

Swimming for Life: The Emergency of Teaching Black Children to Swim

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Abstract

The purpose of this article was to provide relevant discussions and data related to the urgency of teaching Black and other minority children to swim. The findings in this report indicated that Black children tend to have a higher drowning rate when compared to other groups. Also, as high as 64 percent of Black children suffer from extreme fear when confronted with discussions pertaining to swimming. Researchers sometimes perceive this as a cultural issue manifested by parents who never learned to swim themselves. Our findings indicated that Black children have a six times likelihood for unintentional drowning when compared to their white counterparts. Among the reasons for low swimming priorities among Black children, included lack of facilities, affordability, fear of water, and hair concerns.

The USA Swimming Foundation has established strong financial support for many children and families to take basic swimming lesson throughout many communities. More scholarships and fundraising initiatives are critically needed. Health officials should continue to partner with social clubs and businesses in a consolidated effort to teach swimming on a continuous basis.

The Haddon Matrix has been effectively used for national and international swimming programs to help define risk factors and to implement strategies for safe swimming.

Many children consider swimming as fun and exciting. Swimming can contribute to increased flexibility, increased skills levels, cardiorespiratory fitness, and other health-related benefits [1]. Understandably, individuals who can swim are likely to have the requisite knowledge and skills to save themselves and others whenever a water emergency arrives. Moreover, scholarly research shows that participation in swimming contributes to emotional and psychological wellbeing including enhanced level of personal contentment and opportunities for positive social interactions [2].

Apart from the wide range of benefits associated with swimming, nearly ten people die every day from unintentional drowning, of whom two are children aged 14 years or younger. Also, for every child died from drowning, five children receive emergency hospital care for nonfatal submersion injuries. Drowning is the fifth leading cause of unintentional injury death in the United States. Nonfatal drowning injuries can be as serious as severe brain damage leading

to long-term memory problems, learning disabilities, and loss of basic functioning [3,4]. In 2002, the World Congress on Drowning and the World Health Organization (WHO) re-defined drowning as “the process of experiencing respiratory impairment from submersion/immersion in liquid,” which prohibits using such terms like wet, dry, secondary, active, near, passive, and silent drowning, etc. as synonyms for drowning [5]. Below is a summary and break down of the drowning rates by age and race from 2014 to 2018 as reported by the [6].

Table 1: Drowning rates* among persons aged 5 to 19 years old, by age group and race – United States, 2014 and 2018.

	Rate per 100,000	95% Confidence Interval
5-14-year olds		
Black	1.4	1.2, 1.5
White	0.4	0.4, 0.5
15-19 year olds		
Black	2.2	1.9-2.4
White	0.9	0.8, 1.0
Total (5-19 year olds)		
Black	1.6	1.5, 1.8
White	0.6	0.6, 0.6

Black Children: Risks and Constraints of Swimming

Black children undergo disproportional risk of unintentional fatal and non-fatal drowning. A 2017 study conducted by the USA Swimming Foundation disclosed that 64 percent of African-American children (aged 4-18 years) had no or low swimming ability when compared 45 percent of Hispanic children and 40 percent of White children-which was attributed for the problem of a historical lack of accessibility and training facilities for blacks. And, African-American children and their parents are three times more fearful of drowning than their Caucasian counterparts [7]. The Foundation also found that parental inability to swim is strongly associated (91%) with their children's lack of swimming skills [8]. The low percentage of African American children who stated that they were proficient swimmers, reported that they did not feel adequately prepared to swim in the deeper water. Less than a fraction of those surveyed, indicated that they were taught by a certified water safety instructor. Likewise, Pharr, Irwin, Layne, & Irwin, found that (1) African American and Hispanic/Latino respondents were significantly less skilled or comfortable in the pool and less likely to come from a home that regularly exercises and swim, or encourages swimming than White/Asian respondents; (2) as income increased so did respondent swimming ability/comfort, agreement with "swimming is for me", "I have a parent/guardian that encourages me to swim", "a majority of my family members can swim", and fear of drowning decreased; (3) respondents from homes with highly educated parents/guardians (advanced degrees) were significantly more skilled/ comfortable swimming and inclined to receive parental/guardian support for swimming, and less inclined to express fear of drowning than children from households with less educated parent/caregivers; (4) African-American boys reported significantly higher swim ability/comfort in pool and less fear of drowning than did African American girls, who were significantly less skilled or comfortable in the pool; (5) respondents indicating that it is not easy to get to the nearest pool as well as those citing a "fear of people around pool" and reported significantly lower swimming ability/comfort and higher fear of drowning; (6) free/reduced lunch recipients reported significantly lower swimming ability, significantly less agreement with "swimming is for me", parental/caregiver support, and greater fear of drowning; (7) 46 percent of parents of at-risk swimmers agreed or strongly agreed that they are afraid that their child will drown or become injured while swimming (compared to only 21% of non-at-risk swimmers); and, (8) 65 percent of parents of at-risk swimmers are, themselves, at-risk swimmers, whereas only 19% of parents of non-at-risk swimmers are, themselves, at-risk.

