



SINK OR SWIM

The state of Victorian primary school children's swimming ability

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Executive Summary

A knowledge of swimming and water safety can reduce a child's drowning risk and provide them with skills that may one day save a life. In addition, swimming and water safety skills have demonstrated benefits on child health in terms of social, psychological and physical well-being. Recent trends indicate an increase in drowning in children between 5 and 14 years of age in Victoria. This, alongside suggestions that Victorian school children are missing out on engaging in swimming and water safety education, leads us to ask what our children are learning and what their abilities in the water are. The current study therefore aimed to determine the swimming ability and water safety knowledge of Victorian children exiting primary school, measured against state and national standards, and estimated by parents and teachers.

Swimming ability

Teachers estimated that three in five Victorian Year 6 students in 2012 could not swim 50 metres and that two in five were unable to float for more than 2 minutes. This translates to over 39,000 Victorian children leaving primary school unable to swim 50 metres. Parents estimated that two in five children could not swim 50 metres and that one in ten could not float for more than 2 minutes. These estimates are poorer than those suggested by research from Royal Life Saving Society Australia which estimated that one in five could not swim 50 metres and highlight a startling need to address the extent of the gap in ability.

The current report supports other Australian studies that suggest regular participation in swimming lessons has the most measurable impact on a child's swimming ability. Based on parent responses, significantly more children who went swimming on a fortnightly or more frequent basis were able to swim 50 metres unaided compared with those who went swimming "about once a month" or less. Regular lessons not only improve swimming ability, they also provide benefits to health, fitness, motor skill

development and influence social, psychological and physical wellbeing.

This study found no significant difference in reported swimming ability between children living in metropolitan areas and those in regional areas, indicating a need for improved access to quality swimming and water safety education across Victoria. Most teachers believed that the swimming ability of children born outside Australia was below that of an "average swimmer". Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities have been identified as being at greater risk of drowning than other communities in Australia because a large proportion reportedly cannot swim and often have little or no experience with Australian aquatic environments.

Water safety knowledge

In addition to providing safe and well-supervised locations for people to swim in, there is a need to provide quality swimming and water safety education to children. Teachers estimated that 39% of Year 6 students lacked adequate water safety knowledge. This translates to over 25,000 Victorian students leaving primary school without sufficient knowledge to avoid getting into dangerous situations in and around water. Children living in areas of greatest socio-economic disadvantage were more likely to lack this knowledge and particular attention should be focused on addressing this gap.

Provision of swimming and water safety education

40% of parents said their child had never participated in a school-run swimming program and 12% of surveyed school teachers reported their school did not run a swimming program. The case for in-school provision of swimming and water safety education is strong because access to swimming lessons is easier if they are part of the school program. This may enable the participation of children who might otherwise not engage in physical activity such as those

from CALD, Indigenous or low socio-economic backgrounds. This highlights the importance of in-school provision of lessons to provide these opportunities for children in a safe, organised environment.

In 2012, 64% of schools taught other water safety programs alongside, or instead of, formal swimming lessons. The most popular were classroom-based water safety programs (44%) and surf/beach safety programs (35%) followed by inland waterway safety programs (14%). With one-third of students potentially missing out on school-based swimming and water safety education, there are theoretically thousands of children who lack the ability to recognise potential aquatic risks, cope with accidental entries, or assist someone else in danger.

Barriers to participation

Despite the importance of swimming and water safety education, barriers exist that prevent or limit participation for families, schools and the industry itself. For schools, program cost was the greatest barrier to their participation in formal lessons, followed by an already crowded curriculum and transport costs. These findings are not dissimilar to previous studies. A lack of qualified swim teachers was highlighted as an issue particularly for schools in regional Victoria. For schools in metropolitan areas, cultural barriers need addressing in order to increase participation among children from CALD communities.

Due to the high reported participation in swim lessons in the study sample, limited information was collected from parents on the barriers to their participation. Prohibitive factors included the time and financial costs of lessons. Whilst 60% of children had had lessons organised through their school, 81% had undertaken swimming lessons organised externally to school. These results suggest parents are filling the gaps in swimming education provision, therefore increasing the economic burden on families. This also means that those without the resources to pay for their

child to have lessons will miss out, increasing the gap in health inequality for those from low socio-economic backgrounds and CALD communities. These groups must be considered a priority for addressing gaps in swimming skills provision.

Barriers for the aquatic industry were not directly assessed; however, Life Saving Victoria (LSV) has sought feedback from the aquatics industry in the development of the recommendations of this report and will remain in consultation with the industry throughout the implementation process.

Future research

This study is the first to provide an assessment of the swimming ability and water safety knowledge of Victorian children. However, it did not provide a direct assessment of swimming skills due to limitations in the availability and access to this information. Further research is required to provide direct assessments of children's swimming ability, to determine the most effective methods to increase participation levels and to improve the quality of delivery of swimming and water safety education.