Camp Counselor Water Safety Training

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A free 90-minute staff training for camp counselors: swim tests and areas, buddy checks every 15 minutes, spotting drowning, and lost swimmer drills.

Adults · 90 minutes · For camps, teens, adults

This training prepares **camp counselors to keep every camper accounted for at swim time**. In 90 minutes, counselors learn how swim tests and swim areas work, run real buddy checks, practice scanning for the quiet signs of drowning, and walk through the lost swimmer plan until it's automatic. Use it at staff orientation, before the first swim day.

Every 15 min

is the longest NYC camp rules allow between buddy checks. A check is also called any time a child may be missing (NYC Department of Health).

Source: nyc.gov https://www.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/camp/camp-safety-plan-addendum-swim-safety.pdf

Learning objectives

- Explain the counselor's job at swim time and how it differs from the lifeguard's.
- Run a buddy system: pairing by ability, checking in and out, and a buddy check at least every 15 minutes.
- Keep campers in the area that matches their tested swimming ability.
- Scan an assigned zone and recognize the quiet signs of drowning.
- Carry out your camp's lost swimmer plan in the right order.

Materials

- ☐ Your camp's written swim safety plan and lost swimmer plan (every counselor needs a copy)
- ☐ A buddy board or accountability chart, and the signal your camp uses for buddy checks (whistle or bell)
- ☐ Tape or cones to mark a pretend swim area with a swimmer section and a non-swimmer section
- ☐ Colored wristbands or tags if your camp uses them to show swimming ability
- ☐ Copies of the Camp Counselor Checklist and Water Watcher cards

Lesson steps

1 Why we drill — 10 minutes

Open with the NYC Health Department's warning (in the Background section) that failure to run a complete buddy system has been a significant contributing factor in every camper drowning it has seen since 1986. Then set out roles: lifeguards guard the water; counselors supervise, account for every camper and back up the lifeguards. Nobody does both at once.

2 Swim tests and swim areas 10 minutes

Walk through how your camp tests and groups campers.

- Every camper is tested before swimming. In NYC, the test must be given by a qualified swim instructor (a Water Safety Instructor or equivalent); a lifeguard is not qualified to give it.
- Campers are grouped by tested ability, for example non-swimmers and swimmers.
- Non-swimmers stay in water less than chest deep, measured on each camper.
- If there is no physical barrier between areas, campers wear an ability marker such as a colored wristband. In NYC rules, float lines alone don't count as a barrier.

3 Buddy system drill 20 minutes

Set up the pretend swim area and run three full buddy checks with staff acting as campers.

- Pair every camper with a buddy of similar ability. One group of three is allowed per area if numbers are odd.
- Record each pair on the board as they enter and leave the water area.
- Call a buddy check no later than 15 minutes after campers enter, then at least every 15 minutes, and any time a child may be missing.
- At the signal, buddies grab hands and raise them. One leader counts pairs aloud while a second counts silently. Compare the count with the board.
- A single raised hand means a missing buddy: get that buddy's name, call it out, ask where they were last seen, and immediately tell the nearest lifeguard to start a water search.

4 Scanning and recognizing trouble 15 minutes

Assign each counselor a zone. Practice sweeping the whole zone and counting heads. Counselors on duty are Water Watchers: no phones, no side conversations, no other tasks.

- Needs help now: upright in the water, head back, mouth at the surface, not moving forward, not calling out.
- Needs help now: not making forward progress, can't tread water, or face down and still.
- In trouble too: yelling and splashing. They may still be able to grab a pole or ring.
- Drowning is usually silent. Look, don't listen.

5 Lost swimmer drill 15 minutes

Run your camp's lost swimmer plan as a timed drill. In NYC camp rules, the order is:

- Tell the nearest lifeguard a child is missing and request an immediate water search.
- Clear the water of all children and gather campers in a safe place away from the water, with counselors assigned to supervise them.
- Assigned staff begin the land search, high-risk areas first, while the camp director is told.
- Expand the search and keep in contact with the director. If needed, notify parents, law enforcement and the local health department.

