Community Water Safety Workshop Plan

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A free 75-minute water safety workshop for any community group: who drowns and why, the quiet signs, reach or throw, CPR and finding swim lessons.

Community groups · 75 minutes · For adults, teens, parents, caregivers

This plan is a **75-minute water safety workshop any community group can host**: a community center, library, tenant association, youth program or cultural organization. People learn who is most at risk and why, how to spot the quiet signs of drowning, how to help from land, and where to get CPR training and swim lessons. Everyone leaves with one written next step.

Over 4,500

people drowned each year in the U.S. from 2020 to 2022, about 500 more a year than in 2019 (CDC Vital Signs).

Source: cdc.gov https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/drowning/index.html

Learning objectives

- Describe who is most at risk of drowning in the U.S. and the access barriers behind the gaps, using CDC data.
- Recognize the quiet signs of a swimmer in trouble.
- Practice helping from land: shout, call 911, then reach or throw something that floats.
- Explain why CPR training with rescue breaths matters for drowning, and where to get it.
- Leave with one concrete next step: a swim lesson, a CPR class, or a life jacket check.

Materials

- [ ] Projector or printed copies of the key facts
- [ ] A rope or tape line on the floor (the water's edge), a pole or broom handle, a rope, and something that floats (a ring buoy, cooler or empty jug)
- [ ] Two or three Coast Guard-approved life jackets in different sizes for the fit station
- [ ] Printed lists of local swim lessons (including adult classes) and CPR classes you looked up in advance
- [ ] Copies of the Recognize Drowning and Reach or Throw, Don't Go posters, the Adult Swim Lesson Guide and the Emergency Action Plan
- [ ] A bilingual co-presenter if your group speaks another language

Lesson steps

1 Welcome: water in our lives — 10 minutes

Ask each person to tell a neighbor one place their family goes near water: a beach, a park lake, a pool, a family trip back home. Say the goal: *Everyone leaves with one next step.* Don't ask who can or can't swim.

2 Talk: who drowns, and why it isn't anyone's fault — 10 minutes

Share three or four facts from the Background section. Name the barriers CDC describes (no nearby pool, cost, history) and stress that skills and safety habits can be learned at any age.

3 Activity 1: Spot the swimmer in trouble — 10 minutes

Describe three swimmers out loud and have pairs decide who needs help. Don't show videos of real drownings.

- Swimmer A is upright in the water, head tilted back, mouth at the surface, not moving forward and not calling out. *Needs help now.*
- Swimmer B is yelling and splashing, waving an arm. *In trouble too (aquatic distress); may still be able to grab a rope or ring.*
- Swimmer C is floating face down and not moving. *Needs help now; call 911.*

4 Activity 2: Reach or throw, don't go — 15 minutes

Use the line on the floor as the water's edge. Volunteers take turns as rescuer and swimmer. Nobody crosses the line.

- Shout for help and point at one person: *You, call 911.*
- Reach: stay on solid ground behind the line and hold out the pole. If you feel yourself being pulled in, let go and start over.
- Throw: toss one end of the rope, or the floating item, to the swimmer. Hold on to your end of the rope and pull them in.
- Discuss: *Why not jump in?* People trying to rescue others can drown. Only trained rescuers go in, with a flotation device.

5 Activity 3: Next-step stations — 20 minutes

Set up three tables. People visit at least two and leave with one written next step.

- **Swim lessons (kids and adults):** your printed local list, plus national locators: the YMCA, Red Cross Learn-to-Swim providers, USA Swimming's Find a Team & Lessons map, and U.S. Masters Swimming's adult instructor search.
- **CPR:** your printed list of CPR classes. In New York City, groups of 15 to 50 can ask the FDNY Mobile CPR Training Unit for a free hands-only class at least 14 days ahead.
- **Life jackets:** try one on and do the fit check: buckled, arms up, a partner gently lifts at the shoulders, and it doesn't ride up over the chin or face.

6 Assessment and wrap-up 10 minutes

Ask the quick check questions below. Then each person says their next step to a neighbor. Hand out the posters and guides.

7 Take-home

The Recognize Drowning poster, the Reach or Throw, Don't Go poster, the Adult Swim Lesson Guide and the Emergency Action Plan.

Background for the facilitator

Who is most at risk. CDC reports that drowning death rates for Black people under age 30 are 1.5 times higher than for White people, and 2 times higher for American Indian or Alaska Native people under 30. In CDC's 2023 survey, about 36.8% of Black adults and 25.8% of Hispanic adults said they could not swim, compared with 6.9% of White adults, and more than half of all U.S. adults (54.7%) had never taken a swimming lesson. More in drowning disparities.

