Children's Swimming & Water Safety Skills

Teacher and Parent Perceptions

ROYAL LIFE SAVING
AUSTRALIA

ABOUT ROYAL LIFE SAVING

Royal Life Saving is focused on reducing drowning and promoting healthy, active and skilled communities through innovative, reliable, evidence-based advocacy; strong and effective partnerships; quality programs, products and services; underpinned by a cohesive and sustainable national organisation.

Royal Life Saving is a public benevolent institution (PBI) dedicated to reducing drowning and turning everyday people into everyday community lifesavers. We achieve this through: advocacy, education, training, health promotion, aquatic risk management, community development, research, sport, leadership and participation and international networks.

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Australian Government

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Royal Life Saving Society - Australia acknowledges the traditional custodians and Elders past and present across Australia, with particular acknowledgment to the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional owners of the lands where our offices are located. We pay our respects to Australia's First Nations cultural and spiritual connections to water, and acknowledge the land where we work, live and play always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

KEY INSIGHTS: STATUS OF CHILDREN'S SWIMMING AND WATER SAFETY SKILLS

TEACHERS PERCEIVE THAT:

48% of year 6 students cannot swim 50 metres and tread water for 2 minutes.

40% of year 7-10 students cannot achieve the National Benchmark for primary school students.

After year 7 there is little improvement in swimming ability.

84% of year 10 students cannot swim 400 metres, the National Benchmark for 17 years.

TEACHERS REPORT THAT:

7.5 hours is the median time allocated by schools to learn-to-swim programs.

31% of schools do not offer a learn to swim program.

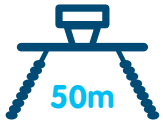
The three top reasons for schools not offering a learn to swim program are:

- **54%** cost of lessons
- **48%** limited staff resources or capability
- **36%** lack of time

One in four schools do not conduct a school swimming carnival.

55% indicated that low swimming skills of students are a leading reason for not conducting swimming carnival.

PARENTS PERCEIVE THAT:



46% of children aged 11-12 years (year 5 & 6) cannot swim 50 metres.

8% of children aged 11-12 years cannot float or tread water for 2 minutes.

46% of children aged 7-14 years cannot achieve the National Benchmark for 6 years (of this 13% are aged 11-14 years)

PARENTS REPORT THAT:

One in ten children aged 5-14 years have never attended swimming lessons

The majority being from low socio-economic backgrounds and those living in regional locations

33% of children stop lessons between ages 7-9 years.

59% of children first enrol in formal swim lessons between 0-3 years old.

Types of swimming lessons school-aged children are attending

60% of kids attend weekly group lessons outside of school hours

36% attend swimming lessons during school hours

WHAT WE KNOW ALREADY

Previous research has reported:

- 40% of children leave primary school unable to achieve the National Benchmarks of swimming 50 metres continuous and floating for 2 minutes unassisted [1-3].
- Many children start lessons at an early age (between 2-3 years) and dropout by age 8 years, well before meeting the National Benchmarks [1, 2].
- Children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, migrant and refugee backgrounds, those living in regional locations and lower socio-economic areas are most vulnerable to missing out and failing to achieve National Benchmarks [4, 5].

Policy responses are fragmented, and include:

- School-based programs are offered in all States/Territories, however the objectives, mode of delivery, reach, funding and successes varies greatly.
- Vacation-based programs are a cost-effective government funded approach, with widespread availability in Western Australia, South Australia and Victoria.
- Voucher programs aiming to reduce the cost of swimming lessons are popular, however they often fail to meet the needs of children most likely to miss out [6].
- Large- and small-scale grants to deliver wet and dry programs at community-level, often focused on groups vulnerable to missing out on lessons however are often restricted to a small number of lessons (e.g. 10 lesson) with no follow up.

The pandemic is thought to have amplified the problem, including:

- Pools and swim schools were first to close and last to reopen under public health rules [7].
- The closures caused 10 million swimming lessons to be missed [8].
- The closures caused significant loss of aquatic facility and swim school staff.
- When pools reopened, closed borders further impacted labour shortages.
- Many pools and swim school eventually returned to full capacity, but many children missed out and are unlikely to ever return without help [8].

WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS

Primary-aged students falling further behind on National Benchmarks

- Teachers estimate that 48% of year 6 students are unable to swim 50 metres and tread water for 2 minutes, so fall below the Benchmark for 12-year-olds.
- Parents estimate that 46% of 11–12-year-olds are unable to swim 50 metres, so fall below the Benchmark for 12-year-olds.
- Parents estimate that 66% of 9–10-year-olds are unable to swim 50 metres and may be in danger of not meeting the Benchmark for 12-year-olds.

Swimming skills don't improve much in high school

- Teachers estimate that 39% of year 10 students, cannot achieve the 12-year-old Benchmark of swimming 50 metres and tread water for 2 minutes.
- Teachers estimate that 84% of year 10 students (15-16 years) are unable to swim 400m and tread water for 5 minutes, so fall below the Benchmark for 17-year-olds.
- Parents estimate that 39% of 13-14-year-olds (year 7 and 8) are unable to swim 50 metres and tread water for 2 minutes, so fall below the Benchmark for 12-year-olds.

School programming is under pressure

- Schools allocated 7.5 hours per year (median time) to swimming and water safety programs.
- 31% of schools do not offer a learn to swim program, citing cost of lessons (54%), limited staff resources or capability (48%), and a lack of time (36%) as key reasons.

School swimming carnivals are rapidly becoming for squad kids only

- One in four schools do not conduct a school swimming carnival.
- When they run carnivals, teachers estimate 50% of eligible children do not participate.

Parents are doing the heavy lifting, but many cannot afford the costs

- One in ten children aged 5-14 years have never attended swimming lessons in any form, most are from low socio-economic backgrounds and those living in regional locations.

Start early, and stop by age seven

- 59% of children are enrolled in formal lessons between before the age of three.
- On average children stop lessons between ages 7-9 years old.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030 identifies the lack of swimming and water safety skills as a contributing factor to drowning across the lifespan, but with particular emphasis on primary and secondary school years. Opportunities are greatest and crucial to obtain swimming and water safety skills during these life stages.

This report presents perspectives on swimming and water safety from parents and teachers of children aged from 4 years to 16 years old. The report explores key questions about perceived swimming and floating ability and assesses these perceptions against the National Benchmarks for Swimming and Water Safety.

Royal Life Saving Australia has previously estimated that more than 40% of primary school children cannot meet the National Benchmarks of swimming 50 metres and floating for 2 minutes. Research shows that children from low-socioeconomic, regional/ remote, migrant and Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities are most the likely to miss out.

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation, with an estimated 10 million swimming lessons missed by children between 2020 and 2022 due to pool closures, staff shortages and waitlists. This has likely contributed to a cohort of children and young people who are now unable to swim, making them extremely vulnerable to drowning.

