

Episode 5 School Swimming

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Interviewer(s):

Respondent(s):

Hello, and welcome to this bonus episode of the physical activity and education podcast. This episode was recorded last summer just as the academic year came to a close and it reflects much on the importance of physical activity along with a strong message about our national school swimming statutory requirements and the importance of water safety.

There was concern in particular at that time with pupils having had very limited access to school swimming and learn to swim programmes because of facility and school closures. Much of the messages are hugely prevalent, relevant and important to this year and ongoingly as we consider what we could do better to ensure our children and young people are happy, engaged and active as well as staying safe in and around water.

[Music 00:00:55 to 00:01:13]

Good morning. It's a Saturday, the first weekend of school six-week summer holiday break and I'm currently sat on a beach in Northumberland after taking a teeny tiny stroll. So whilst I'm taking in the pleasant surroundings; we're so blessed with our beaches and coastline in the North East, aren't we? And I'm taking a moment to reflect. Really, at this time, I wanted to share a dialogue with you about the value of physical activity, being outdoors and making the most of this glorious weather whilst it's here, we know how changeable that can be, and remind you too of some hugely important aspects related to school curriculum swimming and learn to swim agendas.

So let me quickly describe what I'm seeing here at the moment. The tide's currently out but the water's calm and flat and there's plenty of beach space. There are a few family groups setting up beach picnic camps, there's a group playing cricket, a football activity of some sort happening with some teenagers. It's a lovely sunny day. So I do expect further busyness. There's many sandcastles

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and forts being built ready for the tide coming in. There's a grandma playing scatch. Is it scatch? You know, the Velcro catch pads and a little ball to throw between you? All in all it's just so lovely to see everyone enjoying good weather outdoors, re-engaging socially but safely with one another.

My Dad's also just joined me with a cup of coffee. "Thanks, Dad." Which also reminds me, Dad's volleyball net is getting a little bit rusty and we are short of players. So if you see us setting up camp and would like a game, you'd be very welcome. Any messages for potential players, Dad? Dad's gone very shy, but I think by what he seems to be gesturing, like a game of charades, is that working on diving skills for beach volleyball would be crucial. Basically that's a dig at the fact that his daughter's let him down several times over the years. But in defence of myself, Dad, sometimes you look like you're going for the ball and so I basically leave it for you to get.

Anyway, so I'm thinking about a few things whilst sat here. The Chief Medical Officer's recommendations for children is to do 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity daily, 30 minutes of which to be at school and the other 30 at home. And that's a key focus for school settings, communities and families particularly on the back of the active lives campaign and public health warnings and these fab beach time opportunities all contribute to the active 30 to 60 agenda. Do take a look at our #active30durhamcampaign for a few insightful ideas about how to keep active, how to keep our children active especially during the summer break.

But what I'm seeing and reflecting on at the moment and all these gorgeous activities in front of me, well it's just getting me thinking about curriculum opportunities to engage perhaps the less sporty children or those that are a little more disengaged with PE and activity since national lockdown measures and school or leisure club closures that we've had in recent months. For our physical as well as our mental health and wellbeing as well, we want to encourage all of us to sit less and to move more.

There are some gorgeous activities going on today and a few dog-walkers too and it just gets me thinking about the messages around being fit, healthy and active. We should continue to raise the profile of being active and what that is. It's not always running 5K or hitting the gym. The idea of that may completely switch off some youngsters and adults completely. It's also about gardening, sandcastle making, kicking a ball around, social opportunities, fresh air, getting outdoors and making activity engaging, fun and part of everyday normality.

Every movement helps and more is better than some. Sometimes a little reminder of physical activity being fun and playful and not a chore is needed and it's what our children crave and it's definitely what our children and adults need.

If you are a school teaching member of staff, make sure you talk to our children and young people. Seek their views and interests. Perhaps audit your school curriculum and extra-curricular provision and present broad opportunity for new or re-imagined purposeful leisure activity and pursuit. Involve parents and families too.

Many of my up-coming podcasts with guests will talk about physical literacy, curriculum, physical education, active learning and so forth, so do keep a watch out for those across the coming academic year. There are many professional development opportunities for our school staff to engage with.

So as well as all the fab dry-side activity on the beach, there's also an awful lot of stand up paddle boards. It seems to be a trending activity again this summer. So if you are wanting to treat yourself to your own board, you'll need to get your orders in quick. There are a few kayakers out there. No windsurfers or kite-surfers yet. It's a flat water sort of day although the wind is starting to pick up. There are a few serious swimmers out there too, swimming across the bay. Perhaps maintaining some open water training. That's becoming very popular.

