



World Water Safety

INTERNATIONAL LIFE SAVING FEDERATION

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LIFESAVING POSITION STATEMENT - LPS 15

BASIC SWIMMING, WATER SAFETY AND SAFE RESCUE SKILLS

PURPOSE

The purpose is to provide guidance for basic swimming, water safety and safe rescue programmes.

SCOPE AND CONTEXT

This position statement is targets those involved in the education and delivery of basic swimming, water safety and safe rescue programs in swimming pools and/or open water environment.

DEFINITIONS

HIC: High Income Country

LMICs: Low and Middle-Income Countries

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

Water Skill means an ability, usually learned and acquired through training, to perform actions which achieve a desired outcome

PRINCIPLES

1. Key principles of basic swimming, water safety and safe rescue programmes are outlined, noting that terminology including survival swimming, learn to swim, swimming lessons is used interchangeably in many nations.
2. Survival swimming is a subset of swimming skills, distinct from competitive strokes and advanced lifesaving training.
3. Skills in the survival swimming continuum extend from the minimum skills needed to survive an unexpected fall into deep water, to those required to swim long distances or float for long periods in an emergency.
4. Learning basic survival skills should be part of a lifelong learning process and require regular instruction or practice.
5. Instruction should reflect the appropriate development sequence of skills for the learner.

6. Instruction should be appropriate to the learner's (in many cases a child), mental and physical development.

STATEMENT ON BASIC SWIMMING, WATER SAFETY AND SAFE RESCUE SKILLS

1. The health and safety of participants is paramount and must be ensured through surveillance and supervision that may include the use of lifeguards and/or rescue equipment.
2. Basic swimming, water safety and safe rescue skills are defined as the ability to demonstrate the following set of skills, in a competent manner.
 - a. A range of entries into the water that will ensure participants can orient themselves in deep water. As a result of learning this skill, participants will be able to get their heads above the surface after an unexpected fall into deep water. Safety considerations are paramount. For example a roll entry may be an appropriate in a swimming pool but it may not be safe or practical in open water⁵⁰
 - b. An action to ensure participants can gain control of their breathing and find safety. As a result of learning this skill, participants will be able to keep their mouths above the surface so that they can breathe while in deep water for a period of 30-60 seconds⁵⁰. This could be floating on their back or treading water.
 - c. Move through water using any form of propulsion and combination of strokes on the front, back or side for a minimum distance of 25 meters; The distance should take into account the water environment – large, cold, deep and fast-moving water environments would suggest a longer distance. The ability to swim on both front and back has been identified as equally important and should require equal attention in the teaching process.⁵²
 - d. Rescue and be rescued by extending or grasping a rescue aid (e.g. pole, bottle, rope etc.) and be guided to safety over a distance (i.e. 3 to 5 metres).
 - e. Practice putting on and swimming and floating using a lifejacket.
3. The assessment of competence in the basic aquatic survival skill should be conducted:
 - a. with no supporting equipment (i.e. no fins or flotation aids);
 - b. in any suitable and controlled body of water over measured distance
 - c. by assessors with a required level of skill and competence;
 - d. with student to instructor ratios specific to the skill level (e.g. beginner), the water conditions and with due considerations for safety of all persons involved.⁵⁰
4. Instruction should aim to build awareness of a range of water conditions such as moving water, breaking waves, rip currents with a focus on the predominant drowning scenarios that may be encountered.
5. Practice while wearing clothing is an important part of basic aquatic survival skill acquisition. It is recommended that clothing should be kept on due to the additional buoyancy it provides (in most cases) and the risk on entanglement when removing. The level of clothing worn should be consistent with that normally worn in the country and region in which the person normally resides.

Risk Management Approaches

Fear of drowning is a major deterrent to learning basic swimming among individuals and cultures^{43,44}. Inappropriate experiences in the water at a young age can lead to a lifelong avoidance of water and aquatic education. The United Nations - Convention on the Rights of the Child states that a child should be protected from circumstances that are harmful to the child's physical or mental development.

Several risk management guidelines may be drawn from the WHO Global Report on Drowning Implementation Guide⁴⁶:

- A safe training environment adapted to local settings. WHO cite LIMICs programmes that demarcate areas in ponds with submerged platforms or above ground transportable pools filled with fresh water as examples of training environments adapted to local settings
- Trained instructors - who are well versed in the curriculum, its training methods and what is expected of them in relation to supervision”.
- Instructor to participant ratios should be a factor in safety planning.⁵⁰ Determination of ratios should be based on ages, water conditions, water environment and skills etc.. Any factors that increase the risk, such as using open water, deeper water or teaching more swimmers at the same time would require additional teaching/lifeguard support.

The underlying prerequisite for teaching children to swim is a heavy emphasis on safety. Curricula, training environment, screening and student selection, instructors and student instructor ratios all need to be part of an overall risk management system. And training children to swim is an inherently dangerous process and swim skills training should be approached as a public health intervention – where safety should be demonstrated and constantly monitored.”⁴⁶

Classroom-based Education Programmes

Classroom based education should supplement aquatic programmes and/or be used in areas where aquatic activity is not available. The International Life Saving Federation (ILS) provides a library of education programmes. Classroom based programs should ensure that the information provided is relevant to the local area's needs and that it is appropriate and engaging for the learners.

