

Developing Butterfly in Youngsters

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Be patient and progress slowly

This paper is written for coaches and teachers of swimming who are required to teach Butterfly to youngsters in the age group 8-11 years.

For these youngsters, most of whom will be just out of Learn-to-Swim, Butterfly is a most difficult stroke to learn. Until some mastery of the coordination and timing of the stroke is achieved by the learner, the mere effort required to drag the body out and over the surface on every stroke is exhausting and off-putting.

Whereas a young swimmer can achieve a degree of mastery of the other strokes in a few sessions, Butterfly takes much longer and relies to a far greater extent on the use of drills and aids. Coaches/Teachers are advised to exercise patience when teaching this stroke and to expect progress to be slow.

Use short swims during the learning phase

The importance of keeping Butterfly swims to short distances during the learning phase cannot be too strongly stressed. These youngsters should never be asked to swim past the point where good technique is lost – so be prepared to accept swims of 15-17 metres initially and work up from there. Even when young swimmers achieve some mastery of the stroke, the distance used in training situations should not be excessive.

Start with fins

Learning Butterfly with fins is a good way to go. Fins provide the swimmer with...

- Propulsion needed to drive the body through the water at a speed where a better body position can be maintained, thus making it easier for the recovery action.
- A more realistic feel for the dolphin kick than can be achieved without them.

Fins sold in any sports store will do, but overlong ones should be avoided. To prevent swimmers developing blisters through the use of fins, socks can be worn with them.

Dolphining with fins

The following drills and games, using fins, are recommended in introducing Butterfly at this age group. At no time, during these drills and games, is it necessary or desirable to use the terms “butterfly” or “butterfly kick”. The group should be asked to imagine they are dolphins and to try to swim like dolphins. All instruction should be related back to the way a dolphin behaves.

Kicking with a Board

- Kicking with a board provides a good feel for the power of the dolphin kick, develops good body position, and helps in the development of a continuous rhythmic kicking action.
- The board should be held “over the top”, with the hands at the front.
- The kicking action should commence in the middle of the back and the head and shoulders should be kept as still as possible.
- A continuous kicking action, with all kicks of equal size, should be asked/sought.

Kicking on the Back and on the Side

- Kicking on the back and on the side without a board can be useful in gaining a feel for the dolphin action.
- On the back, with arms by side, and later with arms extended ahead in a streamlined position, is easily achieved.
- Kicking on the side with the lower arm extended ahead and the upper arm on the swimmer’s side helps develop a kick in both directions.

Dolphining

- A good, introductory game for youngsters is Dolphining.
- This game involves the group pushing off the wall underwater, pretending to be dolphins and kicking as far as they can with their arms by their sides, while looking at the bottom of the pool.
- When they need to breathe, usually after 10 or 12 metres, they surface and swim back to the starting point.
- After a few of these repeats, the arms should be stretched ahead of them in a streamlined position with the wrists touching and one hand on the other.
- Finally, the swimmers can practise rolling through 180 degrees and moving from one lane to another while swimming deep in the water.

Dolphin Drill Progression

The next set of progression drills can be used to develop the stroke to the point where the swimmers are able to swim a few strokes of Butterfly with fins. Each stage needs to be done only once or twice in the session but the order shown is recommended for the initial lesson. Later, if there is a need to repeat the progression, some of the stages can be omitted.

One or two lengths should be enough practice for each stage and a rest should be given after about every 50 metres. On all of these drills the swimmers determine how many kicks they do before surfacing for air. The coach should not set a specific number because some swimmers will be better than others at breath holding.

- **Stage 1**

Have the group dolphin kick underwater with the arms stretched forward and with the hands at about shoulder width. When they need to breathe, they pull back with their hands as an aid to surfacing, breathe, and dive down again “just as dolphins do”. The hands return to the leading position by an underwater movement as they dive down again.

- **Stage 2**
The next drill requires the swimmers to kick and pull harder as they near the surface to breathe. This time, the hands leave the water slightly at the end of the pull and return to the front starting position with an underwater movement. This drill is similar to the “Biondi Drill” used by experienced Butterflyers but the number of kicks is not specified as it is in that drill.
- **Stage 3**
Next, the swimmers are asked to try to imitate dolphins leaping from the water “like real dolphins do on the bow wave of ships”. A breath is taken and the head is lowered to break through the surface first. Again, the arms are recovered underwater.
- **Stage 4**
This drill requires the swimmers to complete the previous drill, but with the arms recovering over the surface and entering with a diving action. This is the first time that the arms recover over the water and a real dive is attempted – the hands touch at the front.
- **Stage 5**
The final stage of the progression is to ask the swimmers to reduce the number of kicks between dives and to make as many dives as they can for the length of the pool.

