Keep it Simple!

By Gary Roth,
Owner of KIDS FIRST Swim School

Over the past 30 years, I have taught swimming to thousands of kids throughout the Northeast. In my teens and twenties as a Lifeguard and Swim Coach in North Jersey, in my thirties as head coach of a top YMCA Swim Team in Maryland, and now in my old age as the owner of the KIDS FIRST Swim School in Baltimore, MD. I have been working with swimmers since I can remember. And, as much as I would love everyone to believe that it is "rocket science" that I have been teaching for the past 30 years, the truth of the matter is, that whether I have been teaching toddlers in a Mommy & Me program, a grownup in Adult Swim Lessons, or a national level swimmer on my swim team, it all seems to boil down to three basic skills…breath control, buoyancy, and propulsion. Sure, the level of proficiency we expect varies from group to group, but the basic skills have never changed. If we can teach these skills to our constituents… they will learn to swim.

Breath Control is essential for the human body to operate in an aquatic environment. Whether swimming under or over the water, we need to learn to provide oxygen to the body. With the youngest swimmers, we begin with blowing bubbles and later we work on submerging our face for 1, 2, then 3 seconds. Diving for rings is another activity, which stretches the swimmers' Propulsion is the final basic skill. I am an advocate of teaching swimmers to kick first and add the arms later. There are at least three important reasons for this. 1. The legs help determine body position in the water. A swimmer that drags their legs will not achieve optimum swimming position. 2. The legs are the biggest muscles in the body and can provide plenty of propulsion if used and plenty of drag if not. 3. The human body naturally moves in 1-1 timing. In most physical activities, the arms and the legs naturally move at the same rate of speed. That is not the case in swimming, at least Freestyle and Backstroke. These strokes are performed in 1-6 timing (the feet kick six times for every complete arm cycle). So, let's teach the feet to work at a short fast rate of speed before we introduce the arms. Let's keep it simple for our students. Later, as we build in the arms and develop more advanced forms of propulsion, we'll always have our six beat kick as the foundation to our stroke.

For those of you that think that teaching folks to swim is more complicated than this…I suggest you take a look at all the skills that are part of your curriculum. Can't most of them be placed into one of these three buckets??? I offer this perspective not to minimize the efforts of all those instructors that have worked so hard to learn their craft. Rather, I offer this framework to make the "learn to swim" process less verwhelming for students and teachers, alike. If students and their

ability to control their breath. Rhythmic breathing is introduced through bobbing (for the beginners it's breath in, breath out) and rotary breathing is developed in the intermediate swimmer. For the competitive swimmer it might be minimal or alternate side breathing. No matter the skill level, we all need to learn to control our breath when operating in an aquatic environment.

Buoyancy is the bodies natural ability to remain and work on the surface of the water. It comes from relaxing and from proper head position. When first asked to float on their "tummy", most kids will hold for just 2-3 seconds. Not surprisingly, they find that their body initially sinks, they panic because they will not wait for the body to float to the surface, they struggle. When challenged to hold their float for 5-6 seconds, these same kids will find their body will rise to the surface after 2-3 seconds and they will float. For these kids a 10 second tummy float is easier than a 2-3 second float simply because they have forced themselves to relax. Head position is also critical in mastering this skill. Ask a child to "float on their tummy and look at the bottom". Then ask them to "float on their tummy and look at the instructor". The kids quickly understand the concept that head position helps determine the body's ability to float. And, if it is easier to float on our tummies with the head in the down position…. Doesn't it follow that it is easier to swim on our tummies with the head in the same position??? The reverse is true when floating/swimming on our backs… look up!

instructorscan understand the process in it's simplest form, it makes it easier to teach, easier to learn. Try it sometime with the anxious toddlers and parents in your Mommy & Me classes or that terrified adult in a first swim lesson. Explain to them how simple swimming is. Hopefully, you'll enjoy the same reaction, the same success rate as we have with our students!