

Swimming Instruction: an Essential Service

Lifesaving Society Position Statement, December 2020

Position Statement

The Lifesaving Society supports the classification of basic instruction in swimming skills, lifesaving skills for self and others, and CPR skills as an essential service during the ongoing pandemic. The Society recommends that government permit such instruction to protect and maintain public health.

Background/Rationale

- The World Health Organization (WHO) reports drowning is among the top causes of death for children worldwide, and that programs like the Lifesaving Society's Swim to Survive instruction could have immunization-like benefits. Teaching school-age children basic swimming, water safety and safe rescue skills is one of the Ten Actions to Prevent Drowning specifically identified by the WHO report.
- "Teaching young children basic survival swimming skills can have a life-long immunization effect against drowning," says Dr. Stephen Beerman, a Canadian doctor and researcher who contributed to the report. "The Lifesaving Society's Swim to Survive program is an excellent example of how an organized, community-based approach can have an impact on generations of children. The program is a great model for other countries in the world."
- In Canada, drowning is the No. 1 cause of unintentional injury deaths among children 1-4 years of age, and the second leading cause of preventable death for children under 10 years.
- With some 450-500 fatalities annually, drowning is the third leading cause of unintentional death among Canadians under 60 years of age (surpassed only by motor vehicle collisions and poisoning). In Ontario, about 160 people drown every year. These drownings are preventable.

- In 2010, the Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario conducted a review of drownings in Ontario between May 1 and September 30, 2010. The Lifesaving Society participated as a member of the Drowning Review panel and assisted in the data input process. The Drowning Review report, released in June 2011, included 12 recommendations with two related to swimming instruction. The review supported the Lifesaving Society's Swim to Survive program for Grade 3 students and recommended that as many school boards as possible in the province utilize the instructional program that provides both in-water and classroom education.
- Further, the report recommended that advanced programs be developed for children so that they can swim and are knowledgeable about water safety skills before they graduated from elementary school. In June 2012, the Society launched its advanced survival swimming program – Swim to Survive+. Both programs receive funding from the Ministry of Education.
- The Lifesaving Society has reported on its research with New Canadians that indicates they are at higher risk for drowning than those born in Canada. Specifically, New Canadians are four times more likely to be unable to swim than those who were born in Canada. Further, swimming and recreating around water is a popular activity with almost 80% of New Canadians reporting they intended to be on or around water in the summer.
- The Lifesaving Society believes basic swimming ability is a fundamental requirement in any meaningful attempt to eliminate drowning in Canada. Programs like the Lifesaving Society Swim for Life and Lifesaving Society Swim to Survive teach skills needed to survive an unexpected fall into deep water.

Implementation

- The Ontario government support the classification of basic instruction in swimming skills, lifesaving skills for self and others, and CPR skills and the necessary training and recertification of aquatic staff as an essential service during the ongoing pandemic and therefore amend Regulations 82/20, 263/20 and 364/20 which would permit this instruction in public aquatic facilities.
- Ontario's COVID-19 Framework for Keeping Ontario Safe and Open should be updated to reflect these regulatory changes and align with the Lifesaving Society reopening plans that are used by Ontario Public Health and aquatic facility operators throughout the province

- An educational campaign should be launched by the Ontario government, regional health units and owner/operators of public aquatic centres promoting lesson programs.

Sources

- WHO Global Report on Drowning, Preventing a Leading Killer, 2014
- Canadian Drowning Prevention Research Centre, 2020 Drowning Reports – Canada and Ontario
- Canadian Drowning Prevention Coalition, Essential service Classification for swimming, lifesaving, and CPR skills training letter, November 2020
- IPSOS Reid research study in 2010 with New Canadians and in 2016 with Pre-teen New Canadians
- Canadian Drowning Prevention Coalition, Canadian Drowning Prevention Plan, 7th edition

Disclaimer

Lifesaving Society Safety Position Statements are developed using Coroners' recommendations, the latest evidence-based research, and reflect the aquatics industry's best practices at the time the publication was approved.

The purpose of these statements is to encourage swimming pool, waterpark and waterfront owners, managers, operators and regulators to encourage regulators to adopt these positions, in order to prevent drownings in aquatic environments.

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