



**Department
of Health**

CHILDREN'S CAMPS SWIMMING SAFETY

**Recreational Environmental Health Section
Bureau of Community Environmental Health and Food Protection**

Spring 2026

OVERVIEW

- 2025 Season Swimming Incidents
- Multiple Barrier Approach to Safe Swimming
- Resources



3/31/2026 | 2

Welcome! This training for children's camps operators and staff will:

- Present strategies for safe swimming at children's camps.
- Discuss camp swimming requirements.
- Provide resources and guidance.

Swimming is a popular summer camp activity and a fun, memorable part of many camp experiences. But, because any activity in water involves the risk of drowning, there is a critical need to ensure swimming activities are held safely. Thank you for your interest in learning more about safe swimming at children's camps.

We will start by summarizing a few incidents that occurred during swimming activities in 2025. Keep these in mind during the presentation as you learn about the multiple barrier approach to reduce drowning risk.

A list of resources and contact information is available at the end of the presentation.

CHILDREN'S CAMPS SWIMMING INCIDENTS

- 5 non-fatal drownings associated with children's camps swimming were reported during the 2025 season

Date	Camper Age	Setting
June 2025	5	On-site outdoor public pool used by camp
	4	Camp's bathing beach
July 2025	3	Camp's outdoor pool, during swim lessons
August 2025	5	Camp trip to State Park outdoor pool (camp operating without a permit)
	4	Camp trip to water park – outdoor wave pool (camp operating without a permit)

- Drowning happens when a person cannot breathe because their nose and mouth are submerged in water, and their body does not get enough oxygen
 - A fatal drowning means the drowning victim died
 - A non-fatal drowning means the drowning victim survived



There were five non-fatal drownings associated with children's camps swimming reported in 2025. Four occurred at swimming pools, and one at a beach.

Drowning happens when someone can't breathe because their nose and mouth are completely covered or surrounded by water. When you can't breathe, your body can't take in any oxygen. When your body doesn't get enough oxygen, brain damage and cardiac arrest can occur. Drowning can result in death (a fatal drowning), or the victim may survive (a non-fatal drowning).

State Health Department data indicates there were zero to two camper non-fatal drowning incidents a year over the past 20 years. Five incidents in a single year was unusually high.

Fortunately, there has not been a fatal drowning of a camper during swimming activities at a regulated children's camp in New York State since 2001.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS IDENTIFIED (PRELIMINARY)

Camp swimming requirements

- No safety plan
- Failure to implement approved safety plan
- No assessment of camper swimming ability
- Buddies not documented/no buddy board
- No buddy checks
- No visual identification of non-swimmers
- Non-swimmers not restricted to water less than chest deep
- Counselors providing inadequate or no supervision
- Failure to provide 1 to 3 ratio of counselors to non swimmers in water greater than chest deep

Bather supervision

- Inadequate number of lifeguards
- Chair change at time of incident
- Inadequate scanning techniques
- Lifeguard positioning

Environmental

- Poor water clarity

Victim

- All young children 3 to 5 years of age
- All non-swimmers or ability not assessed



3/31/2026 | 4

Local health departments investigate drowning incidents to determine contributing factors. This slide lists preliminary contributing factors that were identified during investigations of the five non-fatal drowning incidents that occurred in summer 2025.

All incidents had at least one identified deficiency that was related to children's camp swimming requirements or the supervision requirements for regulated bathing facilities.

These incidents involved very young campers ages 3 to 5. All were either classified as non-swimmers or had not had a swimming ability assessment.

All incidents occurred in water depths less than 4½ feet, which is often considered "shallow" water. However, it was not shallow water for these young campers, which underscores the importance of the requirement to limit non-swimmers to water less than chest deep.

AQUATIC SAFETY AT CHILDREN'S CAMPS

NOT JUST HORNS, BELLS,
& WHISTLES!



3/31/2026 | 5

Click on the box on the slide to view the video “Aquatic Safety at Children’s Camps: Not Just Horns, Bells, & Whistles” on the State Department of Health’s YouTube channel

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsFx_TvXJOA).

