



## **“Learn to Swim” Program**



**THE BENJAMIN L.  
HOOKS INSTITUTE  
FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

**at The University of Memphis**

**A Collaborative Co-Sponsored by the Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change**

### **A brief description of a deadly problem, drowning:**

- Nationally, fatal unintentional drowning rates for 5-14 year old African Americans has been found to be more than 3 times higher than for White peers.
- Drowning is one of the most common causes of death and disability for all ages world-wide, but particularly for children (<15 years).
- Recent Tennessee data indicate that African American child death rate by drowning was 1.96 (per 100,000) while the rate for White counterparts was 1.08, a highly significant difference.
- Drowning is the second leading cause of injury death in Memphis.

### **Knowing how to swim can protect against drowning:**

- Research has confirmed that swimming skill is a preventative mediator from drowning.
- According to a national study commissioned by USA Swimming and conducted by the University of Memphis, approximately 69% of African American youth and 58% Hispanic/ Latino children reported a “no or low” swimming ability (unable to swim or were comfortable in shallow end only) as compared to 42% of White peers.
- Memphis data from this study showed youth swimming ability lower than national data with a 78.8% “no or low” rate for African American subjects and Hispanic/Latino children reported a 60% rate, compared to a much lower 37.7% for White respondents.
- Income is a strong predictor for “no or low” ability. Closely repeating the race/ethnicity results, both US and Memphis data show similar lack of swimming ability results for children on free or reduced lunch program status (US=65.6%; Memphis=67.5%) compared to “no lunch program status” children (US=50.2%; Memphis=46.2%).

- This lack of water competence hinders minority youth from being on competitive teams, which can lead to job/life opportunities (i.e., lifeguarding, teaching, US Navy/Coast Guard) as well as college scholarships.
- Racial membership of all men's and women's collegiate swim programs: only 1.6% reported being African American and 3.5% noted being Hispanic/Latino.
- Race/ethnicity breakdown of all USA Swimming competitive swim team members: 1.7% African American and 4.2% Hispanic/Latino.
- Major predictor variable, or reason, that explains why African American populations do not learn how to swim is fear of drowning or injury due to drowning.
- Other variables include: Lack of parental encouragement, how water and chemicals in the water negatively affect personal appearance issues (hair, skin, & eyes), as well as limited pool access, and financial constraints.
- Historically, minority populations, primarily poor females of color, have been banned from municipal pools.
- Focus group solutions revealed during the USA Swimming/UofM study:
  - Educate parent/caregivers about the problem;
  - Ask health clinics/pediatricians to endorse swim lessons for children, and;
  - **Offer community-based free/low cost swim lesson programs.**

### **Splash Mid-South: A public/private partnership for swimming in Memphis**

- From February 2009 to present, the Splash Mid-South (SMS) program, formerly known as Make a Splash Mid-South, has taught over 5,000 Memphis area children to swim.
- The SMS program has brought together several community-based organizations toward the goal of teaching aquatic skills and saving lives (i.e., American Red Cross, City of Memphis, YMCA of Memphis & the Mid-South, Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare and Le Bonheur Children's Hospital, the University of Memphis, the Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change, the Memphis Tigers Swim Club, & Safe Kids Mid-South).
- In the past, several small and large businesses have donated time and money to Splash Mid-South: Memphis Pool Supply, Methodist/Le Bonheur, Lehman Brothers, Baker Donelson Law Firm, Association of Pool & Spa Professionals Mid-South Chapter, Le Bonheur Children's Hospital, Safe Kids Mid-South, Safe Kids Worldwide, Johnson & Johnson, plus an anonymous local foundation.
- Grants have been awarded to Splash Mid-South by the Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change, USA Swimming Foundation Make a Splash Initiative, City of Memphis, and Collierville Community Fund.
- Numerous private individuals have donated time and money to Splash Mid-South.

- Past program evaluation data have shown that approximately 100% of all children gain at least one level of swimming competence (using American Red Cross or YMCA program checklists). These data also illustrate that about 76% increase two or more levels.
- Using a pre/post test design (before lessons/after lessons), attitudes/perceptions concerning swimming have been measured, and most improve from more negative to more positive with “fear of drowning/injury” being the most improved.
- For Summer 2014, 175 Memphis area children registered for swimming lessons at four sites (Omni Fitness in Collierville, Davis YMCA in Whitehaven, Bickford Community Center in North Memphis, & Hickory Hill Community Center in South Memphis).

**Preliminary data show:**

- Nearly 100% of all completers improved at least one level of swimming skill (Red Cross/YMCA).
- Approximately 75% improved two or more levels of swimming skill.
- Using a 4-point scale, “fear of drowning” decreased from pre-test (Mean=3.27) to post-test (Mean=2.40) at a highly significant level ( $p=.001$ ).
- Using a 10-point scale below, swimming ability improved pre-test (Mean=3.20) to post-test (Mean=6.13) at a highly significant level ( $p=.001$ ).

<b>Cannot swim at all</b>	<b>Can splash around-shallow end</b>	<b>Can put face in water-blow bubbles</b>	<b>Can hold head under water-5-10 secs</b>	<b>Can glide a little-face in water-shallow end only</b>	<b>Can swim a little in the deep end-face in water-can float a little</b>	<b>Can swim with a true front crawl stroke- 1 pool length - no stopping</b>	<b>Can swim-front crawl stroke- 2 or 3 pool lengths- can tread water for 5-10 minutes</b>	<b>Can swim 4 or more pool lengths- no stopping-know 3 or 4 different strokes</b>	<b>Can swim many lengths without stopping- on a swim team or could be on a swim team</b>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Information updated on August 14, 2014