



water safety
England

National Water Safety and Swimming Competency Framework (3 to 18 year olds)



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This Education and Swim Competency Framework provides a strategic overview of the Water Safety skills, knowledge and key benchmarks that every child should know at each stage of their learning. It is designed to support partners, educators and government in their efforts to provide consistent swimming and water safety education for all children by mapping key water safety competencies to the National Curriculum and the Learn to Swim Framework. A supporting National Water Safety Education Pathway can be used by teachers and practitioners to develop and deliver tailored water safety resources and interventions, supporting all school aged children and their families to build lifesaving skills and understanding.



Stop and Think



Stay Together



In an emergency, Float



Call 999 or 112

Introduction

The National Water Safety and Swim Competency Framework has been developed by Water Safety England in line with the aims of the [UK Drowning Prevention Strategy](#), which includes aims to reduce water-related fatalities and associated risk among vulnerable groups and communities, one of which is children. Because of this, the strategy includes as one of its five headline targets: “Every child should have the opportunity to learn to swim and receive water safety education at primary school and where required at Key Stage 3.”

This framework has also been informed by the National Curriculum in England for Physical Education; relevant outcomes within the Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), and Health Education curriculums; and significant research into swimming and water safety by sectoral organisations and researchers in the field. It has drawn expertise, references and inspiration from a range of well-developed programmes and organisations from around the world, including teaching and learning materials from Scotland and Wales.

The global perspective

In April 2021, the United Nations General Assembly adopted its first ever Resolution on Drowning Prevention, calling on countries to adopt a number of actions including “the introduction of water safety, swimming and first aid lessons as part of school curricula, consistent with the Member State’s governance framework for education.”

In 2025, the World Health Organization published the first Global Strategy for Drowning Prevention, which highlights that almost half of drowning deaths occur among people aged under 29 years old. A recommended action is that countries “establish policies and allocate resources for universal access to swimming, water safety and self-rescue skills, building swimming pools, training teachers and supporting inclusion in school curricula, ensuring national reach.

The National Curriculum

In England, it is currently a statutory requirement for schools to deliver the following three national curriculum outcomes for swimming and water safety through the Physical Education (PE) Curriculum to each pupil by the end of Key Stage 2:

- Perform safe self-rescue in different water-based situations¹
- Swim competently, confidently and proficiently over a distance of at least 25 metres
- Use a range of strokes effectively, e.g. front crawl, backstroke, and breaststroke.

From September 2026, it is a statutory requirement in England that the RSE (Relationships and Sex Education) guidance for schools includes the following water safety outcomes for each pupil:

- **Primary:** how to recognise risk and keep safe around water, including the Water Safety Code
- **Secondary:** how to identify risk and manage personal safety in increasingly independent situations, including water (including the Water Safety Code), and in unfamiliar social or work settings (for example, the first time a young person goes on holiday without their parents); how to recognise and manage peer influence in relation to risk-taking behaviour and personal safety; basic first aid, including basic treatment for common injuries and ailments; and life-saving skills, including how to administer CPR, the purpose of defibrillators, when one might be needed and who can use them.

¹ [Swim England and STA clarify minimum standards for school swimming](#)

How was this framework developed?

It is widely recognised that water competence is a key factor in an individual's safety and enjoyment around water. There is a growing body of evidence – both nationally and internationally – that classroom-based water safety lessons improve the knowledge, understanding and confidence of children in respect to water-based risks.²

In 2017, an international research project for the International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education identified 15 water competencies, recognising both physical competencies (traditional swimming and self-rescue skills that enable a person to survive and thrive in water) and equally important cognitive competencies such as attitudes and awareness, risk management and knowledge of local hazards.³ A subsequent research study commissioned by the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) used focus groups of teachers, parents and young people to identify how key water safety messages should be presented to young people in order to achieve maximum retention and impact. The study concluded that messages should be clear and simple; show relatable situations; make children and teens aware of dangers without provoking fear; and present information in new and interesting ways that encourage interaction. This study informed the development of the Water Safety Code for England. (Please note the Water Safety Code is different across the UK, e.g. Scotland uses a three-step code). Developed by the Royal Life Saving Society UK (RLSS UK), Swim England and the RNLI, the Water Safety Code reflects how people use water and the competencies they might possess, and is purposefully designed to be adaptable to specific age groups and activities.