The video provides a general overview of swimming programs at children’s camps and the components that form the multiple-barrier approach to provide for a safe aquatic environment.

Please note that this video is not intended as comprehensive guidance for the camp swimming requirements specified in the State Health Department's regulations for Children's Camps, Subpart 7-2 of the State Sanitary Code (Subpart 7-2). If you have any questions, be sure to contact your permit-issuing official (city or county health department or State District Office) – we will refer to them as your “local health department” in this training.

We have been using this video as a training tool since 2001. It’s a bit dated but still very relevant and a valuable training tool.

MULTIPLE BARRIER APPROACH

- **Camper Supervision:** Aquatics Director, Lifeguards, Counselors
- **Camper Swimming Ability:**
 - Assessed by progressive swimming instructor
 - Water depth restricted for non-swimmers/designated swimming areas
 - Visually identify non-swimmers
- **Camper Accountability:** Buddy System, Board System, buddy checks at least every 15 minutes
- **Additional requirements** for off-site swimming, wilderness swimming
- **Camp's written safety plan** describes how the camp will accomplish the above

- Swimming is a high-risk activity. The video covered the nuts and bolts of the system for keeping campers safe during swimming. We call this the multiple barrier approach.
- The multiple barrier approach is intended to account for the fact that in a camp setting, campers aren't visiting the pool or beach with their parent or guardian, so enhanced supervision is necessary to reduce risk.
- This slide lists the components of the multiple barrier approach. They apply to both on-site and off-site swimming activities.
- There are requirements in Subpart 7-2 for each of these components. This is because they are critical to camper safety during swimming.
- The next several slides will highlight key aspects of these components.

SUPERVISION



QUALIFIED
AQUATICS
DIRECTOR



LIFEGUARDS



COUNSELORS
– ACTIVELY
SUPERVISING
ASSIGNED
CAMPERS



PERFORM
BUDDY
CHECKS



BATHER
CHECK
IN/OUT

- Aquatic staff are required to possess specific certifications and must be properly qualified and trained.
 - The State Department of Health maintains “fact sheets” of accepted certifications for camp aquatic directors, lifeguards, progressive swimming instructors, and camp trip swimming, which are updated annually (see Resources, slide 16).
 - There are additional qualifications for certain staff such as minimum age and experience.
- Camp Aquatic Directors have primary oversight for the camp’s pool/beach. They establish swim areas, determine lifeguard positioning and zones, supervise aquatic staff and counselors, and implement the camp’s safety plan.
- Lifeguards provide surveillance for bathers in the water.
- Counselors must supervise campers during swimming activities. Their role is critical because it allows the lifeguards to focus on surveillance. The required camper to counselor ratios are based on activity setting and camper age.
 - Counselors must provide continuous supervision of the campers assigned to them.
 - Duties include keeping campers together, enforcing safety rules, monitoring and correcting behavior, knowing the whereabouts of all campers assigned to them, making sure non-swimmers stay in water less than chest deep, and enforcing use of the buddy system.
- Camps that take campers off-site to swim must have a qualified trip leader to oversee trips to the off-site bathing facility, including pre-arrangement and coordination with facility staff and implementation of the buddy system.
- Training, teamwork, oversight, and support are necessary to effectively supervise campers.
 - All staff must be familiar with the camp’s safety plan and trained in their respective roles and responsibilities.
 - Campers must receive an orientation to the pool/beach/waterfront prior to swimming or participating in any aquatic activity.

