



Position Statement 20-1

Use of social/physical distancing practices during swimming lesson programs

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the entire world. In response to the new emerging threat, and without a viable vaccine, governments implemented personal hygiene guidance and social isolation measures to slow the spread of COVID-19. These measures resulted in the closure of aquatic facilities.

Aquatic facilities must adapt when local restrictions change and facilities are allowed to reopen and resume swim lesson programs. Timelines and the scope of restrictions on the size of gatherings will vary widely depending upon region and other factors. Guidelines and resources may change rapidly as new information about COVID-19 becomes available. Staying informed and up to date with local as well as national and international developments is and will remain important with regard to COVID-19.

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) serve as the government resource for information about healthy swimming practices and the CDC is regularly used by local health authorities in developing swimming pool regulations. The CDC guidance document *Considerations for Public Pools, Hot Tubs, and Water Playgrounds During COVID-19*,¹ released May 8, 2020, states that “[t]o maintain healthy operations, operators of public aquatic venues may consider avoiding group events, gatherings, or meetings both in and out of the water if social distancing of at least 6 feet between people who don’t live together cannot be maintained.” It further suggests that “[i]f planned events must be conducted, staggering drop-off and pick-up times, as much as possible, to maintain distance of at least 6 feet between people who don’t live together” and “[a]sking parents to consider if their children are capable of staying at least 6 feet apart from people they don’t live with before taking them to a public aquatic venue”.

While this guidance will require significant adaptations to swim lesson programs, the CDC also recommends “consult[ing] with local officials to determine if and how to implement these considerations while adjusting them to meet the unique needs and circumstances of the local jurisdiction. Their implementation should also be informed by what is feasible, practical, and acceptable.”

Because there is no prescribed method of conducting lessons during COVID-19, the purpose of this document is to provide a decision-making framework to use when determining what may be feasible, practical and acceptable for a specific facility.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/parks-rec/aquatic-venues.html>

A Recommended Sequence of Actions Before Offering Swim Lessons During COVID-19

In addition to the physical distancing considerations, there are other important decisions that need to be made and put into place before resuming swim lessons. A checklist tool is provided in the Appendix.

- **Stay up to date with guidance** from your swim instructor training/certification agency and local health officials.
- **Conduct a risk assessment and plan for reducing contact with and disinfecting the common physical areas used during swim lesson programs** such as the building entrance (parking lot, front door), lobby after entry, pool room, changing rooms/bathroom and office areas.
 - Consider a policy that encourages coming to the pool ready to swim and showering before and after at home. Follow your local health authority guidance on whether or not access to bathrooms, showers or changing areas at the facility can or should be restricted.
- **Determine a plan for use and disinfection of teaching equipment and toys.** Consider options for a “bring your own” or “clean your own” policy to reduce staff time needed to disinfect. If disinfection is performed by staff, have a clear method to identify clean and dirty items such as sorting bins. There should be no sharing of goggles, towels or toys.
 - Implement procedures to monitor that cleaning and disinfection procedures are followed.
- **Determine the policy for use of face coverings and other protective devices by instructors/staff and lesson participants,** including which type(s) will be allowed. Procure these devices if applicable.
 - Face coverings should not be used by anyone in the water if the face will be submerged or immersed in the water. Instructors who are teaching from in the water but are keeping the face above the water should wear a face covering. It will be important to stress that face coverings (other than an N95 device for use by medical professionals) do not protect the wearer but rather reduce the potential of the wearer to spread the virus particles. Communicating the “my mask protects you, your mask protects me” message can help with compliance.
 - Consider requiring the use of swim goggles/masks or plastic face shields (with face covering underneath) to reduce the risk of virus transmission via the eyes.
- **Review chemical testing and documentation procedures and the water quality maintenance plan.** The virus is killed in pool water only when it has consistent levels of sanitizer within the required operating parameters². It is more important than ever to maintain regular testing and solid documentation of pool operating systems to demonstrate compliance with standards during swim lessons.
- **Determine how any health screening of employees and/or participants will be conducted,** and develop an enforcement plan and protocols for known or suspected COVID-19 cases.
- **Review the operational safety plan for the facility.**
 - Evaluate any additional resources that may be needed to provide surveillance at new entrances or exits.
 - Evaluate the facility Emergency Action Plan (EAP) modifications and enhanced Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for emergency response that may now be in place, and how these changes affect swim lesson instructors.
- **Train Instructors on COVID-19 awareness³, employee safe workplace practices** for handwashing, staying home if ill and reporting illness.

² <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/water.html>

³ A free COVID-19 awareness course, customized for aquatic professionals is available at bit.ly/inservicecovid-19. Upon course completion, the learned can print a certificate for one (1) hour of continuing education/in-service credit

- For programs with many swim instructors, consider scheduling instructor teams that do not interact with each other. If one person contracts COVID-19, only that instructor team may need to quarantine – not the entire staff.
- **Create the Instructor development plan** and calendar to meet certification requirements and deliver orientation to new policies, procedures and methods of class delivery.