This research has confirmed Royal Life Saving's concerns that children are not reaching National Benchmarks for Swimming and Water Safety and in some cases, falling well below the minimum standards. Teachers and parents hold similar perceptions of children's abilities, estimating that 48% and 46% respectively of year 6 students (typically 11-12 years of age) are unable to swim 50 metres and float for 2 minutes; the two key performance indicators of the National Benchmark for 12-year-olds.

The data also showed there is little improvement in skills once children progress through the secondary school years. Thirty-nine percent of parents of 13-14-year-olds (typically in school year 7 and 8) and similarly teachers (41% for year 7 and 39% for year 8) estimated they were unable to achieve the primary school benchmark. Alarmingly, teachers estimated that 39% of students in year 10 were unable to achieve this benchmark for 12-year-olds and 84% are unable to swim 400 metres: the National Benchmark for 17-year-olds.

With schools and parents increasingly under pressure financially, costs are a key barrier in providing swimming lessons. Thirty-one percent of schools do not offer a learn-to-swim program for their students and one in four schools do not conduct a school swimming carnival. One in ten children aged 5 to 14 years have never attended a swimming lesson in any form and the average drop-out age for those that have had lessons is between 7 to 9 years, well before achieving the National Benchmark for 12-year-olds.

Overall, the findings paint a worrying picture and reinforce the need for a nationally coordinated approach to boosting children's swimming water safety skills before it is too late.

BACKGROUND

Royal Life Saving has long held concerns that many children miss out on learning to swim and survive, fall well below National Benchmarks for Swimming and Water Safety before leaving primary school, making them vulnerable to drowning when exposed to hazards in rivers and at beaches as teenagers, and throughout their lifespan.

Drowning rates increase ten-fold between the ages of ten and twenty [9], where swimming skills are known to be critical to keeping young people safe around the water. Addressing disparities between those who can, and those who cannot swim is recommended in the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030 [10] and were reinforced recently by World Health Organization [11] .

This study explored children's swimming and water safety skills from the perspective of school teachers and parents and is structured into two sections:

1. Swimming and Water Safety skills from the school teachers' perspective.
2. Swimming and Water Safety skills from the parents' perspective.

The study presents the results of two surveys which explore the status of children's swimming and water safety skills against National Benchmarks, comparing to previous research.


TEACHER

Purpose

The purpose of the survey was to gather information relating to participation in swimming and water safety education in schools.

Aims

The survey aimed to:

1. Examine the level of swimming and water safety skills of school students against the National Benchmarks.
2. Examine the status of school swimming carnivals in Australia including cohort and participation numbers.
3. Identify the range of swimming and water safety programs that schools provide for their students.

Methods

This study used Survey Monkey for the design, deployment and initial analysis. The survey consisted of a total of 79 questions in the following sections:

- General information – 5 questions
- Level of swimming and water safety skills - 54 questions*
- School swimming carnivals – 5 questions
- Learn-to-swim programs – 6 questions
- Other aquatic programs – 2 questions

*The level of swimming and water safety skills questions were focused on years 5 to 10 to ascertain their swimming and water safety abilities relative to the National Benchmarks. There were 8 questions: 4 for girls and 4 for boys for each year. Respondents only answered for the year/gender cohorts of their school.

The target respondents for the survey were Physical Education Teachers and School Principals at both primary and secondary schools who were responsible for implementation of swimming and water safety education.

Several channels were used to promote the survey including a e-Newsletter to all registered teachers on Royal Life Saving's education hub and bronze e-Lifesaving teacher database, an eDM to ACHPER's (Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation) member database and via social media.

The survey was open for a period of 4 weeks in November to December 2024, which was mid-term 4 of the school year.

Respondents

There were 326 respondents to the survey with the majority (68%) being PDHPE teachers, sports coordinators or department heads, 24% were classroom teachers or principals and the remainder had various roles such as administration or program provider.

Type of school:

- 28% Secondary schools
- 27% Primary schools
- 20% Combined schools
- 3% Special needs schools
- 21% were unknown (information not provided)

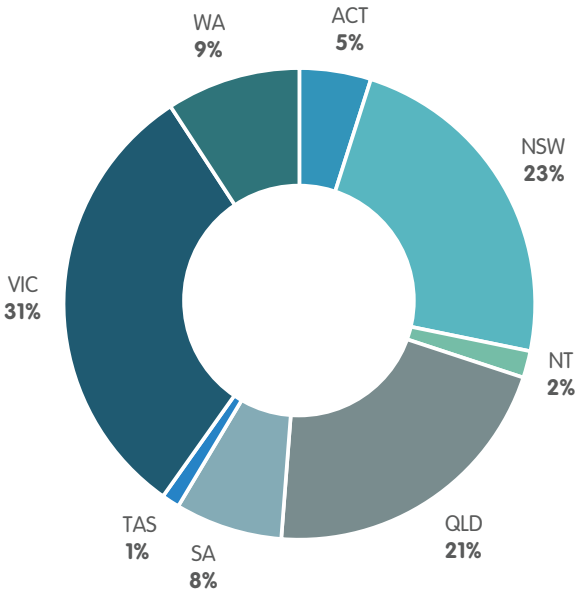
School category:

- 49% Government schools
- 30% Non-Government schools
- 21% were unknown (information not provided)

Breakdown by school type and category:

- 81% of primary school respondents are government (public) schools
- 69% of secondary school respondents are government (public) schools
- 82% of combined school (primary and secondary) schools are non-government (independent or catholic schools)

Respondent's school location



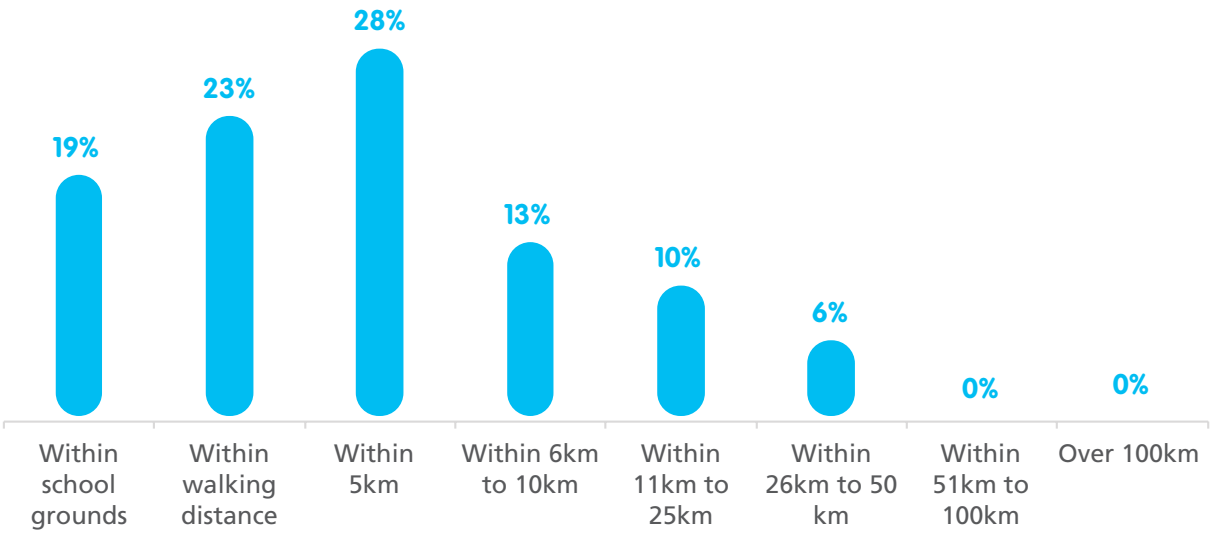
Location and proximity to swimming pool

59% schools located in major city, **41%** schools located in regional and remote areas.

