Evaluation of Swim Safe

Sponsor: RNLI Community Safety and Amateur Swimming Association (ASA)
Department: RNLI Operations Research Unit
Date started: July 2015
Date completed: August 2015
Contractor: Cloud Chamber
Principal researcher: Matthew Terry

Swim Safe aims to teach children the difference between swimming in a pool environment and open water. The 2015 evaluation sought to measure changes in self-reported attitudes, awareness and behaviour. The results showed positive increases across all three areas, but the study team concludes that further work is needed to understand how long these effects last and what influence the length of session has on outcomes.

Summary

During the summer of 2015, the RNLI, in partnership with the ASA, ran outdoor swimming and water safety sessions called Swim Safe, for 7–14 year olds. 2015 was the third year of the programme and the research builds on findings from 2014, which are available to read at RNLI.org/SwimSafe2014.

The 2015 evaluation of Swim Safe found that the project had met its overall objectives in that year, in relation to short term (pre- and post-lesson) changes in children’s attitudes, knowledge and awareness. However, it is not possible to ascertain any long-term behaviour change from this evaluation.

Children increased their awareness of the dangers of cold water and swimming in open water. They also improved their awareness of lifeguards and beach safety flags, and increased their knowledge of how to respond appropriately when they, or someone else, got into trouble in the water.

As Swim Safe expands to more sites in 2016 and beyond, the evaluation team aims to identify the extent to which improvements in attitudes and knowledge are retained over time.

Background to the project

Swim Safe provides free outdoor swimming and water safety sessions to children aged 7–14 years, who are competent at swimming 25m. The aim is to teach participants about the differences between swimming in a pool and the challenges of swimming in open water. Swim Safe started in 2013 as a pilot programme in Bude, Cornwall, and in 2014 expanded to four sites, including an inland site at Windermere, Cumbria.

In 2015 the project ran in six sites:
- Boscombe, Dorset (second year running)
- Bude, Cornwall (third year running)
- Sandhaven, Tyne and Wear (second year running)
- Windermere, Cumbria (second year running)
- Peel, Isle of Man (new location)
- St Brélade, Jersey (new location)

The swimming sessions were run by Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) instructors, with the support of RNLI staff and volunteers across the sites.

The key objectives were to teach the children:
- the importance of supervision
- the dangers of swimming in cold water
- how to attract and call for help
- how to choose a safe place to swim

The long-term objective of Swim Safe is for the programme to contribute to the RNLI’s aim of halving drowning around the coastlines of the UK and Ireland. As this is a long-term aim, it has not been evaluated in this report.

A literature review will be sought in 2016 to assess available evidence from other high-income countries on the link between open water swimming skills and drowning reduction strategies.

Photo: RNLI/Nathan Williams
Evaluation aims and objectives

The aim of the evaluation of Swim Safe is to assess if the project has met its stated outcomes, including changes in attitudes, knowledge and awareness. Specifically, the focus for the evaluation in 2016 was to assess the extent to which Swim Safe has developed children’s understanding of the risks of cold water and how to stay safe when swimming in open water.

Method and approach

The evaluation of Swim Safe took place during July and August 2015. Over the last 2 years of Swim Safe evaluations, the RNLI and the ASA have recognised some of the challenges of this, specifically:

• the challenges of scheduling interviews with children without interfering with their session preparation or time getting warm and dry at the end of the session
• the difficulties of insufficient capacity – we are asking volunteers to run the surveys for us
• the challenges that some volunteers experienced in shifting from helping and encouraging children to conducting research interviews, where they had to remain objective (and not prompt answers)

The surveys sought to assess whether immediate improvements had been made in the participating children’s knowledge, behaviour and attitudes. (In 2015 the decision was taken not to formally assess parents’ awareness and attitude change in the evaluation, as Swim Safe is aimed at the children and parents were not directly engaged).

Knowledge, attitude, awareness and behaviour

Did the children have a better understanding of the risks of open water swimming and how to be safe? Including:

Did they change their attitude to risk, including:
• increasing confidence in swimming in open water
• recognising the risks
• increasing parental supervision while swimming
• recognising a lifeguard
• understanding safety flags
• what to do if they or someone else gets into trouble
• understanding the effects of cold water swimming.

