Water Safety Lesson Plan for Grades 3-5

A free 45-minute lesson for grades 3-5: the five water competency skills, why drowning is quiet, life jacket fit, reach or throw don't go, and how to call 911.

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Grades 3-5 · 45 minutes · For teachers

This lesson teaches students in grades 3-5 to be "water smart": the **five water competency skills** they can work toward in swim lessons, why **drowning is usually quiet**, how to **help someone without going in** (reach or throw, don't go), how to check a **life jacket**, and what to say when they **call 911**. It takes 45 minutes in a classroom or gym, with no pool needed.

2nd

leading cause of unintentional injury death for U.S. children ages 5-14 is drowning, after motor vehicle crashes (CDC, 2024).

Source: cdc.gov https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/data-research/facts/index.html

Learning objectives

- Name the five water competency skills and explain that learning them takes practice with an instructor.
- Explain why drowning is often quiet and why a grown-up Water Watcher must keep watching.
- Demonstrate how to help a person in trouble without going in: shout for help, then reach or throw something that floats.
- Check that a life jacket is Coast Guard-approved and fits snugly.
- Practice what to say on a 911 call: what happened, where you are and who needs help.

Materials

- ☐ Masking tape to make a 'water's edge' line on the floor
- ☐ Reaching items: a pool noodle, broom handle or jump rope
- ☐ Throwing items: a soft ball, an empty plastic jug with a rope tied to the handle, or a beanbag
- ☐ A child-size life jacket with a U.S. Coast Guard label (borrow one if you can)
- ☐ A pretend phone (any block or eraser) and the school's address written on the board
- ☐ Copies of the exit ticket in the Assessment step and the Water Safety Pledge to take home

Lesson steps

1 Warm-up: Myth or fact? 5 minutes

Read each statement. Students stand up for *fact* and stay seated for *myth*. Give the answer after each one.

- *You would hear it if someone was drowning.* Myth. Drowning is usually quick and quiet.
- *Water wings and pool noodles keep you safe.* Myth. They are toys, not safety devices.
- *Kids who can swim still need a grown-up watching.* Fact.
- *If your friend is in trouble, you should jump in and save them.* Myth. Reach or throw, don't go.

2 Activity 1: Five skills that keep you safe 10 minutes

Write the five water competency skills from the American Red Cross on the board. Act out each one on dry land as a class (bob down and pop up, starfish float, turn around, swim arms, climb out).

- Enter water that's over your head, then come back to the surface.
- Float or tread water for at least 1 minute.
- Turn over and turn around in the water.
- Swim at least 25 yards.
- Get out of the water.
- Say: *These are skills you learn with a swim teacher, in a pool, with a lifeguard. Even people who have all five skills still swim with a buddy and a grown-up watching.* Do not ask students who can or can't swim.

3 Activity 2: Reach or throw, don't go (relay) 12 minutes

Tape a line on the floor: that's the water's edge. One student is the 'swimmer in trouble' sitting a few feet past the line. A team of three practices the steps. Nobody crosses the line.

- **Shout:** the first student calls *Help! Someone's in the water!* and points to a pretend grown-up or lifeguard.
- **Reach:** the second student stays behind the line and holds out the pool noodle or broom handle to the swimmer, who grabs it.
- **Throw:** the third student tosses the ball, or the jug on a rope, to the swimmer and holds on to the end of the rope.
- Swap roles. Ask: *What if you feel yourself being pulled in?* (Let go and start over.) *Why don't we go in?* (People who go in to rescue can drown too.)

4 Activity 3: Life jacket check and 911 practice 13 minutes

Split the class: half do the life jacket check with you, half practice 911 calls with a partner, then switch.

- **Life jacket check:** find the U.S. Coast Guard approval and the weight range on the label. Buckle a volunteer in, have them raise their arms, and gently lift the jacket at the shoulders. It should not ride up over the chin or face.
- **911 practice:** one partner is the caller, one is the dispatcher. The dispatcher asks: *What happened? Where are you? Who needs help?* The caller answers using the school address on the board.

5 Assessment: Exit ticket 5 minutes

Students answer on a half sheet (answer key in the section below).

- Name two of the five water competency skills.
- Why does a Water Watcher need to keep watching instead of listening?
- Your friend is struggling in a pond. Write the three things you do, in order.
- What two things do you check on a life jacket?

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6 Take-home

Send home the Water Safety Pledge with the family note below. Students teach one skill from today to someone at home.

