

# THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF CHILDREN'S SWIMMING AND WATER SAFETY EDUCATION

A NATIONAL SURVEY OF  
PARENTS AND CARERS



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# THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF CHILDREN'S SWIMMING AND WATER SAFETY EDUCATION: A SURVEY OF PARENTS AND CARERS

## KEY FINDINGS



of participants reported that their children were either currently participating in lessons or had previously participated in lessons with a qualified instructor



of participants reported their children participated in lessons between the ages of 5 and 14 years



of participants reported their children participated in lessons for a period of 1 to 4 years, with few continuing for more than 6 years



of participants believed that parents have the primary responsibility for funding lessons, with approximately 15% believing it was a shared responsibility between parents, schools and government



Children's participation varied based on their parent's country of birth, language spoken at home and household income

### Reasons for participation in lessons:

- Safety and survival
- Confidence and skill development
- Part of the Australian culture
- Close proximity of home to water
- Enjoyment and leisure
- Physical activity

### Barriers to participation in lessons:

- Existing knowledge and ability
- Skill progression and age
- Cost of lessons
- Location of lessons
- Unsuitable weather
- Alternative sporting commitments
- Medical condition or disability

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## DID YOU KNOW?

- More than half of the respondents (54.9%), reported that their children had previously participated in swimming lessons with a qualified instructor, with a further 31.6% currently participating
- Almost three-quarters (73.5%) of respondents who reported their children participated in lessons, indicated their children participated between the ages of 5 and 14 years
- More than half of children (61.7%) participated in lessons for a period of 1 to 4 years, with few children continuing for longer than 6 years
- Reasons for children participating in swimming lessons included:
  - Safety and survival
  - Confidence and skill development
  - Part of the Australian culture
  - Close proximity of home to water
  - Enjoyment and leisure
  - Physical activity
- Barriers to children participating in swimming lessons included:
  - Existing knowledge and ability (parental perception of competence)
  - Skill progression and age
  - Cost of lessons
  - Location of lessons
  - Unsuitable weather
  - Alternative sporting commitments
  - Medical condition or disability
- Participation in swimming lessons ranged from 91.3% for children of parents who were born in Australia, to 73.0% among children of parents who spoke a language other than English at home
- Children of participants who were born in another country were significantly less likely to either be participating in swimming lessons, or have participated previously, than those who were born in Australia
- Children of participants who spoke a language other than English at home were significantly less likely to either be participating in swimming lessons, or have participated previously, than those who did not speak another language at home
- More than half (51.9%) of participants believed that parents have the primary responsibility for funding swimming and water safety lessons, with more than twice as many respondents believing this duty lay with the state government (16.2%) as federal government (7.4%)
- The proportion of respondents in each demographic category who chose this answer varied, with the highest response rate coming from high income earners (71.4%) and the lowest from low income earners (35.6%)
- Low income earners were significantly less likely to believe that parents had the primary responsibility for funding lessons than other income groups

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Australian Water Safety Strategy 2016-2020 identifies eleven goals where action is required in order to reduce drowning, with the first of these goals relating to children, 'Goal 1: Reduce drowning deaths in children aged 0-14 years'. This goal is then divided into young children (aged 0-4 years) and school-aged children (aged 5-14 years). The key objectives outlined for 5-14 year olds are to promote compulsory swimming and water safety education to parents, carers, industry and policy makers; and to create and evaluate systems to benchmark children's survival swimming skills.

Between 1 July 2002 and 30 June 2015 (a period of 13 financial years), 578 children aged 0-14 years drowned, of which 171 (29.6%) were aged 5-14 years. More than a third of these were swimming and recreating prior to drowning, highlighting the importance of swimming and water safety skills for all Australian children.

In focusing this survey on parents and carers of children, it advances the discussion in an issues paper on the "right of all Australian children" to learn swimming and water safety skills, which identified parents as a key stakeholder in the debate and the primary funder of children's swimming and water safety lessons. This study sought to gain a greater understanding of the current situation in Australia, with particular emphasis placed on gathering information regarding why children participate in lessons, why they cease participating or why they do not participate at all. It also aimed to examine the frequency and cost of lessons, as well as the notion of funding responsibility.

Data in this report was sourced from the 2016 National Social Survey. This survey is the second annual series of cost-sharing surveys aimed at obtaining public opinion on a range of topics held by a random sample of Australian residents. The survey uses the CATI (Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing) method, with respondents identified using a sample of landline and mobile telephone numbers with a random selection approach used. The target population was all persons 18 years of age or older who, at the time of the survey, were living in a dwelling in Australia that could be contacted by a direct-dialled land-based telephone service or a direct-dialled mobile telephone service.

A total of 1,217 respondents completed the survey. Of those, 288 people (23.7%) had at least one child aged 18 years or under and were therefore, eligible to respond to the targeted swimming and water safety questions. More than half of the participants (54.9%), reported that their children had previously participated in swimming lessons with a qualified instructor. A further 31.6% were currently participating, while the remaining 13.5% reported that their children had never participated in swimming lessons.

Almost three-quarters (73.5%) of respondents indicated their children participated in swimming lessons between the ages of 5 and 14 years. Just under a quarter (23.5%) participated when aged five years or under.

Participation in swimming lessons ranged from a high of 91.3% for children of parents who were born in Australia, to a low of 73.0% among children of parents who spoke a language other than English at home. Children of participants who were born in another country were significantly less likely to either be participating in swimming lessons, or have participated previously, than those who were born in Australia ( $X^2=11.4$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). Similarly, children of participants who spoke a language other than English at home were significantly less likely to either be participating in swimming lessons, or have participated previously, than those who did not speak another language at home ( $X^2=13.2$ ;  $p<0.05$ ).

Children most commonly participated in 1 year of swimming lessons (19.1%). More than half of children (61.7%) participated in lessons for 1 to 4 years, with few children continuing for longer than 6 years. Children commonly attended 10 lessons (11.5%), 20 lessons (9.3%), 40 lessons (13.7%) and 52 lessons (9.8%) a year. The most common amounts of money to be spending per lesson were \$1 (13.1%), \$10 (26.8%) and \$20 (9.3%).