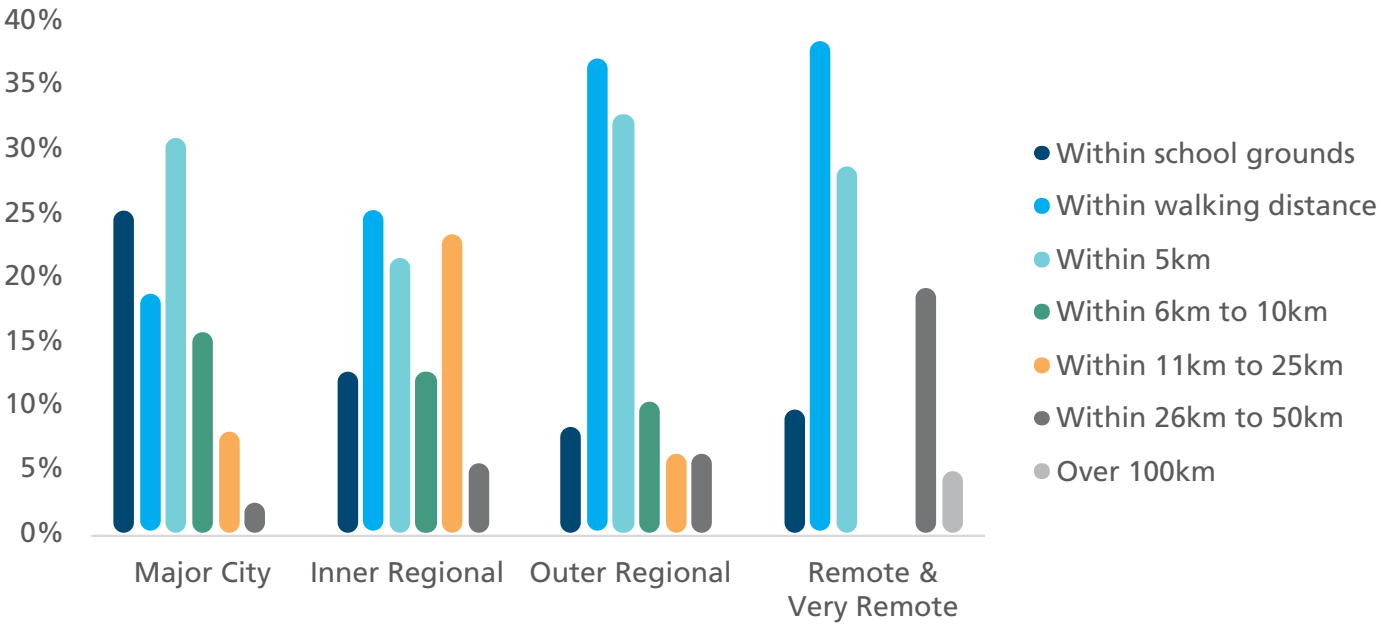
70% of schools had a swimming pool within 5km distance of their school, even in remote areas.

Schools in remote locations had to travel further to a swimming pool (**25%** to a pool 26km or further).

Schools proximity to a swimming pool



Remoteness by proximity to a swimming pool



Key findings from this research

Estimated swimming abilities

Respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of students that fit into each of the listed categories by school year and gender.

Respondents were asked to only respond to the school year applicable for their school (e.g. primary schools would only answer for years 5 and 6) or school years they taught.

Proportion of children in each swimming ability category by school grade

		Benchmark 6-year-olds		Benchmark 12-year-olds		Benchmark 17-year-olds
	Category A	**Category B**	**Category C**	**Category D**	**Category E**	**Category F**
School Grade	They normally cannot swim in the water without support.	At best they can float on front and back and move for 5m.	At best they can swim 10-15m freestyle.	At best they can swim 50m freestyle and tread water for 2 mins.	At best they can swim 200m freestyle.	At best they can swim 400m: 100m freestyle and 300m survival strokes.
Year 5	13%	15%	24%	26%	13%	9%
Year 6	12%	16%	20%	27%	14%	11%
Year 7	10%	12%	19%	30%	16%	12%
Year 8	10%	11%	18%	26%	18%	16%
Year 9	11%	11%	18%	28%	17%	15%
Year 10	13%	11%	15%	28%	18%	16%

Data was analysed measuring achievement against the National Benchmark for 12-year-olds for students in all school years 5 to 10 which indicated whether they were either below (category A+B+C) at or above (category D+E+F) the benchmark.

48% of year 6 students are below the 12-year-old Benchmark and cannot swim 50 metres.

39% of year 10 students are below the 12-year-old Benchmark and cannot swim 50 metres.

83% of girls and **85%** of boys in year 10 are below the 17-year-old benchmark and cannot swim 400 metres.

Swimming ability relative to the National Benchmark for 12-year-olds

School Grade	Below Benchmark for 12-year-olds Category A+B+C	At or above Benchmark for 12-year-olds Category D+E+F
Year 5	52%	48%
Year 6	48%	52%
Year 7	41%	59%
Year 8	39%	61%
Year 9	40%	60%
Year 10	39%	61%

Swimming ability relative to the National Benchmark for 12-year-olds by school type

School Grade	Government schools Below Benchmark for 12-year-olds	Non-Governments schools Below Benchmark for 12-year-olds
	Primary	
Year 5	60%	32%
Year 6	52%	31%
	Secondary	
Year 7	48%	30%
Year 8	48%	27%
Year 9	47%	28%
Year 10	47%	24%

When analysed by school type:

- 51% of students from Government schools are below the 12-year-old Benchmark and cannot swim 50 metres.
- 29% of students from non-government schools are below the 12-year-old Benchmark and cannot swim 50 metres.

When analysed by school type and year level, a higher proportion of year 5 and 6 students from Government schools could not meet the National Benchmark compared with students at non-Government schools. This gap widens in secondary school years.

