SWIMMING

A beginner’s guide
Swimming as a sport was first introduced in the early 1800s by the National Swimming Society in Britain. The swimming strokes used at this time were the Sidestroke and the Breaststroke; the front crawl was introduced in 1873. Today, competitive swimming uses four main strokes across 16 events.

Whether you’re competing at a high level or having fun in the local pool, swimming is one of the easiest sports to play—all you need is a suit and a body of water. Swimming is consistently rated as a top-20 sport worldwide, with countries like Australia registering 70,000 professional swimmers. The United States has over 400,000 registered members under USA Swimming.

It’s important to understand the fundamentals before your child jumps into the pool for the first time. This guide contains useful information for you and your child to get started.

Congratulations! Your kid is thinking about participating in swimming. While trying a new sport can be a bit scary for everyone involved, we know that once you get started, you and your child are going to love it.
THE FUNDAMENTALS OF SWIMMING

Before your child jumps into the pool, it’s helpful to understand the basics of the sport and what to expect.

### Strokes

**Freestyle**

While competitors can technically use any stroke in this style of competition, the front crawl is the most common. Swimmers will be face down in the water, breathing to the side, and alternate their arms over the surface of the water while adding a flutter kick. Some part of the swimmer must touch the wall during turns and finishes; most swimmers choose to do a flip turn.

**Breaststroke**

Swimmers compete on their stomachs. They push their arms out in front with hands together, then push them out to the side and bring them back in a heart-shape motion. Their legs move simultaneously in a circular motion, almost mimicking a frog. When swimmers finish and turn, they must touch the wall with both hands at the same time.

**Butterfly**

A swimmer competes on their stomach using circular arm motions from front to back. They will also perform a dolphin kick where they are not allowed to separate their feet or legs at any point. Swimmers must touch the wall simultaneously with both hands during turns and when they finish.

**Backstroke**

As the name suggests, competitors lay on their back while in the water and then swing their arms out of the water, over their head, and back into the water while adding a flutter kick. When a swimmer turns, some part of them must touch the wall. Turns are the only time they may switch to their stomach,—they must be on their back when they finish the race.

### Pool Standards

**Water Depth**

Lanes should be two meters (six feet and seven inches) deep throughout the course. However, many local pools have deep ends that are used for diving, and shallow ends for inexperienced swimmers to practice.

**Pool Length**

Long courses are 50 meters (164 feet and ½ inch), and short courses are 25 yards or 25 meters (82 feet and ¼ inch).

**Pool Width**

Pools must be able to fit eight or 10 lanes in the pool, with each lane measuring a minimum of seven feet (2.13 meters) for competitions.

**Pool Markings**

Lane markings on the bottom of the pool will be a minimum of 10-inches (25 centimeters) wide, and has a dark contrasting color (preferably black). Each lane will have a marking running down the middle of it, uninterrupted the length of the pool.

**Pool/Air Temperature**

Water temperature will be between 25-28 degrees Celsius (77-82.4 degrees Fahrenheit). The air temperature should not fall below 76 degrees Fahrenheit, with relative humidity maintained at about 60%.
## Relays

**Freestyle Relay**
Four swimmers per team. Each individual swims one-fourth of the prescribed distance using any desired stroke, which is usually the front crawl.

**Medley Relay**
Four swimmers per team. Each individual swims one-fourth of the prescribed distance in the following order: backstroke, breaststroke, butterfly, and freestyle.

**Mixed Gender Relays**
Must consist of two males and two females.

### Relay Rules
No swimmer may swim more than one leg of a relay. Each swimmer must touch the wall at the end of their lane when they finish their leg. The next swimmer up is not allowed to enter the pool until the swimmer before them touches the wall—if they leave early they can be disqualified. Each team member must leave the water immediately after finishing their leg, except for the final racer.

## Age Group Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Events</th>
<th>Distances</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 AND YOUNGER</td>
<td>Freestyle, Backstroke, Breaststroke, Butterfly, Individual Medley, Freestyle Relay, Medley Relay, Mixed Gender Freestyle Relay, Mixed Gender Medley Relay</td>
<td>50, 100, 200, 400m/500y, 800m/1000y, 1500m/1650y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 AND 12</td>
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SWIMMING’S BASIC RULES

The technical rules of swimming are designed to provide fair and equitable conditions of competition and to promote uniformity in the sport. Each swimming stroke has specific rules designed to ensure that no swimmer gets an unfair competitive advantage.

The Start of the Race

At the commencement of each heat, the referee signals to the swimmers to get ready with a short series of whistles, followed by a long whistle, which indicates they should take their positions on the starting blocks.

When everyone is ready, the referee signals with an outstretched arm to the starter that the swimmers are ready.

The starter will issue the command “take your mark” and the swimmers will immediately assume their starting position. When all swimmers are stationary, the starter will give the starting signal.