The scholarly literature further suggested that Black children have a six times higher likelihood of unintentional drowning in swimming pools when compared to White children for the same age group [9]. On an average, 300 pool and spa related deaths involving children younger than 15 years of age were reported from 2007 to 2009. Approximately 73 percent of those deaths occurred at residential locations, and three-quarters of the reported deaths involved children under the age of five. Of an estimated annual average of 5, 200 pool or spa related injuries involving children younger than 15 years, from 2009 through 2011, of which approximately 51 percent occurred at residential locations [6]. Portable pools accounted for an annual average of 40 deaths involving children younger than 15 years of age. Even more questionable, several self-reported investigations have indicated that up to 40 percent of

African American children "taught themselves to swim" [10,11]. Such self-instructions are frequently associated with inadvisable techniques and poor skills habits that are difficult to manage.

Wiltse indicated that swimming has never been a significant part of the recreation culture for most African American children [12]. The prevailing challenge is for children to learn not to fear the water and learn the basic techniques such as blowing bubbles, breathing, and gliding. Some practitioners have suggested that the ability to swim is a cultural issue, because many of the African American children have parents and grandparents who never learned to swim [13]. It is commonly perceived that minority parents and children tend to have higher levels of fear of the water which is thought to be linked to their genetic make-up. This fear is connected to a type of phobia called "Aqua-phobia". Subsequently, this high level of anxiety is frequently observed when many of the children come in contact with pools, spas, and large bathtubs. Unfortunately, this phobia has been passed down through several generations and is a major reason for not learning to swim [14].

Widely Broadcasted Incidents

One of the most tragic water-related accidents in recent times occurred in the state of Louisiana in 2010, when six teenagers from two families drowned in the Red River in Shreveport. None of the bystanders could swim. It can be a devastating act to watch friends or relatives struggle for life in water and cannot assist or rescue them. Similarly, Cullen Jones, an Olympic gold medalist and record-setting swimmer, nearly became a drowning statistic at age five when he was thrown from his inner tube at a water park and remained submerged for 30 seconds. He was saved by resuscitation, after which his parents insisted that he learn to swim. Mr. Jones who is African American, now tours the country encouraging and providing support for African American children to learn to swim.

In Georgia, an 11-year-old female drowned during a pool party to celebrate the last day of class in 2011. At the time, there were 33 adolescents and teenagers in the pool and only 16 students admitted that they had any swimming experience. Kadarius Wagner, a 13-year-old, slipped into a closed YMCA pool in Oak Cliff, Texas, to cool off. Wagner didn't know how to swim and got stuck out in the deep end. He became another drowning statistic. But it doesn't just happen to children who sneak into pools. Public pools and water-parks pose a danger to minorities at all times according to Sue Nelson, aquatics program specialist for USA Swimming. Nelson warned that one of the greatest growing threats to water-safety is the water slide. Children who are not skillful swimmers can go directly to the bottom of the pool due to the moving force from leaving the slide and entering the water.

