Evaluation of Swim Safe

Sponsor: RNLI Community Safety Team and Swim England (previously known as the Amateur Swimming Association)
Department: RNLI Operations Research Unit
Date started: June 2016
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Contractor: Sport Structures
Principal researcher: Lisa West

Swim Safe aims to teach children the difference between swimming in a pool environment and open water. The 2016 evaluation sought to measure changes in self-reported attitudes, awareness and behaviour. It also looked at the overall process of Swim Safe, such as the programme governance and the challenges associated with the growth of the programme. These processes are not discussed in this summary, but the findings are available in the full report.

Summary

Swim Safe is a partnership programme between the RNLI and Swim England. Our vision is to provide access to a Swim Safe session for every child across the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

Between 2014 and 2016, the programme grew by 115%, increasing from four sites and 3,287 participants to 14 sites and 7,059 participants.

The 2016 evaluation of Swim Safe found that before taking part in Swim Safe, only 54% knew that they had to put one hand in the air if they got into danger. This increased by 40 percentage points after Swim Safe, showing that 94% of participants knew this learning outcome after taking part, thus making it one of the most well retained messages after taking part in a session. It also found the negative effects of being in cold water is the message least well retained by participants, with only 59% able to recall this message immediately after taking part in the session. This message should therefore be reviewed to ensure delivery is having the required impact.

Background to the project

Swim Safe is a swimming intervention programme for young people aged 7–14. It teaches children to transfer skills learned in the pool into an open water environment. Swim Safe began as a pilot in 2013 in Bude, Cornwall and in 2014 expanded to four sites. The following year, the project ran in six sites; and in 2016, 14 sites.

Sites can be categorised in the following ways: sea pool or lido, coastal and inland. Sessions are led by Swim Safe instructors, delivered at sites managed by a site coordinator, with support from many volunteers. Sessions are free to attend, and public sessions ran at different sites across the country between July and August. School sessions also ran at a smaller number of sites during this time.

Swim Safe aims to teach children and young people about open water safety, specifically the following:
- swimming in a safe place
- recognising who can help
- swimming with adult supervision
- understanding the effects of cold water on the body
- knowing how to call for help.
Evaluation aims and objectives

The aim of the Swim Safe evaluation is to assess whether the project has met its stated outcomes, including changes in attitudes, knowledge and awareness. The 2016 evaluation encompassed the review of the 2016 programme data as well as a review of the impact of the programme overall, including governance, operations and evaluation process and effectiveness.

For this summary, we are only covering evaluation relating to the stated programme outcomes and impact and some elements of process evaluation. Findings related to governance and wider operations are included in the full report.

Method and approach

The data collection method for 2016 was set prior to this piece of work. Participants were chosen at random from public sessions only to complete an online survey before taking part in their session, immediately after taking part in Swim Safe and one month on. Data was analysed and compared to previous years.

Knowledge, attitude, awareness and behaviour

Did the children have a better understanding of the risks of open water swimming and how to be safe? Did they change their attitude to risk? We look at the following behaviours:

- 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.

**Intended behaviour change**

Did they know how to enjoy open water swimming in a safe way for the future, including adopting safer behaviours in and around open water?
Total number of participants per site

In total, 7,059 participants attended over 153 days of delivery at 14 sites. This was an 81% increase in the number of participants, making Swim Safe 2016 the most successful year yet in terms of participation.

Swim Safe participants took part in schools and public sessions, 1,460 were school participants and 5,599 attended public sessions. The top two most attended sites were Poole (Shore Road) and Lake Windermere (Rayriggs Meadow).

All data was captured using an online booking system. 5,472 participants pre-booked using the system and the remainder booked on the day.

121 participants attended more than one session over the summer.

Swim Safe 2016 saw an almost equal split between males and females (51% female and 49% male). Most of the participants were aged 7–11 years old (85%). The most populated single age group was 8 years old (20%). 12–14 year olds made up 12% of participants.
Participants by age and gender

On-screen surveys were conducted with a sample of participants just before and after they participated in Swim Safe. A follow-up online survey was sent to participants one month after the end of the project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey</th>
<th>Total attendees</th>
<th>Survey responses</th>
<th>Confidence interval at 50%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before Swim Safe</td>
<td>7,059</td>
<td>671</td>
<td>+/- 3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After Swim Safe</td>
<td>7,059</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>+/- 5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One month later</td>
<td>7,059</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>+/- 10.8%</td>
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</table>

The response rates and confidence levels are shown in the table above. We would normally consider a confidence interval of 2 as good, 5 as adequate, and 10 as adequate to poor. The session surveys before and after Swim Safe can therefore be analysed with adequate–good confidence in the results. The data received through the follow up survey only has an average confidence level and the results should be interpreted and used accordingly. The response rates for 2016 were considerably higher than 2015.
Outcomes

**Does an adult normally come in with you?**
Before taking part in Swim Safe, 37% of participants said that they were not allowed to swim outdoors without their parents. Just less than half (47%) were allowed, but were watched from the water’s edge. After taking part in Swim Safe, 47% of participants reported that their parents always watched them when swimming. After Swim Safe, the percentage reporting that they aren’t watched because their parents trusted them decreased from 15% to 8%.