Proportion of girls in each swimming ability category by school grade

		Benchmark 6-year-olds		Benchmark 12-year-olds		Benchmark 17-year-olds
	Category A	**Category B**	**Category C**	**Category D**	**Category E**	**Category F**
School Grade	They normally cannot swim in the water without support.	At best they can float on front and back and move for 5m.	At best they can swim 10-15m freestyle.	At best they can swim 50m freestyle and tread water for 2 mins.	At best they can swim 200m freestyle.	At best they can swim 400m: 100m freestyle and 300m survival strokes.
Year 5	13%	14%	25%	26%	13%	9%
Year 6	12%	16%	19%	26%	15%	12%
Year 7	11%	12%	19%	29%	17%	13%
Year 8	12%	11%	18%	27%	16%	17%
Year 9	11%	12%	17%	25%	17%	17%
Year 10	13%	11%	15%	26%	18%	17%

Proportion of boys in each swimming ability category by school grade

		Benchmark 6-year-olds		Benchmark 12-year-olds		Benchmark 17-year-olds
	Category A	**Category B**	**Category C**	**Category D**	**Category E**	**Category F**
School Grade	They normally cannot swim in the water without support.	At best they can float on front and back and move for 5m.	At best they can swim 10-15m freestyle.	At best they can swim 50m freestyle and tread water for 2 mins.	At best they can swim 200m freestyle.	At best they can swim 400m: 100m freestyle and 300m survival strokes.
Year 5	13%	16%	24%	26%	14%	8%
Year 6	12%	16%	20%	28%	13%	11%
Year 7	10%	12%	19%	31%	16%	11%
Year 8	10%	11%	18%	27%	18%	15%
Year 9	11%	11%	17%	28%	19%	13%
Year 10	13%	10%	14%	29%	18%	15%

School swimming carnivals

76% of schools conducted a swimming carnival.

- 59% of students participate in the school swimming carnival.
- Participation ranged from 7% to 100% of enrolled students.
- 20% of schools indicated they had less than a third of enrolled students participate.

Of the schools who conducted a swimming carnival:

- 20% were primary schools
- 32% were secondary schools
- 22% were combined schools
- 26% were schools with an unknown classification.

Reasons why schools don't offer a swimming carnival

24% of schools indicated they do not conduct a swimming carnival for the following reasons:

55% low swimming skills of student

55% cost of venue hire

- 45% limited staff resources or capability
- 43% cost of travel to swimming pool
- 39% lack of student interest
- 34% Access to swimming pool
- Other things were travel distance, lack of parent interest, lack of time

One in four schools do not conduct a swimming carnival

Which cohorts participate?

To understand participation for each year group this question asked the respondents to select from the following options: no participation, mandatory participation, swimming participants only or to select 'not applicable to school' if they did not have that year group.

For primary schools, the average across the years K-6:

- 27% mandatory participation
- 26% swimming participants only

No participation was highest for years K, 1 and 2 and averaged at 37%. This is understandable given their age, level of swimming skills and the depth of swimming pools.

For secondary schools, the average across the years 7-12:

- 40% mandatory participation
- 38% swimming participants only

No participation was lowest for years 7, 8 and 9 and averaged at 2.5%. This may be due to some schools making it mandatory to attend the school carnival for junior years.

It's important to note we did not distinguish between actively participating in a carnival event and simply attending the swim carnival, so it cannot be determined what teachers understood by 'participation'.

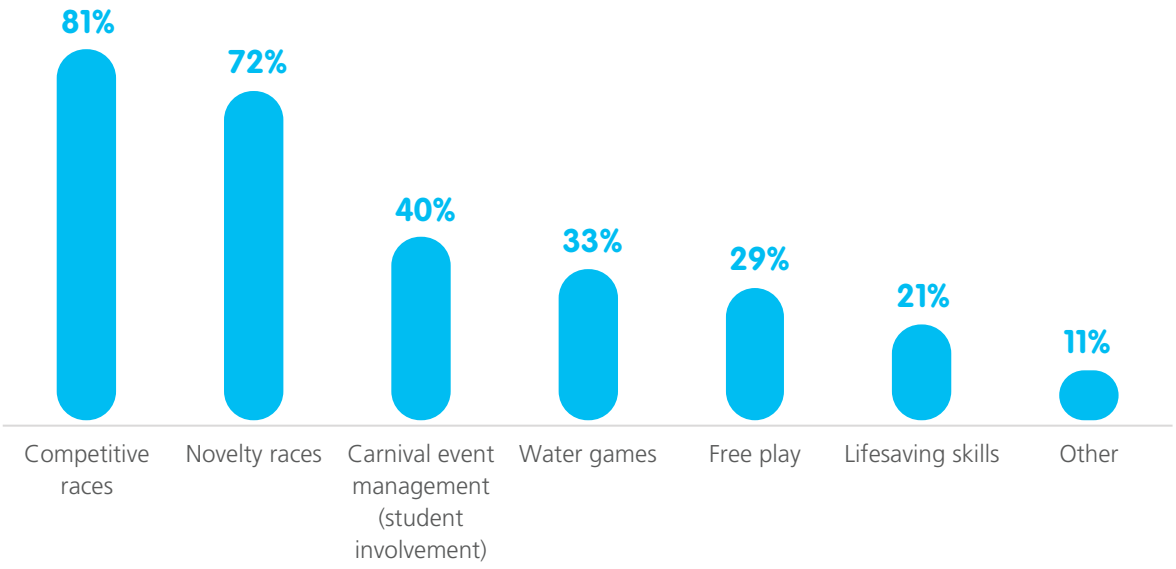
Carnival activities

Although the school carnival is traditionally focused on competitive events, this question sought to investigate what activities were offered as part of the swimming carnival.

Schools most commonly ran competitive races (81%) and novelty races (72%), which suggests schools attempt to create both a competitive and fun environment and encourage participation for those that may not be competitive swimmers but want to be involved. 40% of schools provided students with opportunities to assist with the event management which is assumed this may include timekeeping, event runners or assistance with marshalling participants. Schools also indicated they ran water polo, pool volleyball, diving, boat races, search and rescue and several non-swimming activities such as basketball, volleyball and scavenger hunts at the pool complex.

One school noted due to the size of the school they were unable to offer fun events.

Swim carnival activities offered



School learn to swim and aquatic programs

This section of the survey explored what schools offered in terms of learn to swim programs and other aquatic activities for students.

Sixty-nine percent of respondents indicated their school provided a learn to swim program for their students and of these 62% travelled to a local pool to participate in an external program, 28% ran an in-house program on school grounds and the remaining schools noted they either went to a local pool but used the school's in-house program and staff, used external qualified swim teachers at their school pool and one school mentioned they have lessons at the local jetty as this was the only place available.

When analysed by school type:

- 50% of primary schools offer a learn to swim program.
- 17% of secondary schools offer a learn to swim program.
- 40% of combined schools offer a learn to swim program.
- 39% of government school offer a learn to swim program.
- 28% of non-government schools offer a learn to swim program.

