



Baxter Moves Closer and Stays Longer

by Pam Potter



The beach at the end of our road

The "Summer of Swimming" was announced in our household in September 2005. Our son Baxter was 6 years old. We lived in sub-tropical Queensland, Australia at the beach. Swimming was a non-negotiable in the school curriculum. Baxter had spent many enjoyable hours in pools with floatation devices and jumping around in the white wash at beaches but it was time to take swimming seriously.

How hard could it be!

My husband Jeff literally has gills and doesn't even remember learning to swim. He just did it. I, on the other hand, resisted hard for a short time at the same age but went on to train regularly and later win Age Champion at high school.

Well we found out very fast it would be different again for Baxter.

So a little background on the process...

We rang around and found a swim school and were advised given his age, which is considered old to start swimming these days, that he participate in private lessons. These were not cheap and were universally unsuccessful.

At, what I will call Pool A:

- we were chastised as parents for not starting him earlier
- we were accused of not supporting our son to learn to swim
- he was told he was not trying and that he was lazy
- he was physically pushed under the water by the instructor because he wouldn't do it of his own accord
- he was "sacked" by the teacher as she was unable to work with him

Needless to say, emotion was running high in our household. We, as parents, were dealing with taking a dressing down, feeling embarrassed as our son howled in a pool with a so called professional swim teacher and beginning to wonder if Baxter really was lazy. Which I am sad to say tended to bring out a scolding tone in my voice, manner and behaviour.

But I like to think that we are resourceful, consistent and loving parents. Rationally I know rebuke is not an effective influencing strategy. So I thought "LET'S TRY REWARD!" Baxter is six years old, he LOVES Lego. And he had consistently been asking for the Star Wars Wookiee Lego set. This is a very expensive set by the way but I thought "what the heck", this is an essential life skill. The investment would be worth it.

One afternoon I presented my idea - the Star Wars Wookiee set for swimming independently across the width of the pool.

Baxter thought this through and demonstrated on the floor the technique that would be required for the passage from each side of the pool in order to win this prize. He thought it through a little more and suggested that if he didn't achieve the goal then Santa would bring him the set anyway as Christmas was not that far away and he was willing to wait if swimming didn't eventuate. It is fortunate that both Super Nanny and Dr Phil would probably issue gold stars to Jeff and I. We are united and very very consistent. If a request for clearing of toys is not acted upon, a follow up suggestion that toys will be given to charity or dumped in the wheelie bin elicits a lot of tidying up behaviour. By the end of that afternoon Baxter was well aware that unless he swam across the width of the pool he would never possess the coveted Lego.

So, onto Pool B.

The lessons at Pool B were more successful.

At Pool B we booked him in for twice weekly group swimming lessons. We were going to nail this one and a more intensive approach would achieve this (in our minds). One group was more advanced than the other. The second group had a school friend and provided some important social contact and fun.



An unexpected battleground



What is Darth Vader without a few Wookies around?!

After a couple of weeks things started to go pear shaped. The younger teacher in the more advanced group told us she could no longer work with Baxter. She wanted to dump him as he was holding the other children back and requiring too much personal attention. SACKED AGAIN. Our only salvation at that time was that the older teacher of the second class had an alternative view and insisted that he remain, but at one class a week and to only work with her.

It was at this stage that it finally hit me.

It was not about our embarrassment, or poor parenting. It wasn't about US at all. It also wasn't about Baxter being idle, or an unwillingness to try. We could cringe all we liked, we were dealing with a very scared little boy.

We were dealing with FEAR.

Why had it taken me so long?!

I had the remedy, or at least another approach, at my finger tips and not recognised it.

I'd worked closely with Stephanie for a number of years and was probably one of the first people to read *Move Closer, Stay Longer*. I had even provided a critique early in the writing process for the book. Maybe my thinking had been clouded as the stories had revolved around horses. This was swimming. But so RELEVANT to our current experience.

However this was not a time to berate myself for stupidity. That just would not be useful.

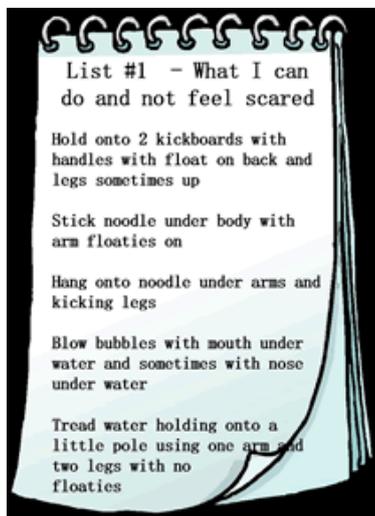
I grabbed the book and flicked through to the list making sections.

Baxter and I lay on our bellies on the carpet and explored the activities he could do without fear, with a little fear and those in which fear interrupted him so much he could not take action.

Well what a revelation.



The answer was right in front of me



He knew EXACTLY what swimming activities went in which category.