The main reason I want to talk to you today in particular whilst sat here looking at all the fab range of water sports taking place and many youngsters and adults enjoying the cool temperatures of that North Sea, is to focus your thinking, I guess, around the swimming agenda. School PE Leads engaged in my county networks in Durham and the CPD we offer may already have heard me talk about some of this and have actioned some actions with regard to this. But I just really wanted to remind you all, and entice some new listeners too, into thinking about school swimming and how we might hit the ground running in September. My fingers are crossed for school and swimming facilities continuing to be COVID-safe and open over the academic year ahead.

So thinking about the pandemic, national lockdown and school closures and the lack of school swimming across almost two academics years and yet I'm seeing all these of children and adults out in the sea and I can't help but think about the children missing out on these opportunities, going forward, if they don't achieve, or have opportunity to develop basic swimming capabilities as they

should through curriculum swimming. Confidence and competency in water opens us all to enriching and broader physical active opportunities. We may have the next Olympic kayaker yet to be able to start their swimming lessons.

But I'm also anxious and I'm also fearful about how safe everybody is in and around water. How well-informed are we all about water safety and the emergency measures to adopt should we, or someone we observe, get into difficulty in water?

So in primary schools, our national curriculum states that all schools must provide swimming instruction either in key stage one or key stage two and the aim is that pupils leave primary school being able to, one: swim competently and confidently, proficiently over a distance of at least 25 meters. Two, use a range of strokes effectively such as your front crawl, back stroke and breast stroke and, three: perform safe self-rescue in different water-based situations.

[00:10:04]

So it's very clearly stated as a curriculum objective in the PE national curriculum. And school responsibility, acting as a levelling up, if you like, of all children nationally having access to school swimming. A responsibility to ensure really that children receive that minimum swimming teaching provision. Every school should be aiming to get 100% of children to that minimum standard by the end of key stage two and that can be extremely tricky.

There are many, many barriers as to why this is difficult to achieve for all pupils. Physical capabilities, special education needs, lack of facilities, curriculum timetabling and other academic and school pressures. It is, however, really important for us to raise the profile of swimming in school and across the community to think about what strategic planning we can put in place to make a difference to children and young people.

So let's think about the why, the what and the what. So why is it important, what does it look like now and what are we going to do about it?

Okay, so why is swimming important? Well we live on an island for starters surrounded by sea, rivers, canals. Your school location may mean that drown prevention, education and taught swimming agendas should be hugely prevalent on your school development priority list. COVID

cancelled eight million, seven, eight million swimming lessons in leisure services and access to swimming lessons outside of school swimming provision is simply not present for most children. So thinking about our year sevens and year eights in secondary from this September coming, they will have had a significant reduction in any swim-time, if any at all, whilst in their primary school years. So how will we bridge those gaps in opportunity and learning?

More of the why's. Let's think statistics, and I wrote this on my hand earlier. 254 people died in accidental drowning in 2020. Take a look at #RespectTheWater campaign. It's backed by Sport England- Swim England and we were very fortunate to have Swim England's chief executive, Jane Nickerson, present a keynote at our County Durham schools swimming conference in May this year and she reminded us of Swim England and the Royal Lifesaving Society campaign and key messages of, "Float to live."

The RNLI also back and promote the Respect The Water campaign. You know, the Royal Navy Lifeboat Institution is hugely respected here on the Northumberland coast and their message, along with Swim England and water safety campaigns, remains really clear. Not too dissimilar to safety aspects within physical education. We use a PIE, P.I.E. acronym to think about prevent, inform, educate and that's really crucial, isn't it?

And I guess that brings me to the, "What?" So what are we going to do? Educate children and young people. Take a look at drown prevention and water safety campaigns, #RespectTheWater, and share key messages with pupils and parents.

Key messages that I've picked up from the Respect The Water campaign include, don't take risks. If you find yourself having trouble in water, be calm, lean back, catch your breath and that message of, "Float to live." Then you think about your exit from the water or calling out for help.

And also if you see somebody else having difficulty in water, shout reassurances to them. Shout for them to float on their back, use a stick or a pole to reach out to them, or something buoyant. Don't put yourself at risk. Keep an eye on them at all times and keep reassuring them and obviously alert 999 and call for help. Do seek out drown prevention information first hand and open dialogue with youngsters. Educate and disseminate as much as possible.

Drown prevention week usually runs in June each year and it's a great time to readdress or reassert current or new important messages. But remember too that we have a duty as a school and community to ensure that teaching and learning is meaningful, appropriate and fit for purpose. For instance, think about your PSHE, your personal social health education curriculum content and the new statutory content of relationships, sex and health education and how school duty of care is to ensure children can keep themselves and each other safe.

So if we want water safety and drown prevention to be part of that, how do we build understanding right from reception age through to year sixes in primary and beyond into secondary school so that learning about water safety and drown prevention is progressive and accumulative so that the messages are relatable, age appropriately understood? Consider the text and the images and activities that we use to really get children engaged in the learning as you would elsewhere in the school curriculum. You know, get them to think about how they stay safe and understand those key messages.