False Starts

A swimmer that starts before the starting signal will be disqualified. When that occurs, swimmers remaining on the starting blocks will be able to leave their starting positions when the “Stand up” command is issued.

If the starting signal has been given before the disqualification is declared, the race will continue without stopping. If both the referee and starter observe the violation, the swimmer or swimmers involved will be disqualified once the race is finished.

Amount of Events Swimmers can do

In preliminaries and finals meet, a swimmer may compete in no more than three individual events per day.

In a timed finals meet, a swimmer may compete in no more than six events per day.

FACT

THE FIRST SWIMMING GOGGLES WERE MADE FROM TORTOISE SHELLS.
Seeding and Finals

Preliminary Heats
Entry times shall be listed by the meet committee with the fastest swimmer first and the slowest swimmer last. Swimmers with no times listed will be considered the slowest and placed at the end of the list.

Seeding Heats
Championships have three final heats. The fastest swimmer will be placed in the final heat, with the second fastest swimmer placed in the second to last heat, and the third fastest swimmer placed in the third to last heat. The fourth fastest swimmer and subsequent qualifiers are placed in the final heat alongside the fastest swimmer.

Finals Lane Assignments
The fastest swimmer heading into the finals will be placed in the middle lane, with the second and third fastest placed next to them. Lower seeding will continue towards the ends of the pool.
DRESSED TO PLAY

There aren’t many mandatory articles of clothing for swimming. Most of the items your child will use in the water will assist them and make them more aerodynamic.

Swimming Suit
Competitive swimmers wear special, form-fitting suits created to minimize drag in the water. Men typically wear suits called “Jammers” or “Briefs,” and women typically wear a one-piece swimsuit.

Swim Cap
These tight caps go over a swimmer’s head. They cover the athlete’s hair to help reduce drag in the water. Some swimmers choose to shave their head instead of wearing a swim cap.

Goggles
This eyewear helps protect the swimmer from chlorine in the pool and helps them see underwater.

Ear Plugs
Not everyone wears ear plugs while swimming, but they do help keep water out of your ears, which can prevent swimmer’s ear.

Nose Clip
These optional clips pinch the nose shut to prevent water from going up the swimmer’s nose. They’re great for beginners to learn how to control their breathing, especially when working on flip turns.

Towel
Many swimmers use their own towels to dry off after competing in the pool.

Swim Parka
These jackets keep competitors warm in between their races.

Sandals
Swimmers will wear sandals with good grips on the bottom to help them walk around the wet deck.

FACT
MANY SWIMMERS HAVE FLEXIBLE ANKLES AND CAN TOUCH THE GROUND WITH THEIR TOES WHILE LAYING ON THEIR BACKS.
**SWIMMING TERMS EXPLAINED**

**ALTERNATE** Once the finalists are decided in a preliminary/finals meet, the swimmers with the next two fastest times are considered alternates. If a finalist can’t participate, the alternates are called to take their place.

**ANCHOR** The final swimmer in a relay.

**BLOCKS** The starting platforms located behind each lane. The minimum water depth for the use of starting blocks is four feet and can be either permanent or removable.

**COURSE** The distance for a swimming competition, which ties into the length of the pool. A long course is 50 meters, and a short course is 25 meters.

**DECK** The area around the swimming pool reserved for swimmers, officials, and coaches.

**DECK SEEDING** Heat and lane assignments are posted after swimmers have checked in.

**DISTANCE** How far swimmers swim, often determined by lengths, meters, or yards.

**DISQUALIFIED** A swimmer’s performance is not counted because of a rule infraction. Disqualifications are shown by an official raising their arm above their head with an open hand.

**DIVING WELL** A separate pool, or a pool set off to the side of the competition pool. These have deeper water and diving boards/platforms.

**FALSE START** When a swimmer leaves the starting block before the horn or gun sounds. While one false start will disqualify a swimmer or relay team, an official may disallow it due to unusual circumstances.

**FALSE START ROPE** A recall rope across the width of the racing pool for the purpose of stopping swimmers who were not aware of the false start.

**FINS** Large rubber flipper-type devices that fit the swimmer’s feet. They’re used in swim practice but not allowed in competition.

**FLAGS** Pennants that are suspended across the width of the pool, approximately 15 feet from both ends, indicating to the swimmers they are approaching the wall.

**GOGGLES** Glasses-type devices worn by swimmers to help them see underwater and protect their eyes.

**HEATS** These are groups of swimmers that compete against one another. The results are compiled by times swum once all heats are completed.

**JUMP** Done in a relay when the swimmer on the block jumps into the water before the team member in the pool touches the wall.

**KICK BOARD** A flotation device used by swimmers during practice, but can’t be used during competitions.

**LANE** An area the length of the pool that the swimmer must stay in during the race. Each swimmer is assigned a different lane (i.e. Lane 1, Lane 2, Lane 3, etc.).

