Water Safety Lesson Plan for Grades 6-8

A free 50-minute middle school lesson: why lakes and oceans aren't pools, rip currents, cold water shock, and making safe choices with friends.

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Grades 6-8 · 50 minutes · For teachers

This lesson helps middle school students make safe choices in the places where many young people actually swim: **lakes, rivers and the ocean**. In 50 minutes, students learn why natural water is not a pool, how to **spot and escape a rip current**, what **cold water shock** does, and how to **turn down a risky dare** with words that work with friends.

Over 40%

of drownings among U.S. children ages 5-14 happen in natural water such as lakes, rivers and oceans; over 35% happen in pools (CDC).

Source: cdc.gov https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/risk-factors/index.html

Learning objectives

- Explain three ways lakes, rivers and oceans are more dangerous than a pool.
- Spot the signs of a rip current and describe the National Weather Service steps to escape one.
- Explain cold water shock and why warm air doesn't mean warm water.
- Use a decision-making process to choose a safe action in a water scenario with friends.
- Recognize a swimmer in trouble and describe how to help without going in.

Materials

- ☐ Board or chart paper, sticky notes
- ☐ Projector or printouts of the Rip Current poster and the Beach Flags poster
- ☐ Six scenario cards (text in Activity 3), one per group
- ☐ Decision steps written on the board: What's going on? What are my options? What could happen? What will I do? How do I say it?
- ☐ Exit ticket half sheets

Lesson steps

1 Warm-up: Where do we swim? 5 minutes

Each student writes one place they have swum or might swim this summer on a sticky note (no names). Sort the notes on the board into pool, lake or pond, river, and ocean. Ask: *Which of these has a lifeguard? Which has a bottom you can see?*

2 Mini-lesson: Lakes are not pools 10 minutes

Share the CDC figure in the background section: for children 5-14, over 40% of drownings happen in natural water. Build a two-column chart with the class: *Pool* vs. *Lake, river or ocean*.

- Natural water can hide currents, waves, rocks, plants and sudden drop-offs, and you often can't see the bottom.
- The water can be much colder than the air.
- Help can be farther away, and many spots have no lifeguard.
- Red Cross rules for natural water: enter feet first, dive only where it's marked safe and at least 9 feet deep, don't jump from a height such as a bridge, and swim with a buddy.

3 Activity 2: Spot it, escape it (rip currents) 12 minutes

Show the Rip Current poster. Draw waves breaking on both sides of a calm, darker channel and ask students to find the rip.

- Signs: darker water, a gap where waves aren't breaking, and foam or seaweed moving away from shore.
- Rip currents pull you out, not under. They often form on calm, sunny days.
- Escape (National Weather Service): relax; don't swim against it; swim out of it along the shore, then to shore; if you can't, float or tread water; yell or wave for help.
- Flags: show the Beach Flags poster. Flags are not used everywhere and can mean different things, so read the sign at each beach. No flag does not mean safe.

4 Activity 3: What would you do? (scenario groups) 18 minutes

Groups of 4 get one card. They work through the decision steps on the board, agree on an action and write the exact words they'd say to their friends. Each group reports in 1 minute.

- **Card A:** At a pool party, friends start a contest to see who can stay underwater longest. They breathe fast first to 'load up' on air.
- **Card B:** Your friends want to jump off a bridge into a river. 'Everyone does it,' they say.
- **Card C:** You're kayaking with your family. It's hot and you want to take off your life jacket.
- **Card D:** The beach has a red flag up, but the water looks calm and your cousin says it's fine.
- **Card E:** At a lake, a friend is upright in the water, bobbing, not moving forward and not yelling.
- **Card F:** It's a hot day in early summer. Someone dares you to jump off the dock into the lake, which still feels freezing.

5 Assessment: Exit ticket 5 minutes

Students answer on a half sheet (answer key below).

- Name two hazards in a lake that you usually don't find in a pool.
- You're caught in a rip current. What are the first two things you do?
- A friend is in trouble in the water. Why shouldn't you swim out to them, and what should you do instead?
- Pick one scenario card. What did your group decide, and what words would you use?

6 Take-home

Students take home the Open Water Checklist and teach a family member the rip current escape steps before the next beach or lake trip.

