

Summer Safety ☀️

Staying Safe Around the Water



Background

At Connecticut Children's, advocacy is an important part of advancing children's health and well-being. During the summer months, children spend more time around pools, lakes, rivers, and beaches, making water safety a critical public health priority. While swimming is a healthy and enjoyable activity, it comes with risks that can be mitigated through parent awareness and public policy changes.

Drowning is the leading cause of death for children ages 1–4. For children ages 5–14, drowning is the second leading cause of unintentional injury death, surpassed only by motor vehicle crashes. Across the United States, more than 4,000 people die from unintentional drowning each year—an average of approximately 11 deaths every day. Thousands more survive nonfatal drowning events, many of whom experience permanent brain injury or other lifelong disabilities.

Connecticut Children's supports evidence-based strategies that help families prevent drowning while promoting policies that expand access to lifesaving water safety education.

Swim Lessons Save Lives

Formal swim lessons are one of the most effective tools available to reduce childhood drowning. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identifies participation in formal swim instruction as an evidence-based strategy for lowering drowning risk, particularly when combined with close adult supervision, barriers such as pool fencing, and the use of life jackets when appropriate.

Modern swim instruction focuses on developing **water competency**—the practical skills children need to survive an unexpected fall into the water. Rather than emphasizing swimming strokes alone, quality programs teach children how to safely enter the water, surface after submersion, float or tread water, turn toward safety, swim a short distance, and exit the water independently.



Swim lessons also teach children how to remain calm, control their breathing, conserve energy by floating, and safely reach the edge of a pool or another exit. These survival skills can provide valuable time until help arrives.

Research consistently demonstrates the effectiveness of formal swim instruction. One landmark study found that participation in formal swim lessons was associated with an **88% reduction in drowning risk among children ages 1–4** (Brenner et al., 2009), making swim instruction one of the strongest evidence-based interventions available for drowning prevention.

Expanding Access to Swim Lessons

Although swim lessons save lives, many families face barriers that limit access to quality instruction. The cost of lessons, transportation challenges, limited program availability, and lack of nearby aquatic facilities can prevent children from developing critical water safety skills.

These barriers have contributed to longstanding disparities in drowning risk. Nationally, more than half of U.S. adults have never received formal swim instruction, with participation rates lowest among Black and Hispanic adults. Similar disparities exist among children, with Black and Hispanic youth significantly more likely than White children to have never taken swim lessons.

The consequences are reflected in drowning statistics. Black children ages 5–9 experience drowning rates approximately 2.6 times higher than White children. Among children ages 10–14, the rate increases to 3.6 times higher overall and 7.6 times higher in swimming pools. Overall, Black individuals under age 30 experience drowning death rates approximately 1.5 times higher than their White peers.

Research consistently attributes these disparities to historical and structural inequities in access to swimming instruction, safe aquatic facilities, and recreational opportunities—not to biological differences. Expanding equitable access to affordable swim lessons represents an important opportunity to reduce preventable injuries and improve health outcomes.

Water Safety Requires More Than Swimming Ability

Learning to swim is only one part of preventing drowning. High-quality swim programs also teach children how to recognize unsafe water conditions, understand when life jackets are necessary, avoid swimming alone, and know how to call for help without placing themselves in danger.

Equally important, these programs reinforce that swimming ability does not eliminate risk. Children should always be supervised around water, regardless of their age or swimming experience.

Many swim lesson programs also educate parents and caregivers about additional layers of protection, including:

- Maintaining constant, close supervision—particularly "touch supervision" for young children.
- Installing four-sided fencing with self-closing, self-latching gates around home pools.
- Keeping rescue equipment readily available.
- Learning CPR.
- Using properly fitted U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets while boating and in natural bodies of water.

Because drowning can occur quickly and quietly, no single intervention is sufficient. The greatest protection comes from combining supervision, swimming skills, physical barriers, and emergency preparedness.

Policy Opportunity: Expanding Water Safety Education

Senate Bill 263, the **Water Safety and Swim Instruction Act**, which was introduced during the 2026 Connecticut state legislative session but did not become law, would help address these barriers by directing the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection to establish a free summer swim instruction program for eligible children and adolescents under age 17.

Expanding community-based swim instruction would provide more children with access to evidence-based drowning prevention education while helping reduce financial barriers that place lifesaving skills out of reach for many families. Investments in affordable swim lessons, water safety education, and community aquatic programs have the potential to reduce drowning deaths, improve health equity, and ensure that every child has the opportunity to safely enjoy Connecticut's lakes, rivers, pools, and shoreline.

To learn more about this issue and other injury prevention initiatives, please visit Connecticut Children's Injury Prevention Center's [Community Outreach page](#).