There was no doubt in his mind at all. I did have to "shut down" his dad as Jeff wanted to chip in his opinions as he had been a witness to the majority of lessons. I felt it was really important that Baxter owned those lists.

There was a lot of pride in that little boy when we reviewed the first two lists of things that did get done. Jeff then took all three lists to the older teacher who was really appreciative that we had undertaken this work.

Now at this time I was probably running a fantasy that Baxter would magically start swimming. It became very apparent, very quickly, that the "in what situation" was key to the lists.

School swimming is undertaken as it happens at Pool A. While he was making progress at Pool B, hysterical would be an understatement if describing Baxter's reaction at Pool A. Given the negotiable nature of the school swimming we needed to address this as hysteria is unsettling to the other kids, especially in a class of 25 plus.

So we signed on for more lessons at Pool A but armed with new knowledge and experience. We negotiated a different teacher in a small group of less experienced kids.

A lot of coaching around fear and bravery goes down at home but we also now have two teachers who Baxter himself has identified as "patient" and I interpret as trustworthy.

Although we don't write down all our lists, I regularly engage Baxter in identifying what he can do with, and without fear, and what is still too scary around water in general including Pool A, Pool B, the ocean and even the bath and shower.

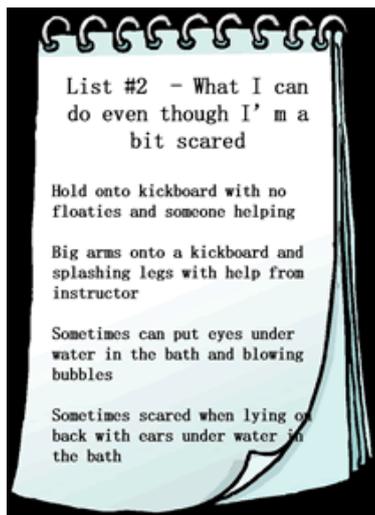
On the journey to Pool A he will often be heard saying "I'm scared". I am now able to remind him of how brave he is based on his own words. I also encourage him at these moments to say "I'm brave because I can do...".

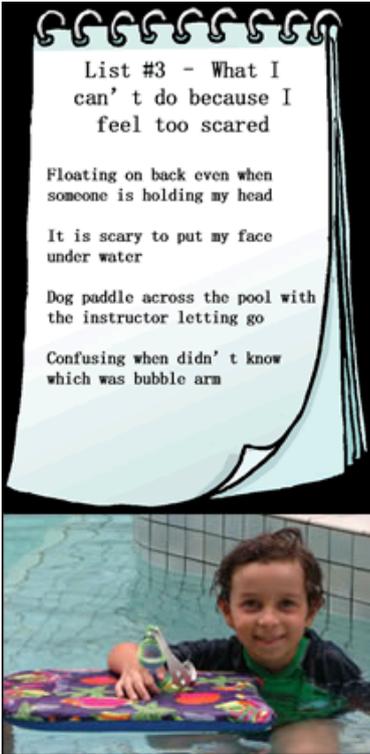
I still cringe with my own embarrassment at some swimming classes and it rips my heart out to see him teary or rigid with fear rather than floating effortlessly. It has been an emotional rollercoaster for all but I am confident we have found the path through moving closer and staying longer that is going to see him swimming in his own time. I hold strong on reminding myself it is about him and not my need for achievement.

Eight weeks into this journey...

We are still waiting for Baxter's face to be immersed but he has just finished a great "homework" session in the bath. There has been pouring of water from a cup over the head and over face, there has been bubble blowing and floating with ears under water. All managed under his own steam.

And then the music to my ears as he towels off - "Mum I really want to learn to swim". He has the motivation and is willing to work with his fear. His inspiration, I find out is a TV show in which a strong young man assists a woman and child in open seas after a boat sinking. For a six year old he never ceases to amaze me with his drawing of pieces together to make meaning for himself.





List #3 - What I
can't do because I
feel too scared

Floating on back even when
someone is holding my head

It is scary to put my face
under water

Dog paddle across the pool with
the instructor letting go

Confusing when didn't know
which was bubble arm

The key learning for me is that a six year old has the capacity to access his intrinsic motivation and is fully aware of what causes fear along with the ability to find his own path through with understanding and support.

AND I feel the Wookie Set is not too far away because as a parent it is important that I stand by my commitment to consistency even though he has found a higher order reward for himself.

Maybe 2006 will see the "Summer of Swimming."

At twelve weeks "humpty dumptys" are almost fun!

Over the school holidays, swimming intensives of classes every day have moved things along dramatically. We've achieved enough "closeness" to instigate the strategy similar to the one that tasked Stef to race up a Colorado mountain each morning on her horse.



[table of contents](#) | [help](#) | [biographies](#) | [communication](#)



◀ back

▲ top

Copyright 1999-2005 Navybridge Pty Ltd. All rights reserved.