SWIMMING ASSESSMENT

- Assess swimming abilities for each camper
 - Determined by a progressive swim instructor (PSI)
 - Conducted annually and as appropriate
 - Campers considered non-swimmers until determined otherwise by PSI
- Minimum of two bather classifications
 - Non-swimmer and swimmer
- Assessment criteria is not specified in Subpart 7-2
 - Suggested criteria is included in the safety plan template



3/31/2026 | 8

- All campers must be considered non-swimmers until they have had a swimming assessment conducted by a Progressive Swimming Instructor (PSI) to determine their swimming ability.
 - Conduct assessments as appropriate and at least annually. Camper swimming ability may change from year to year due to injury or changes in fitness or physical abilities. Campers must also be reassessed to advance to the next level.
 - Assessment should be appropriate for the type of bathing facility (pool, lake).
 - Assess campers in shallow water first to determine if they have basic swimming skills for additional assessment.
 - The camper's assessed ability should be documented and the camper told what their classification is.
 - Assessment is also necessary for camp trips unless the camp designates all campers as non-swimmers and restricts them to water less than chest deep.
 - Assessing staff swimming ability is also recommended.
 - Refer to the PSI fact sheet for accepted PSI certifications (Resources, slide 16).
- Swim assessment criteria is not standard nor specified in the camp regulations. The camp must determine and specify their swim assessment criteria and classifications in their safety plan. The safety plan template includes suggested criteria (see Resources, slide 16), but the following should also be taken into consideration:
 - The aquatic setting that the camp will use, such as pool or beach, size of swim area, water temperature, currents, depth, and water clarity.
 - The PSI should evaluate swimming ability using the standards and criteria established by the provider that certified them.

NON-SWIMMER WATER DEPTH RESTRICTION AND VISUAL IDENTIFICATION



Restrict non-swimmers to water less than chest deep, except:

- During approved learn to swim programs
- When 1:3 in-water supervision is provided: a counselor in the water directly supervises a maximum of three non-swimmers in shallow water in the non-swimmer area



Visual identification:

- Identify swimmers, or both swimmers and non-swimmers



Rationale:

- Bathers become buoyant in water chest deep and above which causes them to lose contact with the bottom
- Non-swimmers who lose contact with the bottom may not have the ability to prevent themselves from entering deeper water

- Campers designated as non-swimmers must be restricted to water less than chest deep, except:
 - During approved learn-to-swim programs. Refer to the fact sheet of accepted programs (Resources, slide 16). Other programs may be used, but non-swimmers will need to be restricted to water less than chest deep.
 - When counselors in the water directly supervise a maximum of three non-swimmers in shallow water in the non-swimmer area. Even though this is allowed by regulation, it is not a recommended practice because it relies on counselor attentiveness.
- Non-swimmers must be conspicuously identified to be readily distinguishable from swimmers, except if they are:
 - Restricted from entering the area designated for swimmers by a physical barrier such as a swim crib or dock (float lines are not physical barriers), or
 - In a separate pool used only by non-swimmers.
- Visual identification allows counselors and lifeguards to more easily identify campers who aren't in the appropriate area.
- Common identifiers include wrist bands, bathing camps, or t-shirts.
- Camps can use different visual identifiers for non-swimmers and swimmers or can visually identify swimmers only. (If only non-swimmers are identified, they could remove the identifier and enter the area designated for swimmers unnoticed.)
- Why are camps required to restrict non-swimmers to water less than chest deep?
 - People become buoyant at water depths chest deep and greater, which causes them to lose contact with the bottom.
 - Non-swimmers who lose contact with the bottom may not have the ability to prevent themselves from entering deeper water.
 - Non-swimmers entering water greater than chest deep was identified as a contributing factor in all non-swimmer camper drownings in New York State since 1988.

DESIGNATION OF SWIMMING AREAS

Non-swimmers in water less than chest deep

Designate areas: float lines, staff positioning, separate pools, docks

Natural bodies of water may have depth fluctuations

Surf beach and wave pool (not appropriate for non-swimmers)

Some pools may be too deep for shortest non-swimmer

- The pool or beach area must be divided into at least non-swimmer and swimmer areas.
- Some camps establish the non-swimmer area based a maximum water depth that is still less than chest deep for the shortest non-swimmer, and re-position the deep end float line of the section accordingly.
- Water depth in natural bodies of water may fluctuate due to heavy rains, so there may be a need to monitor and adjust area limits established by floats or docks.
- Camps must develop procedures for how they will restrict non-swimmers to water less than chest deep. Details need to be included in the camp's safety plan, and staff must be trained on these procedures.
 - Staff may be positioned in the water to restrict campers from entering water greater than chest deep, but enough staff are needed so that campers cannot enter deeper water.
 - Separate pools can be designated for non-swimmers and swimmers.
 - If the minimum water depth in the shallow end of the camp's pool is greater than chest deep, the camp may be able to apply for a waiver to allow non-swimmers to use the shallow end of the pool if additional safety measures are provided. Options should be discussed with the local health department.