Time allocated annually to learn to swim program

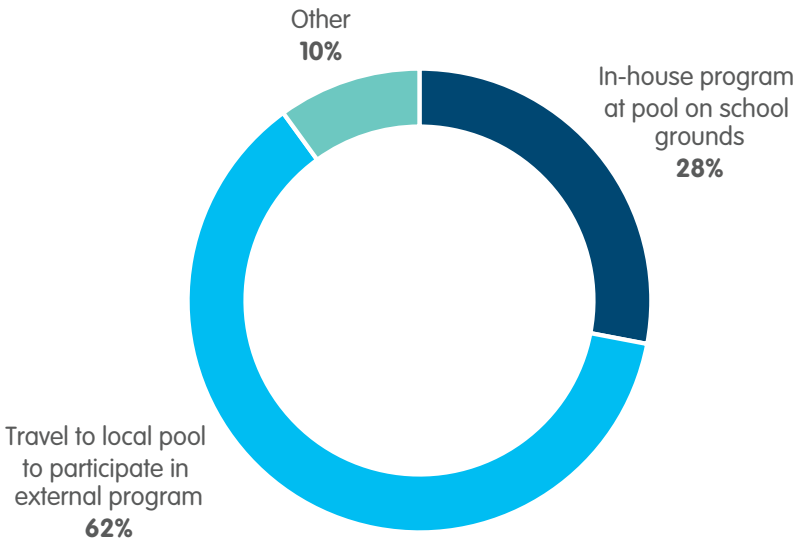
7.5 hours is the median time allocated by schools to learn to swim programs, which is not sufficient to achieve and maintain National Benchmarks.

- Typically, this is offered in a 10 x 45-minute lesson format.

31% of schools do not offer a learn to swim program.

- The majority of schools that did not offer a learn to swim program are secondary schools.

Type of learn to swim program provided



Participation of year groups
Primary school years 4 and 5 have the highest rates of learn to swim programs with 63% and 60% respectively, closely followed by year 2 (59%) and year 3 (57%). In primary school, kindergarten followed by year 1 have the lowest percentage of learn to swim programs provided.

For secondary schools the percentage of learn to swim programs gradually declines from 33% in year 7 to 11% in year 12.

Schools not offering a learn to swim program
Of the 31% of schools that do not offer a learn to swim program, 36% had previously offered a learn to swim program.

Other reasons included not enough trained teachers or difficulty in obtaining qualifications, pool availability and size, executive staff not willing to fund programs, and the amount of time required for a 45-minute lesson being more like 2-3 hours.

Other aquatic programs offered
Thirty-one percent of schools indicated they did not offer any other aquatic programs.

For those schools that offered other aquatic programs, the most common were:

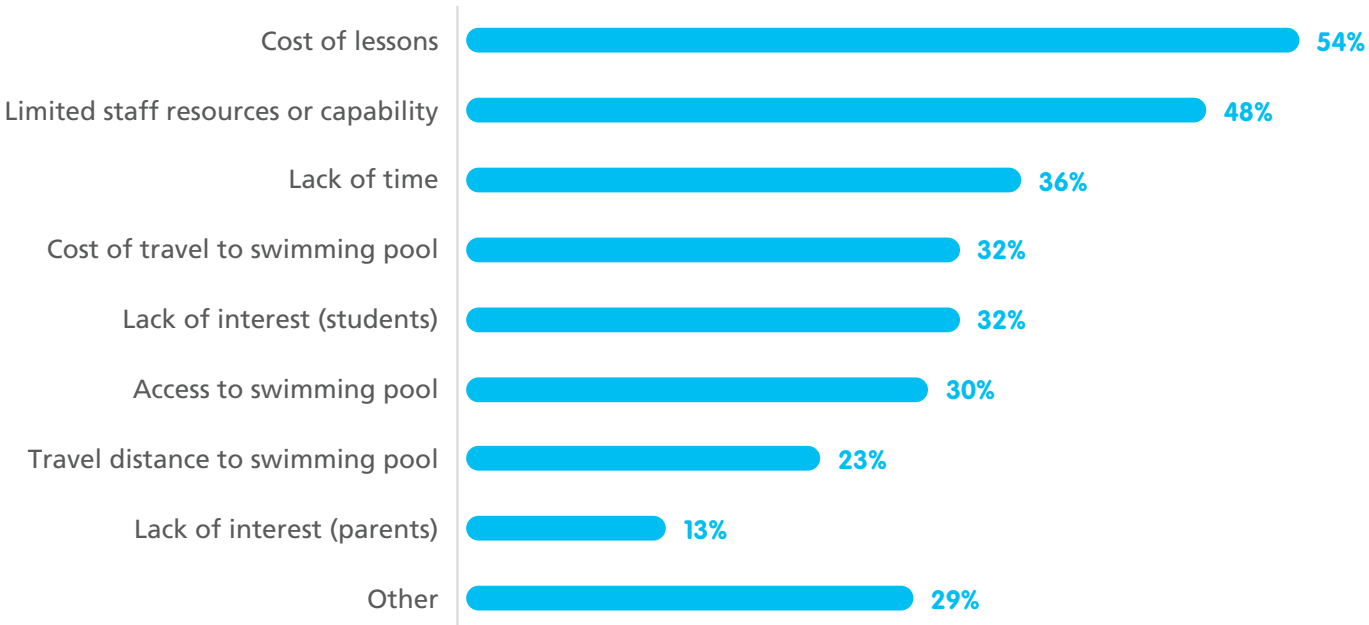
- Resuscitation or first aid (34%)
- Watercraft programs (25%)
- Surfing or aquatic sports such as water polo or diving (both 23%)
- Lifesaving awards (20%).

Other activities that were noted were water safety and lifesaving classroom programs, school camps and excursions that involved water activities, and squad programs.

Although it was not asked which year groups were offered these programs, it is assumed by the types of activities, it is most likely secondary schools.

Time allocated annually to other aquatic programs varies substantially from school to school depending on school years, elective subjects, type of program and the multiple programs offered across the school.

Reasons for not conducting a learn to swim program



Purpose

To explore parental perceptions of children's swimming and water safety skills, to inform the development water safety and drowning prevention solutions.

Aims

The survey aims were to:

1. Explore parental perspectives of their children's swimming abilities
2. Identify participation patterns and identify who is missing out
3. Identify barriers to initial and sustained participation

Methods

This study was conducted by the Centre for Social Research, as part of the Life In Australia panel survey on behalf of Royal Life Saving Australia over two week in November 2024. The final sample size was 1,234 people >18 years of age with at least one child aged 14 years or younger. This was a nationally representative, with results aggregated and weighted to best reflect a population sample.

Life in Australia™ has approximately 10,000 members. Members of the panel were randomly recruited via their landline or mobile telephones (rather than being self-selected volunteers) and agreed to provide their contact details to take part in surveys on a regular basis. Unlike other research panels, Life in Australia™ includes people with and without internet access.

Those unable to complete surveys over the internet, are able to complete surveys by telephone and represent the offline population. Because Life in Australia™ is based on probability-based sampling methods, results from surveys undertaken on the panel are generalisable and sampling errors and confidence intervals can be calculated. Research conducted by the Social Research Centre shows Life in Australia™ produces survey estimates of comparable accuracy to other major approaches for conducting probability surveys.