Did they know how to enjoy open water swimming in a safe way in the future, including adopting safer behaviours in and around open water?

Delivery and attendance

3,647 children took part in Swim Safe. 5% of these children attended a Swim Safe session more than once. Participation rates varied according to the number of days that sessions were delivered. The Isle of Man and Jersey only had 4 and 6 days of delivery respectively, whereas Windermere and Sandhaven had 18 days, Boscombe 17 days and Bude 14 days.
Total number of participants per site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boscombe</td>
<td>996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brockhole Park</td>
<td>916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bude</td>
<td>607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peel</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Brélade</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandhaven</td>
<td>793</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: RNLI data

Participant profile
The Swim Safe project is open to children aged 7–14. As in 2014, over half (56%) of Swim Safe participants were aged 7–9.

Participant surveys

Numbers of children who completed the surveys compared to number of attendees by site:

When you are swimming outdoors, does an adult normally come in with you?
Before the session, respondents were asked about their parents’ attitudes to open water swimming. Around half the respondents said that when swimming outdoors they were not allowed in the water without their parents. Over a third were allowed in but were watched from the water’s edge, fewer than 1 in 10 were trusted as they could swim safely (9%), and 3% were left to swim on their own as they were strong enough swimmers. A small number of respondents (14) had never been in the sea or open water before the Swim Safe session. The majority of these respondents were participants at the Windermere and Sandhaven sites (11 of 14 respondents).

Outcomes
57% of children felt that Swim Safe was ‘great fun’, with 31% saying they ‘learned a lot from the teachers’. No respondents felt that they ‘did not learn anything new’ or that ‘it was boring’.
Knowledge

Recognising safety flags
Before and after the Swim Safe session, participants were shown a series of four flags and asked whether they indicated that a beach was safe for swimming. The proportion saying it was safe to swim after seeing a red and yellow flag increased from 87% to 100%. This compares favourably with Swim Safe 2014, where the proportion correctly identifying the red and yellow flag rose from 53% to 66% post-session, although the question was framed slightly differently.

Although both years show a 13 percentage point increase in the awareness of flags, the baseline of recognition before taking part in Swim Safe was much higher than in 2014. This suggests that more children already had this knowledge in 2015 and that Swim Safe may no longer need to concentrate on this teaching point as it is already widely known. Thus, resources can be targeted towards lesser-known areas of water safety in future years.

Identifying lifeguards
As with swimming between the flags, the pre-session survey has a high recognition of how to spot a lifeguard by their clothing. This could, in part, be because Swim Safe is delivered primarily on lifeguarded beaches, so it would be fairly easy for children to just look around and see how lifeguards are dressed. It does suggest that more emphasis could be put on the locations where lifeguards can not be found.

Getting into trouble
Participants were asked about their behaviour in open water in a dangerous situation. The proportion of respondents saying that you should ‘stick one hand in the air’ increased from 60% to 96% in the post-session survey (72% and 92% respectively in 2014). ‘Making lots of splash’ was a less-cited response in the post-session survey, reducing from 10% of participants to only 1% of participants. A greater proportion of participants cited ‘keeping your head above the water’ (49% to 64%) and ‘holding on to something that floats’ (46% to 64%) as appropriate responses to getting into danger in open water.

After attending a Swim Safe session, participants had better knowledge about what to do if someone else was in danger in the open water. The proportion saying that you should ‘dial 999/112 and ask for the coastguard’ increased from 46% to 80% of respondents (30% and 62% respectively in 2014) and ‘telling an adult’ increased from 48% to 62%.

Attitude
When asked about the dangers of cold or open water swimming, pre-session survey responses suggest that there is a lack of understanding about how cold water can affect them. It also suggests that the messages being taught within the Swim Safe session are being immediately retained post-session with significantly more children understanding how cold water can make it more difficult for them to swim.
Do you think being in cold water makes it more difficult for you to swim?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-session</th>
<th>Post-session</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Action**

**Feeling safe in the water**

The post-session survey showed that over half (54%) of survey respondents felt ‘really safe’ in open water and just under a third felt ‘quite safe’. This result on the surface is positive, suggesting children feel safer having learned specific techniques that can help them keep safe in open water. However, this increased confidence needs to be treated with caution as it could lead to an unintended scenario where children or their parents overestimate their abilities as a result of them attending a water safety session.

