

Mother & baby

Grace Timothy on swapping her Manolos for motherhood

Water babies

The day I found out I was pregnant, I am only slightly ashamed that my first thought was, "But I don't want to go to Soft Play!" My fear was tied up in the lifestyle I assumed came with a baby: my leather tote ditched in favour of an oil-cloth bag brimming with nappies, leggings that sagged at the knees, and worst of all, spending every other day sitting around a stinking ball pool with strangers comparing sleep schedules. Because, as if delivery wasn't painful enough, you're expected to relish other people's children's dirt and sticky fingers when you become a mother. For a while I traipsed from one draughty church hall to another so my girl could garner far better social skills than her moaning mother, gum on much-used Fisher Price plastic and swipe soggy custard creams from distracted toddlers. I wasn't sure what she was really gaining from some of these groups - don't get me wrong, I love the singing groups, and I look forward to the arts and craft activities when she's a bit older, but for the first year it seems to be about the new mothers finding a support base rather than really stimulating the babies. And I don't even like custard creams...

One class really did strike a chord though: swimming. I soon learnt we could take our daughter for her first swim as soon as she'd had her jabs, so when she was



three months old, we took her to join the Water Babies classes in Fontwell, near Chichester.

Classes are available all over the country (find your local class at www.waterbabies.co.uk) and cost £140 for ten sessions, starting from birth and going up to 4-5 years old. At the beginning you're mostly splashing and dipping the child in and out of the pool but at around nine months they're holding onto the side unsupported, swimming underwater and blowing bubbles - it's amazing how quickly they progress. Unlike the teaching of *The Wheels On The Bus...* and *Hickory Dickory Dock* - though I appreciate both are essential listening for any one-year old -

this kind of class can save your child's life, should they wander too close to a pond or lake in the second your attention is diverted. From day one, they're taught to hold their breath when submerged and feel at ease in the water, which is a helpful trick when it comes to a tear-free hair wash, too. My daughter spent the first few sessions chewing disdainfully on her fist, looking reproachful every time we were instructed to pour water over her head like a slightly repetitive baptism. But she now wriggles with glee as soon as we enter the pool, splashing about, trying desperately to swim to our class leader, Emma, for a wet cuddle. And once I'd learnt to forget that you're most likely swimming in a soup of other babies' wee, I enjoyed it too. That's right - the one baby activity I enjoy is the one where I float about with other women's husbands in what might as well be a hot tub. Don't judge me - I did not think it through. Nor did I consider whether a one-piece was the best attire for a new mother. Or whether wearing mascara would make me look less Esther Williams, more Gene Simmons. But in both instances I was able to hold my baby up in front of me like a human shield, so it's not all bad. ■

Swimming Bag Essentials

Ever since my school days, the worst part of any exercise is the showering, and baby swim classes are no exception. Once you've wrestled your baby and yourself out of clinging swimwear, you've got to wash the slipperiest creature known to man, and then dress without dipping your JBrands into the ubiquitous puddles. The one thing that tempers the ordeal is Estelle & Child Baby Body Wash (£13.30) - the deliciously smooth body wash in a beautiful bottle. It's got the easiest dispenser (key when one-handedly washing a wriggling baby, all you have to do is pop the lid with your thumb), it's unperfumed and it actually softens skin whilst cleansing away chlorine. Another top tip: a Bumbo Baby Sitter (£39.99) will safely contain a wet baby while you shower.

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