Water Safety Lesson Plan for Grades K-2

A free 35-minute water safety lesson for kindergarten to grade 2: ask before going near water, a grown-up watches, life jackets, and shout for help.

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Grades K-2 · 35 minutes · For teachers

This lesson teaches children in kindergarten through grade 2 four simple water rules: **ask a grown-up first, swim only when a grown-up is watching, wear a life jacket, and shout for a grown-up instead of going in.** It takes about 35 minutes, needs no pool, and ends with a pledge families sign at home.

The rules come from the American Red Cross, which tells families to teach children to always ask permission to go near water and never leave a young child unattended near water. They matter at this age.

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

- Say four water rules: ask a grown-up first, swim only when a grown-up is watching, wear a life jacket, and shout for a grown-up instead of going in.
- Show how to ask a grown-up before going near any water, including pools, lakes, beaches, bathtubs and buckets.
- Tell the difference between a life jacket and a water toy such as water wings or a swim ring.
- Show what to do if someone is in trouble in the water: shout for a grown-up and stay out.

Materials

- ☐ Chart paper and markers
- ☐ The 8 picture cards described in Activity 2 (draw them on index cards or print simple clip art)
- ☐ A child-size life jacket with a U.S. Coast Guard label, if you can borrow one, and a water toy (water wings, a swim ring or a pool noodle)
- ☐ A copy of the Water Safety Pledge for each child to take home
- ☐ Optional: tablets or computers for the free follow-up games (no sign-in; the games collect nothing)

Lesson steps

1 Warm-up: Where do we find water? 5 minutes

Ask: *Where can we find water?* Draw each answer on chart paper: bathtub, sink, pool, beach, lake, pond, bucket, puddle. Then say: *Water is fun. Water can also be dangerous, so grown-ups keep an eye on it. Today we'll learn four rules that help us stay safe.*

2 Activity 1: Our four water rules 10 minutes

Teach one rule at a time with a hand motion. Say it, show it, then have the class say it with you.

- **Ask first** (raise your hand). Always ask a grown-up before you go near water, even a bathtub or a bucket.
- **Grown-up watching** (hands around your eyes like binoculars). Swim only when a grown-up says yes and is watching you.
- **Life jacket on** (pretend to zip up). Wear a life jacket on a boat, and near water when a grown-up says so.
- **Shout, don't go** (hands around your mouth, then cross your arms). If someone is in trouble in the water, shout for a grown-up. Don't go in.
- Role-play: you are the grown-up. Pairs of children take turns asking, *Can I go near the pool?* Answer *Yes, I'll watch you* or *Not now*, and praise children who wait.

3 Activity 2: Safe or not safe? Picture sort 10 minutes

Hold up each card. Children show thumbs up (safe) or thumbs down (not safe), then one child says which rule helps.

- A child standing at the edge of a pool with no grown-up nearby. *Not safe: ask first and wait for a grown-up.*
- A grown-up sitting by the pool with the phone put away, watching the kids. *Safe: grown-up watching.*
- A family in a small boat, everyone wearing a life jacket. *Safe: life jacket on.*
- A child wearing water wings alone in the deep end. *Not safe: water wings are toys, not life jackets.*
- A child jumping in to grab a friend who is splashing. *Not safe: shout for a grown-up, don't go in.*
- A child asking a parent, *Can I go in the lake? Safe: ask first.*
- A bucket full of water in the yard with a baby crawling nearby. *Not safe: tell a grown-up to empty it.*
- Kids playing at a beach near a lifeguard stand, with a parent watching. *Safe: grown-ups watching.*

4 Activity 3: Life jacket or toy? 5 minutes

Show the life jacket and the water toy side by side. Point to the U.S. Coast Guard label on the life jacket. Say: *A life jacket is made to help keep you floating. Toys can lose air or slip off. Toys are for playing, not for keeping you safe.* Let a volunteer try on the life jacket over their clothes while you buckle it.

5 Assessment: Thumbs up, thumbs down 5 minutes

Read each sentence. Children show thumbs up for true and thumbs down for false. Watch for children who hesitate and repeat the rule with them.