Participants were motivated to enrol their children in swimming lessons so that they learnt an important life skill, which would keep them safe and prevent them from drowning. Equipping children with the ability to survive an unexpected fall into water was a priority for some participants, while others sought to increase their confidence and provide them with a source of enjoyment and physical activity. Some stated that spending time by the water was a part of the Australian culture, which they wanted their children to be able to participate in. For others, close proximity to water was an important motivator.

However, the reasons for enrolling children in lessons are not always enough to overcome the barriers to participation, with not all children having the opportunity to learn to swim. Existing knowledge and ability, skill progression and age of the child were all common reasons for ceasing participation. Barriers to participation included the cost of lessons, location of facilities, unsuitable weather, alternative sporting commitments and pre-existing medical conditions or disabilities. Some participants mentioned a lack of time or organisation on their part, while others felt lessons were not a priority.

Participants reported the most common reason their child had ceased or would one day cease swimming lessons was that they could swim competently enough (68.7%). This level of competence would likely be different for every parent. Whichever measure is used by parents, it is not an objective measure, nor is it likely to be based on any published guideline.

While some of these barriers are related to individual beliefs and circumstances, others could be viewed as logistical challenges, related to cost, time and distance. For example, the cost of lessons can be addressed by programs which exist around the country, providing free or subsidised swimming lessons to children. Similarly, outdoor and seasonal pools pose a challenge for year round teaching, as does the distance to pools. Lobbying for new and improved facilities will take time and will need to propose solutions to address issues such as the cost of building and maintaining swimming pools.

More than half (51.9%) of participants believed that parents have the primary responsibility for funding swimming and water safety lessons. A further 16.2% believed it was the responsibility of State Government, while 7.4% suggested the Federal Government should fund lessons and 7.9% believed it should be the responsibility of the school system. The remainder selected 'other', going on to indicate that they believed it was a shared responsibility involving multiple stakeholders.

The proportion of respondents in each demographic category who chose 'parents' varied, with the highest response rate coming from high income earners (71.4%) and the lowest from low income earners (35.6%). Participants who spoke a language other than English at home (49.2%) and rural respondents (46.4%), also had lower response rates when questioned.

Although 'parents' was still the most common response when asked about funding responsibilities, low income earners were significantly less likely to believe that parents had this obligation than other income groups ( $X^2=20.4$ ;  $p<0.05$ ).

All children in Australia should receive swimming and water safety instruction, not only to teach them vital survival techniques but also to equip them with the skills they will need for a lifetime of enjoyable, aquatic activity. It is encouraging that the majority of respondent's children participate in swimming lessons, or have participated in the past. However, children of parents born outside Australia or who speak a language other than English at home are more likely to miss out on the opportunity to participate in swimming lessons. A collaborative and cohesive approach between key stakeholders is needed to provide a suitable environment for learning, making sure that all children have the opportunity to participate in swimming and water safety lessons.

## NEXT STEPS

### Policy, Programs and Advocacy

- Advocate for all children in Australia to receive swimming and water safety education, regardless of where they live, or the circumstances of their family
- Examine strategies to increase access to swimming and water safety education for those identified as missing out, including low income families and families from non-English speaking backgrounds
- Continue to promote the benefits of swimming and water safety education to parents, using the evidence to highlight the most compelling reasons for enrolling children in lessons and work to combat the most common barriers to participation
- Utilise findings to direct existing government support to those with the greatest need (including children of parents born outside of Australia, children of parents who speak a language other than English at home and children of low income earners)
- Explore strategies to utilise findings to strengthen the Swim and Survive fund, including using the results to advocate for increased funding
- Work to address the logistical barriers to participation in lessons, including financial, time and geographical constraints, ensuring these solutions are individualised and targeted
- Improve communication with parents on the target benchmarks by providing a guide to the minimum competencies children should be achieving by certain ages

### Research Agenda

- Explore the specific reasons for reduced participation among children of parents who were born outside Australia, or who speak a language other than English at home
- Conduct qualitative research with those who have never enrolled their children in learn to swim to identify behavioral motivations and barriers to enrolment and participation
- Investigate the most effective age to begin swimming and water safety lessons, including the optimal duration of lessons and pattern of participation, and whether this differs depending on the age of commencement
- Investigate children's retention of skills learnt in swimming and water safety lessons, including how much is remembered and for what length of time





## BACKGROUND

The Australian Water Safety Strategy 2016-2020 (AWSS 2016-2020) identifies eleven goals where action is required in order to reduce drowning (1). The first of these goals relates to children, 'Goal 1: Reduce drowning deaths in children aged 0-14 years', emphasising the importance of this age group to the overarching goal of reducing drowning by 50% by 2020 (1). This important goal is further broken down by age, considering young children (0-4 years) separately to school-aged children (5-14 years), noting differences in drowning statistics and therefore, differences in prevention strategies.

Between 1 July 2002 and 30 June 2015 (a period of 13 financial years), 578 children aged 0-14 years drowned (407 deaths in children aged 0-4 years and 171 deaths in children aged 5-14 years) in Australia (2). In the younger age group, swimming pools were the leading location for drowning, accounting for more than half (53%) of deaths, while 78% of children drowned as a result of a fall into water (2). By comparison, the most common location for drowning in the older age group was a river, creek or stream, which accounted for 35% of deaths, with more than a third of children (38%) swimming and recreating prior to drowning (2).

The high proportion of school-aged children who drowned while swimming and recreating highlights the importance of a basic level of swimming and water safety education for all Australian children. The National Swimming and Water Safety Framework describes a continuum of learning, allowing educators and facilitators to develop and implement a swimming and water safety program suitable for different age groups, with skills and techniques targeted toward specific ages (based on school-years) (3).

Previous research surveyed community members, including parents of children currently enrolled in swimming and water safety programs in Australia, regarding access and delivery (4). This survey provided a number of insights into the current state of programs and instruction, including information regarding swimming ability, age of participation, participation in the context of financial and time constraints, frequency of participation and the importance of various skills. This study noted several requirements for future research in this field, including the need to gain a greater understanding of why children cease lessons, or do not participate at all.

A discussion paper on the "right of all Australian children" to learn swimming and water safety skills, identified parents as a key stakeholder in the debate around children's swimming and water safety ability (5). As the primary funder, parents are responsible for enrolling children in lessons, as well as selecting the type of program and additionally, may influence school policy regarding lessons for children (5).

