Lydia Phillips, who runs swimming lessons for babies across Hertfordshire, looks at why swimming can be good for babies.

More and more of us are joining structured swimming classes or heading to the local pool with our babies and toddlers. Our little ones love being in water and the sense of freedom it gives them. Importantly, they're also learning the potentially life-saving skill of swimming from a young age.

But are these the only reasons for swimming with your baby?

Baby swimming originally evolved out of a desire to ensure that babies are safe and confident in water. However, the exercises used to teach this confidence – gentle rocking, reaching for objects, kicking movements and learning to respond to commands – also provide the perfect stimulation for your baby’s brain.

In the first year of life, the brain develops more rapidly than at any other time and swimming with your baby can have an extremely positive effect on this development, making it even more beneficial to take to the water as early as possible.

Development of motor skills

Babies love the repetitive movement of bouncing and splish-splashing in the pool, and this movement provides fantastic stimulation for the vestibular system (which allows us to sense motion and to balance). As this system matures it will help a baby to keep their head upright, pull themselves up onto their feet, balance and eventually walk.

Chasing after bright and colourful toys in the pool, then grasping hold of them to bring them in for a good old chew is a great exercise for enhancing hand-eye coordination. The cross-lateral movement of reaching out is the same one used in crawling. This teaches both sides of the brain to work together, not only helping to coordinate physical movements, but also strengthening nerve pathways between the two sides, helping the brain store and retrieve information more effectively – all great for learning!

One study recently carried out in Iceland (where baby swimming is extremely popular) concluded that, when tested at the age of four, children who had attended baby swimming lessons from a young age showed better balance than their peers. Their ball skills and dexterity were also tested, with the early swimmers achieving better results.

Physical development

It's not only motor skills that benefit from swimming; physically it is wonderful for your baby and one of the only forms of exercise they can do literally from birth. Just half an hour in the pool can provide a complete work-out for them (and you!) and parents often comment that their little ones eat and sleep better on swimming days.

Babies can exercise many more muscles in the water than they can on land, and amazingly can swim short distances unaided from when they are tiny. Sessions in the pool are great for strengthening arm, leg and neck muscles, and superb for tiny lungs and cardiovascular fitness.

Swimming will not only make your baby fitter and stronger, you will also notice the difference in their physical ability on land, with regular swimmers often starting to crawl and walk earlier than their peers.

Emotional development

As babies learn how to manoeuvre in the water on their own, their independence and self-confidence blossoms, and they enjoy being in the pool more and more. Where they are very dependent on you in the early days, after a few months a baby will happily swim a short distance between you and their instructor, or splash off the poolside and into the water all by themselves.

The confidence and self-esteem involved in learning to swim will often then be transferred into other aspects of life. For a toddler, the thrill of grasping a new skill in their lesson, or achieving something they have been working up to for a while, will be evident in their ear-to-ear grins – and may also give them that confidence to try new things, as well as increase their interest in learning in general.