



Association of Aquatic Professionals
The Association **for** Aquatic Professionals
by Aquatic Professionals

Association of Aquatic Professionals (AOAP) Position Paper: RESPECT the Water Drowning Prevention Program

Drowning remains a significant public health concern and is a leading cause of accidental death for children and adults in the United States. The Association of Aquatic Professionals (AOAP) asserts that drowning is preventable and affirms its commitment to the highest standards of aquatic safety through our RESPECT the Water Drowning Prevention Program. This official position is founded on the latest scientific evidence, best practices in injury prevention, and the collective expertise of aquatic professionals nationwide. The RESPECT the Water framework is informed by policy recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics and other recognized authorities in drowning prevention.

Official Position: RESPECT the Water as a Foundation for Drowning Prevention

Effective drowning prevention requires a comprehensive, layered approach. The AOAP RESPECT the Water program provides a foundational framework, with each component representing a critical element of safety. These pillars are as follows:

1.R — Recognition

* Drowning can happen to anyone, anywhere, and often occurs quickly and silently. Recognize the risk of drowning in all aquatic settings, regardless of age, swimming ability, or familiarity with the water. Be aware of higher-risk situations, such as unsupervised access, lack of barriers, or crowded environments.

* Recognize the signs of distress, unsafe behaviors, and hazardous conditions. All aquatic participants, caregivers, and professionals must remain vigilant and act promptly by summoning help or using a reaching aid when necessary.

2. E — Education

* Learn about water safety and the importance of supervision.

* Promote universal access to water safety education and swimming skills. Water competency is central to this pillar, encompassing the ability to anticipate, avoid, and

survive common water hazards. All individuals—regardless of age, background, or ability—should receive age-appropriate education and skills training.

3. S — Supervision

- * Never leave children unattended around water—not even for a moment. Provide constant, direct, uninterrupted supervision by a responsible adult. Supervision is critical even when lifeguards are present.

- * Designate a responsible adult as a Water Watcher during swim times, using a card or badge to identify them. Rotate Water Watchers every 15–30 minutes to maintain attentive supervision. Share water safety information with family, friends, and your community.

- * Uninterrupted, attentive supervision is essential wherever water is present. Supervisors should remain within arm's length of inexperienced swimmers and avoid distractions at all times. Designating a responsible Water Watcher is strongly recommended.

4. P — Physical Barriers

- * Install and maintain effective physical barriers such as four-sided fencing, self-closing gates, and pool alarms. Ensure that all aquatic environments are equipped with rescue equipment and controls to prevent unsupervised access to water.

5. E — Expectations

- * AOAP advocates for building water competency—the ability to anticipate, avoid, and survive common water hazards. This includes the skills and knowledge to:

- * Enter and exit the water safely

- * Tread water or float for at least a minute

- * Turn around in the water and orient to safety

- * Swim a certain distance (at least 25 yards) without stopping

- * Enroll children and adults in high-quality swimming and water safety lessons. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, formal lessons reduce the risk of drowning, especially for children ages 1–4. Water competency includes being able to enter and exit water safely, tread water, turn around, and swim at least 25 yards without stopping.

- * Establish, communicate, and routinely rehearse comprehensive emergency action plans for all aquatic environments. Set clear expectations for safety behaviors,

preparedness, and coordinated responses among staff, participants, and caregivers. Regular drills and clear protocols are essential to ensure effective and timely action in the event of an aquatic emergency.

6. C — Communication

- * Clearly communicate pool and water safety rules to all swimmers and guests. Ensure everyone knows what to do in an emergency. Supervisors and caregivers should be trained in CPR and basic water rescue techniques. Keep a phone and rescue equipment near water at all times.

- * Clearly communicate water safety rules, expectations, and emergency procedures to every participant and caregiver. Foster open dialogue and ensure all users understand the risks and responsibilities associated with aquatic environments.

7. T — Training

- * Promote swimming lessons and water safety education for all ages. Water competency is essential for preventing drowning and should be encouraged in every community. Support equitable access to water safety programs, especially for groups at higher risk of drowning, such as young children, teens, males, and those with limited access to swimming instruction.

- * Keep a phone and rescue equipment (life ring, reaching pole) close to the pool or waterfront.

- * Encourage participation in evidence-based, professional lifesaving and water safety training programs. All aquatic staff, caregivers, and community members should seek ongoing training and certification in CPR, first aid, and aquatic rescue skills to enhance community preparedness.

Additional Considerations from Policy Recommendations

The American Academy of Pediatrics policy highlights that drowning is fast, silent, and can happen to anyone. It recommends:

- Close, attentive, and undistracted supervision around all water, including bathtubs and natural bodies of water

- Use of barriers and safety devices as the first line of defense

- Promotion of water competency and swimming lessons for children starting at age 1, when developmentally ready

- Use of life jackets in open water and for non-swimmers
- Community efforts to address disparities in access to swim lessons and water safety resources
- Bystander CPR training for parents, caregivers, and older children

AOAP's RESPECT the Water Drowning Prevention Program brings these evidence-based recommendations to life and provides a framework for families, communities, and aquatic professionals to work together.

A Call to Action

Drowning is fast and silent, but it is also preventable. The AOAP urges everyone—parents, caregivers, aquatic professionals, and communities—to adopt the RESPECT the Water Drowning Prevention Program. By working together, building water competency, and following evidence-based layers of protection, we can save lives and help everyone enjoy water safely.

For more information, resources, and water safety tips, visit the Association of Aquatic Professionals at www.aquaticpros.org.

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