



# Water safety warning: Australian kids at risk

## Poll report

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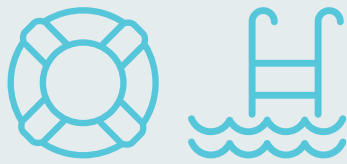
Poll 27, December 2022



### Report highlights

- Half of Australian parents (49%) are not aware that young children should always be within arm's reach of an adult in the water.
- Many parents hold misbeliefs about water safety, with almost half (44%) not aware that drowning is often silent.
- Almost half (47%) of children missed out on swimming lessons and opportunities to develop water safety skills due to the COVID pandemic.
- Parents from culturally diverse backgrounds have lower levels of knowledge about water safety.

**Half of Australian parents (49%)** are not aware that young children should always be within arm's reach of an adult in the water



**What is the level of water safety skills among Australian children?**

According to parent report, one in five pre-schoolers (21%) have 'no swimming skills at all', and almost a third of primary school aged children have either 'no

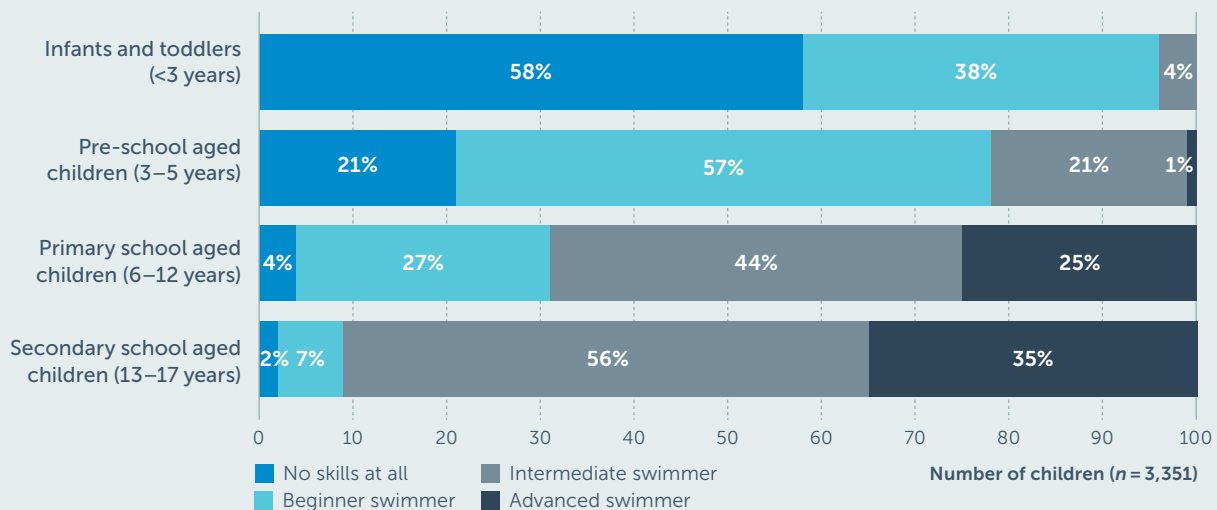
swimming skills at all' (4%) or 'beginner skills only' (27%). Equally of concern, one in 10 teenagers have 'no swimming skills at all' (2%) or only beginner skills (7%) (see figure 1).

**What proportion of Australian children have had swimming lessons?**

While most Australian children aged over six months have had at least one swimming lesson with a qualified instructor, of concern, parents report that one in six (16%) have never had a lesson. Younger children were less likely to have had a lesson, half (49%) of children aged six months to less than three years, one in three pre-schoolers (33%), one in 10 primary school aged children (9%) and 4% of teens have never had a swimming lesson.

Although the vast majority of parents (91%) believe that children are never too young to start learning about water safety, there are many reasons children are missing out on swimming lessons. The leading reason across all age groups for children never having had a swimming lesson is cost, with 27% of parents saying they cannot afford lessons for their children. Many parents report they had not enrolled their children in lessons because they had 'not got around to it' (21%), because classes were booked out (16%) or because their child did not want to attend (9%). Just 9% reported that they felt swimming lessons for children were not necessary as child never goes swimming. A minority

**Swimming skill levels of Australian children, rated by parents**



**Beginner swimmer:** can't swim or float without help, can only doggy paddle over a very short distance and don't have any recognised strokes  
**Intermediate swimmer:** can float without help for up to one minute, and can swim for up to 25 metres without stopping or touching the bottom  
**Advanced swimmer:** can float without help for two minutes or more and swim for at least 50 metres without stopping or touching the bottom

Figure 1.