It is key that we continue to focus Swim Safe messaging towards the risks of swimming in open water in order to mitigate this potential negative effect.

**Key findings**

While a precise like-for-like analysis is not possible between the two delivery years (factors such as the number of sites, the research tools and some delivery processes are different), the evidence indicates that Swim Safe has maintained or improved its short term performance in 2015 compared to 2014.

The four key messages of Swim Safe in 2015 were: supervision, the dangers of swimming in cold water, how to attract and call for help, and how to choose a safe place to swim.

- **Supervision**: while half of parents could recall at least one key safety message, only 6.7% indicated that they would improve their supervision as a result of Swim Safe. It is not clear why this element was not more successful – whether this is due to parental views on the suitability of their own supervision (they believe they already supervise well), or whether it is more about the delivery of the message through the Swim Safe sessions.

This deserves further exploration because it could influence the extent to which Swim Safe should engage parents and target children in future, as well as what messages they are targeted with. For example, might parents’ confidence in their supervisory abilities be misplaced? Does Swim Safe currently attract more safety-conscious parents? If so, are these the families that need Swim Safe the most?

- **The dangers of swimming in cold water**: the proportion of children recognising the dangers of cold water rose from about one half of participants to more than two-thirds. Understanding the effect on energy levels and breathing rose substantially.

- **How to attract and call for help**: children learned what to do if they, or someone else, got into trouble while swimming in open water.

- **Choosing a safe place to swim**: Swim Safe improved children’s awareness of safety flags and the identification of lifeguards, although overall awareness of both was high among participants before they took part (for example, 87% could recognise the red and yellow flag).

Knowledge retention across all key safety messages, as measured immediately after Swim Safe, was strong. This is the second year of very positive findings at this point. Assuming that the delivery model and content do not change substantially in future years, this element of the evaluation fieldwork might be scaled down (for example, replacing a formal end-of-session survey with a group exercise around recall of key messages). Meanwhile, the long-term effects of Swim Safe are not known – this is the area of research and evaluation that needs to expand and be more robust in future years. It is essential that we begin to understand if Swim Safe knowledge can be retained to change attitudes and behaviours over a much longer period.

Understanding and retention of key safety messages
Behaviour change and impact

From the results of this evaluation, we are unable to say with any confidence whether the learning is likely to translate into behaviour change. This is a fundamentally important area for Swim Safe to continue to explore, given the need for the RNLI and the ASA to understand whether the knowledge gained through Swim Safe is retained beyond the immediate aftermath of the session. In doing so, the programme team should consider the length and type of session that is required to effect long-term, sustainable outcomes.

Future evaluations will be geared towards the need to establish whether Swim Safe does contribute to long-term attitude and behaviour change. The scale of Swim Safe evaluation has to date been relatively small, in line with the number of sites. With the number of sites set to expand significantly, the level of research and associated evaluation will need to reflect this.

The ultimate impact of the intervention is likely to be almost impossible to directly attribute. That is: proving that a life saved (or fatality avoided) was the result of a 45-minute learning session, possibly many years previously.

How the RNLI is using the evidence

We are continuing to work in partnership with the ASA to deliver Swim Safe in 2016. The key focus for evaluation during this next phase of programme delivery will be geared towards collecting evidence of any longer term changes in retention of knowledge and changes in attitudes and behaviour, as opposed to just the short-term gains.

Surveys will be focussed on attitude and behaviour change over a length of time – including measuring whether children who may return to Swim Safe in subsequent years have retained knowledge and are doing things differently than they had previously.

As Swim Safe is a 45-minute intervention, the 3-month post-session survey will move to being a 1-month post-session survey, held in September, when children may have recently been swimming in open water and may be more engaged because of this.

The RNLI and the ASA have committed to a long-term plan with the aim of promoting the UK drowning prevention strategy where: ‘every child should have the opportunity to learn to swim and receive water safety education at primary school and where required at key stage 3’ (National Water Safety Strategy).

Further reading:
Evaluation of Swim Safe, 2014: RNLI
RNLI.org.uk/SwimSafe2014

Acknowledgements

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