

Cold water shock and safety

Working in collaboration to deliver a Water Safety Community Project: A practical case study



You can never tell where an email will take you...

In June 2017 I received an email regarding contacting Sarah Lea, to see if we could work with her. In May 2017 Sarah had tragically lost her son when he drowned in a lake within our park.

At the height of the peak outdoor delivery season, I might normally have been unable to pursue the suggestion of branching out into water safety. However, a broken leg meant fate forced me to work from home, so I had the time to recognise and realise the potential for an education-based approach and the Robbie Lea Water Safety Partnership began.

I write this article in the hope that elements of the approach may be replicable in your area. In its first year, the partnership engaged over 4000 young people in water safety activities and we are keen to spread the cold water shock message further. We held a launch event at which secondary students participated in a range of practical water safety scenarios, led by a diverse range of agencies and emergency services. This was followed by in-school assemblies and workshops in secondary schools and colleges across the borough of Broxbourne, Hertfordshire.

What worked well?

- Utilising community networks enabled the partner membership to grow quickly. The Partnership now includes the family of Robbie Lea, Lee Valley Regional Park Authority, Hertfordshire Police, Hertfordshire Fire & Rescue, Crucial Crew, Vibrant Partnerships, Royal National Lifeboat Institution, Royal Lifesaving Society UK, Canal and River Trust, Herts Sports Partnership, Cheshunt Football Club, Broxbourne Council, Parks Patrol, Broxbourne Boat Centre and Hertfordshire Boat Rescue.
- Not reinventing the wheel. By taking time to establish initiatives, contacts and resources already covered by partners a lot of time and effort was saved, allowing us to focus on what was really needed. For example, the partnership focussed on secondary students as the community safety initiative 'Crucial Crew' already provided activity for all Year 6 pupils. It also utilised the successful 'Crucial Crew' session format for secondary students. Using existing RNLI resources and an RLSS UK film saved considerable amounts of time and ensured that messages were in line with national best practice.
- Asking teachers what they wanted and making participation as easy as possible, so it involved no extra work, just ready-made resources and prompts for discussions in tutorials.
- A launch event at an interesting venue (in this case, Lee Valley White Water Centre) to create advocates for the partnership within school staff, the student body and within senior management of partner organisations.

Unexpected benefits

- Improved liaison with emergency services over park emergency access.
- Increased awareness of potential for sharing resources and equipment. For example, the Fire & Rescue Service drone was used for filming, RNLI water safety resources were used at ranger drop in events.
- Recognising a gap in staff knowledge around cold water shock and resultant awareness raising.
- Profile raising through achievement of awards (the partnership won the 'Innovation in Community Engagement Award' at the Herts Police Constabulary Awards and 'Community Initiative of the Year Award' at the HEART awards run by Hertfordshire Fire & Rescue Service). These will be used to help raise awareness of the projects through press coverage and help ensure continued support from partner organisations.
- Working in a different area demonstrated the flexibility of the Outdoor Learning Service and helped engage secondary schools, which make up only a small part of the normal customer base.

In conclusion, gaining experience in this new area has been highly rewarding. It must be said that the partnership would not have happened without having so many passionate and dedicated individuals involved from different partner agencies. Personally, the project has opened my eyes to the scale of the problem. I was saddened by the number of times I met someone who had been affected by a drowning incident.

**Is your team up to speed on cold water shock and water safety?
Could you help stop future tragedies?**

See below information provided by Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) and Royal Life Saving Society UK for you to share.

INFORMATION for ADULTS

What's the risk?

Anything below 15°C is defined as cold water and can seriously affect your breathing and movement, so the risk is significant most of the year.

Average UK and Ireland sea temperatures are just 12°C. Rivers such as the Thames are colder – even in the summer.

What happens?

Cold water shock causes the blood vessels in the skin to close, which increases the resistance of blood flow. Heart rate is also increased. As a result, the heart has to work harder and your blood pressure goes up. Cold water shock can therefore cause heart attacks, even in the relatively young and healthy.

The sudden cooling of the skin by cold water also causes an involuntary gasp for breath. Breathing rates can change uncontrollably, sometimes increasing as much as tenfold. All these responses contribute to a feeling of panic, increasing the chance of inhaling water directly into the lungs.

This can all happen very quickly: it only takes half a pint of sea water to enter the lungs for a fully-grown man to start drowning. You could die if you don't get medical care immediately.

How can you minimise the risk?

If you enter the water unexpectedly:

- **TAKE A MINUTE.** The initial effects of cold water pass in less than a minute so don't try to swim straight away.
- **RELAX AND FLOAT** on your back to catch your breath. Try to get hold of something that will help you float.
- **KEEP CALM** then call for help or swim for safety if you're able.

INFORMATION to be shared with YOUNG PEOPLE

When working with young people we encourage them to:

- **STOP & THINK** when around water. The water is colder than you think.
- **STAY TOGETHER** with a friend or family member. Always go with someone else when you go into or near water. Friends or family can help in an emergency.
- **FLOAT** if you're in trouble in the water, until you feel calm. Then think about what to do next.
- **CALL 999 or 112** If you see someone in trouble in the water, call 999 or 112 immediately and tell them that someone is in trouble in the water.

Sam Johnson from the RNLI explains: "Educating kids about water safety is fundamental to saving lives and a core part of our prevention work. The more young people we can reach with our water safety messages, the more lives we can save now and in the future. As a teacher or youth leader, you really can make a lifesaving difference."

For more information please visit <https://rnli.org/youth-education> and RLSS UK

AT THE RIVER

SEE IF YOU CAN SPOT ALL 14 DANGERS AND USE YOUR SAFETY KNOWLEDGE TO MAKE SURE YOU HAVE A GREAT TIME EVERY TIME YOU GO TO THE RIVER



ANSWERS

- 1 Kids jumping off bridge
- 2 Child sitting on edge of bridge might fall
- 3 Woman in boat doesn't have lifejacket
- 4 Boy in trouble with hands in air
- 5 Boy kicking football in river
- 6 Kids jumping off raised bank
- 7 Dangerous rubbish in water
- 8 Public rescue equipment scattered
- 9 Person in water looking very cold

- 10 Someone caught in strong current
- 11 Boy slipping near edge
- 12 Dog, not in trouble yet but owner mustn't go in to rescue it
- 13 Safety sign says no swimming or diving!
- 14 Bike rider near edge



Thank you to all those involved in the Robbie Lea Water Safety Partnership for their time and commitment. This article is dedicated to the memory of Robbie Lea and the courage of his mother Sarah Lea, which has been a continual inspiration to the Partnership.

These two pages include a poster and answer sheet as awareness aids. ■

Useful resources

Here are some suggested activities specifically for different age groups:

- Suggested activity – **Respect the Water: Fight or float? (11-18)**

This simple, short exercise gives the students an idea of the lifesaving differences between fighting against cold water and floating to live.

<https://rnli.org/youth-education/education-resources/lower-secondary/respect-the-water-fight-or-float>

- Suggested activity – **Risky Business (14-18)**

Debate the pros and cons of risk taking and how it influences identity and friendship groups.

<https://rnli.org/youth-education/education-resources/upper-secondary/risky-business>

- Suggested activity – **Spot the Dangers (7-11)**

Work together to identify and describe dangers near the water

<https://rnli.org/youth-education/education-resources/upper-primary/spot-the-dangers-head-cam>



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Water safety information for this article has been provided by two members of the Partnership:

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Images from RNLI and RLSS UK Coordinator, RLSS UK.
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