## Reasons why children have **not had swimming lessons**\*

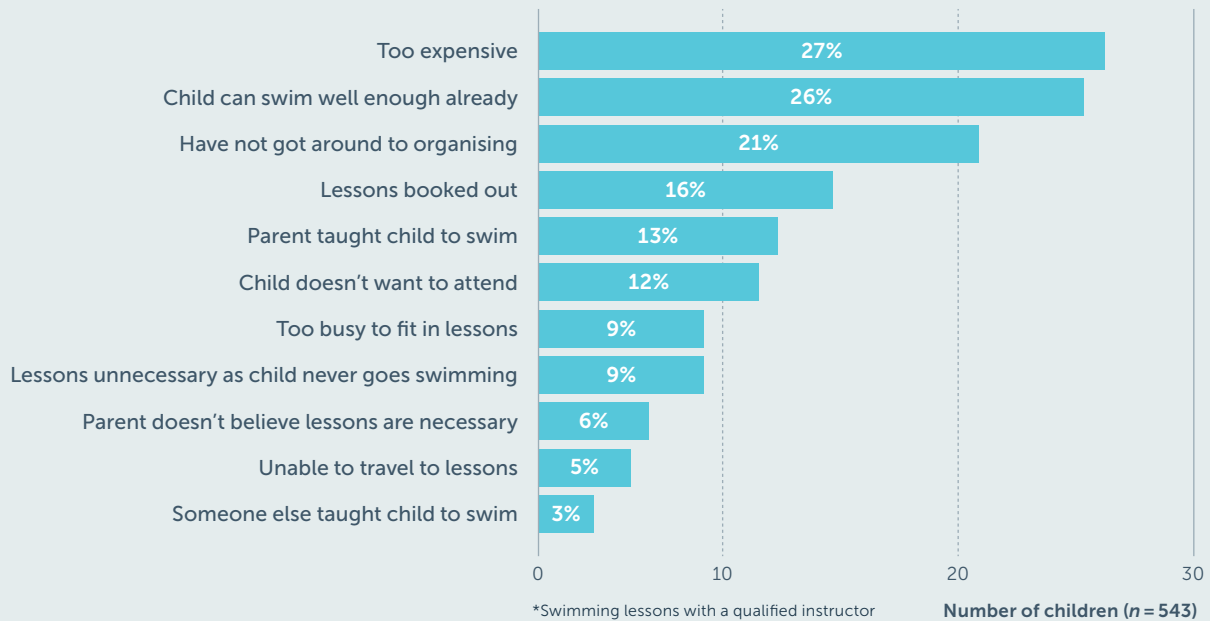


Figure 2.

of parents reported their child had been taught by a parent (13%) or a friend or family member (3%) instead of attending lessons with a qualified instructor (see figure 2).

Parents with lower household income (less than \$1,000 per week), were more likely to report that their child had never had a swimming lesson from a qualified instructor than those parents with higher household income (equal to or more than \$1,000 per week) (33% vs 14%). Children with parents born outside of Australia were reported to be slightly more likely to have had swimming lessons with a qualified instructor than those with parents born in Australia (89% vs 82%), as were children residing in remote or regional areas compared to those children living in urban areas (90% vs 83%).

### Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on swimming lessons

According to parent report, almost half (47%) of all Australian children aged between six months and 17 years missed out on swimming lessons and/or other opportunities to develop and practise their swimming skills due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions, with those children living in Victoria (63%) and NSW (58%) being most affected. Among the 35% of children who missed swimming lessons due to the pandemic (n = 1,195), half (49%) have not yet caught up on their swimming skills, with 45% of primary school aged children, 60% of pre-schoolers and 58% of

toddlers not yet having had 'catch-up' swimming lessons. The proportion of children who missed out was similar in regional/remote and urban areas (43% vs 47%).

### What do parents know about water safety?

Many parents hold misbeliefs and misunderstandings about drowning risks and water safety practices for children (see figure 3 on the following page).