Discussion

Swimming ability is such a vital survival skill that some health officials believe it should be a school requirement like reading, writing, and math [15]. For many poor families, it appears that they just don't have the extra finances to afford swimming lessons for their children. Even more disturbing is the general belief that many minority parents would not allow their children to take swimming lessons even if they were free. Indeed, cost and exclusivity have always been barriers for many black and lower-class families [16]. Consequently, many African Americans believe that

a lack of access to pools, the expense of swimming lessons, and the perception that recreational swimming is a culturally white activity, are factors that prohibit them from learning how to swim. Some countries, such as the United Kingdom require swimming as part of the national curriculum, and usually no cost is associated with their program offerings. On the other hand, in the United States, the burden is largely placed on parents to provide the financial resources for their children. Furthermore, the inability to swim prevents African American children from being qualified for a variety of summer employment and career opportunities, ranging from lifeguards and camp counselors to sport coaches and directors of swimming clubs.

In relation to family values, between white and black Americans, some reports have suggested that embedded values can lead to lack of attention and access to aquatic activities [17,18]. For example, conversations with parents who knew how to swim, saw the value in making sure their children could swim as well. On the contrary, messages from parents who were never taught to swim, did not identify swimming ability as being a high priority. When a parent doesn't endorse swimming or discourages a child from participating in swimming, the life threatening cycle continues to exist. It requires intentional effort on the part of children and adults to disrupt the pervasive and persistent narrative in African American communities that water is dangerous and swim lessons are not accessible.

Stereotypes can also play a large role in how parents decide what is beneficial for their children. Children's self-concept can be a strong determinant in how they perceive themselves and what activities best fit them. If an African American youth has grown up hearing and seeing that swimming is not for them, it could be understandable that swimming is not part of their life as an African American [19]. They have to connect the value, need, and importance of the activity. Nevertheless, swimming is a life skill, much like riding a bicycle or fishing. Much too often, stereotypes suggest African American children don't want to swim because they can't float, terrified of water, and will do nearly anything to avoid getting their hair wet. Social barriers and the media influences are also factors that may not be favorable to African American children when considering swimming instructions. Recent observations indicated the lack of minority representation in aquatic activities portrayed in movies and on television has further delineated black and minority children from perceiving swimming as being important [17].

The USA Swimming Foundation's "Make a Splash" initiative has granted more than \$45 million to swimming organizations to support free and reduced cost lessons [8]. After providing grants to 34

swimming schools in 2011, they have grown to recently granting 77 swimming schools with funds to teach underserved children. These are inspiring numbers, but still there is a much bigger need to assist children and their families from around the nation. Olympic Gold medalist Cullen Jones, other visible athletes, and many corporate partners, are making a significant difference in communities across the country where they continue to emphasize the urgency of children and youth learning to swim.

Nonprofit organizations such as the Boys and Girls Clubs, NYSPs, YWCAs, YMCAs, and local parks and recreation departments can provide valuable exposure for many communities. The National Red Cross's Centennial Campaign has expanded its initiative to teach millions of Americans how to swim, with greater emphasis in cities and states where some of the nation's highest drowning rates are located.

Conclusion

Swimming, when learned properly, can be an enjoyable recreational skill that children can engage at all aquatic locations throughout their lifespans. Otherwise, it can pose the risk of drowning, which is a major public health problem as discussed in this article. Learning to swim via a structured program is widely recognized as a major drowning prevention strategy [20]. Drowning also affects racial/ethnic groups disproportionately among different age groups and in different aquatic settings. There is a myriad of reasons found in the literature for the inability of African American children to swim, including fear of water, stigma associated with hair and skin color, lack of facilities, funds and affordability, attitudes and experiences of family members and others, low interest and motivation, and others influences. Hence, efforts should be made to increase African American children's participation in safe and acceptable ways to reduce their fatal and non-fatal drowning rates. The Haddon Matrix provides several strategies for drowning prevention before, during, and after the drowning event at the individual, environment, and policy levels, as shown in the Table 2.

Public health officials and the African American community must work with local school systems, public agencies, and social clubs to emphasize the fundamental needs for establishing and maintaining effective swimming programs. Crucial elements such as scholarships and fund-raising are essential components in bringing about effective and long-lasting swimming initiatives. Improving swimming skills through proper training, along with active supervision, proper use of life jackets and other protective measures, and adhering to basic rules would make significant differences in children's risk reduction [21-25].