They should now be swimming basic Butterfly.

working without fins

Once the above progression has been developed to a satisfactory degree, the time has come to remove the fins and try without them. However, instead of trying to swim the full stroke immediately, it is best to carry out another progression set so that the youngsters can get used to the movements of the stroke without fins.

The following progression can be used successfully at this time.

- **Stage 1**
Practise a few laps of one-arm Freestyle breathing every stroke to the side, under the working arm, and with the resting arm stretched in front.
- **Stage 2**
When satisfied that the one-arm Freestyle is working properly, introduce a dolphin kicking action to the drill. You then have one-arm Freestyle with a dolphin kick.
- **Stage 3**
Next, ask the group to recover with a straighter arm, reaching high, while ensuring that they stay on their (shoulders parallel to the surface). They should not recover while on their sides. Now the drill is one-arm Butterfly.
- **Stage 4**
During the next swim, have them count their kicks for each arm cycle. Most will be taking two, which is the right number. One kick should occur as the hand enters the water, and the other as the hand exits the water.
- **Stage 5**
Now the arms can be changed as they move up the pool – perhaps changing at the halfway or after a set number of strokes ... 4x4 or 6x6.

- **Stage 6**
Finally, work up to using two arms together for a few strokes. A drill like four strokes with the left arm, four strokes with the right arm, two strokes with both arms can be tried here. Let them breathe to the side with the one-arm strokes and to the front with the double arm strokes.
- **Stage 7**
Now it is time to try the full stroke – possibly from a dive to gain momentum – and breathing every second stroke. Keep the swim short (around 15-17m will do).

Developing a good technique

When youngsters can swim a very basic Butterfly for short distances, the coach can concentrate on developing technique further. The stroke tips below are best taught and developed through swimming the full Butterfly stroke. Again, short swims should be used so that concentration can be maintained. The group should work on only a few of the points in any one lesson.

The tips to be concentrated on are...

Recovery

- The recovery should be made low over the water.
- The hands should reach as far over the water as possible before entering.
- The palms of the hands should be facing the water on entry and the tips of the fingers should touch the water first. The entry should not be made with thumbs first.
- The entry point should be at about shoulder width and the hands should not be allowed to move closer together after entry.

The Catch

- The catch should be made as soon as possible after entry.
- To achieve a good catch, the hands should sweep slightly apart but only far enough to get a good purchase on the water.

The Underwater Stroke

- Once the catch is made, the elbows should be kept high and force should be applied in a backward direction – accelerating all the way.
- As the arms bend in the underwater phase, the hands will move in close together under the body – at about chest level – before driving (exploding) back to the finish of the stroke.
- For an effective underwater stroke, the hand, wrist and forearm should be held in a single, straight unit. The pitch of the hands should not be changed during the underwater stroke.

The Kick

- Two even kicks should be used for each arm cycle.
- The first kick down occurs during the stretch into the “catch”.
- The second kick down occurs with the final thrust of the hands in the underwater stroke.

The Body Movement

- The body-wave motion should be kept small – i.e. not too much up and down movement.

Breathing

- The breath should be taken at the same time as the second downward kick.
- It should be taken quickly and as low on the surface as possible.
- The face should drop back into the water as soon as possible afterwards.
- Breathing every second stroke should be practised in training.

Underwater Dolphin Kicking

While under the surface after a start or a turn, a fast and vigorous dolphin kicking action should be used. This should be combined with a perfectly still and streamlined upper body. The length of time spent underwater before surfacing will depend on...

- The speed that the swimmer can generate with the kick ... if they are not fast, they should surface early.
- The fitness of the swimmer.

Turning

When turning, the swimmer should try to hit the wall with an upward motion, touching with both hands at the same time and “brushing their head” with the hand as they push off.

Finishing

At the finish of the race a two-handed touch is required. Unlike the approach to the wall at the turn, this should be a downward motion, trying to hit the wall at the end of a full stroke.

Worth remembering...

“Measure your success as a coach – not by the progress made by your most talented swimmer – but instead, by the progress made by your least talented swimmer.”