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Background

Data collected from all the CDOP's across GM and GMP suggests that the number of adolescents (10-19 years old) who lost their lives associated with drowning was consistent between 2013-2019. However, in 2019-2020 the number doubled. The average number of deaths thereafter was consistent until 2022-2023, which saw numbers return to pre-2019 levels. The initial spike in numbers correlates with the pandemic and the unusual warm weather experienced during this time. Giving adolescents the opportunity for social mixing in outdoor spaces only, and furthermore, risk taking behaviours such as alcohol and drug taking around cold water.

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Why it Matters

It is thought that more than 400 people accidentally drown in the UK and Ireland every year and that even more suffer life-changing injuries from water related incidents ([RLSS](#)). Unfortunately drowning is one of the more common causes of death in children and is completely preventable ([NHS 2022](#)). However, adolescents tend to be less supervised and are more likely to engage in risky behaviour around water ([WHO](#)). Therefore, professionals who have contact with adolescents and their families can all play an important role in promoting water safety amongst this group.

3

Brain Development

During adolescence the brain is still developing and continues to mature until around mid- to- late 20s ([NIMH 2023](#)). The prefrontal cortex, is one of the last parts to mature ([NIMH 2023](#)). This part of the brain is responsible for planning complex cognitive behaviour, personality, decision making, social behaviour and overall executive functioning ([SOP 2017](#)).

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There is a huge emphasis placed on seeking approval within adolescent peer relationships ([MILH 2023](#)). This coupled with any additional complexities including; personal and medical factors such as epilepsy, neurodiversity and disability, brain development and risk taking behaviours such as drugs and alcohol may result in poor decisions, which further increases the risk of adolescents drowning ([AACAP 2017](#)), ([RLSA 2022](#)).

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Professionals Role

[GMFRS](#) launched their Safe4summer campaign in 2022 which aimed to work in partnership to educate and keep young people of GM safe around water. During the winter months the focus shifts to ice/water safety. The RLSS also provides safety messages on the dangers of water and ice in the summer and winter months and keeping [safe](#).

Preventative messages can save lives and should be discussed during contact with adolescents and families by front-line professionals.

Safety campaigns around water by GMFRS are delivered in schools and are also available [on-line](#).

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Open Water Swimming

This is usually undertaken anywhere other than a swimming pool for example; reservoirs, rivers, lakes, the sea etc ([Swim England](#)). As warmer weather approaches reservoirs can appear very inviting to swim in but can harbour hidden dangers either below the surface, due to cold temperatures or due to their remote locations ([Water.org](#)). They also pose real risks in winter when individuals venture onto the frozen water ([RLSS](#)). For some it is a recognised sport, however each year approximately 85% of accidental drownings occur in open water due to lack of knowledge and understanding of the risks ([RLSS](#)). Older children may underestimate their true abilities and lack the strength and skills to get out of trouble in water e.g. strong currents, deep water, or hidden dangers beneath the surface ([CAPT](#)).

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Vulnerabilities

Neurodiversity refers to the normal variations in brain development as seen within autism and ADHD ([Psychology Today](#)). Neurodivergent individuals are often drawn to water for sensory needs and therefore are at greater risk of drowning compared with the general population ([RLSS](#)). Alcohol and water do not mix ([RLSA](#))! Common side effects of alcohol and drug misuse include; compromised judgement, perception of risk, alertness and drowsiness, which can all further increase the risk of drowning ([RLSA](#)).

