

'Treat them as people, not some kind of foreign race . . . it is all wrong to talk to them in phoney language'

CHILDREN, AND HARRIS THE PIED PIPER

ROLF HARRIS was spending an hour or two at the Crystal Palace swimming baths. The setting of a crowded London baths was a lot different from the Swan River, at the bottom of his parents' home in Perth, Australia, where he had learned to swim.

But swimming is something very dear to Harris. On this particular occasion he was watching a group of parents who were trying to teach their children to swim — or at least not to be afraid of the water. They weren't having much success.

Harris was torn between what could be taken as interfering in somebody else's business and the urge to give them a hand.

Inevitably, he had to take the plunge. He walked over to the parents and said: "Look, if you think I am interfering please tell me and I will go away, but if you would like I can help the kids on the first stage at least — to float, in a matter of seconds."

As it turned out, the parents were only too happy to have Rolf help out, and he had the children "floating" in a matter of seconds.

"I didn't want to be thought a nosey parker," he said, "but at the same time I believe it is essential that children should be taught to swim. Not only because it is such a great pastime but because if they can swim then they can look after themselves should they ever fall into the water."

Watching that group of parents set Rolf thinking. They had been playing about with water wings and so forth without really instilling any confidence into the children. "It wasn't their fault," said Rolf. "They didn't have the advantage of all the natural facilities which you have in Australia. It is difficult to learn to swim in crowded baths, particularly if you have someone teaching you who, though he can swim fairly well himself, hasn't really grasped how to pass it on to somebody else — probably because he has never had to before. Yet, like everything else, when you know how it isn't difficult at all."



Out of that incident came the Wednesday afternoon BBC television programme Swim With Rolf, which has been running for three weeks now. The last one is next week.

Harris has been a great swimmer. He was an expert by the time he was ten, and at the age of 15 won the Junior Backstroke Championship of Australia. Anyone who is interested in competitive swimming knows just what kind of a feat that is.

His seven-year-old daughter, Bindi, loves swimming and his wife, Alwen, learned only last year. "It was something I felt that I had to do . . . but I had never concentrated on it before," said Alwen. "Bindi loves it. She takes to the water like a fish."

"I had a wonderful childhood," said Rolf. "I was outdoors every single minute that I could be. Of course I was lucky to be born in an outdoor country, where you have got the sun. Some friends of ours have emigrated to Australia and they are delighted, because they have found that they can be outside for ten months of the year instead of inside for that time."

"The River Swan ran along at the bottom of our garden in Perth. We had a parallel bar-type pole at the bottom of the garden. I always cycled to school and back. It was so warm that you didn't wear many clothes, and I had a pair of trunks on under my trousers. If I had a shirt on I would get rid of that as I was cycling home. I used to cycle into my garden, down the path and under the bar. Then, in one movement I would pull myself off the bike by gripping the bar, drop my trousers at the same time and swing into the river. It was great."



He added: "I had the kind of childhood that every child should have. I was so happy, I just didn't want to grow up."

Harris has always had an affinity with children. They follow him everywhere as soon as they see him, as if he was a Pied Piper.

"One thing that makes me very happy is that I get on with children," he said. "It isn't difficult you know, but so many



PICTURE : NICK ROGERS

SUPERSTAR

The incredible story of Rolf Harris, part 4

BY LINTON MITCHELL

people just don't seem to manage it. I feel I can communicate with them. That's because I treat them as people and not some kind of foreign race. I don't talk down to children. Doing that is a terrible mistake. It is all wrong to talk to them in some sort of phoney language . . . a kind of patronising baby talk that they are supposed to understand.

"Children don't talk that way naturally. They only do it if they are encouraged to by adults. Talk to a child naturally and he will come up to the same level as yourself."

Harris has very strong views on the subject of children's television. "I have had lots of discussions about going into the American television market," he said. "And children's television would seem to be a natural. This is one of the things that they do so badly. They do talk down to the children."

One thing that the Harrises worry about constantly is the effect on their daughter of Rolf being constantly in the limelight. "Because of my type of work there is bound to be publicity. That is one thing you have to accept from the start. But you must consider the effect of this on your own child," said Rolf.

"We always try to be natural about it with Bindi, but it must be confusing for the child. She knows that her father has a different job from most fathers and that people come to take pictures of him.

"We encourage her with her drawing and painting, which she does very well."

Her education: "Well, she goes to a school just along the road; an ordinary school. Obviously I pick her up from school whenever I can, just like any other father picks up his child. When I go along there the other children are naturally very interested. They watch television, and when someone they see on television comes along in the flesh they are bound to come over and have a look at him.



"Bindi is taking it very well. Like everyone else, she is a person in her own right. In the long run she must do what she wants to do. We can encourage her in doing what she does well, but that is as far as you can go. It is a tragedy that so few people ever get around to doing what they want to do. They settle for something else . . . something less," said Rolf.

One room in the Harris house is particularly interesting. It looks like the kind of playroom that a seven-year-old girl would dream about, a playroom right out of Walt Disney.

In a sense, it is. For this is the room which Bindi likes best. Inside is the original house of Harris's old television

character, Koogie Bear. Koogie lived in a kind of dolls' house to end all dolls' houses — the sort of dolls' house you would expect to find in Texas, where they do everything BIG. The walls of the room are covered by Bindi's drawings.

The Disney touch is made complete by a sign suspended by a wire from the ceiling. It advertises the Disney full-length cartoon The Aristocats and shows a picture of a typical cartoon-type pussy-cat.

Yet what is really interesting is the other sign dangling from the ceiling. This one advertises naturalist Peter Scott's plea on behalf of the World Wildlife Fund. This is all about the REAL animals, not the cute little wisecracking characters that turn up in the cartoons.

Subconsciously, perhaps, it gives an indication of another, very important side to the Rolf Harris character — a side which he is trying to get over to Bindi. . . .

TOMORROW: Harris and the environment