I guess what I'm trying to say that a whole-school assembly for everyone, once a year during drown prevention week, is great but it may not just be enough. We could do more. Allow our older pupils and students to take ownership and lead projects on water safety, perhaps. Our secondary schools have wellbeing ambassadors and safe role models in school. You could use them perhaps to raise the profile and disseminate key messages.

My niece and nephew shared a great little song about water safety with me this morning. Elizabeth, Benjamin, would you like to have a little go and help me to get a good message about water safety across? They're nodding. Ready? One, two, three.

[Singing together]

Choose a life-guarded beach if you're going to the sea.

Stay between the flags, it's a safer place to be.

If you get in trouble just float like this.

Use your arms and legs like a big star fish.

Marvellous. So the message from Benjamin is?

Be safe everybody and always float on your back.

Oh, wonderful.

And put your tummy up.

Put your tummy up and float on your back-

Like a big star fish.

Like a big star fish. Great, thank you.

In September, you know, what are we going to do? Thinking or primary colleagues, will you focus your provision on upper key stage two cohorts of year five and year six pupils in case, for instance, we go into another lockdown? Will you baseline pupils to see their current swimming capability and target those struggling with more swim time? Use your assessments ongoingly to evaluate and think about and predict children who may need additional swimming time.

We do have a primary PE and sport premium which, although you cannot use it to pay for core swimming curriculum which must come from your school's curriculum budget, we could use the premium to fund any additional booster swimming lessons and water-based opportunities. Your evidence would be in your assessment of pupils and identifying those in need of additional swimming support.

You could consider voucher systems to support vulnerable families financially to receive private swimming or leisure swim attendance opportunities within the community. Will you perhaps offer water-familiarity sessions with your younger pupils so that when they begin their more structured swimming lessons, their fear of water and getting their face wet isn't such a milestone to overcome, hindering their swimming progress?

Might you use the PE premium to fund training for your school teaching staff to support swimming lessons and reduce the adult to pupil ratio? Or provide additional extra-curricular swim clubs? As

I've said, secondary year seven and year eight students will no doubt have been affected by the lack of swimming in their primary years. So what transition information about swimming is available to secondary schools and how might secondary PE or enrichment provision meet the needs of students and improve swimming capability and safe self-rescue in particular? So with all of this in mind, I would perhaps also like to remind you that every value added progress is hugely important.

[00:19:58]

Don't forget to celebrate the small gains for individual pupils. For some that's getting their face wet, blowing bubbles in the water, using a float to swim on their back and using correct leg-kick action, treading water, sculling or pushing gliding. And for some of our anxious pupils, that's getting on the bus to go to their swimming lessons. It's changing into swim costumes and dipping a toe in the water.

So don't forget that swimming is also complemented by other PE-related movement and activity that's crucial to child physical development. So everything in your curriculum that develops fundamental movement, agility, balance and co-ordination, core strength and stamina. All of that builds to support any potential swimmer. So if the child struggles to swim, it's likely they also struggle with physical movement and co-ordination in other ways. So mat-based early essential movement and fundamental movement activities in PE or specific interventions may also help.

I guess I'm trying to say is, don't see swimming as this separate activity isolated from your full PE curriculum offer. And educate your staff about the transferable co-ordinational movement skills. Maybe use that PE premium to identify and fund appropriate staff training.

So swimming is something that sits a little uneasy with me at the moment with my fear for children's safety in particular during these summer months. So do open dialogue with parents, stakeholders and your senior leadership team in school about swimming and your PE curriculum.

If we have competency in water and swimming, look what activities and opportunities open up to us; swimming, kayaking, stand up paddle boarding, sailing, canoeing, water-skiing, wake boarding. And, you know, it might just be that one thing or one or more of those activities that your child, a child in your class, might just adore or thrive in.

When they are perhaps less inclined to engage with the typical and traditional team-related popular sports that are delivered in school, such as football, netball etc., why not broaden their future opportunity to prepare them to embrace any water-based activity by supporting them to achieve that minimum swim capability where possible?

Physical literacy is about giving children physical competencies, skills and knowledge but it's also about motivation to be lifelong movers and lifelong self-selective participators and they may just find their niche in some of those water-based activities.

So I'm rounding this up. I've talked at you an awful lot but most importantly we need to think about how we ensure children and young people understand the dangers and risks associated with the sea, with rivers, canals etc., and how to keep safe in and around water and understand how best to self-rescue if they fall into difficulties from dry land into water, not just when they're already submerged too.

So lots to think about and lots of things to action ready for September. Whilst I'm recording this, I do hope you are currently and most importantly enjoying a safe relaxing and carefree summer.

[Music: 00:23:51 to 00:24:08]

[Audio ends: 00:24:08]