

**SAVING CHILDREN'S LIVES THROUGH  
WATER SAFETY AWARENESS INSTRUCTION**  
Is it worth our time?

**Policy Brief**

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# **SAVING CHILDREN'S LIVES THROUGH WATER SAFETY AWARENESS INSTRUCTION**

## **Is it worth our time?**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Approximately 800 children die from unintentional drowning in the United States yearly. A disproportionately higher number of minority children are represented in those numbers. Water safety awareness instruction could reduce those rates. However, disadvantaged families have limited access to this lifesaving information. Including water safety instruction in elementary school physical education curriculum by way of several classroom mini-lessons and parent outreach could save lives.

### **CONTEXT AND IMPORTANCE OF THE PROBLEM**

Unintentional drowning is a global, national, and local problem. According to the World Health Organization, "Drowning is the process of experiencing respiratory impairment from submersion/immersion in liquid. Drowning outcomes are classified as death, morbidity and no morbidity<sup>1</sup>." The WHO *Global Report on Drowning: Preventing a Leading Killer*, highlights that, "Alarming, drowning is among the 10 leading causes of death of children and young people in every region of the world, with children aged under 5 years disproportionately at risk and males twice as likely to drown as females<sup>2</sup> ." Those statistics are mirrored on the national level as well. The National Safe Kids Campaign estimates that 5,000 children ages 14 and under are hospitalized annually as a result of drowning incidents; 15% die in the hospital, and as many as 20% suffer severe, permanent neurological disability<sup>3</sup>. The USA Swimming Foundation national research study indicates that in ethnically-diverse communities, the youth drowning rate is 2-3 times higher than the national average<sup>4</sup>. The statistics in the state of Connecticut are analogous. From 2004-2014 sixty-two children from birth to nineteen died from unintentional drowning<sup>5</sup>. Of those, 35% were white and 34% were minority while the general population averaged 75% white and 25% minority<sup>6</sup>. These data do not include children who experienced other short or long term effects. The State of Connecticut Department of Public Health corroborates this information with its summation that for 2000-2004, "The Non-Hispanic Black population experienced a drowning rate twice that of the Non-Hispanic White population, and 33% higher than the Hispanic population. There were no drowning deaths among the Non- Hispanic Other Race population<sup>7</sup>."

## **WHY IS THERE A DISPARITY IN RATES?**

To explain the disparity of unintentional drowning rates between white and minority children, various theories identify factors such as swimming skills of those in the household, fear, parental encouragement, discrimination, and practical barriers. The USA Swimming Foundation study found, “If a parent does not know how to swim, there is only a 13 percent chance that a child in that household will learn how to swim.” They also indicate, “Children from nonswimming [sic] households are eight times more likely to be at-risk of drowning. Two key barriers preventing children from learning to swim are fear of injury or drowning, and lack of parental encouragement<sup>8</sup>.” The YMCA states, “while legal barriers to sharing the water and learning to swim no longer exist, practical barriers still do. Years of discrimination have resulted in cultural memories of hurt and pain, fallacies about buoyancy, an absence of role models, discomfort in being in the distinct minority at pools, on swim teams and beaches, and the mistaken but persistent belief that “blacks can’t swim<sup>9</sup>.” Water safety awareness may or may not be conveyed to children via parents or other adults through the natural course of parenting or in conjunction with swimming instruction. In order for instruction to take place, however, a caregiver needs access to it both logistically and financially. For families without transportation, finances, or access to a local facility that provides lessons, their children go without formalized water safety awareness and swimming instruction.

## **WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP SAVE LIVES?**

Included in the ten actions for preventing drowning, the World Health Organization suggests, “Teach school-aged children basic swimming, water safety, and safe rescue skills<sup>10</sup>.” According to the Center for Disease Control, “drowning continues to be a public health problem affecting racial/ethnic groups disparately among different age groups and in different aquatic settings; these differences require implementation of multiple prevention strategies<sup>11</sup>.”

The current model of swimming instruction by major providers including the American Red Cross, the YMCA, and Swim for Life, include water safety awareness as a component of their learn to swim programs. Water Safety USA, a roundtable of longstanding national nonprofit and governmental organizations, outlines water safety tips for a variety of aquatic settings including pools and waterparks, natural bodies of water (lakes, rivers, and oceans), and at home<sup>12</sup>. These tips are content based and do not involve skill acquisition. It is possible to isolate the water safety awareness

component to be taught on “dry land” without the physical aspect of swimming skill acquisition. The Guidelines for a Coordinated Approach to School Health from the Connecticut State Department of Education, authored in 2007, have no direct reference to water safety instruction. Including water safety awareness instruction would provide equal access to lifesaving information to all children regardless of their racial/ethnic affiliation, socioeconomic status, level of parent interest, or access to a swimming facility.

## **CRITIQUE OF POLICY OPTIONS**

One option to address the concern is to provide all students with water safety awareness and swimming instruction. This would require access to swimming pools, transportation to those pools, certified instructors at appropriate ratios, and curriculum. Unfortunately, given the current economic climate, providing all students with water safety awareness and swimming instruction is both fiscally and logistically unrealistic. However, it should be considered for small target populations such as children with Autism Spectrum Disorder; of all children with ASD who die, 90% are as a result of unintentional drowning<sup>13</sup>.

A second option is to offer water safety instruction to all elementary aged students via four to eight mini-lessons on water safety awareness in the month of May (National Water Safety Month) during Physical Education classes. Lessons might include discussion, playing games simulating a water experience, watching videos and disseminating information to families. This would require either the development of or adoption of a water safety curriculum, its distribution, and teacher training.

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## **OTHER SOURCES**

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Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
National Park Service  
National Swimming Pool Foundation  
Safe Kids Worldwide  
Swim for Life  
U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission  
United States Lifesaving Association  
USA Swimming Foundation  
YMCA of the USA

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