Respondents

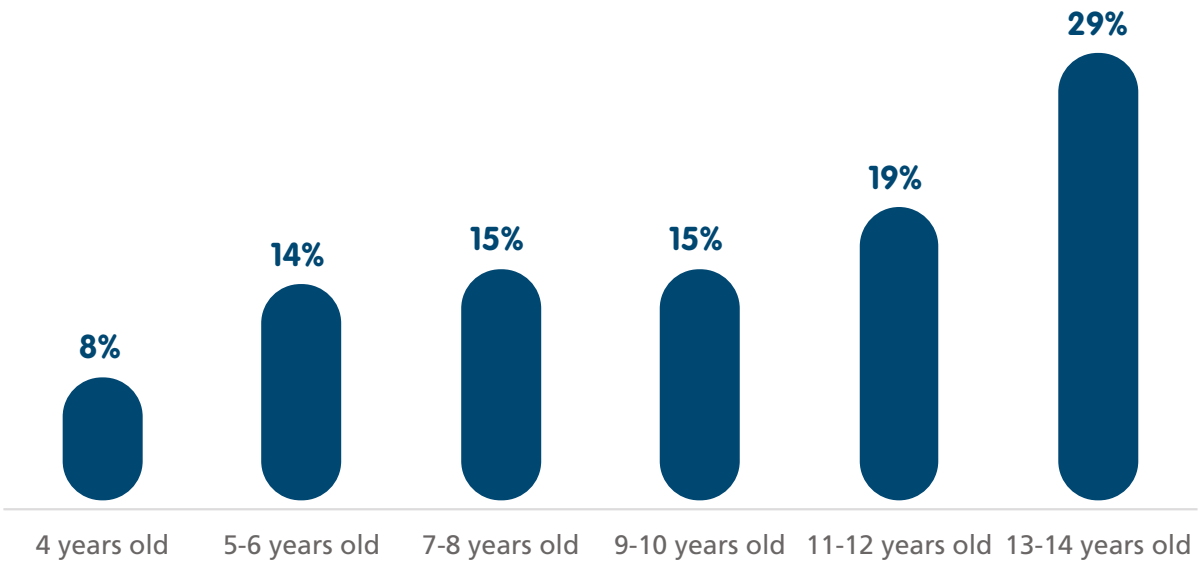
N = 1,234 people >18 years of age with at least one child aged 14 years or younger.

- 63% female, 37% male
- 54% were aged 35-44 years old
- 63% of respondents had children over the age of 9 years old.

Geographic location of respondents

The highest proportion of respondents were from NSW (29%), Victoria (28%) and Queensland (19%), followed by Western Australia (12%) with a smaller proportion from South Australia (7%), Tasmania (3%), ACT (3%) and NT (0.5%). Most (72%) of respondents lived in a capital city. This sample aimed to reflect a nationally representative sample as much as possible.

Age of respondent's child



Key findings from this research

These questions sought to understand the current picture children's participation in a range of swimming programs, by:

- Age
- Demographic information
- Type of programs e.g. a school-based swimming program or attending organised out-of-school lessons

Swimming lesson participation

Parents with children aged 4-14 years, just over one-third (35%) reported that their children were currently enrolled in swimming lessons. Over half (54%) reported that their children were not currently enrolled but had previously attended lessons. Interestingly, some parents (44%) stated that their child had stopped and returned to lessons again (so they 'take a break' then re-enrol).

One in ten (11%) of children had never been enrolled in lessons, with half aged between 11 and 14 years old.

This indicate that perhaps these children were impacted by Covid-19 pool closures during 2020 and 2021 when they may have attended either school-based or out-of-school lessons at around 7-8 years of age (or older, depending on the State/Territory). Almost three-quarters of children that have never enrolled in lessons resided in the lowest SEIFA areas (decile 1-3) and almost one-third (30%) resided outside of a capital city.

Age of children who attend lesson

Of those currently in lessons, almost half (48%) were aged between 5-8 years old and 12% were aged 4 years. When asked about the age children first enrolled in lessons, 59% stated that their child started swimming/water safety programs between 0-3 years old. One-third of children stop lessons (and do not re-enrol) between ages 7-9 years.

Type of lessons

Consistent with other research, the majority (60%) of children across all aged attend weekly group lessons outside of school hours, with one-third (36%) attending lessons during school hours. A small proportion (9%) attended vacation / school holiday swimming programs.

Number of lessons attended per year

This question was asked to ascertain how many lessons children are receiving each year, to determine how many lessons are required for achieving the National Benchmarks. This was asked about the total number of lessons, including school-based programs, weekly lessons or any other form of swimming lessons attended.

Based on this research, parents reported that on average, children attend 36 lessons per year. However, the average number of lessons differed by residential location; State/Territory, metro/region and SEIFA background (residential). The average number of lessons did not differ significantly by age group or by country of birth.

Parents in NSW reported highest numbers of lessons that children were attending, and children in Tasmania the lowest (37 lessons versus 29 lessons). The average number of lessons attended in Metro / Capital cities was higher than in regional location (37 lessons versus 33 lessons). When analysed by residential SEIFA quintile, children in the most disadvantaged areas attended 33 lessons, compared to children in the highest advantaged areas who attended 38 lessons.

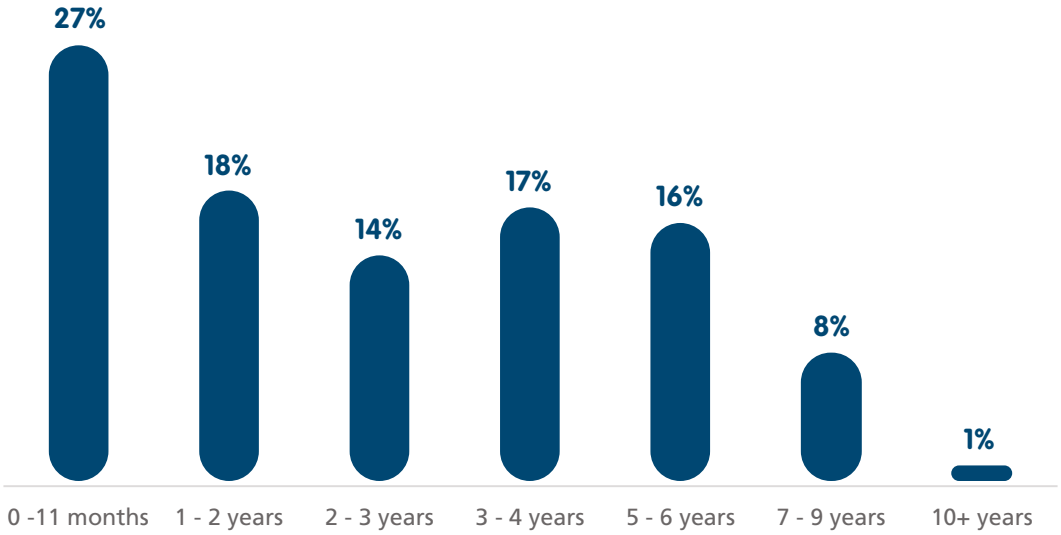
There may be several reasons for these differences, including proximity to a pool, seasonality and opening hours and program structure (e.g. terms versus ongoing throughout school holidays) and how long families can afford to pay for one child (or more) to attend lessons.