- I can go near the pool by myself if I'm careful. *(false)*
- A grown-up should watch me whenever I swim. *(true)*
- Water wings are the same as a life jacket. *(false)*
- If my friend is in trouble in the water, I should jump in. *(false: shout for a grown-up)*
- I should ask a grown-up before I go near a lake. *(true)*

6 Take-home

Send home the Water Safety Pledge and the family note below. Ask families to practice the four hand motions together and sign the pledge.

Background for the teacher

You don't need to be a swimmer to teach this. A few facts help you answer questions:

- **Drowning is usually quiet.** CDC says drowning happens in seconds and is often silent. That's why a grown-up has to *watch*, not just listen.
- **Toys are not life jackets.** The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) says floaties, water wings and inflatable toys can deflate and do not prevent drowning.
- **Children shouldn't watch children.** The AAP advises families not to leave a baby or young child near water in the care of another child. Your students should never be the "watcher" for a younger sibling.
- **Helping means shouting, not jumping in.** The Red Cross teaches "reach or throw, don't go". For this age, the safe version is: shout for a grown-up and stay out. Older grades practice reaching and throwing in reach or throw, don't go.

Discussion questions

Use two or three of these during the wrap-up or at circle time.

1. Who are the grown-ups who can watch you near water? (A parent, a caregiver, a teacher, a lifeguard *and* your grown-up.)
2. What would you do if your ball rolled into the pool? (Ask a grown-up to get it.)
3. Why do grown-ups put their phones away when they watch water? (So they can keep their eyes on you the whole time.)
4. How is a life jacket different from water wings?
5. What words would you shout if someone needed help in the water? ("Help! Grown-up! Come quick!")

Take-home sheet for families

Copy this note onto the back of the pledge, or send it by your usual class message tool.

> **Today we learned four water rules.** Ask your child to show you the hand motions: *ask first, grown-up watching, life jacket on, shout don't go.*
>
> **Try these at home this week:**
>
> - Sign the Water Safety Pledge together.
> - Practice your home address with your child. Nemours KidsHealth says kids should have their street address memorized, and the apartment number and floor if you live in a building.
> - Empty buckets, tubs and kiddie pools right after use. The AAP says to never leave a filled, open-top water container unattended.
> - Ask about swim lessons. The AAP says swim lessons can begin for many children starting at age 1. Find swim lessons near you.

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

Teaching this topic with care

- **Some children have lost someone to water, or are afraid of it.** Tell families the topic ahead of time. Don't tell real drowning stories or show scary images. Keep the focus on what children *can do*.
- **If a child shares a loss,** thank them, stay calm, and follow your school's process for letting the counselor know.
- **Some families don't swim.** About 40 million U.S. adults say they do not know how to swim. Never ask children to say who can or can't swim.
- **Keep addresses private.** Practice "calling 911" with the school's address on the board, not children's home addresses. Home practice belongs on the take-home sheet.

Follow-up ideas

- Play Safe or Not? or Spot the Hazard as a class. The games need no sign-in and collect nothing.
- The American Red Cross offers Longfellow's WHALE Tales, nine free dry-land water safety lessons for kindergarten through grade 5.
- For grades 3-5, continue with Water Safety Lesson Plan for Grades 3-5.

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

Pick a date to teach the lesson, borrow a child-size life jacket from a parent or a local pool, and print one Water Safety Pledge per child. Then read how to talk to kids about water safety without scaring them before class.

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

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3. Drowning Prevention for Curious Toddlers: What Parents Need to Know, American Academy of Pediatrics (HealthyChildren.org). https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Water-Safety-And-Young-Children.aspx
4. Drowning Facts, CDC. https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/data-research/facts/index.html
5. Preventing Drowning, CDC. https://www.cdc.gov/drowning/prevention/index.html
6. Teaching Your Child How to Use 911, Nemours KidsHealth. https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/911.html
7. 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
8. 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
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10. Longfellow's WHALE Tales, American Red Cross. https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class/teach-water-safety/whale-tales

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