What is this open water swimming malarkey?

by Jacqui Young

Many school visits, residentials, expeditions and even family trips involve water. Whether this is walking a canal path, boating on a reservoir, a river study or swimming in the sea.

What do we say when a group ask to go in the water on a hot day? Is it safe to let them? Nobody has buoyancy aids when out for a walk! For activities like sailing and canoeing NGB guidance is 'wear buoyancy aids' where as, for activities like surfing, rowing or dragon boat racing this might not be the norm.

If and when we let groups get in the water and play or 'swim' at the end of a canoe session or during a walk: what do we call it? how do we manage it and do we think they need to wear buoyancy aids or not? Is this 'water play' - outdoor swimming? And what training do we need to supervise them - if any?

Is swimming outdoors dangerous?

Take a quick look at statistics (the National Water Safety Forum)

For a UK population of around 70 million – in 2013 there were 231 deaths by drowning . Most as a result of an accident or illness: 60% in inland waters, 30% on sea and coast. Of the remaining 10%: 6 deaths were in private swimming pools and 8 deaths in the bath/Jacuzzi.
Young men and teenagers were those most at risk of drowning.
The commonest activities leading to drowning were: walking alongside water and falling in, swimming (predominantly in open water), and jumping into open water.

The leading activities people were doing: walking alongside water and falling in, swimming (predominantly in open water), and jumping into open water. All activities that are commonly done on outdoor programmes, all be it in a supervised manner!

Research clearly confirms that learning to swim has an enormous effect on reducing the subsequent likelihood of a person dying from drowning. This is particularly significant for children and young people. Take a moment to consider how many ways outdoor water is different to indoor water – and what extra challenges, even risks, this poses. It is not just the issue of cold water shock but of many other distractions and unknowns – including the depth! Is learning to swim in heated indoor pools enough to keep people safe when they face 'real water' in the outdoors? As outdoor educators have we lost sight of our role in helping people to become competent to go safely into 'cold outdoor water' with all its extra complexities not just into managed heated pools.

Some, possibly many, leaders may be uncomfortable about letting children go in the water, go out of their depth or may be unsure as to whether they are 'qualified ' to have children in the water without buoyancy aids. So where can outdoor educators go to get guidance on good practice for 'swimming' in outdoor water as part of other outdoor activities. What should good practice look like for providers of outdoor /open water swimming sessions for those I their charge especially novices and under 18 year olds? >>>

JARGON BUSTER
Lotc – Learning Outside the Classroom
IOL – Institute of Outdoor Learning
RLSS – Royal Lifesaving Society - NWSMP – RLSS course – National Water Safety Management Course
RNLI – Royal National Lifeboat Institute
ASA – Amateur Swimming Association
FINA – International swimming Federation
ROSPA – Royal Society for the Protection of Accidents
National Water Safety Forum
Outdoor Swimming Society
DfES – Department of Education and Skills
LEA – Local Education Authority
OEAP - Outdoor Education Advisors Panel

Where is the current guidance on good practice?

There have been a good many papers written on water safety From organisations such as RoSPA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents) on general water safety. The RLSS (Royal Lifesaving society) publish good practice guidance. There is also the former DfES leaflet Safety at the Water Margins.

The RLSS also run a National Water Safety Management Programme (NWSMP) that helps teachers, youth leaders and outdoor instructors, amongst many others, to be more safety aware in and around water

Do you include water safety education in your water activities?

Activities that involve water can be an opportunity to educate young people about both the fun and risks of our natural water environments. How well do we do this and how well do we model good 'water safe' behaviour?

Do we let the kids jump off the jetty or leap off rocks into deep water? Do we get them to acclimatise to the cold water before jumping or is the jump supposed to do that? Do we insist on buoyancy aids or let them swim without ? What about wetsuits? How far do we let them go out of their depth or don't we? How many children can we supervise in the water and where do we supervise them from?

It is easy to see why providers may shy away from getting involved in outdoor swimming but the benefits of learning to swim outdoors are well worth the risks of getting cold, wet and possibly tired but they are obviously not worth drowning*for; so some thought needs to be given to what we do.

*Drowning is often not the dramatic affair that many people assume, with frantic waving of arms or screams for help. All too often it is a quiet slipping below the surface scenario. They call it 'silent drowning'. Even if you are actually watching the person at the time it can be difficult to tell that they are in difficulties.

What are the benefits of swimming outside?

For young people swimming can be part of a healthy lifestyle. Knowing how to cope with cold outdoor water , an understanding of the risks involved and the confidence to swim outdoors can reduce the risk of drowning in later life due to ignorance. Swimming outdoors is "free" doesn't need a lot of expensive equipment - a bright hat and a wet suit all that most people use. Swimming outside can be very safe with the right education and understanding.

For outdoor learning providers including water safety is has many benefits: it's a transferable life skill, it's in the national curriculum and you could save a life, what better reason is there...? However they maybe some challenges for the "supervisor" of the swimming session to consider all the "what ifs"....and challenges for the organisation in risk assessment and seeking best practice.

So what can we do to help manage the risks?

Organisations can signpost young people to a new FREE summer initiative from the RNLA/ASA called SwimSafe where 7-12 year old can experience a safe introduction to open water and learn some basic water safety skills (for example the HUDDLE and HELP position) and water safety messages linked to the SAFE code*. There are 6 locations for the programme in 2015 and its FREE. Participants are then signposted to either safe swim spots at inland waters or into RLSS clubs. http://www.swimming.org/swimsafe/.*IOL can provide a space for discussion and a place to share experience and opinions.. What are your thoughts and concerns?

Some questions that practitioners are raising already about open water swimming for it's own sake:

- Who do you allow to take part?
- How do you determine their abilities?
- How do you manage the progression from beginner swims?
- What kit do they need to wear?
- What safety boat cover do you provide?
- What additional briefing/training do participants receive?
- What additional briefing/training do safety boat staff receive?
- What other safety cove do you provide?
- Must swimmer follow a particular course?
- What features do these courses have or avoid
- Have you any other Top Tips and Handy Hints?

IOL can provide a forum for discussion and IOL regional events are an ideal place to organise CPD workshops - see the members' newsletters and website for more information. ■

*SAFE code - http://www.rlss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/SAFE-Code-poster.pdf

- Spot the danger
- Take advice
- Go with a friend
- Learn what to do in an emergency

Contributions from:

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