Background for the teacher

Natural water. CDC notes that lakes, rivers and oceans have hidden hazards such as dangerous currents or waves, rocks or vegetation, and limited visibility. The American Red Cross says to always enter unknown or shallow water feet first, dive only where the water is marked safe and at least 9 feet deep, and not to enter the water from a height such as a bridge. More in lake swimming safety.

Rip currents. The National Weather Service (NWS) says rip currents pull you away from the shore; they don't pull you under, and that rip currents often form on calm, sunny days. Its five steps: relax, don't swim against the current, swim out of the current then to shore, float or tread water if you can't escape, and yell or wave for help. Signs include darker water, a gap where waves aren't breaking, and foam or debris moving away from the beach. Warning flags aren't used in all areas, and their meaning can vary. See rip currents: how to spot and escape one.

Cold water. NWS says gasping and rapid breathing from sudden immersion can be triggered by water as warm as 77°F, and to dress for the water temperature, not the air.

Breath-holding games. CDC warns: do not hyperventilate before swimming underwater or hold your breath for long periods; this can cause you to pass out and drown.

Life jackets. Federal law requires children under 13 to wear a Coast Guard-approved life jacket on a moving boat, except below deck or in an enclosed cabin; state laws may differ. The Red Cross says to always wear a life jacket while boating, regardless of swimming skill.

Why this age. The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that adolescents may overestimate their swimming skills, misjudge water hazards or take impulsive risks. That's why this lesson practices the words, not just the facts.

Scenario card answer guide

- **A (breath-holding):** Don't play. Fast breathing and long breath-holding can make you pass out underwater. *"I'm out. People pass out doing that. Let's race laps instead."*
- **B (bridge jump):** Don't jump from a height. River depth and currents change, and you can't see what's under the surface. *"Not worth it. I'll meet you at the beach area."*
- **C (kayak):** Keep the life jacket on. Under 13, it's federal law on a moving boat, and the Red Cross says everyone should wear one while boating.
- **D (red flag):** Stay out or ask the lifeguard. Rip currents often form on calm, sunny days, and a red flag means high hazard. *"The lifeguards put that flag up for a reason."*
- **E (friend bobbing upright):** This can be drowning. A swimmer who is vertical but can't move forward or tread water needs help right away. Shout for help, have someone call 911, then reach or throw something that floats. Don't swim out. See reach or throw, don't go.
- **F (cold dock jump):** Cold water can make you gasp before you can swim. Don't jump in. NWS advises staying out of the water until it's warmer if it's too cold, and always wearing a life jacket in and around cold water. *"Nope, that water's way too cold. I'll wait for July."*

Exit ticket answer key

1. Any two: currents, waves, rocks, plants, sudden drop-offs, cold water, can't see the bottom, no lifeguard.

2. Relax and don't swim against it (float). Then swim along the shore out of the current, or keep floating and wave and yell for help.
3. Rescuers can drown too. Shout for help, get someone to call 911, and reach or throw something that floats from land.
4. Look for a safe action and specific words they would actually say.

Discussion questions

1. Why do you think people take more risks around water when they're with friends?
2. What makes it hard to say no to a dare? What words make it easier?
3. How would you check if a beach or lake is safe before you go? (Lifeguard on duty, the posted flag key and signs, the weather forecast.)
4. What would you tell a younger sibling about rip currents?

Teaching this topic with care

Some students may know someone who drowned. Tell families the topic ahead of time, avoid real-life stories and videos of rescues, and let students pass on a scenario. Remind the class that if a talk brings up hard feelings, the school counselor is there. If you teach in a coastal area, add your local beach's flag key and lifeguard hours.

Follow-up ideas

- Practice with Rip current trainer and Beach warning flags decoder.
- Print the Rip Current Safety for the hallway before summer break.
- For high school, continue with Water Safety Lesson Plan for Grades 9-12.

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

Print the six scenario cards and the two posters, and look up whether your nearest beach or lake has lifeguards this season. Share what each beach flag color means with your students' families before summer.

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 2: Analyze influences that affect health and well-being of self and others. https://shapeamerica.org/standards/health/new-he-standards/
- NHES 5: Use a decision-making process to support health and well-being of self and others. https://shapeamerica.org/standards/health/new-he-standards/

Sources

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7. How to Avoid Getting Caught in a Rip Current, National Weather Service. https://www.weather.gov/safety/ripcurrent
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10. Cold Water Hazards and Safety, National Weather Service. https://www.weather.gov/safety/coldwater
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