Building upon these considerations, the capacity control and programming/activity procedures to manage distancing guidelines can be developed.

Discussion - Potential *Best Practices for Physical Distancing During Swim Lesson Programs*

Like most other services, swim lessons will be different until the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed or been eliminated. The goal of swim lesson programs for the immediate future may need to be modified to seek to minimize risk of disease transmission while providing value to the most people under the circumstances. How this looks will vary widely among aquatic facilities.

Determining maximum capacity

In locations where strict social/physical distancing of 6 feet (2 meters) is in place, the first step in deciding what programs may be practical is to determine the maximum capacity to maintain distancing. The radius of a 6-foot circle is 113 square feet. Measure the surface of the water where lessons will be conducted, then divide that number by 113. The result will provide a theoretical maximum capacity for swimmers in the pool at any given time. Measure the surface area of the deck areas where people will be located and divide that number by 113. From there, the practicality and feasibility for various types of lesson formats can be evaluated depending upon which areas of the pool and deck are used to conduct the lesson for a class for a specific age and ability level.

Instructional and safety considerations

Regardless of the instructional programs that are offered, there will need to be modifications to how instructors teach and activities are monitored. Modifications for consideration include but are not limited to:

- Teach from the deck or in the water with a 6 feet (2m) distance from students. This distancing will make the need for additional surveillance (such as that provided by a lifeguard) even more important than it has been in the past.
- When available, have students swim to and from a platform or “tot dock” to foster independence without physical contact with an instructor.
- Because of the increased distance between instructor and student, the use of flotation vests designed for use during swim lessons or the use of lifejackets during all or a portion of the lesson may be useful. Their use can help develop and foster independent movement while also adding flotation as a safety measure.
- Using equipment such as pool noodles, kickboards and rescue tubes between the instructor and student can help maintain social distancing. The equipment can also be used as a teaching tool and to provide flotation as a safety measure.
- Breath control learning activities conducted above the water surface involving strong exhalation should be eliminated.
- Breath control learning activities conducted in the water should be positioned with breath exhalation into the water and/or to the side, away from anyone else.
- Use sinking disks or dive rings to mark the location where each student or small group is to isolate in the pool.

- If a new exit location out of the facility for lesson participants has been created - or doors modified - these areas must be continually watched to prevent children or others from entering unnoticed or unauthorized.

Deciding what programs to offer

When considering what programs are feasible, there are generally two strategies to use:

1. Continue to offer a limited number of existing programs in the same format but with reduced capacity
2. Create new program offerings to maximize the number of participants

Most aquatic facilities will likely use a combination of both methods over time.

Strategy: Modify existing program offerings and reduce capacity

Programs that can be adapted to social/physical distancing with minimum modifications include:

- *Individual 1:1 swim lessons*
- *Programs where the instructor can teach from on deck or maintain distance from in the water such as parent/child classes, stroke instruction, and swim team*

USA Swimming has developed the document *Facility Reopening Messaging and Planning*⁴. While specific for swim team operations, it provides excellent pool mapping resources for maintaining social distance for a 25-yard six lane pool for 12, 18, and 27 swimmers and a 50-meter 10 lane pool for 60 swimmers.

Swimming lesson offerings may need to focus on more advanced course levels for group lessons when first returning to operations. Lessons for more advanced students provide less intimate interaction between students and instructors since the students already possess basic swimming skills and can learn from instructor communication. There is less in-water physical contact between swimmer and instructor.

Extending instructional hours and/or adjusting time

When looking at ways to meet group gathering size restrictions and social/physical distancing during a specific time period with a desire to maximize the number of participants, opening for extended hours (earlier and/or later than normal) is one potential way to spread out users and still provide adequate social/physical distancing. Conversely, new and different programming may be offered at times that were not available in the past. For example, if day camps or open swim times are no longer feasible due to crowd size restrictions, it may make sense to now offer swim lesson programs during that time.

The amount of time for each lesson may need to be adjusted to accommodate the smaller class sizes and provide safe time and distance between student groups transferring in and out of lessons. For example, a former 6-student class that ran 30 minutes may need to be adjusted to a 3-student class for 20 minutes. With a shorter lesson, instructors will need to focus on keeping the lesson plan to fewer activities but with more repetition and “time on task.” Effective use of time can improve the experience for the student despite the shorter lesson.

⁴ https://www.usaswimming.org/docs/default-source/coaching-resourcesdocuments/covid-19-team-resources/facility-reopening-plan-guidelines.pdf?sfvrsn=8a533a32_2

Consider “assembly line” and rolling entry to maximize the number of participants

In a traditional swim lesson session, all students arrive at the same time, divide into instructor-led groups and proceed to an assigned area for instruction – usually around the perimeter of the pool. While this method can still be used effectively with a greatly reduced number of people, an “assembly-line” method may allow for a greater number of students to be accommodated with limited contact and interaction with other people. Creative class structure and organization is necessary to make this format work.

