Swimming and water safety lessons should be mandatory for all children

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The unprecedented number of drownings over this Christmas holiday period is a wake-up call to the federal government to make a national water safety education program for our children an urgent priority.

In this water-worshipping nation, with our countless beaches and ubiquitous backyard pools, it is unbelievable that many children will never have early exposure to water safety education. There simply aren’t any nationally recognised or mandated programs for children under four, and swimming lessons aren’t mandatory. Yes, parents and carers certainly have a responsibility to ensure children are safe around water. But the reality is that for many families, swimming lessons are not accessible due to cost or locality.

According to the Royal Life Saving Society’s National Drowning Report 2016, 11 children aged between 5-14 died in Australian waterways over a 12-month period to July – this is two more than in the previous year. Since this report was released, there have been more. Given we are less than halfway through the summer, the thought that this death toll could rise further is staggering. Astonishingly, it’s thought that three out of five Australian children leave primary school without basic swimming skills. This means that more than half of all Australian 12-year-olds don’t have any training to draw upon to save their lives if they come into danger in the water. Organisations like the YMCA, a not-for-profit that’s one of the largest providers of swimming lessons across NSW, can only reach kids who live where we provide aquatic education programs, and whose parents have the time and the means to send them to regular lessons. Currently across Australia there are a variety of water safety regulations and swimming courses, but they are not nationally standardised. Several of our states and territories do not have legal requirements regarding water safety courses and the provision of swimming lessons. This needs to change.

Just as we teach children to walk, talk, to learn their ABCs and basic maths, we need to educate them about water and its dangers, from backyard pool risks through to how to avoid rips in the ocean. This could begin as early as daycare, with accredited agencies being funded to provide children aged one to four with specialty education about water familiarisation and general water safety – including teaching toddlers how to "swim to the side to stay alive". We could offer government-funded swimming lesson rebates for parents and carers, which could then be followed up with mandatory swimming lessons for primary school aged children.

We simply can’t waste any more time debating whether this issue deserves a
piece of the government funding pie. The tragedy of these recent drowning deaths have shown that we must act now.

The solution doesn't rest with just one organisation, one strategy, or one government, as a 2014 report on drowning by the World Health Organisation recognised. We know this has to be a multi-organisational approach, encompassing schools, government departments, community health centres, swimming lesson providers, community welfare programs, the Royal Life Saving Society Australia, Surf Life Saving Australia, AUSTSWIM and others. There has to be the right mix of theory and practical exposure to water. We know we must reach all children, regardless of where they live. The YMCA NSW is advocating to bring these key players together and create a nationally regulated scheme that will ensure every single child has access to water education.

We need to work together and we need the federal government to make this happen. So let's add swimming to the school curriculum. Let's make swimming lessons a reality for all toddlers and preschoolers. Let's get into day cares, playgroups and preschools and teach kids the basic skills they will need to be safe in the water.

All Australian kids, regardless of their background, address or means, deserve the skills to survive.

**Leisa Hart is the CEO of YMCA NSW.**

**Comments:**

**The Jolly Taxpayer:**
Here we go again - it's Governments responsibility to teach our children to swim.
Our present Government couldn't organise a chook raffle at a poultry farm. And heaven knows the education system continues to fail miserably in teaching the very basics of literacy and numeracy. Why would any parent expect not to be responsible for teaching their child to swim?
Or have we reached the point where Australian parents aren't responsible for anything to do with their children's education for survival in future life unless its paid for by others?

**Socrates:**
Agree 100% that all children need to learn how to swim at an early age. However, it simply cannot fall to schools to facilitate this. The cost of running a learn to swim program is absolutely prohibitive for a school. Bus costs, pool entry and then lesson costs, multiplied out over a (minimum) 2 week daily course of lessons, is simply not in the budget of most schools. Not to mention the time and disruption to the myriad other parental responsibilities we teachers are expected to take on these days. I took the responsibility to teach my kids to swim, despite not living very near any appropriate facilities. Parents, over to you.