Cost of lessons

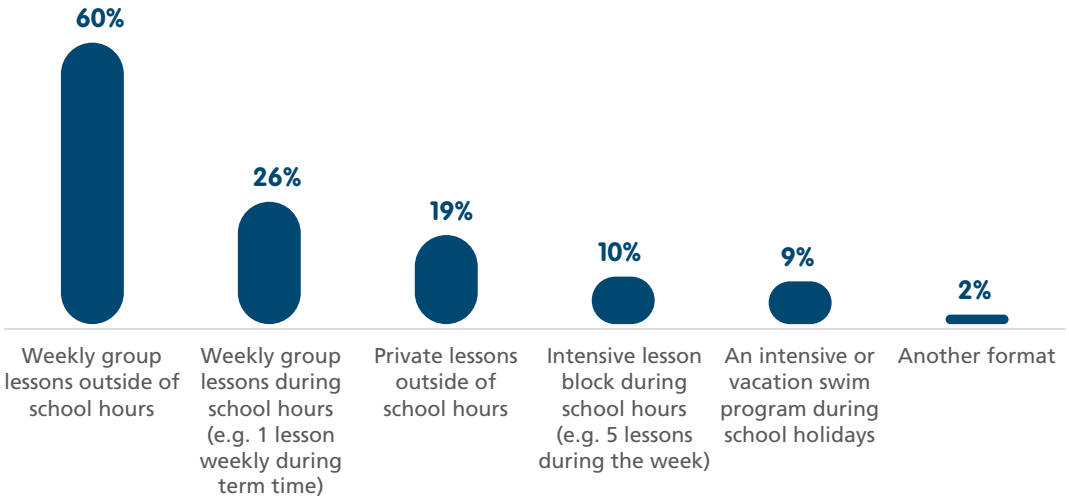
The cost of swimming lessons is a well-known barrier for many families in attending swimming lessons, especially in the current economic climate. Royal Life Saving compiled lessons cost from 47 swim schools across Australia (September 2024), in metro and regional locations, covering a range of management agencies.

Based on this sample, the cost for a 30-minute lesson for children of all ages ranged from $15.60 in regional areas to $28.75 in metro areas, with a national average of $21.78 per lesson (excluding any administration fees often required by the swim school provider). Some swim schools did provide a discount for multiple children from the same family attending.

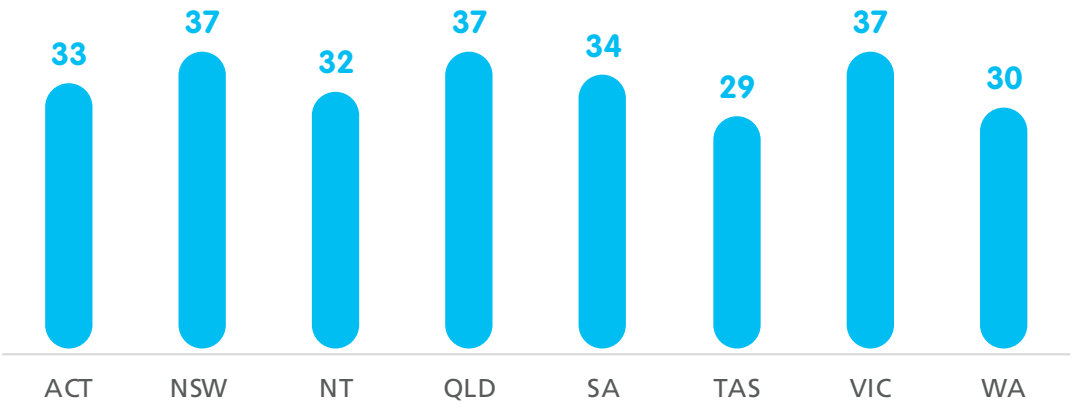
What age did your child start lessons?



Type of lessons



Average number of lessons children are attending by State/Territory



Perceived swimming ability of children

These questions sought to ask parents perceptions of their child's swimming ability to compare against the National Benchmarks and other research on children's swimming and water safety skills. Parents were asked to estimate how far their child could swim without stopping, ranging from less than 5 metres to 200 metres or further (definitions based on the length of an Olympic sized swimming pool). These distances were aligned to the National Benchmarks:

- To move continuously through the water for 5 metres by **6 years**
- To swim 50 metres and tread water or float for 2 minutes by **12 years (or leaving primary school)**
- To swim 400 metres continuously and tread water or float for 5 minutes by **17 years**

Overall, just over one-third (37%) of parents estimated that their child could swim 50 metres or further.

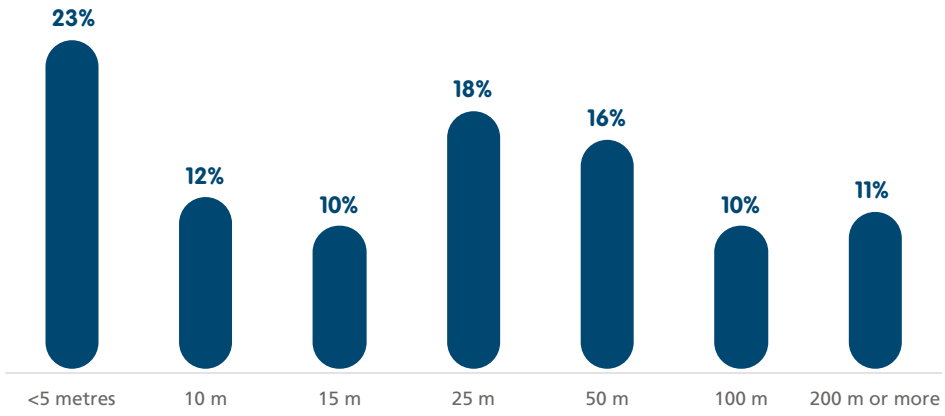
When broken down by age groups, parents estimated that:

- 58% of children aged 5-6-years cannot swim more than 5 metres.
- 18% of children aged 7-8 years cannot meet the 6-year-old benchmark of moving through the water for 5 metres.
- 66% of children aged 9-10 years cannot swim 50 metres.
- 46% of children aged 11-12 years cannot swim 50 metres.

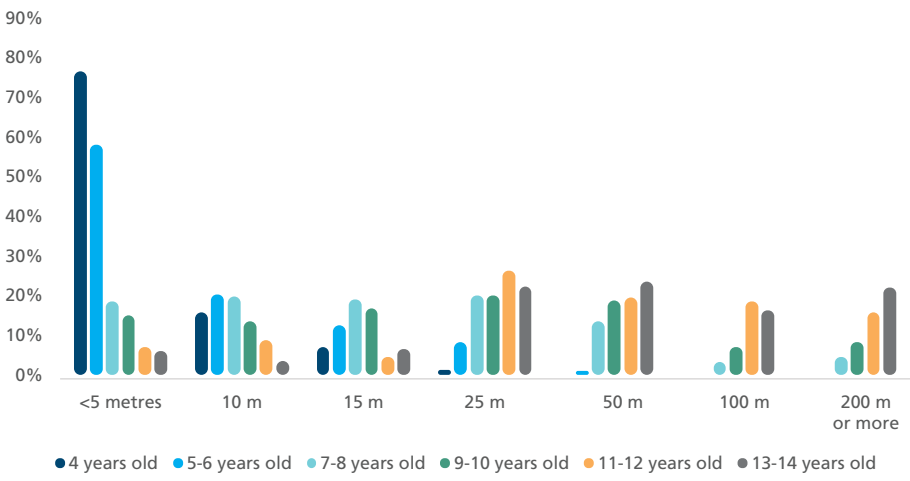
37% of 13-14-year-olds cannot meet the 12-year-old benchmark of swimming 50 metres

In contrast, **22%** of 13-14 years olds could swim 200 metres or more

What is the furthest you think your child can swim without stopping? (all ages)



What is the furthest distance you think your child can swim without stopping?