The second part of Goal 1 of the AWSS 2016-2020 has two key objectives relating to children aged 5-14 years, including 'Promote compulsory swimming and water safety education for school-aged children to parents, schools, industry and policy makers' (1). In seeking to ensure that all Australian children have the opportunity to learn swimming and water safety skills, it is clear that parents have a significant role to play. Among the other important stakeholders, this key objective calls on parents to prioritise swimming and water safety instruction.

Children across Australia learn swimming and water safety skills in a variety of different environments but it is clear that not all children are accessing lessons. Children in regional and remote areas, those from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds are believed to be among those missing out, for reasons including financial, time and geographical constraints (5).

In order to gain a greater understanding of the current situation in Australia, more information was sought on the participation levels of children in swimming and water safety instruction. To obtain this information, a nationally representative survey was undertaken of parents and carers of children, with particular emphasis placed on gathering information regarding why children participate in lessons, why they cease participating or why they do not participate at all.

## AIMS

The aims of this research were to understand the experiences and perspectives of parents and carers relating to children's swimming and water safety education, including:

- How many children participate in swimming lessons and at what ages;
- How often they participate in swimming lessons;
- The cost of participating in swimming lessons;
- The reasons for participating in swimming lessons;
- The barriers to participating in swimming lessons; and
- Who should be responsible for funding swimming lessons.

## METHODS

Data in this report was sourced from the 2016 National Social Survey. This survey is the second annual series of cost-sharing surveys aimed at obtaining public opinion on a range of topics held by a random sample of Australian residents (6). The survey is utilised by university researchers, government and community organisations.

The survey uses the CATI (Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing) method. Respondents were identified using a sample of landline and mobile phone numbers. The target population was all persons 18 years of age or older who, at the time of the survey, were living in a dwelling in Australia that could be contacted by a direct-dialled land-based telephone service or a direct-dialled mobile telephone service. A random selection approach was used to ensure all respondents had an equal chance of being contacted.

When dialing mobile telephone numbers, the eligible respondent was deemed to be the person who received the phone call, provided they were aged 18 years or older. For landline telephone numbers, a respondent inside the dwelling was selected on the basis of sex using the following guidelines to ensure equal representation of both sexes.

- a) The dwelling unit must be the person's usual place of residence and he/she must be 18 years of age or older.
- b) Each household was randomly pre-selected as either a male or female household.
- c) If there was more than one male/female in the household then the male/female that had the most recent birthday was selected.
- d) If there was no-one of the pre-selected gender residing in the house then the house was designated not qualified.

The survey instrument received ethical approval and consisted of three components:

- 1) Standardised introduction
- 2) Questions which reflected the specific research interests of the University and community researchers participating in the study
- 3) Demographic and core health questions

Royal Life Saving Society – Australia sponsored nine questions in the 2016 National Social Survey. The cleaning, coding and analysis of data was conducted in SPSS (7). Descriptive statistics and chi squared analysis was used. Statistical significance was deemed at  $<0.05$ .

## RESULTS

### Overall

A total of 1,217 respondents completed the survey. Of those, 288 people (23.7%) had at least one child aged 18 years or under and were therefore, eligible to respond to the targeted swimming and water safety questions. The youngest child of these eligible participants ranged from 0 to 18 years (mean age 8.29 years), while the age of the oldest child of these eligible participants ranged from 0 to 45 years (mean age 11.72 years).

### Demographic variables

Of the 288 eligible participants, 145 (50.3%) were male and 143 (49.7%) were female. The majority of these were Australian citizens (89.9%), with two thirds born in Australia (67.7%). Approximately a fifth spoke a language other than English at home (21.9%). More than half of the participants had received university or higher education (56.3%), with 83.3% currently engaged in some type of paid work.

The participants represented all States and Territories in Australia, with the highest numbers residing in New South Wales (31.3%), Victoria (26.7%) and Queensland (22.2%). Approximately half of participants resided in a city (50.3%) and 1.4% described themselves as Aboriginal.

When grouped into age classifications, 44.8% of participants were aged between 35 and 44 years, with a further 29.5% aged between 45 and 54 years and 14.6% aged between 25 and 34 years. Three quarters lived in an urban (city or town) location (75.3%), with 24.0% residing in a rural area.

### Participation in swimming lessons

More than half of the participants (54.9%), reported that their children had previously participated in swimming lessons with a qualified instructor. A further 31.6% were currently participating, while the remaining 13.5% reported that their children had never participated in swimming lessons (Figure 1).

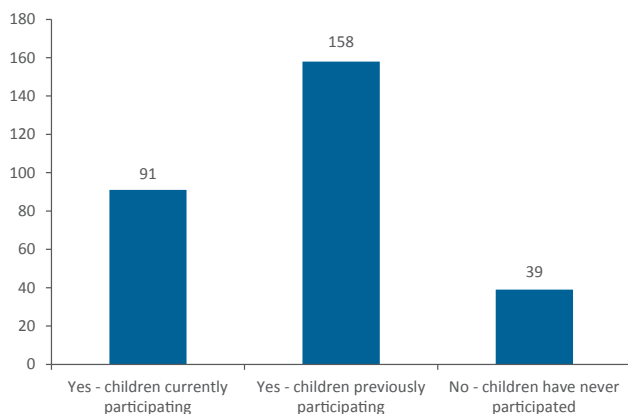


Figure 1: Participation in swimming lessons, N=288

Participants gave a wide variety of responses when asked about the main reason their children were not currently participating in swimming lessons with a qualified instructor. The more common responses included:

- The age of the children – either too young to start or old enough to know how to swim
- Existing ability and knowledge – children already knew how to swim, confident in the water
- Geographical challenges – long distance to the swimming pool, reside in a rural area
- Existing time commitments – including other sporting activities
- Cost involved in lessons – financial constraints
- Weather/climate – too cold for lessons at the present time, pools closed during winter
- Lack of interest or enjoyment from children or a lack of progress
- Difficulty finding suitable instruction – lack of a suitable instructor
- Involvement of the children’s school in the provision of lessons
- Medical conditions and disabilities among children

Similarly, when asked for the main reason their children had never participated in swimming lessons there were a number of different responses. The more common responses included:

- The age of the children – too young to begin swimming lessons
- Instruction was provided by the parents of the children themselves
- Geographical challenges – long distance to the swimming pool
- Existing time commitments, including work responsibilities (parents) and family arrangements
- Cost involved in lessons – financial constraints

Although some participants indicated swimming lessons were simply something they hadn’t yet organised for their children, others felt they were not needed or not a priority.