Table 2: Using the Haddon Matrix to Define Risk Factors and Prevention Strategies for Open Water Drowning

	Personal Factors	Equipment	Physical Environment	Social Environment
Pre-Event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of supervision Lack of knowledge about water risks Alcohol consumption by victim/caregivers Lack of education about open water or swimming lessons Developmental issues Gender (male) Medical condition, e.g. epilepsy Need to access water for functional purposes, e.g., fishing Transport on water Recreational use of water Cultural norms/beliefs Socioeconomic status Race/ethnicity <p>✓ PRIORITY AREA: Swimming Skills and Water Safety Education, Boating Under the Influence</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No life jacket available Life jacket for swimming not allowed in pools or lifeguarded areas Lack of life jackets or other life-saving devices in boat Lack of lifeguards Unprotected water hazards Unsafe/overloaded watercraft <p>✓ PRIORITY AREA: Safer Water Recreation Sites, Life Jackets</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No access to lifeguarded or regulated swim areas No life jacket loaner program Lack of barriers Lack of signage Lack regulation of site Lack of open container laws Attractive nuisance i.e., off shore buoy Unfamiliar environment; slippery, uneven, unstable or steep surfaces near or in water; Weather conditions, e.g., floods, strong sea currents Inadequate physical infrastructure, such as bridges or safe crossings Lack of warning of severe weather <p>✓ PRIORITY AREA: Safer Water Recreation Sites, Life Jackets, Boating Under the Influence, Surveillance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low adult use of life jacket Lack of supervision or child care; reliance on peer or older child supervision Failure of authorities to remove potential hazards; Lack of fencing legislation; l Lack of water safety instruction and community awareness programs Lack of agency oversight/prevention Lack of authority to close high-risk waterways Lack of marine patrol staffing Boating while intoxicated accepted <p>✓ PRIORITY AREA: Safer Water Recreation Sites, Life Jackets, Boating Under the Influence, Partnerships</p>
Event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor swimming ability Not wearing life jacket Rescuer unable to swim and/or lacks rescue skills Lack of swimming and/or water survival skills Overestimation of swimming ability Lack of comprehension of situation Panic response Swimming alone Lack of personal alerting devices or knowledge of emergency signals <p>✓ PRIORITY AREA: Life Jackets, Swimming Skills and Water Safety Education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No life jacket use-child or adult <p>✓ PRIORITY AREA: Life Jackets</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No lifeguarded swim areas Variable water depth; unstable footing; snags in water Lack of escape mechanism e.g., ladder, ropes, flotation device Cold water; deep water River and rip currents Sneaker waves; big waves <p>✓ PRIORITY AREA: Safer Water Recreation Sites</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low adult use of life jacket Poor access to information and resources for minimizing risk Inadequate infrastructure to call for emergency health services Beyond age of life jacket requirement Cultural belief that drowning is fate <p>✓ PRIORITY AREA: Life Jackets, Swimming Skills and Water Safety Education</p>
Post-Event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of water survival skills Lack of CPR training Delay in rescue Inaccessible first-aid kits Lack of knowledge by caregiver about what to do immediately Lack of alerting mechanism (such as mobile phone, flares) <p>✓ PRIORITY AREA: Safer Water Recreation Sites, Swimming Skills and Information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Victim carried away from shore by current <p>✓ PRIORITY AREA: None</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No lifeguards Long emergency or fire department response time <p>✓ PRIORITY AREA: Safer Water Recreation Sites</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low adult use of life jacket Inadequate care; poor access to acute care hospitals and rehabilitation services; Little community support for victims and families Lack of standards for drowning death data collection Lack of enforcement or penalties for BUI <p>✓ PRIORITY AREA: Life Jackets, Boating Under the Influence, Surveillance</p>

Adapted from: Peden M, Oyngbite K, Ozanne-Smith J, Hyder A, Branche C, Rahman AKM, Rivara F, and Bartolomeo K (eds). World Report on Child Injury Prevention (2008). Information on Haddon Matrix: Christoffel T and Gallagher SS. Injury Prevention and Public Health. Aspen Publishers, Inc. Gaithersburg, Maryland, 1999. Developed by Seattle Children's Hospital and Washington State Department of Health. To learn more, visit: www.seattlechildrens.org/ids. Supported by grant #1U7CE001778-01 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors, and do not represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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