Appendix 1

BACKGROUND

In 2007 International Life Saving (ILS) adopted the Position Statement for Swimming and Water Safety Education¹. This ILS Position Statement noted that *“evidence is rapidly accumulating that a basic level of water safety knowledge, coupled with a basic level of swimming skill (often called survival swimming) is sufficient to prevent most drowning episodes”*.¹

Swimming and water safety education was a theme of enquiry during the World Conference on Drowning Prevention 2011 (WCDDP2011) in Vietnam.

The World Health Organization (WHO) *Global Drowning Report: Preventing a Leading Killer, released in 2014*, focused on drowning in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) and among children and young people.⁴⁶ The report recommends the teaching of school aged children basic swimming, water safety and rescue as one of ten key actions.

In May 2017 the WHO released the Global Report on Drowning – implementation guide. The guide reinforces the need to address basic swimming skills in response to drowning as a serious and neglected public health threat.

Numerous papers, posters and workshop discussions informed the development of this position statement.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

Risk Factor and/or Protective Factor

The WHO Global Report on Drowning reports that the highest drowning rates are among children aged 1-4 years, followed by children aged 5- 9 years. Males are twice as likely to drown as females. In the WHO Western Pacific Region, children aged 5-14 years die more frequently from drowning than from any other cause including road traffic crashes⁴⁶

An absence of swimming skills has been identified as a contributing factor in drowning in minority groups in High Income Countries such as Australia.⁵⁻⁷.

In Canada, the need for teaching survival swimming skills to migrant children has been identified following a study conducted by Statistics Canada that estimates that nearly one in two Canadians could be either an immigrant or the child of an immigrant by 2036⁴⁹

An issue in low and middle-income countries (LMICs)

Several studies¹⁰⁻¹³ describing drowning risk factors in children in LMICs have identified the absence of swimming skills as a significant drowning risk factor. Those same studies and several others¹⁴⁻¹⁶ have proposed teaching school aged children basic survival swimming skills as an intervention to prevent drowning in children over 5 years of age.

Research¹⁷ presented at the WCDP2011 showed a reduction in drowning risk in Bangladeshi children as a result of teaching survival swimming skills, coupled with community drowning risk reduction programs, delivered in a structured and well supervised manner. The basis of this intervention is further described in a report by The Alliance for Safe Children and UNICEF¹⁸.

The WHO Global Report on Drowning, highlighted evidence on the effectiveness of drowning prevention programmes in LMICs. The SwimSafe programme – a regional, basic swim skills training program operating in Bangladesh, Thailand and Vietnam was cited. Specifically, the study of SwimSafe Bangladesh was cited as demonstrating a significant reduction of drowning following basic swimming and water safety training for children aged 4-12 years.⁴⁶

Special considerations

As water conditions in emergencies are likely to vary from the controlled environment of a swimming pool, instruction in basic swimming skills should aim to build awareness of water conditions such as moving water, breaking waves, rip currents.

A study⁵¹ reports that most cold-water immersion deaths occur due to either the cold shock response⁴¹ (gasping and hyperventilation), or cold incapacitation (due to cooling of muscle and nerve fibres). Four phases of cold water immersion: cold shock response; cold incapacitation; hypothermia and circum-rescue collapse have been identified.

Age appropriateness

Drowning in children aged under five has prompted debate about the efficacy of swimming lessons as a drowning prevention strategy in children as young as 6 months. A scientific review³⁹ found that the optimal age for introducing children to water education in an HIC is 1-4 years; many basic skills can be acquired between 18-60 months; and that early acquisition of skills serve as a foundational role for later skills. In a case control study, Brenner⁴⁰ found an association between participation in formal swimming lessons and a 88% reduction in drowning in children 1-4 years.

In 2010 the American Academy of Paediatrics issued a statement⁴¹ noting it supports swimming lessons for children 4 years and older and allowing parental decision for children beginning to learn water survival skills between 1-4 years of age and cautions against the notion of drown proofing.

While it may be feasible to teach children 1-4 years, a study by Blanksby⁴² in 1995 comparing the number of lessons taken by children to reach a benchmark of 10 metres of front crawl found that children aged five took substantially fewer lessons to achieve this milestone than children who commenced at age 2, 3 or 4 years.

The term drown proofing has been adopted by some infant swimming practitioners but was initially developed as a water survival technique in adults that was invented by Fred Lanoue, swimming coach at Georgia Institute of Technology from 1936 to 1964. The use of the term drown proofing is discouraged and not supported by the ILS.

LEN (European Swimming Federation) introduced a new programme in 2018. “Getting Europe Swimming Safely”, reflects on a goal to decrease the number of drowning in the continent and to set standards in learning to swim. LEN recommends that all children will have tried to enroll in a learn-to-swim programme at least by the age of 8 years and after completing a course they should be able to swim at least 200 metres in warm water. Standards are also set for facilities, teachers and lifeguards⁵³

Appendix 2

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