Almost three-quarters (73.5%) of respondents indicated their children participated in swimming lessons between the ages of 5 and 14 years. Just under a quarter (23.5%) participated when aged five years or under and 0.4% participated when aged 15 years or over (Figure 2).



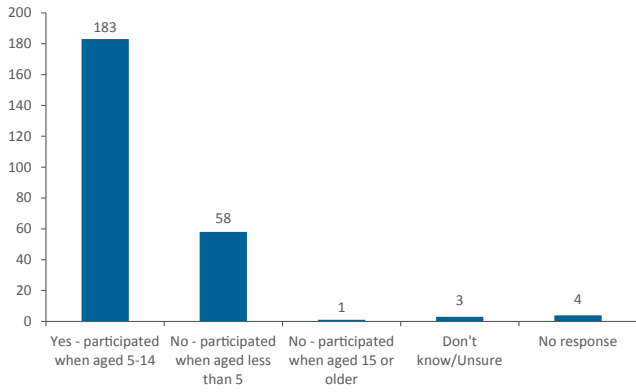


Figure 2: Participation in swimming lessons by age, n=249

Children most commonly participated in 1 year of swimming lessons (19.1%), followed by 3 years (15.3%), 2 or 5 years (both 14.8%) and 4 years (12.6%). More than half of children (61.7%) participated in lessons for 1 to 4 years, with few children continuing for longer than 6 years (Figure 3).

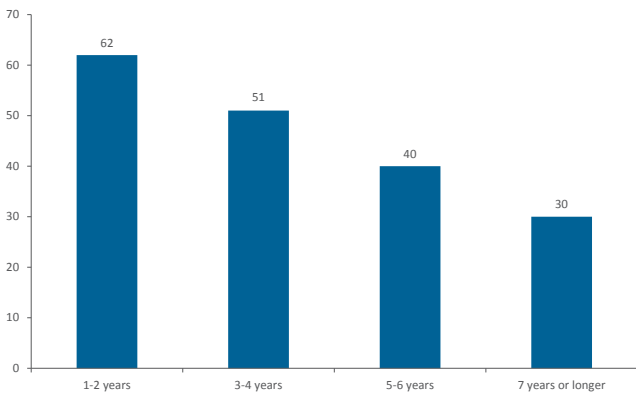


Figure 3: Years of participation in swimming lessons between ages 5 and 14 years, n=183

### Frequency of swimming lessons

Participants reported their children either attend or attended between 1 and 150 swimming lessons per year. The highest frequencies occurred at 10 lessons (11.5%), 20 lessons (9.3%), 40 lessons (13.7%) and 52 lessons (9.8%) (Figure 4).

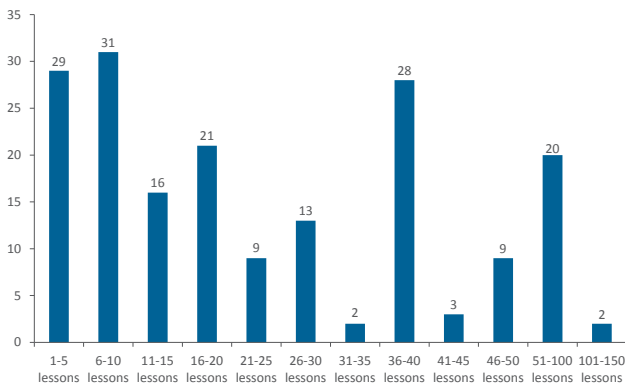


Figure 4: Number of lessons attended per year between ages 5 and 14 years, n=183

### Cost of swimming lessons

It would appear that this question was interpreted differently by different respondents, with amounts ranging from \$1 to \$500. It was assumed that some responses were intended to be the cumulative amount spent over a longer time period, such as a year, rather than per lesson and that participants simply made an error in responding. The most common amounts to be spending per lesson were \$1 (13.1%), \$10 (26.8%) and \$20 (9.3%) (Figure 5).

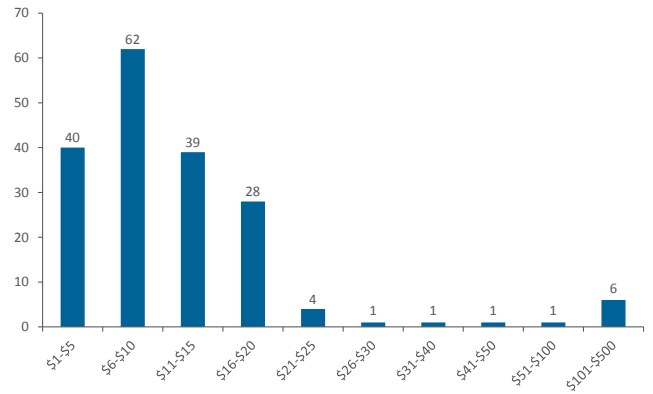


Figure 5: Money spent per swimming lesson between ages 5 and 14 years, n=183

### Motivation for enrolling in swimming lessons

Participants gave a wide variety of responses when asked about the primary motivation for enrolling their children in swimming lessons between the ages of 5 and 14 years. The more common responses included:

- **Safety** – wanting to keep children safe around water and prevent drowning
- **Survival** – to equip children with the skills they would need to survive an unexpected fall into water
- **Important skill to learn** – swimming described as a life skill/lifesaving skill
- **Confidence** – ensuring children are comfortable and confident in and around water
- **Proximity** – families lived near water, for example frequent visits to the beach or nearby dams, families or relatives owning a backyard pool
- **Culture** – common to spend time enjoying aquatic activities in Australia and visiting the many waterways
- **Enjoyment and leisure** – swimming and spending time by the water described as a fun activity
- **Physical activity** – swimming as exercise for children
- **Medical conditions** – improvement in health
- **School curriculum** – part of standard school activities

Similarly, when asked about the primary motivation for enrolling their children in swimming lessons before the age of 5 years there were a number of different responses. The more common responses included:

- **Safety** – wanting to keep children safe around water and prevent drowning
- **Survival** – to equip children with the skills they would need to survive an unexpected fall into water
- **Important skill to learn** – swimming described as a life skill
- **Proximity** – families lived near water, for example living near the coast, families or relatives owning a backyard pool
- **Enjoyment and leisure** – swimming and spending time by the water described as a fun activity
- **Physical activity** – swimming as exercise for children

### Barriers to participation in swimming lessons

Participants reported the most common reason their child had ceased or would one day cease participation in swimming lessons with a qualified instructor was that they could swim competently enough (68.7%). In 8.4% of cases the child no longer wanted to participate in lessons. A small number of respondents also cited concerns around cost (2.4%) and time (1.2%) (Figure 6).

