

> December 2022



1.7
MILLION

kids in lessons, up by 300,000 pre-pandemic.

Some families are swimming their way back to lessons, but with growth focused on the younger age groups and long waitlists, parents need to think about water safety ahead of a long, wet summer.

New data released by Royal Life Saving Society – Australia shows encouraging trends on children returning to swimming lessons since the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions lifted, with an estimated 1.7 million kids in lessons, a 20 per cent increase on pre-pandemic enrolments.

However, the boost in enrolments is predominantly in the age groups under seven. This is a concern, potentially leaving a generation of primary school aged children who missed out on lessons during the pandemic at greater risk of drowning across their lifetime.

A snapshot of swim school enrolments from across the country found that many swim schools are now delivering more lessons and catering for more children than they did prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

While an additional 300,000 children are in lessons compared to pre-pandemic levels, the growth is most evident the younger age groups attending swimming lessons. Despite some growth in enrolments of children aged between seven and 12 years, many older children have not returned to swimming lessons.

Royal Life Saving Chief Executive Officer Justin Scarr said the lack of water safety lessons for those older children heightened the drowning risk over summer.

“The importance of school aged children returning swimming and water safety programs cannot be overstated. It is critical we get children aged between seven and 12 back into lessons now,” said Mr Scarr.

Growth in enrolments of children aged under four may reflect the availability of swimming vouchers for preschool children, particularly in NSW. More is needed to entice older children back to lessons throughout 2023 before they hit the teenage years.

The 2022 National Drowning Report reported a 36 per cent increase in drowning among school aged children (aged five - 14 years) compared to the 10-year average. The last two years have recorded the highest number of school-aged drowning deaths in a decade (since 2011/12). All age groups, except for children under five years, reported an increase in drowning deaths.

Heading into summer, parents and carers should check: Can your child swim 50 metres and float for two minutes without help?

For children aged seven to 12 years who may have missed lessons or dropped out and can't meet these national benchmarks:

- Get kids back into lessons - enrol at your local swim school or in a vacation program over the summer school holidays
- Head down to your local aquatic facility to refresh swimming and water safety skills before heading out into other environments this summer – can your child swim 50m?
- Check to see if you can access sports and learn to swim vouchers that can be used to cover some of the costs of swimming lessons
- To brush up on water safety and first aid knowledge before summer, check out the Royal Life Saving website for fun water safety challenges and app-based games for the whole family to learn together <https://www.royallifesaving.com.au/educate-participate/education/classroom-resources>

For governments: a renewed focus on children aged seven – 12 years is needed.

It is essential that older children have the opportunity to develop vital swimming and water safety skills heading into teenage years and adulthood. These are the children that are most likely to have stopped lessons or not been able to access school programs targeted to primary school children.

> KEY FINDINGS

A snapshot of swim school enrolments from September 2022 vs. September 2019

Overall, enrolments among children from preschool to 12 years have increased by 20%



The greatest increase in national enrolments were in 10 – 12 years age group (up 33% from 2019), and the 0 - 3 years age group were up by 30%.



The highest individual increases were in enrolments among children aged 0 - 3 years in QLD - up by 151%, and in NSW, up by 81%.



Most regional areas appear to be doing better than expected, as swim schools recorded a higher increase in enrolments compared to metro swim schools (32% compared to 15%), except in Victoria where spring flooding may have affected the results



State and territory differences when broken down by age group and location (metro / regional) shown in the table below.



The average price of lessons nationwide was \$18.43, ranging from \$13.50 to \$22.00 per lesson.

ACT recorded the highest average cost of \$21.39 per lesson and South Australia and NSW the lowest, approximately \$17.50.

What does this tell us?

