



Who's in the Pool?

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Unfortunately twenty six people, mostly children, drowned in YMCA swimming pools between 2002 and 2006. When looking at some additional statistics, aquatic and other YMCA professionals can begin to develop strategies to help prevent such tragic incidents in the future. Many of the victims were non-swimmers and most had not been swim-tested. Most victims were young boys, nearly half of the children drowned in shallow water and over two-thirds of them were participants from outside groups.

The job of a lifeguard is demanding and can be stressful, akin to an air traffic controller in terms of the necessity to remain vigilant and focused for extended periods of time. Y administrators need to review the primary functions of a lifeguard when addressing aquatic safety. The idea of saving lives or responding to incidents must be replaced with the idea of preventing accidents and proactive victim recognition. A lifeguard's job is to first prevent drownings and then to rescue swimmers who get into trouble in and around the water. The primary role of a lifeguard needs to be the prevention of drowning and the first rule in prevention of drownings is to pro-actively restrict non-swimmers and poor swimmers to shallow water. All swimmers should be tested before entering the water. Although we should be testing both adults and children, children have not yet reached the age of majority and our duty to protect a child is arguably greater than our duty to protect an adult because the child may not possess the maturity, judgment, or physical capacity necessary to remain safe in and around water. All youth and teens should be swim tested before entering the water with no exceptions. Prevention begins with swim testing all youth and teens before they enter the water.

Many YMCAs are now swim testing and tracking all youth and teen swimmers, including all participants of outside groups like day camp, rental groups and birthday parties, with no exceptions. Still, many YMCAs have not adopted the practice of swim testing all youth and teens with no exceptions. Until we have 100% compliance with swim testing across the YMCA movement we will continue to have preventable drownings.

Testing Guidelines

Every YMCA should have a swim testing policy as part of their comprehensive aquatic policy. The aquatic policy should be approved by the Board of Directors and reviewed at least on an annual basis. The purpose of swim testing is to ensure the safety of the children and to prevent drownings. The swim testing policy should be published in printed materials and posted in the pool area. The swim testing policy and its rationale should be clearly communicated to parents along with what role they have in active supervision. Swim testing times should be in print and posted. Times should be established that are convenient to the members and do not require the guards to test swimmers while guarding. Both deep water competency and shallow water competency should be evaluated. All children should be evaluated even if they are going to remain in the shallow water only. All swimmers should be wearing colored safety neck bands or swim caps at all times they are in or around the pool area. Neck bands are more easily recognizable by lifeguards than submerged wrist bands.

Swim test results should be documented with swimmer's name and assigned safety zone/color and maintained in a manner that allows staff to efficiently retrieve the information. Some YMCA's membership software displays this information when the membership card is scanned. Other Ys maintain the information in a book at the check-in desk; neck bands are provided at that time and returned to the guards at the end of the swim period.

The swim testing policy should be enforced at all times without exception for all youth and teens including all outside groups; rentals and birthday parties. In addition, many YMCAs have a policy requiring children under a certain age (eg: 12 years) to be accompanied by a parent in the building. This policy should be strictly enforced in all areas of the facility, but is critical in an aquatics setting as supervision is key to drowning prevention. A child who has to be accompanied by an adult to be in the building because of age or individual challenges who passes the swim test still needs a parent or adult caregiver in the pool area. Although the parent may not need to be in the water they still have to be present to provide supervision for the child. Neither shallow water competency nor swimming ability relates to a child's maturity and capacity to be left in a pool without parental supervision. Lifeguards are lifeguards only...not babysitters.

Sample Safety Swim Test Procedures

Each patron tested will be given a colored safety band to wear at the pool; preferably a colored breakaway neck band that can be seen easily by a guard while scanning as opposed to a submerged wrist band. These bands are readily available from a number of vendors including the lifeguardstore.com.

The YMCA of the USA suggests the following test criteria.

Deep Water Test - Green Band

First ask the patron to swim across the shallow end of pool. If the first step is completed successfully have them move to the deep end and jump into water that is over their head, and then return to the surface.

The third step would be to swim one length of the pool unassisted and without rest. The swimmer must maintain positive body position (legs should not drop past 45 degree angle) for the entire distance. It is best to start swimmers at the deep end and travel to the shallow end; if they tire they may be able to stand. Finally have them tread water for one minute, turn on their back, float briefly, and then swim (either on front or back) to the side and exit the pool. "Green Band" swimmers are allowed in all pool areas.

Shallow Water Test - Yellow Band

If a swimmer cannot complete each of the objectives listed in the Deep Water Test (above), they may take the "Yellow Band" shallow water competency test. This test starts with the swimmer being placed in a horizontal position on their back by the testing guard. The swimmer must then stand up (regain a vertical position). The second step begins with the swimmer being placed in a horizontal position on their front by the testing guard. The swimmer must again stand up (regain a vertical position). "Yellow Band" swimmers must stay in water that is armpit deep or less.

If a swimmer is tested as shallow water competent (Yellow Band) and is assigned to a zone that is armpit depth or less; this option may be better managed using multiple shallow-water zones separated by appropriate life lines. Example: 3ft zone or 4ft zone. Additional colors for bands may become necessary.

Non-Swimmers - Red Band

Swimmers that do not pass the shallow water competency test are considered Red Band or non-swimmers. Those who decline to take the test are also considered non-swimmers. Red Band swimmers must stay in water that is armpit deep or less and require active adult supervision. Active supervision means the adult must be in the water within arms reach at all times (1 adult per 2 children ratio). Some facilities may also require Red Band swimmers to wear a Coast Guard approved PFD.

A swimmer with a Red Band or Yellow Band should never be allowed to swim in the deep end of the pool. Swim lessons should be arranged for Red Band and Yellow Band swimmers whenever possible. Swimmers that intentionally wear the wrong color safety band should be immediately removed from the pool. Posting swim test times helps manage the safety swim test system and educates parents about the safety swim test. Remember shallow water is in relationship to the swimmer. Use a guideline of water that is armpit deep or less. For small children, the shallow end of your pool still may be deep water to them. The shallow and deep end of the pool must be separated by a floating safety line during all non-instructional and non-lap swim times. Final competency includes having the swimmer and/or parents read all pool rules.

If asked what drowning prevention strategy should a YMCA focus on first that has the most potential for saving lives I would have to answer, swim testing and restricting non-swimmers and poor swimmers to armpit depth water with no exceptions. In a recent study commissioned by US Swimming 1772 children ranging from 6 to 16 years in six US cities were surveyed as to their swimming ability. Results indicate that 31% of white children can not swim safely, 56% of Hispanic children can not swim safely and 58% of black children can not swim safely. There is a clear mandate here for the YMCA. We need to broaden our reach especially into the black and Hispanic communities and teach many more children how to swim.