

Good swimmers drown more often than non-swimmers: How openwater swimming could feature in beginner swimming

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If we look at drowning statistics and relate them to the population we discover that Norway has a high incidence of drowning, twice that of the USA and four times as many as in Britain and Holland (ILS World Drowning Report for 2003).

It is commonly said, "The best insurance against drowning is learning to swim". But the figures tell us something else. While approximately two-thirds of those who drowned were considered 'good swimmers' (2), almost all drowning accidents take place closer than 15 meters from possible rescue and more 50% closer than three meters from possible rescue. Why couldn't they swim to safety?

One might assume that good swimmers to a greater degree engage in water related activities, equally, the figures say nothing about how many survive due to good aquatic skills. Figures from a Survey made by Norwegian Swimming Federation indicate that only a half of the Norwegian population can be classed as 'competent' swimmers. Combining these figures one can conclude that learning to swim in fact doubles the risk of drowning.

Research shows that certain age groups and genders have a higher incidence of drowning. It also shows that although it is no significant difference between the self estimated aquatic skills and the real aquatic skills, in the exposed group there was a low estimation of the risk in specific situations (3).

In Norway, swimming education mainly takes place at indoor pools with a balanced air and water temperature (water temperature is 28°C). Contrast this with outdoor conditions where open water temperatures in Norway are between 0–15 degrees, rising in the summer but seldom above 20°C. Wind and waves add another dimension to swimming and survival skills, necessitating the need for a Personal Floating Device (PFD). Seldom do school swimming lessons include anything about environmental parameters or human limitations associated to swimming in open water. A common supposition is 'You don't need a PFD when you can swim'.

Looking at research about immersion, swimming and survival in cold water they all point to the human physiological limitations in cold water and underline the importance of wearing a PDF (4) (1), (5). Therefore, assessment of environmental challenges and taking appropriate measures should be a part of beginner swimming education. The Norwegian Life Saving Society can, through its many courses in baby and toddler courses, impact a large number of families to see swimming from a drowning preventative perspective. Many of these children progress into our lifesaving clubs where we wish to create an awareness of water safety including environmental factors and human limitations. Will experience and mastery of the outdoor challenges from an early age help to develop the ability to judge risk potential more accurately? This will be an interesting line of enquiry.

In addition, the NLS is engaging in a project funded by the government to introduce outdoor swimming education in schools. The experiences from a project started two years ago with 55 primary school children, participating in open water swimming lessons, form the basis for this undertaking. The project revealed that these children were learning much more than normal swimming education.

This presentation looks at the learning process that occurred in the pilot project and how we plan to educate the families in all levels of our education program to focus on water safety. We hope this will provide grounds for discussion at the conference and some may find they can develop these ideas further in their own country.

References

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