

Buddy Up!

Your waterfront or pool could be MUCH safer if your staff understand what really prevents drowning.

-- by Gary Forster
(originally in *Camp Business Magazine*; and *Safe-wise Consulting*)

The Most Common Safety Mistake

I've visited many camps this past summer and by far the most dangerous thing I repeatedly witnessed was lifeguards and waterfront directors who had no idea how *or* why they do buddy checks, and what they were supposed to be looking for.

It almost always goes like this:

Me: "Why do you have kids swim with buddies?" (This is the best part!)

Guard: "It only takes half as long to count them during buddy checks."

Here's the crux: No matter how often you hold buddy checks (every 10 minutes? every 5 minutes?), it's not often enough to "keep kids from drowning." By that time you're not accounting for kids, you're accounting for *bodies*. The only person that would know **immediately** if a camper has gone under is.... **their buddy**. THAT's why we require buddies, for constant one-on-one guarding. We do buddy *checks* to insure that buddies are sticking close together... close enough to immediately know if their buddy has gone under.

"Hey kids! What do you do if your buddy has gone under or is too tired to swim? CALL FOR HELP! Right!" The critical part of a buddy check is looking for buddies that are NOT swimming together. Not so you can "hurry them up" to raise their hands, but so you can pull them aside and quiz them on *why* it's critical they stay together next time. And then you watch them and *pull them out of the water* for a stern talking-too if they still don't get it.



We're not just babysitters so kids can swim safely at camp. We want them to be safe swimmers for the *rest of their lives*. "You can't swim safely, even in a hotel pool, unless you have a buddy. And that's when you're an adult, too. That's why our staff always have buddies." (You *have* to set the right example if you want them to practice it life-long. You could be saving your counselors lives someday, too.)

"Really? My *staff* need buddies to swim?" Do your climbing instructors wear helmets and use proper belay techniques when they climb on their time off? Of course they do. Safe, smart adults never hike without telling someone where they're going and when they'll be back; and they always wear a helmet when mountain biking. Life lessons -- kids learn from watching us.

The same goes for boating. You always put your tag on the board corresponding to the craft you're taking out. That goes for the lifeguard in the power boat, too. "Never go boating without somebody knowing where you're going and when you'll be back. Never." And if the hour is over and there are still tags on the boating board? You locate those kids NOW as if they

may be stuck on the lake somewhere. They just forgot? Tell them: 1.) You're glad they're safe because you and many others had been looking for them (guilt works better than shame); and 2.) "PLEASE always check IN and OUT. Someday it could help save someone YOU love." Life lessons.

The best time to do a lost-swimmer-drill? Let the kids know it will happen sometime during this swim period. Part-way into the period, have one camper yell, "I can't find my buddy! I can't find my buddy!" or "My Buddy Needs Help!" (That's modeling the appropriate, *responsible* thing to do. NOT modeling "it's the lifeguard's job to keep track of everyone"). Guards call an immediate buddy check to clear the swimming area (*anyone* with a whistle can start to blow it. Search procedures start immediately while the buddy check continues. Or if it's a "swimmer in distress" the lifeguard models appropriate use of either reaching assist from the dock, or from the water with their rescue tube: describing what they're doing so EVERYONE watching can learn from it. Life lessons. Every day. Cool, huh?

"*We never did it this way before.*" That's because you were taught by someone who was never trained specifically in open-water lifeguarding. The Boy Scouts have always had the best materials, primarily because they have a goal of "leadership from within," and every Scout needs to know not just *what* the rules are for any activity, but *what the intentions are* so that even if details are forgotten over their lifetime, they'll know the goals: never swim alone. Always swim within your ability level.

An Excellent Buddy System

Kids check in as buddies (and there's nothing wrong with triples.) We shouldn't make a big deal about kids *only* pairing up. Kids don't swim in real life in even numbers. At least half the time they're in odd numbers, so swimming in pairs OR triples should seem natural. A staff member is supervising the buddy board, encouraging them to pick the "top" open slots for their pair or triple. EACH buddy group is numbered on the board, starting with "1, 2, 3

etc," and kids need to know their number. "What number are you?" ... "17!" ... "Good. Keep an eye on each other; always."

When it comes time to do a buddy check (and it should probably be every 5 minutes at the start of swim periods and at the beginning of the week; maybe as long as 10 or 15 as they get the hang of it), you blow one LONGGGGGGGGG whistle. To show that they know it's begun, every lifeguard on duty also blows their whistle in unity so it's LOUD. (One short whistle is of no use if kids have been laughing or have their heads under water. It needs to be at least 20 seconds long so EVERYONE hears it for themselves and swims to the side (or dock) to grab and raise their buddy's hand BEFORE the whistle stops. Then immediately upon the whistle stopping, the first buddy group yells "ONE!" with their hands raised. Second group, "TWO!" and so on. If a number is blank, the staff person at the buddy board calls that number out in turn, (i.e. "Three!") so that the counting goes off sequentially. If all groups are paying attention, it's possible to do a complete buddy check for 120 kids in 30 seconds. "Good job! All clear!" Two short whistle blasts; back in the water. Some buddies take more than three strokes to get next to each other? Pull them aside and have a little "lesson." (see above.)

Unaccounted-for buddies? Everyone out of the water. Begin lost swimmer search. Phone and radio all program areas looking for the missing campers. EVERYONE learns how important safety procedures are. Campers look forward to the day THEY can be lifeguards and have that kind of responsibility.

Lifeguard Skills

Every lifeguard needs to know all of these procedures, but their PRIMARY job is to constantly supervise and SCAN the water they've been assigned. Scanning skills are too involved to go into here, but it's enough to say not nearly enough time is spent on teaching, reviewing, and supervising them. Kids don't drown on the surface, and drowning kids rarely call for help. Proper scanning helps *prevent* drowning. We must be sure everyone watching

the water gets it right, that we make sure they have proper eye protection from glare (Polarized glasses), and that they are constantly rotated to new positions to prevent inattention. **Safe-Wise Consulting** has some ready-to-use risk management resources and links that are perfect for keeping you and your staff on your toes, safety-wise <http://safe-wise.com/risk-management/resource-library-main.html>

Teach Swimming. Please.

In a recent report, *USA Swimming* stressed that 70 percent of African-American children and 58 percent of Hispanic children have little or no ability to swim, despite many recent advocacy efforts to increase awareness of its importance. In contrast, only 40 percent of Caucasian kids lack swim skills.” Yet less than 50% of camps still require that non-swimmers take swim lessons. My opinion: we’re dodging our responsibility. Make the commitment now to be ready to tell campers and parents you teach swimming next summer. And follow through. A lifetime of enjoyment awaits these kids if we all do our part.

Camps aren’t just a safe place for kids to play in the summer. They should be where kids learn skills for a safe *lifetime*. More exciting than counting kids off by twos, isn’t it?

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