The National Water Safety and Swim Competency Framework draws on the above research – as well as other relevant research and expertise from across the UK and globally – to outline seven water safety strands, and how each of these can be embedded into different stages of a child's educational journey.



The framework makes a direct link between the cognitive competencies (1 and 2) and physical competencies (3 to 7) that, together, make a person water competent, including swim competencies as delivered through the Swim England Learn to Swim Framework. It is important to note that this approach supports and promotes young people's safe and increased participation in water-based activities, empowering them to enjoy the water safely.

² Tipton, M, Muller, JH, Gómez, C & Corbett, J 2022, (2022) Do water safety lessons improve water safety knowledge? International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education, 13 (3), Available online: <https://doi.org/10.25035/ijare.13.03.03>.

³ Stallman, Robert & Moran, Kevin & Quan, Linda & Langendorfer, Stephen. (2017). From Swimming Skill to Water Competence: Towards a More Inclusive Drowning Prevention Future. International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education 10. 10.25035/ijare.10.02.03.



National Water Safety and Swim Competency Framework

This framework outlines an age-appropriate level of physical and cognitive water safety competency that each young person should progress to at each learning stage:

Stage 1

Core Competencies and Fundamental Skills

Ages 3 to 7 (Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1)

Stage 2

Acquiring Skills

Ages 7 to 11 (Key Stage 2)

Stage 3

Applying Skills

Ages 11 to 14 (Key Stage 3)

Stage 4

Independent Application

Ages 14 to 18 (Key Stages 4 & 5)

At each learning stage, the framework is further broken down into two key learning areas: Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviours; and Physical Swimming Competencies.

For practical examples for how water safety competencies can be implemented at each stage of learning, please see our supplementary [National Water Safety Education Pathway](#) for teachers and educators, which includes lesson plans, activities and resources linked to the Water Safety Code.

Learning Area 1: Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviours

This area of the framework offers the progressive scaffolding to develop a child's theoretical knowledge, attitudes and behaviours in relation to water safety. It includes the water safety competencies required to apply these skills in a range of contexts to support themselves and, progressively, others.

The Framework promotes positive attitudes towards water safety to influence safer behaviours, and it encourages children and young people to consider and understand their own aquatic skills.

This area encompasses two competencies:

1. Safe Participation The development of a positive attitude towards being safe when in, on or around water, plus an understanding of the hazards and dangers of water-based environments, as well as an ability to assess risk to oneself and others.

2. Lifesaving and Rescue The ability to recognise and respond appropriately in an emergency to help yourself or another person.

In the tables below, these are categorised and mapped with progression across the four age groups as such:

- Attitudes and Behaviours (AB 1-12)
- Stop and Think (ST 1-8)
- Hazard Identification (ID 1-11)
- Stay Together and Planning (PL 1-12)
- Floatation and Safe Self Rescue (FL 1-8)
- Emergency assistance (EM 1-10)

Learning Area 2: Physical Swimming Competencies

This area of the framework provides the progressive scaffolding for developing a child's physical skills and abilities. It includes the core aquatic skills required to safely and competently participate, survive and assist others in the water.

This area is broken into five competencies:

3. Entry and Exit Being able to enter and exit the water in a controlled, safe way reduces the risk of injury or panic. Safe entries prevent injury from cold water shock, diving into shallow water or unknown hazards. Safe exits ensure someone can get out of the water even when tired, cold or in moving water.

4. Breath Control and Underwater Breath control is essential to confidence in the water. The ability to control breathing between submersion allows individuals to adopt efficient floating and travelling positions. Being competent and confident to submerge and resurface offers an additional layer of protection in scenarios that result in unexpected or required immersion.

5. Rotation and Orientation The ability to roll, twist and change body position in the water means a person can orient themselves after falling in, regain a standing position or face toward safety. It is a core contributor to efficient movement and the ability to start and stop travelling when out of depth.

6. Travel Travel skills, such as swimming strokes or propulsion methods, are the means to get from danger to safety – whether that's reaching the side of a pool, a floating object, or the shore. Efficient movement conserves energy and increases the likelihood of successful self-rescue.

