly to the bottom of the pool, and when turning to breathe, keeping the ear on the shoulder. This allows the head to remain in a perfectly horizontal position. The horizontal body position is critical to the success of freestyle as it minimizes drag forces which slow the swimmer down.

We often teach the correct breathing position through the use of drills and lateral (side) kicking before introducing breathing between strokes. swimming slower.

Breathing between strokes (or every 2nd stroke) is patterned easiest when the swimmer holds a board out the front, exchanging hands on the board as one does a stroke and the other uses the support of the board before swapping. There are plenty more ways to achieve this patterning and with different ages and strengths you will see coaches using other teaching techniques not using a board.

Long and smooth

Once the breathing is mastered between strokes with an efficient kick, the aim is to make the strokes as long and smooth as possible. Ensuring the body rotates through the one axis between the head and pelvis with no bobbing, sinking or wobbling. During my time as an elite swimmer (and freestyle specialist), I learned many drills that encourages the 'long and smooth' style that elite swimmers are known for, and I have incorporated these drills into our Kirby Swim program. As children (and adults) progress in their grasp of the stroke, we introduce more complex and controlled drills to encourage efficiency within the stroke.

Other helpful freestyle tips...

Breathing is the key to staying relaxed while swimming. Many weak swimmers allow their breath to control their technique and destroy their form. By practicing some great drills that focus on breath control, breath position, and breath timing, swimmers can learn the art of controlling the breath without the breath controlling them and their technique. A strong swimmer has the feeling they can swim forever without the need to stop to catch their breath.

You're never too young to learn or master a new skill but remember it does take kids between 3-6 years to master freestyle, so that it is smooth and looks effortless. Adult learners who practice their new skills weekly can master the skill in about 12 months but need to be patient initially and ensure they practice 1-2 times per week.

The final tip for great freestyle is to *slow it down*.

Unlike many other sports swimming can become more efficient when practicing *slow drills* perfectly or even *slow freestyle* perfectly. Slowing it down puts more pressure on maintaining a good kick, strong body position and good breathing position.

Hope to see you freestyling by really soon!

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