



Teaching TEACHING BREASTSTROKE TO

BY OTTO HINKS

Young swimmers in the 4- to 6-year-old age bracket are capable of developing a very good fundamental, technically correct breaststroke if power and speed are de-emphasized and replaced by an emphasis on being calm and working with the water.

JELLYFISH FLOATS

In the introductory phase, we incorporate jellyfish floats, where we concentrate on the swimmers developing an awareness of their balance and position in the water by letting them just float faces in the water without propulsion, hands dangling down or quietly extended to the side. Our emphasis is on relaxing and letting the water maintain their body position.

GETTING A BREATH

From this jellyfish float position, we have the swimmers raise their head, get a breath and re-submerge. They will sink a bit, but we encourage them to wait and let their quiet body position help them return to the surface. As they become more comfortable, we have them try to repeat this exercise three to four times sequentially. Each time, we let them get their breath and return their faces to the water and begin exhaling.

PULL/PUSH

The pull/push sequence is one of the most difficult concepts for young swimmers to comprehend. Oftentimes, they try to extend their hands past their chest.

We begin with an emphasis on the circle aspect of the pull. In our terminology, the word “push” in this stroke helps the children to understand where their hands are going in the recovery phase of the stroke.

In the circle push drill, they will pretend to be mixing cookie or pizza dough in a bowl. They will then try to pull the dough apart. These drills can be done initially from a standing position on the pool deck, the steps of the pool or in shallow water, eventually progressing to a face-down position while floating. Again, we de-emphasize the power and speed aspects of the stroke by concentrating on the stroke motions without power.

To help the children understand the breaststroke nature of the motion, we have them lie on the pool deck on their belly, facing the water with their shoulders extended a little

past the edge of the deck over the water. We then have them pull the water back toward them. In this position, they are unable to take the stroke any lower than the breast area. We let the elbow bend happen naturally. It seems to come without a lot of emphasis.

We occasionally have the children swim with a noodle placed under their armpits as they try to move through the water, relying on their pull and push. This relieves their anxiety about having to coordinate their breath with the pull/push aspects of the stroke in its earliest stages.

With younger swimmers, we let their head rise more above the water line than with older swimmers to get those initial breaths. We do not introduce the breathing aspects of the stroke until the swimmer is connecting sequences of two or three strokes with their kick. We also emphasize a streamline with the glide with the head in-line with the body during the glide phase of the stroke as more power comes into the kick.



NOODLE

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Breaststroke

4- TO 6-YEAR-OLDS



KICK DRILL

Beginning the introduction of the breaststroke kick on the back helps the swimmers to keep the knees in line with the shoulders and torso.



TEACHING ON DECK

Having the swimmers sit on the side with their feet extended over the water, practicing the kick, is a great place to focus on keeping those toes pointed out and the feet flat.

KICKS

Beginning the introduction of the breaststroke kick on the back helps the swimmers to keep the knees in line with the shoulders and torso, and they get the sequence of the feet up to the buns and then out. Oftentimes, we will have the children hold a small kickboard on their chest as they practice the rhythm of the kick on their back.

Having the swimmers sit on the side with their feet extended over the water, practicing the kick, is a great place to focus on keeping those toes

pointed out and the feet flat. We then have the swimmers lie on their back and repeat the exercise, so they cannot see their feet. Again, we are looking for an emphasis on the toes being pointed out.

RHYTHM OF THE STROKE

Over time, we bring it all together in a rhythm of pull plus breathe, then kick, then glide. At this young age, the pull and breathe almost happen simultaneously. At the same time as the pull, the feet are coming up and out. The feet then come together at the end of

the kick as their arms recover (push). As the feet come together after the kick, the body should be fully streamlined during the glide. The early emphasis on being quiet in the water helps them to incorporate and benefit from the efficiency of the glide portion. ♦

Otto Hinks, the director of competitive stroke development at the Hubbard Family Swim School in Arizona, is a senior member of the school's management team. He swam collegiately for Arizona State from 1997-2001 and competed at the 2000 Canadian Olympic Trials.