Background for the teacher

- **Water competency** has three parts, says the American Red Cross: water smarts, swimming skills and helping others. The five skills in Activity 1 come straight from the Red Cross. Read more in water competency: the 5 skills.
- **Drowning is quiet.** CDC says drowning happens in seconds and is often silent. A retired Coast Guard rescue swimmer writing for the U.S. Army explains that drowning people are usually physiologically unable to call out for help. See what drowning looks like.
- **Rescuers can drown too.** The National Weather Service warns that many people have died trying to rescue someone caught in a rip current. The Red Cross teaches "reach or throw, don't go", which is what the relay practices.
- **Life jacket fit.** Water Safety USA's fit check: buckle it, raise your arms, and have someone gently pull up at the arm openings; it should not ride up over your chin or face. Don't buy one for a child to "grow into."
- **911 calls.** Nemours KidsHealth says the dispatcher will ask what the emergency is, where you are and who needs help.

Discussion questions

1. Why might a person who is drowning not be able to shout or wave?
2. Your little cousin is wearing water wings. Is that the same as a life jacket? Why not?
3. What could you reach with at a pool? At a lake? What could you throw that floats? (A ring buoy, a cooler, a ball, a life jacket.)
4. Why should even good swimmers swim with a buddy and a grown-up watching?
5. Which of the five skills would be hardest in a lake instead of a pool? Why?

Exit ticket answer key

1. Any two: enter water over your head and come back up; float or tread water for 1 minute; turn over and turn around; swim 25 yards; get out of the water.
2. Drowning is usually quiet. A person in trouble often can't shout or wave, so you have to *see* it.
3. Shout for help (a grown-up or lifeguard, and someone calls 911); reach with something long from solid ground, or throw something that floats. Don't go in.
4. The U.S. Coast Guard approval and the right size or weight on the label; and that it's snug (it doesn't ride up over the chin when lifted at the shoulders).

Take-home sheet for families

> **Today your child practiced being "water smart."** Ask them to show you how to *reach or throw, don't go*, and how to check a life jacket.
>
> **This week, together:**
>
> - Sign the Water Safety Pledge.
> - Practice your home address and apartment number for 911 calls.
> - Check any life jackets at home: Coast Guard label, right weight range, snug fit, no tears.
> - Think about swim lessons. They help, but the AAP says lessons don't make kids "drown proof," so a grown-up still watches. Find swim lessons near you.

Printable: Family Water Safety Pledge resource.aminfoundation.io/printables/water-safety-pledge

Teaching this topic with care

- Some students may have lost someone to drowning, or may be scared of water. Tell families the topic ahead of time, skip real-life drowning stories, and let students sit out a role if they want to.
- Never ask students to say who can or can't swim. Frame the five skills as "skills we keep learning."
- Use the school address, not home addresses, for 911 practice in class.

Follow-up ideas

- Play Reach or Throw, Don't Go or Swim Skills in Order in class. The games need no sign-in and collect nothing.
- Try Life Jacket Fit Check after the life jacket check.
- The American Red Cross offers Longfellow's WHALE Tales, nine free dry-land lessons for kindergarten through grade 5.
- Older students can continue with Water Safety Lesson Plan for Grades 6-8.

About the standards

This lesson gives students practice with the 2024 National Health Education Standards listed below. It has not been formally reviewed for alignment, so check it against your state's health standards.

What you can do today

Tape the water's-edge line in your room, gather a pool noodle and a soft ball, and print the exit tickets and pledges. If your school is near a beach or lake, add the rip current basics to your next science or health block.

Standards

- NHES 1: Use functional health information to support health and well-being of self and others. https://shapeamerica.org/standards/health/new-he-standards/
- NHES 4: Use interpersonal communication skills to support health and well-being of self and others. https://shapeamerica.org/standards/health/new-he-standards/
- NHES 7: Demonstrate practices and behaviors to support health and well-being of self and others. https://shapeamerica.org/standards/health/new-he-standards/

Sources

1. Water Safety, American Red Cross. https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/water-safety.html
2. Swimming Safety, American Red Cross. https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/water-safety/swim-safety.html
3. Preventing Drowning, CDC. https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/prevention/index.html
4. Drowning Facts, CDC. https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/data-research/facts/index.html
5. Drowning Doesn't Look Like Drowning, U.S. Army (army.mil), by retired USCG rescue swimmer Mario Vittone. https://www.army.mil/article/109852/drowning_doesnt_look_like_drowning
6. Life Jackets Save Lives, Water Safety USA. https://www.watersafetyusa.org/life-jackets-save-lives.html
7. Water Competency, Water Safety USA. https://www.watersafetyusa.org/water-competency.html
8. What if someone else falls in?, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/safety/ice/saving.html
9. Social Media: Rip Currents & Beach Hazards, National Weather Service. https://www.weather.gov/wrn/rip-currents-sm
10. Teaching Your Child How to Use 911, Nemours KidsHealth. https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/911.html
11. Swim Lessons for Children: When to Start & What to Consider, American Academy of Pediatrics (HealthyChildren.org). https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Swim-Lessons.aspx
12. National Health Education Standards (2024), SHAPE America. https://shapeamerica.org/standards/health/new-he-standards/
13. Longfellow's WHALE Tales, American Red Cross. https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class/teach-water-safety/whale-tales

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