

The Polaris logo is a dark blue rounded rectangle containing the word "polaris" in white lowercase letters. Above the text is a cluster of colorful dots in shades of orange, yellow, and blue.

polaris



WATER SAFETY AND DROWNING

**A guide for Foster Parents,
Adopters, Parents and Staff**

WHY DOES WATER SAFETY MATTER?

Water claims the lives of more than **50 children a year in the UK**. Drowning is among the leading causes of accidental death (gov.uk).

Many of these deaths are **as a result of simple everyday mistakes**, such as a trip or fall into water, or misjudgements such as underestimating the effect of swimming in cold open water can have. Others result from inherently risky activities including jumping/tombstoning from a great height into water.

SUPERVISION IS KEY

Children should always be supervised in the water. Although it is tempting to think that they will be safe if they are wearing a rubber ring or armbands – you should never rely on a buoyancy aid or inflatable. In fact, **inflatables can sometimes be more dangerous as if they tip**, children can struggle to right themselves.

Always ensure you are in the water, within reaching distance. However, it is not just in swimming pools, lakes and rivers that children require supervision. You should never leave them on their own in baths or paddling pools and always supervise with any water play.

<https://firstaidforlife.org.uk/staying-safe-water/>

POOLS AND PADDLING POOLS

Most swimming pools have various depths, and it can be easy to misjudge where the shallow end stops and the deep end suddenly starts, especially in private pools that do not have clear markings. **Ensure you know the pool depths before children jump in** for the first time (in case it is too deep or too shallow).

Drowning can happen extremely quickly and usually silently, without any obvious signs of a struggle. Furthermore, **a child can drown in just 2 cm of water**, which is barely deeper than some puddles and considerably shallower than the average paddling pool.

OPEN WATER ENVIRONMENT

Open water environments such as oceans, rivers, lakes, and reservoirs—pose significant drowning risks, especially compared to controlled settings like swimming pools. These environments can be unpredictable and often lack safety supervision.

Every year people die in lakes, rivers, and reservoirs as swimming in open waters is extremely dangerous without proper training, kit, and supervision. Open water is cold, it can be difficult to find an easy place to get out of the water and there are hidden dangers such as weeds and debris beneath the surface that you can easily get caught up in and can pull you under. **The warmer weather can tempt young people to venture into open water.**

KEY RISKS IN OPEN WATER

1. Strong Currents and Tides

- Rip currents, river flow, and tidal shifts can sweep even strong swimmers away.
- Currents may not be visible from the surface.

2. Cold Water Shock

- Sudden immersion in cold water can cause involuntary gasping, hyperventilation, and muscle cramps, increasing drowning risk.
- Cold water can quickly reduce physical capability and cause hypothermia.

3. Unclear Water and Depth Changes

- Visibility is often poor, hiding hazards like sudden drop-offs, rocks, or submerged objects.
- Depth can change rapidly, catching swimmers off guard.

4. Lack of Supervision

- Open water areas may lack lifeguards or emergency support.
- Delayed response times can be fatal during incidents.

5. Alcohol and Risky Behaviour

- Alcohol impairs judgment, coordination, and swimming ability.
- Diving into unknown waters or rough play increases risk.

6. Fatigue and Panic

- Swimmers may misjudge their endurance or distance from shore.
- Panic in open water can lead to rapid exhaustion and drowning.

7. Weather and Environmental Conditions

- Sudden changes in weather, lightning, or high waves can increase danger.
- Strong winds can create surface chop and reduce visibility.

GENERAL DANGERS OF OPEN WATER

The general dangers of open water –according to the RoSPA website – which is crucial to bear in mind, are as follows:

- It is very cold
- There may be hidden currents
- It can be difficult to get out (steep slimy banks)
- It can be deep
- There may be hidden rubbish, e.g. shopping trolleys, broken glass
- There are no lifeguards
- It is difficult to estimate depth
- It may be polluted and may make you ill

WATER SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR ADULTS, TEENAGERS AND OLDER CHILDREN

Teenagers swimming without adult supervision poses significant water safety risks. Drownings often occur when teenagers are unsupervised, and it's crucial to enforce the "never swim alone" rule, especially in open water or unsupervised areas. **Even strong swimmers can be at risk, and distractions like alcohol or peer pressure can worsen the situation.**

Even among older children and teenagers, most childhood drownings happen when there is no adult supervision. **Make sure your teenager knows to swim only where there are lifeguards on duty and to never swim alone.** Urge them to use the buddy system, even when swimming with large groups of friends.

ADVENTURE WATER SPORTS

Adventurous water sports such as kayaking, white-water rafting or surfing are increasingly popular. Riskier activities such as diving into the sea from cliffs or tombstoning often happen in the holidays and frequently with teenagers.

TOMBSTONING

Tombstoning is when someone plunges into deep water from a bridge, cliff, or quay, is a high-risk activity. It has resulted in fatalities or injuries, such as spinal and limb injuries. Diving off cliffs is extremely popular and sadly results in a large number of people experiencing life-changing injuries from spinal injury.

These injuries happen because people misjudge the depth of the water they are jumping into, and it is shallower than it looks. Or they are unable to see submerged objects such as rocks.

COLD WATER SHOCK

Whilst hot summer sun can make a cooling dip tempting, the sudden change in temperatures from hot to cold can make it difficult to swim. Cold water shock triggers the fight and fright response when someone enters cold water. Cold water shock causes panic and this often precipitates drowning.

PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

- Always ensure children swim in designated areas with lifeguards.
- Check water conditions and weather forecasts.
- Ensure children wear life jackets for water sports or when unsure of swimming ability.
- Do not allow children to swim alone
- Supervise children constantly—drowning is often silent and fast.
- Dealing with hazards for children and vulnerable people in and around the home such as ponds, bath, swimming pools
- Ensuring that you and your family can swim, be water confident, and have water safety skills
- Promoting water safety by engaging children in thoughtful, ongoing conversations tailored to their age and understanding

VALUABLE RESOURCES

There's some excellent and valuable advice that can be shared with children and young people in the following PDF:

Also, some great resources on:

- **The Water Safety Code.**
- **Environment Agency - Water Safety Advice.**
- **RoSPA Water Safety.**