



### A NEW LOOK AT LEARNING PLATEAUS (Jane Marsden)

As educators and parents, it is important to encourage and understand children who do not seem to be progressing in their swim lessons. Often after a strong start, children learning a new motor skill such as swimming experience a sudden lack of progress. Parents and teachers can react to a learning plateau with a mixture of surprise, frustration and bewilderment, yet this leveling off period is quite natural. Indeed, some researchers use the term "performance plateau" rather than "learning plateau" because the absence of evidence of learning does not mean that no learning is taking place. It could be that progress is temporarily halted while the learner is assimilating new information. According to Barb Nolan in *SwimTips* (Issue 33, 2009), learning plateaus occur for a variety of reasons including psychological, physical and neurological factors, developmental stages and external factors. These include:

**The Hierarchy of Habits Hypothesis:** According to this, motor skills are made up of a variety of habits in the form of a hierarchy. Complex habits or tasks are placed higher up on the hierarchy than less complex habits. A complex task is comprised of several smaller and simpler tasks. For example, a learner will first need to be able to hold their breath or exhale before being able to float face down in the water. Another example is the learner will need to know how to stay on the water surface before learning to perform an overarm freestyle recovery.

In freestyle, a teacher will break the skills down into parts (e.g. prone floating; gliding; torpedo kicking; torpedo kicking with a body roll; kicking and arms; side breathing without propulsion; kicking, arms and side breathing; kicking, arms and side breathing with a body roll). This progression of skills can be broken down further, such as focusing first on the underwater arm stroke, then on the arm stroke with recovery, firstly using single arms, then alternate arms. As each step is mastered, the next and higher skill in the hierarchy is added.

The hypothesis states that plateaus typically occur while learners are integrating lower habits. In this sense, a plateau can be seen as a kind of transitional phase between two hierarchical tasks. No improvement in performance occurs until the new skill has been successfully mastered. This is quite common when children are beginning to learn side breathing, for example.



Learning plateaus can affect children of any age, from infants such as this happy group taught by Gillian on Friday mornings to these smiling over-five-year-olds taught by Pam on Saturday afternoons.

### TERM 1 2010 DATES

#### Turf City

Monday, January 4 to Sunday, March 28  
(excluding Saturday, February 13, Sunday, February 14,  
Monday, February 15 and Tuesday, February 16)

#### Holland Road

Monday, January 4 to Saturday, March 27  
(excluding Saturday, February 13, Monday, February 15  
and Tuesday, February 16)

#### Sunday Classes at AISS & Sunday Squad at AISS

Sunday, January 10 to Sunday, March 28  
(excluding Sunday, February 14)

#### Tuesday and Thursday Squad at Queenstown

Tuesday, January 5 to Thursday, March 25  
(excluding Tuesday, February 16)

#### After-school Classes at AISS

Monday, January 25 to Wednesday, March 24  
(excluding Monday, February 15 and Tuesday, February 16)

**Remedial Action:** Sometimes learning stops when a learner needs to "unlearn" bad habits. This can happen when children have spent many hours in the water developing their own unique "style". For example, if a child has formed a habit of lifting their head to the front to breathe (which adversely affects body position), an instructor may need to "take them back a few steps" and encourage them to kick in a streamlined body position without breathing before introducing body rolls and side breathing.

**Developmental Factors:** Firstly, teachers and parents must be aware of the different stages of child development and tailor their expectations accordingly. For instance, we can't expect an infant to give vigorous, coordinated kicks in the water if they can't yet walk on land. Secondly, during growth spurts, children's bones sometimes grow at faster rates than their muscles and tendons. This can lead to a reduction in suppleness and coordination as the central nervous system takes time to catch up with all the changes. Progress in learning new motor skills may slow down during growth spurts.

