

Supporting Nippers Who Are Hesitant About the Water

How to build confidence and safety without pressure

Not every child arrives at Nippers ready to dive in. Some may have had a scary experience, some are simply cautious, and others are still learning to feel safe near the ocean. As an Age Manager, your patience and encouragement can help transform fear into confidence—one small step at a time.

1. Why Children Might Fear the Water

- They've had a negative past experience (e.g. being knocked over by waves)
- They're unfamiliar with the ocean or beach environment
- They don't yet feel safe or in control
- They're sensitive to noise, cold, or unpredictability
- It's their first time trying water-based activities

2. What Fear Might Look Like

- Refusing to go near the water or crying at the shoreline
- Clinging to a parent or standing far from the group
- Asking lots of "what if" questions or expressing panic
- Saying they feel sick or want to go home

3. What You Can Do

- **Start with empathy, not pressure**
 - "It's okay to feel a bit nervous."
 - "You don't have to go in until you're ready—I'll stay close."
 - Acknowledge their fear, but offer reassurance.
- **Let them watch before joining in**
 - Observation is a valuable step. Watching the group and hearing positive encouragement can help them feel safer.
 - Let them stand at the edge with you or hold your hand while others participate.
- **Offer low-risk water experiences**
 - Start with ankle-deep water or even wet sand games.
 - Let them fill a bucket, feel the water on their hands, or walk near the shoreline.
 - Avoid dunking or sudden splashes until they're more comfortable.
- **Break activities into small, manageable steps**
 - "Let's try just walking to the flags."
 - "Can you dip your toes in with your buddy?"
 - Celebrate each step—they're all signs of bravery.

- **Use the buddy system**
 - Pair them with a calm, confident peer who can help them feel safe.
 - Choose someone who won't pressure, but will offer encouragement.
- **Keep the tone light and playful**
 - Use fun games and storytelling (e.g. pretending to be sea creatures or surfing superheroes)
 - Laughter can reduce anxiety and help kids focus on fun instead of fear

5. What to Avoid

- Forcing participation ("Just get in—you'll be fine!")
- Dismissing their fear ("There's nothing to be scared of")
- Drawing attention to their hesitation in front of the group
- Comparing them to others ("Look at how brave your friend is")

6. Reassure Families Too

- Let the child's parent know you're aware and supportive
- Share progress, even small wins
- Reinforce that it's common and takes time—especially for new Nippers

Final Thought: Confidence Takes Time

Building trust in the water is a gradual process. Your calm, supportive presence helps Nippers feel safe enough to try—and proud enough to try again next time. You're not just helping them enjoy the beach, you're helping them learn that they can overcome challenges, one small step at a time.