- > This shows that the age groups that were likely most affected in 2020 (children aged four to 10 years) may now be returning two years later.
- > Unfortunately, this growth is not high enough to offset missed lessons, meaning at least 100,000 children in late primary school years are unlikely to return to lessons before high school.
- > Based on available data and industry reports, current waitlists are lengthy, with some families having trouble securing bookings for 2023.
- > The data shows that swim schools are being resilient and flexible in meeting demand and growth. Most have adjusted their approach to extend availability into evenings, and across extended hours on weekend. Despite being challenged by teacher shortages in some areas they have managed to increase their service to local communities.
- > Swimming vouchers programs, now available in some form in most states and territories are helping to offset costs and boost enrolments.
- > The data shows that enrolments are bouncing back. Parents are re-enrolling children, particularly very young children, and some older children (10 - 12 years) who would usually have completed lessons by this age.
- > Growth in enrolments of pre-school children 0 - 3 years should be monitored to ensure that those children are retained into their primary school years for them to reach national swimming and water safety benchmarks.

1.7m kids in swimming lessons up from 1.4m pre COVID-19

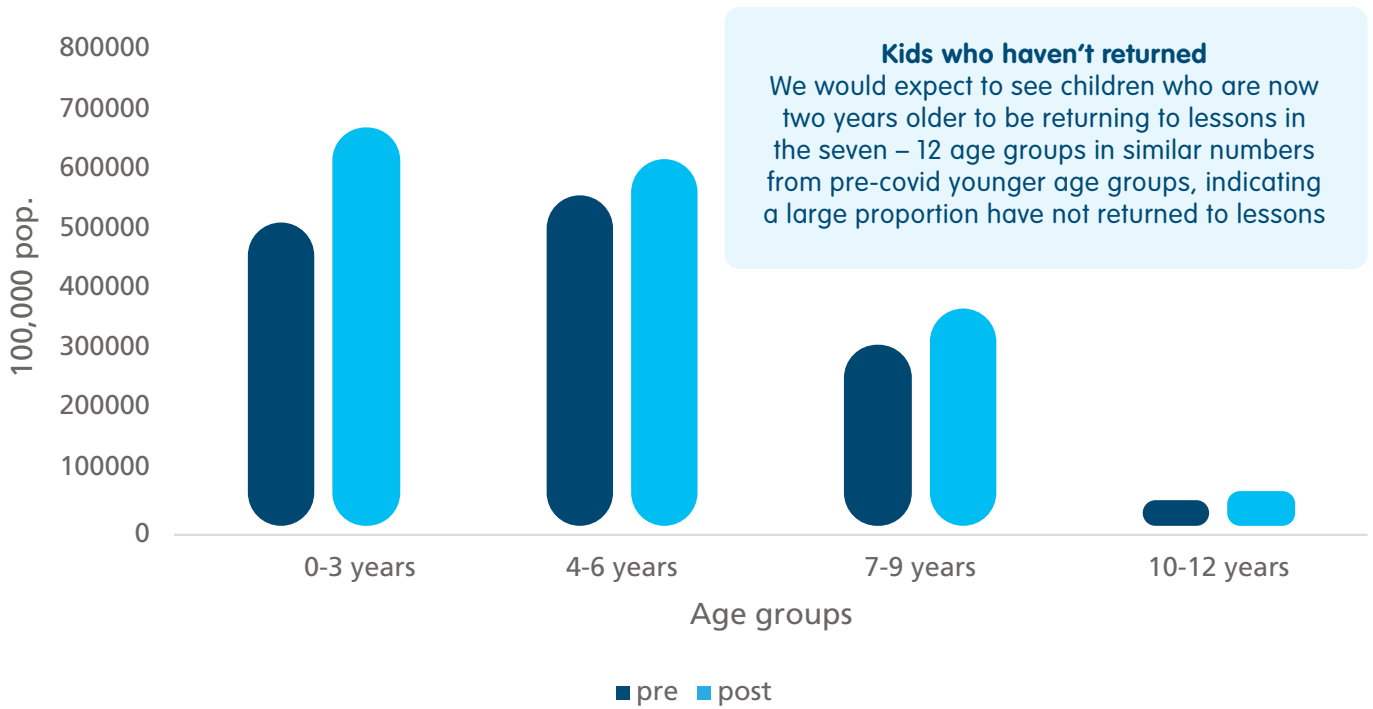


Table 1: National estimate of the number of children aged 0-12 years in swimming lessons pre-COVID-19 (Sep.2019) compared to post-COVID-19 (Sep. 2022)