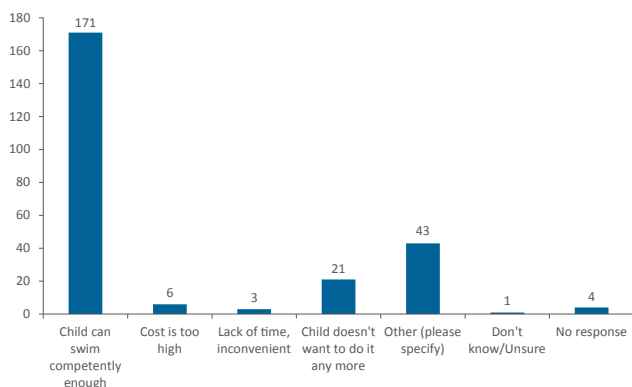


Figure 6: Barriers to participating in swimming lessons, n=249

Almost one fifth of respondents (17.3%) selected 'other', with more detail requested from this cohort. A total of 42 (out of 43 possible respondents) provided more information. Parents and carers provided a variety of responses including:

- **The swimming capability of the child** – already a strong swimmer
- **Skill progression** – child moved onto squad training
- **The weather** – currently winter (may continue in summer when the weather warms up)
- **Location** – for example, distance to the pool or moving to another area
- **Alternative sporting commitments** – developing skills in another area
- **Age of the child** – child getting older, moving onto high school
- **Lack of suitable instructor** – qualified teacher no longer available
- **Medical conditions** – disability, illness

### Responsibility for funding swimming lessons

This question was asked to all survey respondents, regardless of whether or not they had children aged 18 years or under. More than half (51.9%) of participants believed that parents have the primary responsibility for funding swimming and water safety lessons. A further 16.2% believed it was the responsibility of State Government, while 7.4% suggested the Federal Government should fund lessons and 7.9% believed it should be the responsibility of the school system (Figure 7).

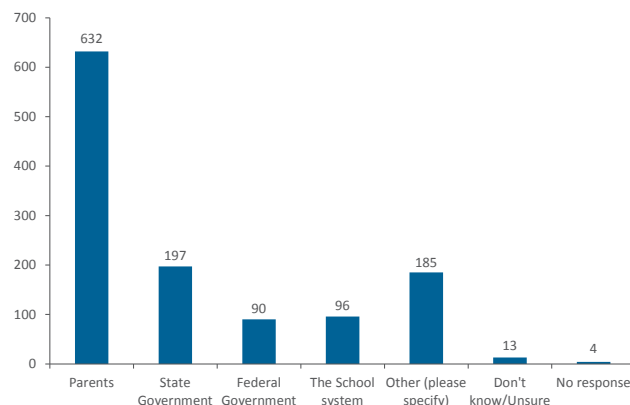


Figure 7: Responsibility for funding swimming lessons, n=1217

Approximately 15% of respondents selected 'other', with more detail requested from this cohort. All 185 possible respondents provided more information.

Overall, most of the responses indicated swimming and water safety lessons should be funded by a combination of the aforementioned groups. For example, there were responses to suggest it was a joint responsibility between parents and the school system, or the State and federal Governments, or parents and the State Government. A common response was that all four parties (parents, State Government, Federal Government, school system) shared the responsibility and each had a role to play in the provision of lessons to children.

Several responses also highlighted the plight of families on low incomes who may not be in a position to be able to afford swimming lessons for children, proposing cost sharing alternatives in the form of subsidised lessons.

Any differences between responses of those people who had children (at least one child aged 18 years or under and therefore, eligible to answer the targeted questions) and those who did not have children were also investigated. Among those with young children who were eligible to answer all survey questions, 53.1% believed parents had the primary responsibility for funding lessons, compared to 42.7% of those without children.

Those without children recorded a higher proportion of respondents who believed that the primary responsibility lay with the State Government (22.3%), Federal Government (9.1%) and the school system (10.5%), compared to those with young children (State Government 13.5%, Federal Government 7.6%, school system 6.9%).

## Influence of demographics on participation in swimming lessons

### Country of birth

Among participants born in Australia, 91.3% of children either are, or have previously, participated in swimming lessons (Figure 8), with 68.5% reporting that the main reason they have, or would in the future, cease lessons was due to their child being able to swim competently enough. Just over half of participants born in Australia believed parents had the primary responsibility for funding lessons (52.3%).

Among participants born outside Australia, 76.7% of children either are, or have previously, participated in swimming lessons (Figure 8), with 69.6% reporting that the main reason they have, or would in the future, cease lessons was due to their child being able to swim competently enough. More than half of participants born in another country believed that parents had the primary responsibility for funding lessons (54.4%).

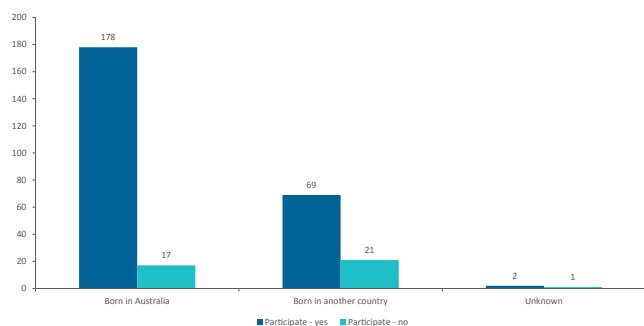


Figure 8: Participation in swimming lessons by country of birth, N=288

Children of participants who were born in another country were significantly less likely to either be participating in swimming lessons, or have participated previously, than those who were born in Australia ( $X^2=11.4$ ;  $p<0.05$ ).

However, the participant's country of birth was not observed to influence the main reason for ceasing lessons or the participant's beliefs regarding funding responsibility for lessons.