6 Trips, boats and water parks 10 minutes

Cover off-site swimming: tell the facility you've arrived and how your buddy checks work, swim only in designated areas, and keep the buddy system running. On any boat, every camper wears a U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket that fits; federal law requires one for children under 13 on a moving boat.

7 Assessment and sign-off 10 minutes

Each counselor answers the scenario questions below out loud, then demonstrates one buddy check as the leader. Sign off counselors who can run both drills without prompts; repeat the drill for anyone who can't.

8 Take-home

Every counselor keeps the Camp Counselor Checklist in their swim bag and a Water Watcher card on a lanyard.

Background for the trainer

This plan follows your camp's rules, not the other way around. Every camp must follow its own written safety plan and its state and local health codes. The examples here come from the New York City Health Department's Children's Camp Safety Plan swim addendum, which says a camp's plan *must* include a bather accountability (buddy) system, and that **failure to implement a complete buddy system has been a significant contributing factor in every camper drowning since 1986.** If your camp is outside NYC, swap in your own state's numbers.

NYC examples of staffing rules (from the same addendum):

Rule	NYC camp requirement
Lifeguards	One qualified lifeguard for every 25 children in the water
Senior counselors (in addition to lifeguards)	1:4 for children under 6, 1:6 for ages 6-7, 1:8 for ages 8 and older
Swim test	During the first swim session, by a qualified swim instructor; a lifeguard is not qualified to give it
Non-swimmers	Confined to water less than chest deep
Buddy checks	No later than 15 minutes after entry, then at least every 15 minutes

Why counselors must keep watching. Pool Safely says that even if a lifeguard is present, parents and caregivers should still be a designated Water Watcher. The Red Cross says to provide close and constant attention to children you are supervising, even when a lifeguard is present, and to avoid distractions including cell phones. Older campers are at risk in public settings too: the CPSC found that for children 5 to 14, public, community or business pools were the most common known location of pool drownings.

What drowning looks like. CDC says drowning happens in seconds and is often silent. The Red Cross lists three signs that a swimmer needs help right away: not making forward progress, vertical but unable to move or tread water, or motionless and face down. A retired Coast Guard rescue swimmer adds that someone yelling and thrashing is in aquatic distress and still in real trouble. Learn more in what drowning looks like.

Scenario questions for sign-off

1. **It's 14 minutes since the last buddy check and a camper asks you to fix her goggles.** [Call or prompt the buddy check first; the 15-minute limit comes before everything else.]
2. **At the check, one camper raises a single hand.** [Get the missing buddy's name, call it out, ask when and where they were last seen, and tell the nearest lifeguard to start an immediate water search. Start the lost swimmer plan.]
3. **A non-swimmer is wading toward the deep line.** [Stop them and bring them back to water below chest deep. Tell the aquatics director if the boundary isn't clear.]
4. **You see a camper upright in the water, not moving forward and silent.** [Alert the lifeguard immediately with your camp's signal. This can be drowning.]
5. **On a canoe trip, a 12-year-old wants to unbuckle their life jacket because it's hot.** [No. Federal law requires children under 13 to wear one on a moving boat, and every camper on a boat wears one.]

Running the training well

- **Train before the first swim day,** then repeat the buddy check and lost swimmer drills at least once during the season.
- **Every counselor gets a copy** of the camp's written plan. If your camp doesn't have one in writing, stop and fix that first.
- **Counselors 16 and older** who want to become lifeguards can look for a Red Cross lifeguarding class. In NYC, NYC Parks Swim Prep offers free coaching for the lifeguard qualifying test.
- **Be kind.** Some staff may have lost someone to water. Run drills seriously but without drowning stories or videos.
- **Counselors who see trouble** shout for the lifeguard and, if they can, reach or throw from the deck. They don't go in.

Take-home sheet

Printable: Camp Swim Time Checklist resource.aminfoundation.io/printables/camp-counselor-checklist

Printable: Water Watcher Card resource.aminfoundation.io/printables/water-watcher-card

What you can do today

Get a copy of your camp's written swim plan and lost swimmer plan, make the buddy board, and schedule this training before the first swim day. Share summer camp water safety: questions parents ask with your families so they know what you do.

Sources

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10. Lifeguarding classes, American Red Cross. https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class/lifeguarding

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