### Drowning is quick and silent

Drowning can happen quickly and is often silent. Yet, almost half of parents (49%) hold the false belief that it takes more than 20 seconds for a child to drown. Almost half of parents (44%) are not aware that drowning is often silent, with 36% of parents mistakenly believing that a child who is struggling in water will thrash about and make a lot of noise, and a further 8% being unsure about this.

Drowning can happen in very shallow water, yet 10% of parents don't know that a child can drown in a bath with water that is only a few centimetres deep.

### Flotation devices don't save lives

Flotation devices do not replace adequate supervision and can contribute to risk of drowning. A third of parents (29%) mistakenly believe a lilo or inflated pool toy will prevent a child from drowning and one in four (25%)

## Misbeliefs about drowning and water safety held by parents

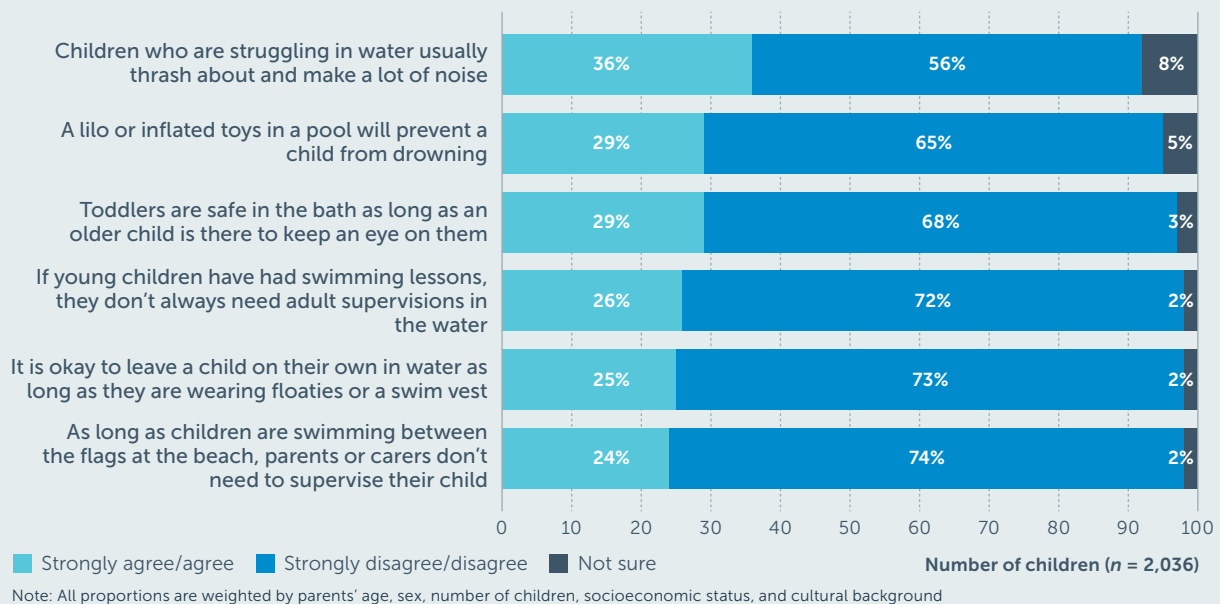


Figure 3.

think it is okay to leave a young child on their own in the water as long as they are wearing floaties or a swim vest.

### Adequate supervision is critical

Despite a large proportion of parents recognising that their young children have little or no swimming skills, many parents are not aware of safest practice with regard to supervision of children around water. Half of parents (49%) are not aware that young children should always be within arm's reach of an adult when in the water, regardless of their level of swimming competence.

Twenty-nine per cent of parents believe that is okay to leave a toddler in the bath if there is an older child there to watch over them, and 27% of believe it is okay to leave children unsupervised in the pool to answer the phone if there is more than one child swimming. Twenty-six per cent of parents think that if young children have had swimming lessons they don't always need adult supervision in the water. One quarter (24%) believe children don't need to be supervised by a parent or carer if they are swimming between the life saver patrolled flags at the beach.