### Language spoken at home

Among participants speaking only English at home, 90.6% of children participated in swimming lessons (Figure 9), with the most common reason for ceasing lessons relating to existing competence in the water (68.3%). Over half of those who spoke only English at home believed parents had the primary responsibility for funding lessons (53.8%).

Among participants speaking a language other than English at home, 73.0% of children participated in swimming lessons (Figure 9), with the most common reason for ceasing lessons relating to existing competence in the water (69.6%). Just under half of participants who spoke a language other than English at home believed parents had the primary responsibility for funding lessons (49.2%).

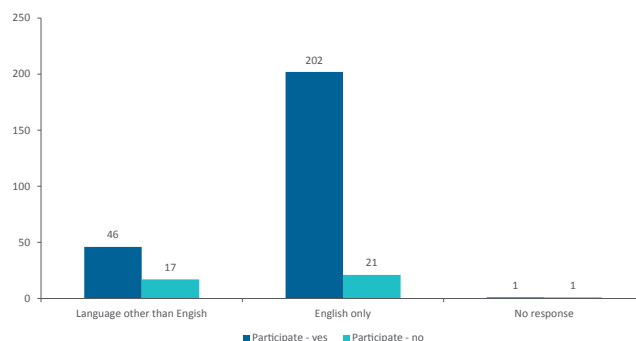


Figure 9: Participation in swimming lessons by language spoken at home, N=288

Children of participants who spoke a language other than English at home were significantly less likely to either be participating in swimming lessons, or have participated previously, than those who did not speak another language at home ( $X^2=13.2$ ;  $p<0.05$ ).

However, the language spoken at home was not observed to influence the main reason for ceasing lessons or the participant's beliefs regarding funding responsibility for lessons.



## Location

Among participants who resided in an urban location, 85.7% of children participated in swimming lessons (Figure 10), with 69.9% stating the main reason they have ceased lessons, or would in the future, being sufficient water competence. More than half of participants believed the primary responsibility for funding lessons lay with parents (55.8%).

Among participants who resided in a rural location, 89.9% of children participated in swimming lessons (Figure 10), with 64.5% stating the main reason they have ceased lessons, or would in the future, being sufficient water competence. Almost half of participants believe the primary responsibility for funding lessons lay with parents (46.4%).

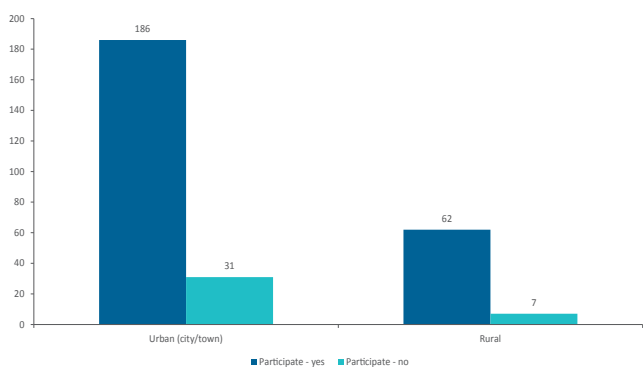


Figure 10: Participation in swimming lessons by location, n=286

An urban or rural locality was not observed to influence participation in lessons, the main reason for ceasing lessons or the participant's beliefs regarding funding responsibility for lessons.

## Household income

Participant's household income was classified into four categories: nil to \$26,000 per annum, \$26,001 to \$52,000 per annum, \$52,001 to \$100,000 per annum and more than \$100,000 per annum.

Among participants falling into the lowest household income category (nil to \$26,000 per annum), 84.4% of children participated in swimming lessons (Figure 11), with the most common reason for ceasing lessons relating to competence in the water (66.7%). Just over a third of participants believed parents had the primary responsibility for funding lessons (36.5%), with a further 29.2% responding 'other' and 14.6% citing the responsibility lay with the state government.

Among participants falling into the highest income category (more than \$100,000 per annum), 90.5% of children participated in swimming lessons (Figure 11), with the most common reason for ceasing lessons relating to competence in the water (52.6%). No respondents reported they had, or would, cease lessons due to the cost. Almost three quarters of participants believed parents has the primary responsibility for funding lessons (71.4%).

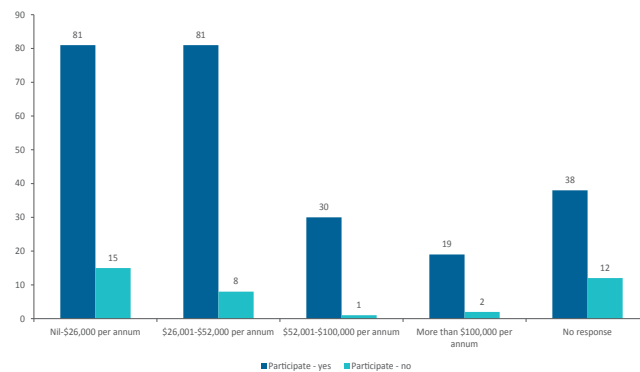


Figure 11: Participation in swimming lessons by household income, n=287

Although 'parents' was still the most common response when asked about funding responsibilities, low income earners were significantly less likely to believe that parents had this obligation than other income groups ( $X^2=20.4$ ;  $p<0.05$ ).

However, the participant's household income was not observed to influence participation in lessons or the main reason for ceasing lessons.

Investigating all respondents (rather than only those with at least one child aged 18 years or under and therefore, eligible to answer the targeted questions), the most common response when asked about funding responsibilities was still 'parents', ranging from 47.5% of low income respondents (nil to \$26,000 per annum) to 56.4% of high income respondents (more than \$100,000 per annum) (Figure 12).

