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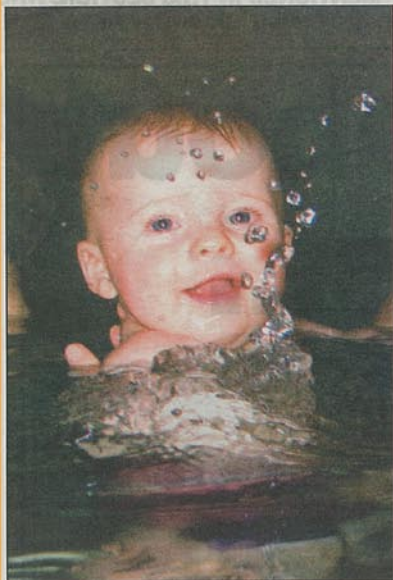
# WHARFE FINAL Telegraph & Argus

PART OF THE FAMILY

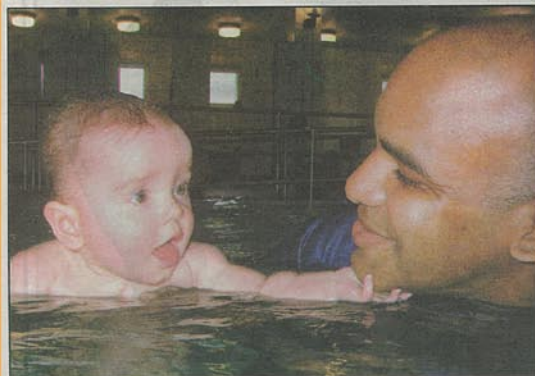
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## Encouraging your baby to exercise from birth



# We were all born to be water babies...



**SMILING SWIMMERS:** Top, Sofia Seabourne smiles for the camera. Above, Sofia and her swimming instructor Paul Thompson. Paul launched Water Babies two years ago with his wife Jess; to provide informative and fun swimming sessions for parents and children

**F**or years Britons' waistlines have been expanding, yet only now is it considered such a big issue.

The Government's drive to get Britain fit again has prompted medical and fitness experts to jump on the healthy living bandwagon. You can't turn on the TV without being told what to eat or seeing celebrities sweating it out in their televised battle to beat the bulge.

In addition to that, TOAST, The Obesity Awareness and Solutions Trust, a national charity dedicated to encouraging better understanding of obesity, its causes and practical solutions, recently launched the latest weapon in the fight against flab, a useful helpline giving information and advice.

The key thing is educating young ones. Celebrity chef and father-of-two Jamie Oliver was so incensed that some children believe food grows on supermarket shelves rather than from the ground that he decided to take action. His recent series Jamie's School Dinners saw him tackling school meals to try and get children into a healthy diet from a young age.

If predictions that obesity among young people could result in parents out-living their children are to be



by **SALLY CLIFFORD**

believed, actions like Jamie's could save lives.

Jamie isn't the only one trying to get the younger generation in shape. Hickey parents Jess and Paul Thompson are teaching exercise to youngsters from a tender age. Two years ago they launched Water Babies, informative and fun swimming sessions for parents and children to encourage the development of swimming skills.

Says Jess: "Children's meals are a hot topic of conversation at the moment. But any concerned parent should also be thinking about how they can encourage their children to take as much exercise as possible - and this is a habit that can be established right from the word go."

"When you're struggling to come to terms with the chaos that's created by

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# will help to stimulate their brain development



**TAKING THE PLUNGE:** Alanna Tomlinson is held by her mum as she takes a look underwater during a Water Babies session in Bradford

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having a new baby, probably the last thing on your mind is the fact that they need to start taking exercise. However, working out regularly is just as important for your baby as it is for you."

Jess says physical fitness isn't the only benefit. She and Paul believe exercise can help brain development too.

"In the first year of life the brain grows more rapidly than at any other," says Jess. "Every action a baby makes stimulates growth, strengthening nerve fibres and making it function more efficiently."

Research has shown that some babies who fail to acquire certain simple physical movements in their first year demonstrate later difficulties with reading, spelling and concentration.

"Movements as natural as rocking your baby, throwing them gently in the air or twirling them round all provide the perfect stimulation - so rock and swing away."

The best form of everyday exercise, she believes, is lying your baby down on a soft mat on the floor, enabling them to move and co-ordinate their limbs as nature intended. "This might look simple stuff to you, but it's actually very challenging for newly developing muscles," says Jess.

Crawling should also be encouraged - for as long as possible. "Crawling is much more mentally demanding than walking (involving as it does the co-ordination of all four quarters of the body) and again plays a crucial role in developing the brain. So even though you might be dying to see little one tottering into your out-

stretched arms, try not to accelerate the process by letting them spend too much time pushing things like baby-walkers around," says Jess.

"Swimming is unique in that it's exercise that babies can do from birth. Not only does it provide a complete physical workout, but the lack of gravity allows certain key movements that would be impossible on land."

Physical play exercises, provided by local organisations such as Tumbletots and Gymbarree, are another way to help baby's development. "These sessions encourage your baby's agility, balance, co-ordination and climbing through the use of specialist pre-school equipment," says Jess, who adds that you can set up child-friendly obstacle courses in your garden with up-turned chairs and cardboard

boxes. "Taking exercise with your child isn't just about fitness - it's also great fun and a great way of bonding."

"Consider this," she adds. "The number of overweight and obese children has doubled since 1982. Over a third aged four and under are now overweight and one in 10 of all six-year-olds is obese. This is in part to do with poor diets but the ability and inclination to run round a field 10 times will mean that your child can happily snack on a whole box of cereal and still have room for tea."

Proud dad Jeff Percy, a familiar face to many who watch his character Cain Dingle in the Yorkshire soap, *Emmerdale*, and actress wife Zoe discovered Water Babies through their midwife at Yorkshire Storks. Since then they've been exploring the benefits themselves with four-month-old daughter Violet.

Says Jeff: "We wanted to try and give her as much experience in life as possible. She was born in water at home and it seems the most natural thing to do."

The couple also believe introducing babies to swimming early on will prevent them developing a fear of water: "Violet loves it, you can tell because she gets excited as soon as she gets to the pool. But it's a good experience for the child and parents. I'd tell anybody it's a must!"

Guiseley mum Linsey Cottrell has been taking eight-month-old daughter Eliza swimming at Water Babies since she was six weeks old. "She adores being in the water, including bathtime," she says. "As soon as she sees the water she can't wait to get in. It's introducing the enjoyment of exercise and playing."

● Classes are held in Guiseley, Cowling, Bradford and Ilkley. For more information visit [www.waterbabies.co.uk](http://www.waterbabies.co.uk), call Jess