### Which parents have the biggest knowledge gaps about water safety?

Parents who were born overseas or were male had considerably lower levels of knowledge about drowning and water safety across a range of indicators than those who were born in Australia or female. For example,

parents born overseas were almost three times as likely as those born in Australia to believe it is okay to leave a young child on their own in water as long as they are wearing floaties or a swim vest (44% vs 15%), and twice as likely to believe toddlers are safe in the bath as long as an older child is there to keep an eye on them (48% vs 21%). Parents born overseas were more than twice as likely as those born in Australia to believe they do not need to supervise their children in the water if they are swimming between the patrolled flags at the beach (40% vs 16%) or if they have had swimming lessons (44% vs 16%). Male parents were twice as likely as female parents to believe a lilo or inflated pool toy will prevent a child from drowning (48% vs 21%) and three times as likely to believe that young children don't always need adult supervision in the water if they have had swimming lessons (42% vs 13%).

Parents from regional and remote areas tended to have better knowledge about drowning and water safety than those from urban areas. For example, parents living in regional and remote areas were more likely than those living in major cities to know that children struggling in water don't always make a lot of noise (80% vs 52%).

There was no meaningful difference in knowledge of water safe practices by parent age, level of education or socio economic status.

## Implications

Drowning was among the leading causes of death in children aged less than 15 years in Australia in 2021.<sup>1</sup> As more deaths were reported in the past year than for previous years<sup>2</sup>, improving water safety and swimming skills is critically important. This study suggests that many Australian children have little or no water safety skills, with more than half having missed out on swimming lessons and other opportunities to develop water safety skills due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions. A quarter of preschool aged children have no swimming or water safety skills at all according to their parents.

While the vast majority of parents believe it is never too young for children to start learning about water safety, one in six Australian children over six months old have never had swimming lessons. The leading barrier is cost, with convenience and family logistics being the second most common challenge. Some states and territories have school-based swimming lessons, and these findings suggest such programs are critical to ensure all children have equitable access to swimming lessons. Only half of children have accessed catch-up swimming lessons following the pandemic, leaving many children vulnerable and at risk of water related accident and injury. Further investment is needed in equitable school-based swimming programs for all Australian children.

Supervision is the single most important protective action parents and carers can take to keep their children safe around water. This study suggests that a concerning number of parents underestimate how quickly a child can drown, and many are not aware that young children should always be within arm's reach of an adult in the water. Parents of culturally diverse backgrounds were significantly less likely to be aware of best water safety practices than parents born in Australia.

As we approach summer, many Australian children and families will be planning recreation time near water. With travel restrictions lifted, people may be returning to holidays and travel for the first time in some years. The combination of reduced water safety skills among children and low levels of parent knowledge about water safe practices means that Australian children are at increased risk of drowning and near-drowning accidents this summer. Public health messaging and education for parents and carers about safe supervision and other water safe practices is urgently needed, with targeted and effective communication to male parents and those from culturally diverse backgrounds being a critical priority.

Many parents hold **misbeliefs about water safety**, with almost half (44%) not aware that drowning is often silent



## Data source and methods



This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. In an online survey, Australian parents were asked about their child's experience of swimming lessons and water safety skills and if this was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents were also asked about their knowledge and behaviours in relation to water safety practices for their children. The survey was administered from 19 September to 4 October, 2022, to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults aged 18 and older. All respondents were parents or caregivers to at least one child aged less than 18 years and provided data on each of their children. A nationally representative sample of 2,036 parents yielded data on a total of 3,351 children aged between one month and 17 years. The data were subsequently weighted to reflect the distribution of the Australian population using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate the completion rate was 86%.

## References



1. Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Causes of Death, Australia* [Internet]. Canberra: ABS; 2021 [cited 2022 November 28]. Available from: [www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/causes-death/causes-death-australia/latest-release](http://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/causes-death/causes-death-australia/latest-release).
2. Royal Life Saving Society – Australia (©2022) *Royal Life Saving National Drowning Report 2022*, Sydney, Australia. Available from: [https://www.royallifesaving.com.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/67687/RLS\\_NationalDrowningReport2022\\_SPG\\_LR.pdf](https://www.royallifesaving.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/67687/RLS_NationalDrowningReport2022_SPG_LR.pdf)

For a full list of references please visit [www.rchpoll.org.au](http://www.rchpoll.org.au)

## Suggested citation



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