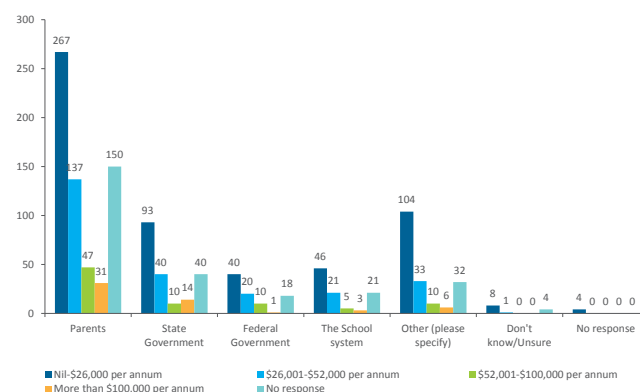


Figure 12: Responsibility for funding swimming lessons by household income, n=1216

Similar patterns were observed when the education level of all respondents was observed, whereby those with the highest level of education (university or higher education) recorded the highest proportion of respondents citing 'parents' (51.8%), compared to those with the lowest level of education (pre-school) (37.5%). However, 'parents' was still the most common response among all groups.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the National Social Survey have reinforced a number of beliefs, as well as validated the results of previous research, regarding swimming and water safety for children, including the most common reasons for participation from a parent or carer's perspective, as well as common barriers to participation. The study substantiated long held beliefs and anecdotal insights, providing evidence to validate common viewpoints.

However, the survey also delivered fresh insights into how much parents and carers are spending on swimming and water safety lessons for children and who they believe should be responsible for funding such lessons.

### Participation

The majority of participant's children either currently participate in swimming lessons, or have participated previously, with most of these participating between the ages of 5 and 14 years. There was a substantial decline in the number of children participating in lessons for longer than 5 years, with most attending lessons for between 1 and 3 years. It would be worthwhile to know what is learnt in this time period and whether key skills are missed by not participating for longer.

Among children who were not currently participating in lessons, the most common reasons related to the child's age and existing ability, the cost and availability of lessons, existing time commitments, geographical and climate constraints, a lack of interest or progress and existing medical conditions or disabilities. The reasons for never participating in lessons were similar, with frequent references to existing knowledge and alternative instruction, as well as financial, geographical and time constraints.

Participation in swimming lessons ranged from a high of 91.3% for children of parents who were born in Australia, to a low of 73.0% among children of parents who spoke a language other than English at home. Participation was also above 90% for children of high income earners (90.5%) and those whose parents only spoke English at home (90.6%) and was also lower than 80% for children of parents who were born in another country (76.7%).

The country of birth and language spoken at home were both observed to significantly influence participation in swimming lessons. Children of participants born outside Australia were significantly less likely to have participated in lessons, as were children of participants who spoke another language at home. It is evident that cultural background plays a role in participation, with those whose parents were born in another country or speak a language other than English at home obviously disadvantaged.

This situation is unlikely to rectify itself without intervention from the water safety sector. Government, water safety organisations and communities all need to come together and investigate possible solutions. The other countries of birth noted in the survey were varied, as were the additional languages spoken at home, necessitating unique community-based solutions which are culturally sensitive and acceptable to the families involved.

### Frequency of lessons

There was substantial variation in the number of swimming lessons children attended per year. The most common responses indicate blocks of lessons, such as school terms of 10, 20 or 40 lessons. Those who attended 1 to 5 lessons likely participated in a 1 week intensive program, while those attending 6-10 lessons likely participated in a school-based program. Another common response indicated a group of children who attended lessons once a week for the year.

It is apparent that some children attend lessons frequently, allowing them to not only develop new skills but also regularly practice them and therefore, increase the likelihood of mastering and retaining these abilities. However, other children did not appear to attend lessons as frequently, limiting their ability to learn new skills and retain this knowledge over time. Without the opportunity to practice and refine these abilities, it is unlikely they will remember what they have learnt as time progresses, rendering them vulnerable to experiencing difficulty in the water when they are older.

### Cost of lessons

The amount of money parents spent on swimming lessons varied greatly, with some lessons appearing to be subsidised and others charging the full amount. It is likely that there is variation between what different providers are charging for lessons. This may be related to the type of program, location of the pool, the qualification level of staff, the ownership structure of the pool, the services provided by the instructor or the circumstances of the individual child.

It is important that subsidised lessons are directed towards those who most need them; the children who would likely miss out on the opportunity were it not for financial assistance. It is evident that parents are paying a significant amount for lessons, particularly those who attend lessons frequently. Given this financial investment, lessons need to be well structured and delivered, to ensure children are receiving optimal benefit, not only for their immediate future but also for the years to come.

## Motivation for participation

Parents and carers provided detailed responses on their motivation for enrolling their children in swimming lessons. The responses were not observed to differ greatly between the age cohorts, with parents choosing to enrol older children in lessons (5-14 years) for similar reasons as younger children (under 5 years).

Parents commonly believed lessons would help to keep their children safe around water and prevent them from drowning. They believed learning to swim was an important life skill, which would help children survive should they find themselves in a difficult situation. Parents wanted their children to feel comfortable and confident in the water, with many stating they lived in close proximity to water and wanted their children to be able to participate in aquatic activities as part of the Australian culture. Swimming and spending time in the water was viewed as an enjoyable leisure activity, which also provided children with exercise.

It is clear that parents value the safety of their children, wanting to keep them safe from harm. They want to teach them important life skills, while making sure they have fun and gain confidence. Given the majority of respondents reported that their children either did, or had previously participated in swimming lessons, these reasons are compelling for most parents. However, it is clear that they are not always enough to overcome barriers to participation, with not all children having the opportunity to learn to swim.

## Barriers to participation

Competence in the water was the most common reason cited for ceasing swimming lessons, with parents deciding to cease participation when they deemed their child's ability to be sufficient. This level of competence would likely be different for every parent. Some may determine this based on the distance their child can swim, what level they reach in the swim school, the age of the child, how long they have been attending or whether they can keep up with family activities at aquatic locations. Whichever measure is used by parents, it is not an objective measure, nor is it likely to be based on any published guideline.

A number of participants selected responses related to the cost or inconvenience of lessons, with some stating that their child lost interest and did not want to participate any longer. Some respondents cited concerns relating to an existing medical condition or disability. A significant proportion reported 'other' reasons. The weather was a relevant factor for some parents, while others noted the location of the pool or finding a suitably qualified instructor was problematic. Other sporting commitments provided competition for swimming lessons, with parents and children lacking time and energy to participate in multiple activities.

While some of these barriers are related to individual beliefs and circumstances, others could be viewed as logistical challenges related to cost, time and distance. For example, the cost of lessons can be addressed by targeted programs, providing subsidised swimming lessons to children in need. The expansion of such programs could assist more families in accessing these services. Similarly, a lack of qualified instructors can be addressed with incentives for teachers to work in areas of high demand.