**What would you do if you got into danger?**
Before taking part in Swim Safe, only 54% knew that they had to put one hand in the air if they got into danger. This increased by 40 percentage points after Swim Safe, showing that 94% of participants knew this learning outcome after taking part. We can also suggest that the message is being retained, with 99% able to recall this a month after Swim Safe.

**Recognising safety flags**
Before taking part in Swim Safe, 59% of participants knew that safe swimming areas were found between red and yellow flags. After Swim Safe, 93% knew – a 34 percentage point increase. These messages are being retained, with 93% still able to recall this message one month after Swim Safe.

**Identifying lifeguards**
Before Swim Safe, 87% of young people knew that they could identify a lifeguard by their clothes (yellow T-shirt and red shorts). After the session, this increased to 98%, and 99% of participants were able to recall this one month after taking part.

**What to do if someone else is in trouble**
After attending a Swim Safe session, participants had gained a better knowledge of what to do if someone was in danger in open water. The proportion who answered: ‘dial 999/112 and ask for the Coastguard’ increased from 49% to 78%, an increase of 29 percentage points. 85% were able to recall this one month later.
Cold water
Swim Safe has increased the participants’ knowledge and awareness of the effects of cold water. The proportion of young people who identified that being in cold water made it more difficult to swim increased from 39% before the session to 59% after the session. Before Swim Safe, nearly 38% knew that the cold water may make it difficult to breathe normally, which increased to 69% after Swim Safe.

Proportionally, the cold water key message is the one that is least likely to be learned and retained as a result of taking part in Swim Safe. One month later, 20% of children did not have a clear understanding of the dangers of cold water.

When in cold water, what could happen to you?

Does being in cold water make it more difficult to swim?

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<th>Pre</th>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Tracking</th>
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<td>Don't Know</td>
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<td>Sometimes</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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Key findings

- The cold water message was by far the least well absorbed message by the participants.
- The cold water message should be reviewed to ensure the delivery is having the required impact to cement the message.
- A returning participant ethos should be developed and adopted.

Behaviour change and impact

By taking part in Swim Safe, the assumption is that the learning will impact behaviour and the participants will be at a lower risk of getting into trouble in open water.

If we consider the output and outcome of Swim Safe, we may gain a better understanding of behaviour change. The output of Swim Safe 2016 was 7,059 young people attending sessions across 14 sites. The outcome of Swim Safe is learning being retained year after year, with the ultimate aim of fewer people drowning in open water.

The tracking survey that is completed one month after taking part in Swim Safe could be extended, so it’s taken again after six months. This would give a clearer picture of how much learning is being retained.

However, 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

As well as continuing to work in partnership with Swim England, we are looking forward to developing exciting new relationships with Swim Wales, Scottish Swimming and Swim Ireland to deliver Swim Safe in 2017 and beyond. We have also developed a number of community partnerships with established activity providers such as Everyone Active, Greenwich Leisure Limited, Plas Menai (The National Outdoor Centre for Wales) and Salford Community Sport to deliver the programme in their communities.

The key focus for evaluation during this next phase of programme delivery will continue to 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.

Another key area of focus will be ensuring that the parents/guardians of all the young people involved with the programme are aware of the core safety messages.

The RNLI and Swim England have committed to a long-term plan, with the aim of promoting the UK drowning prevention strategy: ‘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’ and ‘experience swimming and water safety in an open water environment through a defined programme’ (National Water Safety Strategy). With this in mind, Swim Safe will be delivered in over 20 sites in 2017, including inland locations in London, Manchester and Birmingham, providing approximately 20,000 Swim Safe spaces.

Acknowledgements

The RNLI and Swim England would like to thank Sport Structures for their work on this evaluation. We’d also like to thank all our partners who helped deliver this programme, the volunteers who gave up their time for Swim Safe and the children who took part in the surveys.

The RNLI is the charity that saves lives at sea
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