	NSW	QLD	SA	VIC	ACT	Total*
Metro	29%	16%	0.2%	12%	0.3%	15%
Regional	61%	87%	36%	-6%	-	32%
0 - 3 years	83%	151%	61%	-4%	-7%	31%
4 - 6 years	39%	54%	10%	-9%	7%	11%
7 - 9 years	24%	47%	5%	18%	-1%	20%
10 - 12 years	38%	44%	2%	34%	12%	33%

Table 2: Differences between Learn to Swim enrolments Sep-2019 to Sep-2022

*Data not received from WA or NT, only 1 swim school from Tasmania therefore data not presented for Tasmania.

> BACKGROUND

Royal Life Saving Society – Australia estimates that more than 80 per cent of Australian children aged five - 12 years collectively missed out on 10 million swimming lessons during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the closure of swimming pools.

Royal Life Saving conducted research between 2020 and 2022 to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on the aquatic industry. This research focussed on the impact on children's swimming and water safety skills to inform targeted advocacy, policies and programs to support children and families to access essential swimming and water safety education programs.

Key issues arising included:

- > Aquatic facilities closed, particularly in Victoria and NSW.
- > Swimming lessons missed – both out-of-school (private) and school programs.
- > Swim teacher shortages across the industry due to a casual workforce that have moved out of the sector.
- > Waitlists for some swim schools.
- > Inflation and increased costs of living impacting on families' ability to afford swimming lessons, especially for more than one child.

Royal Life Saving predicts there will be a generational impact on:

- > Children's lack swimming ability = drowning risk in adulthood.
- > Long term drowning risk = drowning numbers among children have increased since 2019.
- > Physical activity.
- > Aquatic sporting participation and success.

> METHODS

Royal Life Saving Society – Australia collected swim school enrolment data from a range of key aquatic agencies and swim schools from across Australia in 2020, 2021 and 2022. Enrolment data for September 2019 was used as the baseline for pre-COVID-19 pandemic figures.

Snapshot from September 2022

Fifty-nine swim schools from across the country (excluding Northern Territory and Western Australia as no data was available) provided enrolment data for September 2022 using an excel spreadsheet tool that had been used for data collection from 2020. This data was matched to previous data collected on their enrolment numbers for September 2019 (pre-COVID-19 pandemic). A percentage difference was calculated based on the enrolment numbers provided for 2019 and 2022. A breakdown of enrolment was requested for the following age groups 0 – 3 years, 4 – 6 years, 7 – 9 years, 10 – 12 years, teenagers and adults.

The location of the swim school - metro or regional - was calculated using the postcode provided against the Australian Geographical Remoteness Classification.

In September 2022, additional questions were asked on average lesson cost and waitlist information. Lesson cost was provided for all swim schools to give the overall average lesson cost provided in the key findings. Waitlist data was requested; however, many swim schools were unable to provide this information. Waitlist information was provided by a small number of swim schools, with responses ranging from 10 students up to 205 students.

All swim schools were de-identified, a postcode was provided for matching to previous years and checking remoteness classification.

We wish to thank to all key agencies and swim schools who provided data for this study.

The estimated number of children in lessons was extrapolated using AusPlay participation data for swimming collected in 2019, as a proxy for pre-COVID-19 participation levels, and calculated based on population data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics by age groups, both nationally and by state/territory. Using the percentage differences in swim school enrolment numbers provided by a sample of 59 swim schools across the country (excluding Northern Territory and Western Australia) from 2019 and 2022, broken down by age groups, these proportions were then applied to the pre-COVID-19 participation numbers to provide an estimated number of children currently in swimming lessons in 2022. Royal Life Saving acknowledges this is an estimate based on the data collected and provided by swim schools.

About Royal Life Saving Society – Australia

Royal Life Saving Society – Australia is a not-for-profit organisation working to reduce drowning and increase water safety skills through learn to swim and lifesaving programs. It promotes safe participation in swimming and other aquatic activities for all ages, abilities and communities. Its vision is a nation free from drowning. www.royallifesaving.com.au