For example, individual students or small group/household units could be assigned a start time at 10-minute intervals. Upon entry into the facility, a clear staging area on deck is designated with social distancing measures in place. Staff could provide a briefing of the lesson plan and conduct land-based drills or instruction. On a pre-determined schedule, the group moves to a new “station” where an activity is conducted. A set-up that includes a land station, followed by two in-water stations, and ends with another land station could accommodate almost twice as many participants over a given time frame than a traditional set-up. When space is available, more than one assembly line can be operating on a slightly different time schedule in another area of the pool. Classes with more advanced swimmers who can swim the length of the pool may be offered concurrently.

This format may also help with developing effective instructors in a shorter amount of time. If one instructor is assigned to each station, and students rotate from station to station, the instructor may only require proficiency in teaching/facilitating the skills assigned to that station. Depending upon the flexibility in training allowed by the certifying agency for the curriculum being used, this option may or may not be feasible.

Strategy: Consider new ideas and methods of teaching

This strategy involves developing new courses and swim lesson experiences that incorporate social distancing in new and creative ways. The approach builds upon skills instructors already have and trains them to deliver the learning experience to the student differently than the traditional group lesson format. It is possible that as an industry trying new methods will help to reinvent the way swim instruction is conducted – for the better!

Parent/caregiver as 1:1 instructor

In this format, the parent/caregiver is 1:1 with the child. The role of the parent/caregiver is to manage behavior, monitor safety and provide 100% attention to the child – greatly increasing the time on task during the lesson. The role of the instructor shifts from teaching the child directly to mentoring and instructing the parent/caregiver on how to conduct learning activities in the water. This format has been used successfully in baby/toddler classes for many years and can easily be adapted to all ages. A side benefit is that the parent/caregiver can then work with the child more knowledgeably outside the actual lesson.

To be successful, there must be clear expectations set for both the parent/caregiver and the instructor, with quality and consistent information. Plans should be in place for adults who may not be comfortable in the water - such as wearing an adult flotation vest or lifejacket - and for increasing confidence of instructors using this method for the first time. When available, supplementing this format with online resources for the parent/caregivers can create a high-value learning experience.

Self-directed learning

Stations can be established with activity cards and individual participants or household units move through the stations at their own pace – similar to a fitness trail. The stations could be a combination of water safety activities and in-water experiences that would be appropriate for any level of swimmer. For

example, a “body position” station could work on floating for beginners, streamline for more advanced swimmers, and streamline with kick for those who can benefit from endurance combined with working on body position.

Virtual or blended learning

Under this format, the student has access to video resources that explain and show the skill(s) to be developed. Practice times or workshops are then offered in the water either with or without an instructor.

Conclusion

Social distancing recommendations will likely be in place at least through the summer of 2020. As aquatic facilities begin to reopen, it is important to offer swim lessons as learning to swim and improving and maintaining competency is an essential life-safety skill.

There is no “one-size-fits-all solution.” Effective programs will develop methods that incorporate local regulation yet are feasible, practical and acceptable for the specific aquatic facility circumstances.

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About SAI

SAI is an international aquatic safety and education organization. Among its many programs and activities, SAI swim lesson curricula Starfish Swimming® and PADI Swim School®, and the AquaTech® pool operator certification are used globally. SAI collaborates in drowning prevention and standards development initiatives and its representatives frequently speak at national and international industry conferences. Clients embrace SAI’s comprehensive programs and recognize that its consulting staff and Medical Directors are the most highly trained and experienced in the industry.

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Swim Lesson Operational Checklist	<i>Date completed</i>
<i>Awareness</i>	
Review current local government or health authority mandates or guidance for COVID-19. Verify planned class sizes are compliant with local guidelines for gatherings.	<i>Ongoing</i>
<i>Preparation</i>	
Confirm necessary operating permits are in place.	
Conduct a risk assessment and plan for how to reduce contact with and disinfect the common physical areas used during swim lesson programs.	
Determine a plan for use and disinfection of teaching equipment and toys.	
Determine the policy for use of face coverings and other protective devices by instructors/staff and lesson participants. Procure as necessary.	
Review chemical testing and documentation procedures and the water quality maintenance plan.	
Determine how any health screening of employees and/or participants will be conducted and by whom.	
Review the operational safety plan for the facility.	
<i>Programming</i>	
Evaluate available space for each program and calculate maximum capacity.	
<i>Training</i>	
Conduct and document COVID-19 awareness and policy and procedure training for all instructors and support personnel.	
Complete instructor certification requirements.	
Create the instructor training and development plan for the programs to be implemented.	
<i>Education</i>	
Create signs and posters to communicate policies and procedures to patrons and staff.	