Outdoor and seasonal pools do pose a challenge for year round teaching, as does the distance to pools. Lobbying for new and improved facilities will take time and will need to propose solutions to address issues such as the cost of building and maintaining swimming pools. Unique challenges exist in regional and remote areas of Australia, with increased distance to pools and poor facilities often influencing parents' prioritisation of lessons. Tackling the logistical concerns cited in this study will need to take into consideration the local environment, with individualised solutions needed for different communities.

## Funding responsibility

More than half of respondents nominated parents as having the primary responsibility for funding swimming lessons. It is worth noting that the cohort for this question was larger than the earlier questions, with almost all participants answering, including those without children aged 18 years or younger. Some of the additional respondents had children aged over 18 years and some did not have any children. It is possible that this larger and more varied cohort influenced the outcome.

The school system, state government and federal government all received responses, with a significant proportion believing that this was a shared responsibility and multiple stakeholders had a role of play. Areas of responsibility differ between the different levels of government. This is further complicated by different arrangements in the different jurisdictions around Australia.

Household income was the only demographic variable investigated which significantly influenced participant's beliefs regarding funding of swimming lessons, with low income earners significantly less likely to believe that parents had the primary responsibility. Given the reduced disposable income in these households, this finding is not surprising. In many cases, without government assistance, children from low income families would miss out on learning to swim.

In all demographic variables, 'parents' was the most common response to the statement regarding funding responsibility. However, the proportion of respondents in each demographic category who chose this answer varied, with the highest response rate coming from high income earners (71.4%) and the lowest from low income earners (35.6%). Participants who spoke a language other than English at home (49.2%) and rural respondents (46.4%), also had lower response rates when questioned.



## CONCLUSION

All children in Australia should receive swimming and water safety instruction, not only to teach them vital survival techniques but also to equip them with the skills they will need for a lifetime of enjoyable, aquatic activity. This study examined the motivation for enrolling children in lessons, as well as the most common barriers to participation. Some of these barriers relate to individual beliefs and circumstances while others are logistical concerns, which need to be addressed nationally in order to ensure all children have the opportunity to access and participate in lessons.

It is encouraging that the majority of respondent's children participate in swimming lessons, or have participated in the past. However, a significant proportion of children had not participated. Children of parents born outside Australia or who speak a language other than English at home are more likely to miss out on the opportunity to participate in swimming lessons. These children are at significant disadvantage, highlighting the importance of equal access and opportunity through programs specifically targeting these demographic factors.

There are a number of key stakeholders who have a role of play in the funding and provision of children's swimming and water safety education, including parents and schools, as well as local, state and federal governments. A collaborative and cohesive approach is needed to provide a suitable environment for learning, making sure that all children have the opportunity to participate in swimming and water safety lessons.

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## APPENDIX

### Participation in swimming lessons – Sponsored Questions

QRLS: For the purposes of answering the questions could you please tell me if you have any children, and if any are under the age of 18 years?

1. Have at least one child 18 years of age or younger
2. Children are all over the age of 18 years
3. Do not have any children

DO NOT READ

4. No response

If (ans>1) skip QRLS9

QRLS1a: What is the age of your YOUNGEST child?

ENTER AGE 0-18

QRLS1b: What is the age of your OLDEST child?

[If only one child, enter 0]

ENTER AGE

QRLS2: Have any of your children participated in swimming lessons with a qualified instructor?

1. Yes - children currently participating
2. Yes - children previously participated
3. No - children have never participated

DO NOT READ

4. Don't know
5. No response

If (ans=1) skip QRLS3

If (ans=2) skip QRLS2b

If (ans=3) skip QRLS2c

If (ans>3) skip QRLS9

QRLS2b: What is the main reason your child/ren is not CURRENTLY participating in swimming lessons with a qualified instructor?

[PROBE FOR A RESPONSE - ENTER COMMENTS]

skip QRLS3

QRLS2c: What is the main reason your child/ren has NEVER participated in swimming lessons with a qualified instructor?

[PROBE FOR A RESPONSE - ENTER COMMENTS]

skip QRLS9

QRLS3: Did your child/children participate in these lessons between the ages of 5 and 14 years?

1. Yes - participated when aged between 5 and 14 years
2. No - participated only when aged less than 5 years
3. No - participated only when aged 15 years or older

DO NOT READ

4. Don't know/Unsure

5. No response

If (ans=2) skip QRLS7b

If (ans>2) skip QRLS8

QRLS4: How many years has/did your child participate/d in swimming lessons between the ages of 5 and 14?

If you have more than one child who participated, please answer for the oldest child.

[ENTER NUMBER OF YEARS 1-9]

QRLS5: On average, how many LESSONS PER YEAR does/did your child participate in between the ages of 5 and 14?

[ENTER NUMBER OF LESSONS PER YEAR, e.g. 1 lesson/week = 52/year]

QRLS6: On average, how much MONEY PER LESSON do/did you spend on swimming lessons for this child between the ages of 5-14 years?

[ENTER COST PER LESSON, e.g. 1 lesson = \$10]

QRLS7a: What was your primary motivation for enrolling your child in swimming lessons between the ages of 5-14 years?

[PROBE FOR A RESPONSE - ENTER COMMENTS]

skip QRLS8

QRLS7b: What was your primary motivation for enrolling your child in swimming lessons before the age of 5 years?

[PROBE FOR A RESPONSE - ENTER COMMENTS]

skip QRLS8

QRLS8: What is the main reason your child has ceased or will one day cease participation in swimming lessons with a qualified instructor?

[PROMPT WITH OPTIONS IF NECESSARY]

1. Child can swim competently enough
2. Cost is too high
3. Lack of time, inconvenient
4. Child doesn't want to do it anymore
5. Other (please specify)

DO NOT READ

6. Don't know/Unsure
7. No response

If (ans<5) skip QRLS9

If (ans>5) skip QRLS9

QRLS8b: Specify other reason

[PROBE FOR A RESPONSE - ENTER COMMENTS]

QRLS9: Who do you believe has the primary responsibility for funding swimming and water safety lessons?

[READ OPTIONS 1-5]

1. Parents
2. State Government
3. Federal Government
4. The School system
5. Other (please specify)

DO NOT READ

6. Don't know/Unsure
7. No response

If (ans<5) end section

If (ans>5) end section

QRLS9b: Specify other

[PROBE FOR A RESPONSE - ENTER COMMENTS]



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