Why the gaps exist. CDC links them to history and access: racially segregated pools led to fewer swimming options for Black people, and a lack of nearby pools is still a major barrier. Say this plainly: the gap is about access, not ability or caring.

Skills pass down. The USA Swimming Foundation reports that if a parent does not know how to swim, there is only a 19% chance a child in the household will learn. That's why adult lessons belong in every family plan.

"I can swim" isn't the whole story. In a 2020 Red Cross survey, 85% of Americans said they could swim, but only 56% of those self-described swimmers could do all five basic water safety skills.

What drowning looks like. A retired Coast Guard rescue swimmer explains that drowning people are usually physiologically unable to call out for help, and that someone yelling and thrashing is in "aquatic distress" and still in real trouble. The Red Cross says a swimmer needs help right away if they are not making forward progress, are vertical but unable to move or tread water, or are motionless and face down. See what drowning looks like.

Helping safely. The Red Cross teaches "reach or throw, don't go", and Water Safety USA describes reaching and throwing a flotation aid from the water's edge without entering the water. The National Weather Service warns not to attempt a rescue by forming a human chain.

CPR. Because drowning starts with breathing failure, the 2024 AHA and AAP guidelines say resuscitation must focus on restoring breathing as much as circulation. Send people to a certified course. Don't teach CPR steps unless you are a certified instructor.

Quick check questions

1. Does a drowning person usually shout and wave? [No. Drowning is usually quiet.]
2. Your friend is in trouble in a lake. What are your first moves? [Shout for help, get someone to call 911, then reach or throw something that floats. Don't go in.]
3. Why does CPR for drowning need rescue breaths? [Drowning is a breathing emergency.]
4. Name one place to find swim lessons for adults. [Your local list, the YMCA, Red Cross providers, U.S. Masters Swimming.]

Optional add-on: free CPR in New York City

The FDNY Free CPR Program teaches free 30-minute hands-only CPR and AED classes. Its Mobile CPR Training Unit can come to your venue for groups of 15 to 50 if you ask at least 14 days ahead. It is not a certification class and does not cover rescue breaths, so pair it with the full-course options above. Outside NYC, ask your local fire department or EMS agency.

Running the session well

- **No blame, no fear.** Some people in the room may have lost someone to drowning. Don't tell drowning stories or show rescue videos. If someone shares a loss, thank them and offer the Grief Support Contacts sheet.
- **Respect privacy.** Don't ask people to say whether they can swim. Collect no names or contact details.
- **Make it local.** Add the beaches, lakes and pools your group actually uses, and the lifeguard seasons for each.
- **Faith groups** can use the Water Safety Workshop for Faith Communities version, which covers gatherings, trips and modest swimwear.

Take-home sheet

Printable: Drowning Is Quiet resource.aminfoundation.io/printables/recognize-drowning-poster

Printable: Reach or Throw, Don't Go resource.aminfoundation.io/printables/reach-throw-dont-go-poster

Printable: Adult Swim Lesson Guide resource.aminfoundation.io/printables/adult-swim-lesson-guide

Printable: Water Emergency Action Plan resource.aminfoundation.io/printables/emergency-action-plan

People can also look up lessons later with Swim lesson finder.

What you can do today

Pick a date and a room, look up two swim lesson programs and one CPR class near you, and print the take-home sheets. Then read how to host a water safety workshop for planning and outreach tips.

Sources

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3. Vital Signs: Drowning Death Rates, Self-Reported Swimming Skill, Swimming Lesson Participation, and Recreational Water Exposure, United States, 2019-2023, CDC (MMWR). https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/73/wr/mm7320e1.htm
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5. Aquatics Centennial Campaign, American Red Cross. https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class/swimming/centennial
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9. What if someone else falls in?, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/safety/ice/saving.html
10. Gulf Coast Rip Current Awareness, National Weather Service Tallahassee. https://www.weather.gov/tae/ripcurrentawareness
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15. Find Your Y, YMCA of the USA. https://www.ymca.org/find-your-y
16. Learn-to-Swim Providers, American Red Cross. https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class/swimming/learn-to-swim-providers
17. Find a Team & Lessons, USA Swimming. https://www.usaswimming.org/home/find-a-team
18. Adult Learn-to-Swim Instructor Search, U.S. Masters Swimming. https://www.usms.org/alts/altsinstrsearch.php
19. CPR Training & Certification, American Red Cross. https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class/cpr
20. Atlas: Find a Class, American Heart Association. https://atlas.heart.org/

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