Parents were also asked to estimate their child's floating ability, based on the 12-year-old benchmark of being able to tread water or float for 2 minutes unassisted.

> Overall, 77% believed that their child could float or tread water for 2 minutes unassisted.

When broken down by age, parents perceived that over 90% of children aged 11 years and older were able to achieve this skill.

What does this mean?

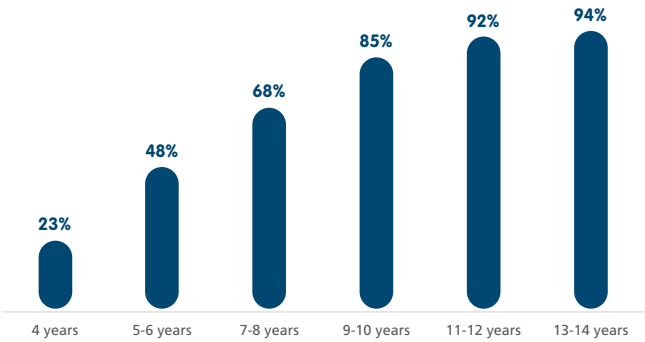
Approximately 40% of teenagers (13-14 years) and almost 50% of 11-12-year-olds cannot achieve the National Benchmark for 12-year-olds of swimming 50 metres. However, it is encouraging to see approximately one-quarter could swim 25 metres, indicating that they may be on their way to achieving this distance (along with other key skills), and could achieve the 50 metres Benchmark with more lessons.

There appears to be a disconnect between parents' perception of their child's floating skills and swimming skills with 61% believing that their children can swim 50 metres and 94% could float for 2 minutes. This may lead to a false sense of security for parents, by overestimating their children's abilities in a pool environment, however these skills are likely to be inadequate to survive in an open water environment and increase risk of drowning into teenage and adulthood.

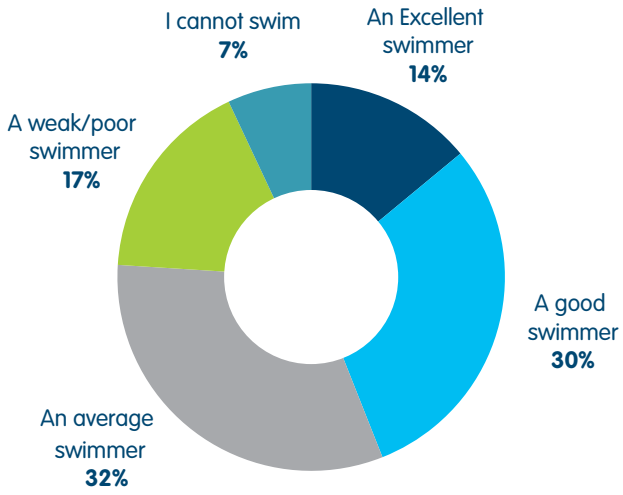
Parents self-estimated swimming ability

This question was included to compare to previous national surveys on adults self-reported swimming ability. Consistent with previous research, one-quarter (24%) believed that they were a non or poor swimmer, 32% believed they were an average swimmer, and 44% believed that they were a good / excellent swimmer. This suggests that there are a cohort of adults, whom are parents, that unable to swim or safely help their children in the water.

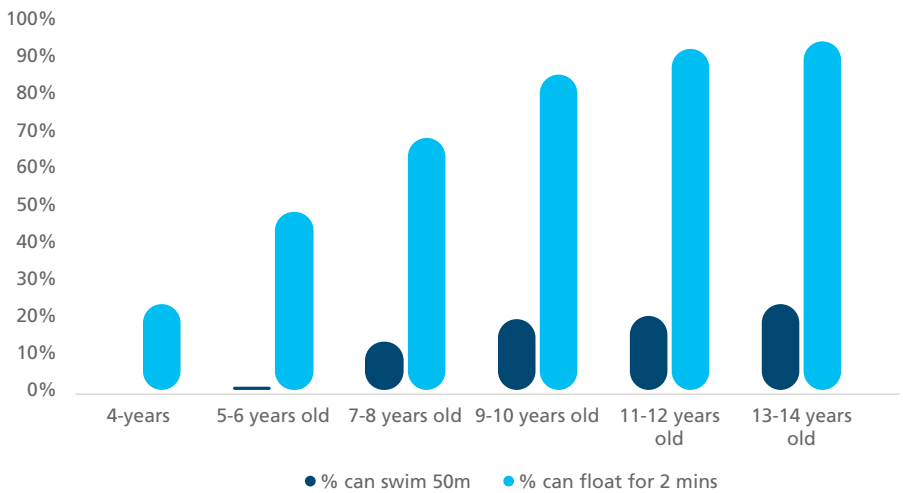
Can your child float or tread water for 2 minutes?



Parents self-estimated swimming ability



Swimming and treading water ability by age



CONCLUSION

This research confirms Royal Life Saving's concerns that many children are not reaching the National Benchmarks for Swimming and Water Safety, with some falling well below the minimum standards.

Teachers and parents share similar concerns, estimating that nearly half of Year 6 students (typically aged 11–12 years) cannot swim 50 metres or float for two minutes - two key performance indicators for 12-year-olds. Alarmingly, there is little improvement as children progress through secondary school. A significant proportion of Year 7 and Year 8 students continue to fall short of the 12-year-old benchmark, and by Year 10, a similar number of students remain below this standard, while well over three-quarters cannot swim 400 metres - the National Benchmark for 17-year-olds.

One of the biggest barriers is the cost of lessons, which is prohibitive for many families, especially those with multiple children. As a result, one in ten children aged 5–14 have never attended a swimming lesson. Dropout rates are also high, with a third of children ceasing lessons between ages 7–9, well before achieving the National Benchmark for 12-year-olds.

Disparities in children's access to swimming and water safety education, particularly for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and living in regional areas, have a significant impact on skill development and widen the gap between those who can confidently swim and those who remain at risk. This increases the likelihood of drowning incidents and limits opportunities for safe participation in aquatic activities.

Overall, children's swimming ability has not improved, leaving a growing cohort of children at increased risk of drowning. Factors such as the high cost of lessons, Covid-19 disruptions, and early dropout rates continue to exacerbate the issue. Urgent action is needed to improve access to swimming and water safety education, particularly for disadvantaged and at-risk groups. Without intervention, many children will continue to miss out on essential life-saving skills, putting them at greater risk around water throughout their lives.

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