BOARD SYSTEM (OR EQUIVALENT ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM)

- A method of recording entry and exit from the pool/beach areas including:
 - Swimming areas
 - Pool/beach enclosure
- Board system identifies each bather by:
 - Full name
 - Swimming ability
 - Area the bather is assigned to
- Should identify buddy pairs and trios

- A “board system” is a method of recording entry and exit from the pool and beach areas, including the designated swimming area and the pool or beach enclosure. A stationary board or a clipboard is often used.
 - The board identifies each bather by full name, swimming ability, and assigned swim area.
- The board system must be used during all swimming activities, including the first day of swimming, instructional swims, camp trips, night swims and any other activities that include swimming.
- Camp staff must be assigned to maintain the board.
- The camp must have a system in place to account for campers not intending to swim or needing to use the bathroom.
- Campers designated as swimmers may move between areas but must move with their buddy and notify the staff member maintaining the “board.”
- For areas with large enclosures or no enclosure, the camp must specify how campers will be supervised and accounted for to ensure they do not enter the water without their location being accounted for on the board.
- When campers cannot comprehend or implement the buddy/board system, an alternative system should be used, such as counselors accounting for campers.
- When there are multiple pools in one enclosure, it may be necessary to use a separate buddy board for each pool depending on the number, size and distance between the pools.

SAFETY PLAN



An operational and risk management manual



Addresses camp-specific aspects of aquatics programming



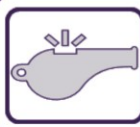
Interactive Templates

- ✓ Personnel roles & responsibilities
- ✓ Facility characteristics & designated swimming areas
- ✓ Supervision
- ✓ Safety equipment
- ✓ Swimming assessments
- ✓ Rules & regulations
- ✓ Lost Bather Plan
- ✓ Buddy & board systems
- ✓ Camp trip swimming or wilderness swimming where applicable

- The camp safety plan is a comprehensive, facility-specific risk management tool. It is used to detail out how the camp will implement each aspect of the multiple barrier approach based on the camp's unique setting, operation, and programming offered.
 - Tailoring implementation to the camp improves safety.
 - The safety plan allows for consistency from year to year and enables new staff to implement established, approved procedures.
 - The safety plan must be detailed enough to understand exactly what the camp is doing to comply with the regulations.
 - Camp operators must review and update their safety plan as needed and at least annually. All safety plan modifications must be submitted to the local health department for approval.
 - A separate plan is needed for each camp trip/swimming location.
- Interactive safety plan templates are available that outline the necessary information to provide (see Resources, slide 16).
- A comprehensive plan is critical, but implementation is equally important.
 - Everyone needs to know their role: counselors, aquatics staff, campers.
 - The safety plan must be implemented as written, all of the time.
 - If in practice something is not working, or there are needed changes, the safety plan must be modified and revisions submitted for approval.

CAMP TRIPS AND SWIMMING AT POOLS/BEACHES OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

Unique Challenges:



Signaling buddy checks



Campers interacting with public



Facility staff versus camp staff

- Supervising campers and implementing the buddy and board system can be challenging at a bathing facility that is also open to the public.
- As a result, there are additional requirements, including:
 - The camp must use a pool or beach with a valid permit to operate from the local health department or a state-operated facility like a State Park.
 - All campers must have a signed permission slip from their parent/guardian.
 - The camp must make advance arrangements with the facility. This is key!
 - Confirm the off-site facility is capable of accommodating the camp.
 - Identify duties of the camp's aquatic staff.
 - Determine whether or not the facility's lifeguards will be present.
 - Campers must be accompanied by camp lifeguards or staff qualified in camp trip swimming, as specified in Subpart 7-2 of the State Sanitary Code. Refer to the fact sheet for accepted certifications for Camp Trip Swimming (Resources, slide 16).
- The camp is responsible for camper swimming assessments. Options for when a camp does not have an on-site aquatics program or progressive swimming instructor (PSI) include:
 1. Use the facility's PSI or "borrow" a PSI from another camp.
 - This requires prior arrangement. The camp is responsible for ensuring the PSI is qualified and for establishing the criteria the PSI will use to assess their campers' swimming ability.
 2. Restrict all campers to water less than chest-deep (no swim assessment is needed if this option is selected).
- Consider reassessing camper swimming ability when the camp's pool/beach differs from the off-site facility, such as a camp with a pool visiting a beach.

CAMP TRIPS AND SWIMMING AT POOLS/BEACHES OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

- Overcoming challenges:
 - When possible, dedicate a section of the aquatic facility to just the camp
 - Prearrangements and open communication between aquatic and camp managers
 - Determine how/if aquatic staff are integrated into camp swimming activity
 - Signal and procedures for buddy checks
 - Staff and camper orientation/training

Create a safety plan for each camp trip involving swimming:

- Include and describe the pre-arrangements and agreements with the outside facility.
- Describe all aquatic amusement park rides/attractions that the camp will use during their trip.
 - Identify water depths for each ride, so non-swimmers can be restricted as appropriate.
- Address coordination between the camp's aquatic staff and facility staff.
- Address buddy/accounting systems – are any modifications necessary?
 - Pre-arrangements with the off-site facility must include agreement on the signal used to initiate buddy checks.
 - The signal must not interfere with facility lifeguards (consider flags, hand signals)
 - The facility may agree to signal buddy checks. It is strongly recommended to see if the facility can assist with signaling buddy checks if multiple camps are present.
 - When groups will separate, such as at an aquatic theme park, a separate “board system” can be used for each group.
 - Consider alternative types of accountability devices: portable board, clipboard (for small groups), pocket charts, tongue depressors (for wilderness swimming).
 - Establish alternative buddy check procedures for slides or other attractions that only allow one individual on at a time. Buddies must stay together on lazy rivers and similar rides.
- Staff should be trained in trip-specific procedures and review the safety plan before the trip. Campers should also receive an orientation before the trip.

Additional recommendations for camp swimming at public pools and beaches:

- Use an area assigned to the camp that is separate from the guarded public
 - If that's not possible, limit the area of facility used by the camp to one that staff can effectively control. Position staff in the water to restrict campers to a designated area.
- Have all campers wear visual identifiers at public facilities so they can be easily distinguished from the public.

RESOURCES

health.ny.gov/camps



- Safety Plan Templates:
 - [On-site swimming](#)
 - [Off-site and wilderness swimming](#)
- Fact Sheets/Publications:
 - [Swimming Requirements](#)
 - [Wilderness Swimming](#)
 - [Supervision of Boating Activities](#)
 - [Requirements for Children's Camps in New York State](#)
- Certification Fact Sheets:
 - [Camp Aquatics Director](#)
 - [Lifeguard](#)
 - [Camp Trip Swimming](#)
 - [Progressive Swimming Instructor](#)
 - [Learn-to-Swim Programs](#)
- [Subpart 7-2 Children's Camps](#)
- [Your Local Health Department!](#)



Children's camp program resources are available at <https://www.health.ny.gov/environmental/outdoors/camps/>. Click on the purple "Operators & Health Departments" button under the picture.

These resources provide general overviews of the code requirements and guidance.

Contact your local health department for assistance if you have any questions about regulations and guidance as they relate to your camp.

Contact information is available at <https://www.health.ny.gov/environmentalcontacts>.

Thank you!



Department
of Health



health.ny.gov/camps

health.ny.gov/environmentalcontacts