7. Survival Skill (Floating, HELP, Huddle, Use of Personal Flotation Devices, Clothed) These are strategies for increasing survival time until rescue. Floating allows the casualty to survive initial immersion and the effects of cold water shock. Knowing how to use a Personal Flotation Device and how to swim while clothed builds confidence and practical ability for real-world situations where immersion is often unexpected.

Stage 1 - Core Competencies and Fundamental Skills – Ages 3 to 7

National Water Safety and Swimming Competency Framework Core Competencies (Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 – Ages 3 to 7)

I'm learning to stay safe around water with an adult/grown up

Area: Water Safety Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviours

1. Safe Participation

2. Lifesaving and Rescue

Early Years Foundations Stage: Understanding the World / RSE: Primary Personal Safety

I know it is important to be able to swim (for fun, to stay healthy and safe). (AB1)

I know there are many ways in which people can enjoy the water. (AB2)

I know that anyone can get into danger in the water. (AB3)

I can recognise lifeguards and the safe swimming flags. (ST1)

I know that water is moving and I understand there are dangers to being in and around water. (ST2)

I know some ways of spotting dangers near water. (ST3)

I can recognise bodies of water around the home and in my local environment. (ID1)

I can identify some water-based dangers around the home and in my local environment. (ID2)

I can identify objects that sink and float. (ID3)

I know people should wear different clothing in and around the water. (PL1)

I know it is important to hold an adult's hand when asked to keep safe and avoid falling in. (PL2)

I know it is important to stay within arm's reach of adults when playing in or near the water. (PL3)

I know that everyone can float but this may look different and require practice. (FL1)

If I get into trouble in water, I know to roll over and float on my back or to hold onto something that floats, then raise my arm and shout for help. (FL2)

I know to tell an adult in an emergency and (if able) to call 999 or 112. (EM1)

I know how to identify a lifeguard / fire officer / lifeboat crew and how they help us. (EM2)

I know how to shout for help. (EM3)

National Water Safety and Swimming Competency Framework
Core Competencies (Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 – Ages 3 to 7)

I'm learning to stay safe around water with an adult/grown up

Area: Physical Swimming Competencies

3. Entry and Exit	4. Breath Control and Underwater	5. Rotation and Orientation	6. Travel	7. Survival Skill
<p align="center"><i>Swim England Learn to Framework: Stage 1-3</i> <i>Swim Award, Water Safety Award 1, STA STANley First Steps and Grades 1-2</i></p>				
<p>I can use steps to safely enter and exit water</p> <p>I can complete a swivel entry</p> <p>I can perform a feet-first entry</p>	<p>I can submerge and resurface while holding the side of the pool</p>	<p>I can push, glide and rotate from front to back</p> <p>I can turn through 180 degrees from a jumping entry to travel back to the side</p> <p>I can move from a front floating position to a back floating position</p>	<p>I can travel from a jumping entry back to the side</p>	<p>I can float while keeping my airway clear to shout for help</p> <p>I can hold onto a floating object and shout and signal for help</p> <p>I can float holding onto an object</p>

Stage 2 – Acquiring Skills – Ages 7 to 11

National Water Safety and Swimming Competency Framework Acquiring Skills (Key Stage 2 - Ages 7 to 11)

I'm learning how to stay safe when supervised in, on and around water

Area: Water Safety Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviours

1. Safe Participation

2. Lifesaving and Rescue

RSE: Primary Key Stage 2 Personal Safety

I know how to enjoy being in and around the water and know how to behave safely. (AB4)

I know how to behave/act safely in and around water. (AB5)

I know the water safety code. (AB6)

I can identify where is/isn't a safe place to swim, including recognising beach flags, wind socks and safety signs. (ST4)

I understand the differences between swimming, floating and treading water in a pool and an outdoor environment. (ST5)

I know that cold water will affect my ability to swim. (ST6)

I know that to minimise my chances of getting into danger in the water I need to identify potential hazards. (ID4)

I know that hazards and risks can't always be seen, can change depending on the different waterside location, can change at different times of the day or year, can change depending on weather conditions, and can change depending on my chosen activity. (ID5)

I know that even though I can swim, dangers are present in and around the water. (ID6)

I know I should be prepared before entering the water and understand the importance of wearing the correct clothing and using the correct equipment for my chosen activity. (PL4)

I know if I fall into cold water to roll over and float on my back until the effect of cold water shock has passed, then call for help by raising my hand and shouting to draw attention or swim to safety if I can. (FL3)

