

Water Safety and Children 7 Minute Briefing

1. Background

The number of children dying from drowning in Greater Manchester has doubled since 2020. Data from Greater Manchester Police serious case review team highlights 8 incidents in 2022 where four children were under-five years old and a further 4 were adolescent children. Six out of the eight deaths were referred for a statutory safeguarding review due to a lack of appropriate supervision whilst the child was in water. Drowning is usually a rare cause of death in childhood, however in terms of accidental or incidental deaths, it is one of the more common alongside death by Road Traffic Collisions.

2. Why it matters

Drowning is one of the commonest causes of child death and completely preventable [NHS 2022](#). Sadly not a new phenomenon when back in 2014 the [WHO](#) reported that drowning was in the top five causes of death in children aged 1–14 years in 48 of 85 countries, and often attributed to a lack of supervision. A young child left alone unsupervised in water, for even the shortest time can be potentially life threatening ([CAPT 2022](#)) babies can drown in as little as 5cm (2inches) of water. It is vital that children are supported to grow up in a safe environment; professionals who have contact with children and families can all play an important role in ensuring children are kept safe by their care givers.

3. Risk Factors

Infants should never be left unsupervised or alone with another child around water. Children under the age of 8, children with disabilities or medical conditions such as epilepsy should also be supervised around water ([CAPT 2022](#)), ([RLSA 2022](#)). Older children (particularly males [WHO 2021](#)) are also at risk of drowning; adolescents often underestimate their true abilities, coupled with risk taking behaviour, current brain development and executive functioning sometimes...

4. Risk Factors continued

...results in poor decision making ([AACAP 2017](#)), ([RLSA 2022](#)). All waters around the UK are cold enough to induce a shock response, even in high summer ([RLSS 2022](#)). The three stages that your body goes through during cold water shock; Loss of breathing control, coordination, strength and stamina leaving the person unable to swim to safety ([RLSS 2022](#)). Parents should understand any risks posed by the surrounding environment ([CAPT 2022](#)).

5. Vulnerabilities

Environmental, personal and medical factors including disabilities can affect the risk of drowning ([RLSA 2022](#)). Babies and young children are often unable to signal for help and drown unseen ([CAPT 2022](#)). Older children may lack the strength and skills to get out of trouble in water e.g. strong currents, deep water, or hidden dangers beneath the surface. Older children may understand safety instructions but likely to forget in the moment ([CAPT 2022](#)).

6. How to keep children safe

Learning from safeguarding reviews across Greater Manchester highlights that water safety is discussed least with parents. Preventative messages can save lives and should be added to existing safety advice during key contact points with families by front-line professionals. Safety campaigns around water by GMFRS are

delivered in schools and available on-line [Safe4Summer 2022](#) During winter months the focus shifts to ice/water safety. The RLSS also provides safety messages on the dangers of ice and keeping [safe](#).

7. Key sources of information

[Drowning - Child Accident Prevention Trust \(capt.org.uk\)](#)

[Water Safety at Home | Royal Life Saving Society UK \(RLSS UK \)](#)

[Accidents to children - RoSPA](#)

[Cold Water Shock – the Facts | Royal Life Saving Society UK \(RLSS UK \)](#)

[Risk Factors | Royal Life Saving Society - Australia](#)

[Drowning \(who.int\)](#)

[Baby and toddler safety - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)

[RNLI Beach Safety – Top Five Tips To Stay Safe By The Sea](#)

[Safe4Summer - Greater Manchester Fire Rescue Service](#)

[Winter Water Safety | Royal Life Saving Society UK \(RLSS UK \)](#)

Additional Information

Visit: <https://safeguardingchildren.salford.gov.uk/>

Email: natalie.watson24@nhs.net

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