

Lessons in staying afloat

"Let me go, Mommy," my son said, as I held him in the four foot section of the pool. I've been taking him swimming with me at my gym for almost a year. Our sojourns to the salt water therapy pool under the lofty, heated dome have increased in frequency as I've slipped into the most uncomfortable portion of pregnancy.

"I can't let you go. You don't know how to swim," I explained. Still, I allowed him to hang on to the railing along the edge while he was in arms reach. He hung on to the railing, let go for a moment, started to sink for just a second and grabbed back on to me. I decided then and there that it was time for swim lessons and signed him up several days later.

I'd been given a flyer explaining the prerequisites for the level one class he'd be taking. "Your child should: be afraid of the water." The flyer continued to explain the sorts of skills he would learn, including putting his face in the water for three seconds, floating on his stomach and back (assisted), using alternating arm and leg motions. The expectations held for my two-year-old were reasonable, which was reassuring.

At his first Saturday morning class, he chose a pair of blue shark-printed trunks. I also arrived suited up, ready to join him in the pool. I'd brought his flotation vest, just in case. His teacher, a slender girl who looked to be in her late teens, met him and his classmate, a four-year-old girl about his size, at the steps. "Do you need me to come in?" I asked.

"No," the teacher, whose name was Caitlin, replied.

"Does he need this?" I asked, holding up his yellow and turquoise vest.

"No," she said, smiling as she encouraged my son and his classmate to sit on the steps. I, too, took a seat on the sidelines.

"Bye, Mommy," he said, giving his full attention to Miss Caitlin. For the next half hour, she guided them through various exercises by turning them into games. They began by blowing bubbles in the water after singing "Ring around the Rosie." Then,

Miss Caitlin demonstrated how to “scoop the water,” or paddle, streamline (one hand on top of the other out in front) and kick. She used foam, floating barbells to get the kids to float and kick on their stomachs, and pool noodles to achieve the same results while they were on their backs. The little girl seemed hesitant, refusing to try some of the activities, but my son eagerly accepted every challenge. Over the course of the lesson, he’d moved from the top step nearly to the bottom, where the water graced his chin. I was amazed at how much he learned in such a short period of time.

At the end of the lesson, my son and his classmate went to the “deep” end of the pool (5 feet) to jump in. Since there were two of them and one Miss Caitlin, they had to take turns. My son giggled with excitement, waved in my direction and yelled, “Hi, Mommy!” I was tempted to rush over, just to make sure he didn’t jump in without someone to catch him, but I sat patiently, albeit nervously, and waited for his safe return. After he made his giant splash into Miss Caitlin’s arms, he kicked and paddled to the ladder with her assistance, then ran over to me, dripping wet and beaming. Miss Caitlin was just behind him. “He’s fearless,” she said.

“That’s what scares me,” I replied.

From his first word, to his first step, to recognizing letters, singing songs, and reciting prayers, it’s been one of my greatest joys to watch my son grow and learn. But those were all things that he learned from me, my husband, his grandparents, and the other people who are involved in his life. Watching him learn from a stranger turned teacher was an exhilarating experience. After all, I make my living by helping other people’s children learn.

It’s sad in a way that I rarely get to know my students’ families. Unlike elementary or middle school teachers, high school teachers are faced with the blessing and curse that is teenage independence. Parents back away or are pushed away from their kids during adolescence and even toddlerhood; it’s the natural order of things. Sometimes our relationship with God is similar. He tests our faith. We know we aren’t supposed to, but, being human, we test Him back. But, God is like that parent on the sidelines at the end of the pool. Even when we feel like we’re drowning, God is watching over us. He trusts that we will make the right decision and return to

him.

Let it be a comfort for parents to know that their teachers, like Miss Caitlin, are always looking out for their children. Most importantly, so is God. Together with you, we will keep them afloat.