**Exhaustion:** If an infant or toddler is tired, or if an older child is pushed too hard and overtrained, physical and mental exhaustion can lead to a reduction in the ability to master new skills. Choosing when the swim class is and being in tune with the energy levels of the learner will help overcome

**PLEASE REMEMBER: ASSUME THE CLASS IS ON EVEN IF IT IS RAINING!**

## IN A FLUTTER OVER THE FLUTTER KICK (Jane Marsden)

The flutter kick, used in freestyle and backstroke, looks the simplest of all kicks. However, many children in stroke development or even squad sessions still display 12 common errors:

- Legs too stiff.
- Legs too floppy.
- Dorsi-flexed feet (heels together, toes turned out, ankles flexed as in breaststroke).
- Toes curled.
- Stiff ankles.
- Legs kicking asymmetrically.
- Feet kicking out of the water.
- Feet kicking too deep in the water.
- Legs too wide apart.
- Legs too close together.
- Kicking from the knees towards the bottom.
- Pulling the knees under the body towards the tummy.

The flutter kick originates from the hip not the knee, which means the legs are long and straight, not bending too much. (Straight does not mean stiff – some swimmers manage to go backwards if their legs are too stiff!). The ankles are relaxed and floppy and the toes pointed (but not stiff!). The feet kick near the surface. Some of the corrections we use to help achieve an ideal flutter kick is to ask the swimmer to turn their toes inwards (as though they were “pigeon-toed”) and to make sure the water “bubbles” at the surface. Also, it helps if the swimmer remembers the flutter kick is made up of “little, fast kicks” (six beats per arm cycle, which is quite fast). One good land drill is asking children to hold onto the wall and swing one leg back and forth from the hip, keeping the ankles loose and the toes pointed. Practising kicking with support under the knees helps swimmers focus on straight legs with not too much knee bend. This can be done lying on a pool mat, lying on the side of the pool, placing an arm under their thighs while they kick with a board or watching if the knees break the surface while kicking lying on the back.

## TARGET TIME INCENTIVE SCHEME (Louise Tang)

To encourage Marsden Swim Squad members (aged nine years and up) to work towards target times and be recognized once they attain them, from Term 1, 2010, they will be awarded a colour-coded swimming cap signifying one of three levels: Yellow (qualifying time + 15%), Red (qualifying time + 7.5%) and Blue (actual qualifying time). These times, which can be accessed on the Children’s Squad page of our website, are based on the Auckland (New Zealand) Junior Age Group and Age Group Championships qualifying times. As these championships are very competitive, any swimmer who reaches the blue standard can certainly feel very proud as that is quite an accomplishment!

*Squad coaches Sam, Alvin and Louise with some of the members of our junior squad which trains at Queenstown on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.*



## INTRA-CLUB SQUAD MEETS IN 2010 (Jane Marsden)

We will be holding four intra-club meets this year – one in each term, usually on the third last Sunday of the term. The first meet, to which we would like you all to come, will be 3pm to 5pm on Sunday, March 14, at the 25m Australian International School pool. Swimmers who come to Sunday morning squad can still come that morning and consider their hour-long session a warm-up for the competition. One innovation we are introducing this year is to invite one outside club to participate in each of the four meets. Aquaducks will be joining us on March 14.

*Senior squad coach Louise Tang is looking forward to preparing Marsden Swim Squad members such as these Tuesday afternoon swimmers for meets this year.*



## INTER-CLUB SQUAD MEETS IN 2010 (Jane Marsden)

Exact dates are to be finalized but we plan to send a Marsden Swim Squad team to the All Nations Cup which is usually held in November each year at the 50m Toa Payoh Swimming Complex pool in Singapore. It sports teams from all over Asia and Australia, and there are qualifying times to join this exciting meet. There are also opportunities earlier in the year to compete against squads at the United World College of Southeast Asia and the Singapore American School in their 50m pools. If you would like to participate in these events, please talk to senior squad coach Louise Tang so she can help prepare you for the events.

**PLEASE MAKE ALL CHEQUES PAYABLE TO C LICENCE PTE LTD**

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