New Study Finds Protective Association Between Swim Lessons and Drowning Risk

A recently released study in the *Archive of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* concludes that involvement in formal swim lessons may protect children in the 1- to 4-year age group from the risk of drowning by as much as 88 percent.*

For years there was debate in the industry about swim lessons for very young children and whether they helped decrease the risk of drowning or increased it through either more exposure to water or because parents become more confident in their children’s swimming ability and less vigilant in their own supervision.

“This research supports what many of us in the aquatics profession have believed for a long time,” said Connie Harvey, project manager for aquatic technical development team, American Red Cross national headquarters. “Swimming and water safety lessons play a key role in keeping young children safe around water.”

Harvey hopes that these research findings can be used to help motivate parents to enroll their children in swimming and water safety programs. “Swimming and water safety skills are lifesaving skills that everyone should know from a young age.”

But Harvey is quick to point out that this study should not give parents a false assumption that swim lessons are a way to "drown proof" their children. “No amount of swim lessons can drown proof any child or adult,” she said.

The most helpful swim programs for children ages 1 to 4 are those that actively involve parents and that focus on water safety, rules about when and where it’s appropriate to swim, comfort in the water and foundational swim-readiness skills. “These programs should be as much about teaching the parents as about teaching the children,” said Harvey.

Harvey realizes that swim lessons might give some parents a false sense of security. She emphasized that swimming and water safety lessons can’t teach adequate swimming and safety skills over one set of lessons . . . or even over one summer . . . and that nothing can take the place of adult supervision. “Children must work through all the levels of a swim program to become proficient and safe swimmers,” she stressed, "And no one should ever swim alone regardless of age or ability."

With the release of its updated swimming curriculum, the American Red Cross now has three swimming and water safety programs designed to address the needs of various age groups. Harvey notes that age-appropriate water safety lessons have been incorporated into every level of the program to help reduce the risk of drowning and other injuries.

| Parent and Child Aquatics (Two levels for children ages 6 months to about 3 years) |
| • Teaches basic water safety skills to children and their parents, and builds readiness for swim lessons. |
| Preschool Aquatics (Three new levels for children about 4 to 5 years old) |
| • Offers preschoolers basic swimming and water safety skills at an appropriate developmental level and in smaller chunks. |
| Learn-to-Swim (Six levels for children about 6 years through adults) |
| • Six progressive levels that help swimmers of varying abilities develop and refine their swimming and water safety skills. |

But regardless of these new research findings, the Red Cross emphasizes the need for multiple layers of protection when it comes to water safety for young children. Along with formal swimming and water safety lessons by certified instructors, the Red Cross encourages the following strategies to help protect young children from the risk of drowning:

• Constant adult supervision around any water whether it be in a bathtub, backyard pool or at a beach.
• Physical barriers surrounding pools and spas…meaning four-sided fencing with self-closing, self-latching gates.
• Proper safety equipment, including a well-stocked first aid kit and U.S. Coast Guard-approved personal floatation devices.
• Alarms on exterior doors of homes and for the pools themselves.

“There is no one thing that can keep a child safe around the water,” concluded Harvey. “But we do know that a comprehensive approach to water safety can make a big difference in saving lives.”