If I'm in trouble in a rip current, I know never to swim against it and, if I can stand, to wade against it rather than swimming. If I can't stand or wade, I know to hold on to something that floats or to float myself and raise my arm and shout for help. (FL4)

I can recognise someone who may be in difficulty and needs help. (EM4)

I know how to respond if I see someone in danger in the water – either use my mobile phone or ask an adult to call 999 or 112 immediately and ask for the relevant emergency service. (EM5)

I know not to enter the water if someone is in trouble but to look for a flotation aid or public rescue equipment to support them and then wait for help to arrive. (EM6)

National Water Safety and Swimming Competency Framework
Acquiring Skills (Key Stage 2 - Ages 7 to 11)

I'm learning how to stay safe when supervised in, on and around water

Area: Water Safety Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviours

1. Safe Participation

2. Lifesaving and Rescue

RSE: Primary Key Stage 2 Personal Safety

I know I should always stay close to an adult to stay safe. (PL5)

I know that it is safer to enter the water when I am with someone else and I know my responsibilities as an individual and in a group when around water. (PL6)

Area: Physical Swimming Competencies

3. Entry and Exit

4. Breath Control and Underwater

5. Rotation and Orientation

6. Travel

7. Survival Skill

Swim England Learn to Framework: Stage 3-5 Swim Award, Water Safety 2 Award, PE: Primary Key Stage 2 School Swimming and Water Safety, RLSS UK Rookie Lifeguard, SLSGB Nipper Pathway, STA Grades 3-4

I can complete a jumping entry with submersion

I can complete a fall-in entry

I can climb out from water of at least full reach depth without using the steps or rail or any other assistance

I can rhythmically bounce from the floor, take a breath and resubmerge four times

I can go from travelling on my front, rotate onto my back to rest for 60 seconds, then rotate back to vertical to tread water

I can swim 10 metres on my front, rotate and swim 10 metres on my back to a floating object

I can swim 25 metres to a floating object

I can swim 50 metres retaining the floating object

I can float on my back for 60 seconds

I can tread water for two minutes

I can signal for help while treading water

Stage 3 – Applying Skills – Ages 11 to 14

National Water Safety and Swimming Competency Framework

Applying Skills (Key Stage 3 – Ages 11 to 14)

I'm learning how to keep myself and others safe when around water.

Area: Water Safety Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviours

1. Safe Participation

2. Lifesaving and Rescue

RSE: Secondary Personal Safety

I know that organised clubs and activities are a safe way to enjoy outdoor water. (AB7)

I know the risks that water presents and my responsibilities to keep myself and those around me safe in and around the water. (AB8)

I recognise the need for safety planning when taking a trip to a waterside location and am aware of how to access the information I need. (AB9)

I know that there are more challenges to swimming outdoors, such as cold water, waves, rip currents, weeds, sudden temperature changes. (ST7)

I can identify hazards and recognise potential areas of harm. (ID7)

I can assess risks, evaluating who might be harmed and how, and how severe the harm could be. (ID8)

I can identify some basic control measures, e.g. what precautions to take to reduce risks. (ID9)

I know what to do to keep myself and others safe. I can make safe decisions on how to help those in my care or friendship group stay safe and make safer decisions. (PL7)

I know to inform an adult of where I am going (i.e. referencing local landmarks or place names), when I'm due back and to carry a mobile phone to call for help if needed. (PL8)

I am aware of specific safety advice relating to activities (bodyboarding, inflatables, stand up paddling, kayaking, open water swimming and surfing). (PL9)

I know how to shout and signal for help and how to make myself seen in water. (FL6)

I remember how to float as well as the HELP and huddle positions. If I fall into water with other people, I know to stay together to float and keep warm. (FL7)

I know not to enter the water if someone is in trouble but to look for a flotation aid or public rescue equipment to support them and then wait for help to arrive. (EM7)

National Water Safety and Swimming Competency Framework

Applying Skills (Key Stage 3 – Ages 11 to 14)

I'm learning how to keep myself and others safe when around water.