**LEG** The part of a relay event swum by a single member of the team.

**PACE CLOCK** The electric clocks, or large clocks with highly visible numbers, located at the ends or sides of the pool so swimmers can read their times.

**RELAY** A swimming event in which four swimmers participate as a team. Each swimmer completes an equal distance of the race. There are two types of relays: 1.) Medley Relay - One swimmer swims Backstroke, one swimmer swims Breaststroke, one swimmer swims Butterfly, one swimmer swims Freestyle, in that order; 2.) Freestyle relay - Each swimmer swims Freestyle.
SWIMMING TERMS EXPLAINED

STROKE The style in which a competitor swims. There are four types of strokes: Backstroke, Breaststroke, Butterfly, and Freestyle.

TIMER These volunteers sit behind the starting blocks at the end of the pool and are responsible for getting watch times on events and activating the backup buttons for the timing system.

WARM-UP The session swimmers use to loosen up prior to their event.

WARM-DOWN The recovery swimming a swimmer does after a race when pool space is available.
WAYS TO PLAY

With a little research, you should be able to find a swimming program that fits your child’s interest level. There are several types of programs, each with varying structures and commitment levels.

### Swimming Lessons

**Age:** 4 and Up  
**Structure:** Your child will be in the pool with a swimming instructor. They’ll begin by getting used to the water, being comfortable in it, and will learn new skills and techniques as they progress through the different levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age: 4 and Up</th>
<th>Season Length: Swimming lessons can take place year-round; you’ll have to talk to your local pool for specifics.</th>
<th>Travel: Will have to travel to the pool.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commitment: Lessons range from occurring once a week to a few times a week. Each lesson usually lasts from 30 minutes to an hour.</td>
<td>Structure: Your child will be in the pool with a swimming instructor. They’ll begin by getting used to the water, being comfortable in it, and will learn new skills and techniques as they progress through the different levels.</td>
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</tbody>
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### Club

**Age:** 8 and Up  
**Structure:** Coaches at this level continue to work on perfecting each of swimming’s four strokes. As players get older the level of competition increases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age: 8 and Up</th>
<th>Season Length: Events will be held throughout the year.</th>
<th>Travel: Travel will vary depending on your club. Weekend meets can take place in different states, or internationally, especially for clubs who compete at a higher level.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commitment: Practices are often held two to four days a week, and the sessions can run from 60-90 minutes. Expect to participate in meets that take place on weekends. Practices are held on average 2-4 times per week.</td>
<td>Structure: Clubs are usually broken up by age groups (7-10, 11-12, 13-14, and 15-and-older teams), but if some areas don’t have the same amount of participants as others, the number of programs shrink. As the age group increases, so does the level of competition.</td>
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SWIMMING USES EVERY MUSCLE IN YOUR BODY, AND CAN BURN 40% MORE CALORIES THAN BIKING.

WAYS TO PLAY

**School**

Prepare for college and participate as a member of your school against other schools in your area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age: 14-18</th>
<th>Season Length:</th>
<th>Travel:</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seasons often run from August through November, or November through February, depending on your state.</td>
<td>Local travel to nearby cities is required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment:</td>
<td>Practices and meets can occur throughout the week and weekend, depending on the team’s schedule.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure:</td>
<td>Teams compete against other high schools. Coaches are paid and student-athletes are generally skilled, depending on the division and school district.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
ABOUT SPORTSENGINE

We’re proud to be home to the world’s largest directory of youth sports programs, hosted on SportsEngine.com. With 120,000+ organization and program listings for 100+ sports, a full marketplace of sports-related apps, and curated content for coaches, athletes, administrators, families, and fans, SportsEngine.com is the Home of Youth Sports for everyone, of all sport interests and abilities.

www.sportsengine.com

ABOUT US SWIM SCHOOL ASSOCIATION

For more than 30 years, the United States Swim School Association has served the learn to swim industry. We are a 501(c)6 non-profit organization serving privately owned swim schools across the country and the world. Our core values are Safety, Relationships, Learning and Professionalism and we use these values as a guide to offer resources and best practices to our member swim schools.

www.usswimschool.org
ABOUT TEAMUNIFY

With over 4,500 teams utilizing our team management platform, TeamUnify is a greater community of coaches, administrators and families that love the sport of swimming. With free 7 day-a-week technical support, dedicated account managers and an online help and training library, TeamUnify is dedicated to our customers’ success.

www.teamunify.com

ABOUT USA SWIMMING

USA Swimming is the National Governing Body for the sport of swimming in the United States. We promote the culture of swimming by creating safe and healthy opportunities for athletes and coaches of all backgrounds to participate and advance in the sport through clubs, events and education. Our membership is comprised of swimmers of every age and ability, all the way up to the Olympic Team, as well as coaches, officials and volunteers. USA Swimming is responsible for selecting and training teams for international competition, including the Olympic Games, and administer competitive swimming in accordance with the Ted Stevens Olympic & Amateur Sports Act.

www.usaswimming.com