Area: Physical Swimming Competencies

3. Entry and Exit	4. Breath Control and Underwater	5. Rotation and Orientation	6. Travel	7. Survival Skill
<i>Swim England Learn to Framework: Stage 5-7, Water Safety 3 Award, RLSS UK Rookie Lifeguard, SLSGB Nipper Pathway, STA Grades 5-6</i>				
<p>I can complete a compact jump entry</p> <p>I know how to safely enter cold water</p> <p>I can climb out from water of at least full reach depth, without using the steps or rail or any other assistance, over a freeboard or simulated freeboard (soft mats)</p>	<p>I can complete a circuit of submerging and resurfacing, swimming under or through objects and collecting an object from floor, including at least one headfirst and one feet-first surface dive</p>	<p>I can stop in deep water, signal for help then resume swimming</p> <p>I can perform an underwater forward roll or log roll (in shallower pools) and push from the floor to the surface</p>	<p>I can swim 200 metres in swimwear after performing entry and treading water</p> <p>I can swim 50 metres in very sheltered outdoor water</p>	<p>I can float for 90 seconds in light clothing in simulated moving water</p> <p>I can shout and signal for help while treading water, demonstrating use of both hands for my signal</p> <p>I can tread water for two minutes, remove clothes afterwards while in the water, then travel back to safety</p>

Stage 4 – Independent Application – Ages 14 to 18

National Water Safety and Swimming Competency Framework Independent Application (Key Stages 4 and 5 – Ages 14 to 18)

I'm learning to manage new water risks independently

Area: Water Safety Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviours

1. Safe Participation

2. Lifesaving and Rescue

RSE: Secondary Personal Safety

I know how to identify hazardous situations in and around the water and avoid them by making sensible, informed decisions. (AB10)

I understand that there can be specific dangers relating to the time of the year/ location e.g. strong currents around piers and jetties, ice in the winter. (AB11)

I know the risks that water presents and my responsibilities to keep myself and those in my care safe in and around the water. (AB12)

I know how to safely plan a trip to a waterside location and where to find relevant and reliable information relating to weather, tides, etc. (including holidaying without parents, guardians or overseas). (ST8)

I know that dangers are present around water and care should be taken at all times. (ID10)

I know I might be at increased risk near water with my peers (elements of peer pressure, risk taking, alcohol and drugs). (ID11)

I know to carry a mobile phone in case of emergency. (PL10)

I can make safe decisions and how to help those in my care / friendship group stay safe / make safer decisions. (PL11)

I know which safety equipment and clothing I need when entering the water. (PL12)

I understand the effects that cold and moving water have on the body if I enter the water unexpectedly. I know how to float until the effects of cold shock have passed. I know to then call for help by raising an arm and shouting to draw attention, or to swim to safety. (FL8)

I know how to help someone who is immersed in cold or deep water until help arrives – Phone, Float, Throw. (EM8)

I can identify where local public rescue equipment is located and know when it is safe to complete a contact rescue. (EM9)

I can accurately identify my location to the emergency services for example using what3words, local landmarks, postcodes and street names. (EM10)

National Water Safety and Swimming Competency Framework
Independent Application (Key Stages 4 and 5 – Ages 14 to 18)

I'm learning to manage new water risks independently

Area: Physical Swimming Competencies

3. Entry and Exit	4. Breath Control and Underwater	5. Rotation and Orientation	6. Travel	7. Survival Skill
<i>Swim England Learn to Framework: Stage 7-10, Water Safety Award 3, STA Grade 7, Advanced Swimmer Series</i>				
<p>I can complete a variety of entries, choosing the most suitable entry for the situation I am in</p> <p>I can climb out from water of at least full reach depth, without using the steps or rail or any other assistance over a level deck while wearing a lifejacket or personal floatation device</p>	<p>I can complete a circuit of submerging and resurfacing, swimming under or through objects and collecting an object from floor, including at least one headfirst and one feet-first surface dive</p>	<p>I can stop in full reach depth water, signal for help then resume swimming</p> <p>I can perform underwater forward roll or log roll (in shallower pools) and push from the floor to the surface</p>	<p>I can swim 200 metres in light clothing using a variety of appropriate survival strokes after performing entry and treading water</p> <p>I can swim 100 metres in sheltered outdoor water following a safe entry</p>	<p>I can float for 90 seconds fully clothed in simulated moving water</p> <p>I can tread water for two minutes, remove clothes afterwards while in the water, then travel back to safety</p> <p>I can shout and signal for help while treading water, demonstrating use of both hands for my signal</p>

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