

By Chris Thurber

# SIX LESSONS LIFEGUARDS MUST LEARN

*Certification alone is never enough*

Directors at camps and other youth programs work hard to staff pools and waterfronts with certified lifeguards. That's a good start, but to prevent accidents and to run a top-notch program, lifeguards and lookouts need much more than a certification card. Here are six aquatic essentials to incorporate into this season's training:

## 1. LEARN BEFORE CAMP STARTS

**I**t's a bigger leap from the practice pool to the real-world waterfront than most newly certified lifeguards believe. During the certification course, participants perform skills under close supervision, in controlled conditions, with experienced instructors who coach them through each element. At camp, it's a whole new ballgame ... or swim meet. Weather, children and program elements add chaos and stress that require leadership, maintenance skills and organizational prowess in order to manage.

Begin pre-arrival training with free online video training modules. Supplement this overview of key guarding skills with Cathy Scheder's new book, *Camp Waterfront Management*. Next, supply new staff members with surveys of the pool or waterfront, and ask them to list anticipated risks. Finally, assign a waterfront director to customize a new emergency-action plan (called a "Lost-Bather Drill" by aquatic professionals). I've included the one I use at Camp Belknap to give you a head start.

## 2. LEARN TO STOW EQUIPMENT

**I** have yet to visit a pool or waterfront that lacks some semblance of safety equipment, such as rescue tubes, ring

buoys, backboards and clear signage.

I've also yet to visit a pool or waterfront where all this safety equipment is stowed neatly, visibly and accessibly. During mid-season audits of camp aquatic facilities, I frequently find torn rescue tubes bunched together in a shed, ring-buoy lines hopelessly tangled, strapless backboards full of spider webs and incomplete or ambiguous signage.

Fixing a stowage problem is a cinch. Simply ask: "If I needed to save a life, could I use this equipment immediately?" There is a problem whenever the answer is: "Actually, it might take a second to get this ready."

Aquatic staff should be instructed in proper rope-coiling, so ring buoys can actually be used in a throwing assist. Staff members also should know how to carry and store rescue tubes in order to perform an in-water rescue without delay. Backboards should be fully equipped, shielded from damaging UV rays, and "stowed to go," meaning that straps are coiled and color-coded for rapid boarding and extraction of a spinal-injury victim. Finally, be sure that signage clearly indicates—in language a six-year-old can understand—boundaries, rules and depths.

## 3. LEARN TO PERFORM DRILLS

**A**t many day- and resident camps, lifeguards and lookouts perform drills, such as backboarding and underwater search-and-rescue, just once—during staff-training week. This helps uncover the differences between the controlled setting in which certifications are earned and the actual camp setting. That's helpful. However, this "one-and-

done" approach won't build confidence in the aquatic staff. Without regular practice, chances are members will freeze or fumble in a real rescue situation.

To increase the likelihood that rescue skills can be instinctively and effectively performed in an emergency, weekly lost-bather drills and in-water-rescue practice sessions are necessary. Document all this practice, of course, for purposes of accreditation. Perhaps even more importantly, incorporate rescue skills at every level of camper swim lessons. More than once I've watched children self-rescue by floating on their backs or stomachs when they suddenly tire in deep water. Remember—swim lessons push participants to their skill limits and beyond. For this reason, swimmers in distress may be more common during lessons than in free swims. Are your staff and campers prepared?

## 4. LEARN TO MAINTAIN CONCENTRATION

**L**ifeguarding research shows that maintaining the vigilance necessary for spotting a drowning victim becomes more difficult over time. Indeed, whenever a vigilance task requires someone to distinguish between high-frequency non-critical signals (e.g., many children splashing around) and extremely low-frequency critical signals (e.g., one child struggling in the water), the task is extremely difficult. Lifeguarding is akin to staring at the night sky, night after night, waiting to see a shooting star.

For most lifeguards, there is a precipitous drop in vigilance after about 20 minutes. Noise, heat, fatigue, stress and distractions make it even more difficult to remain vigilant. Therefore, lifeguards

should rotate positions every 15 to 20 minutes, resist the temptation to engage in distracting side conversations, use proper scanning techniques, and dress appropriately for the weather. Vigilance is also improved when lifeguards have opportunities to vary tasks across the day, such as active lifeguarding duty, teaching lessons, and performing maintenance. Spending all day at the poolside or on dock in a state of constant vigilance is humanly impossible. Adequate sleep is also a must for the aquatic staff, as it is for all camp staff.

## 5. LEARN TO PREVENT ACCIDENTS

**S**lips, falls, and foot injuries are much more common than drowning (thank goodness), but just as preventable. The aquatic staff should conduct daily inspections of all waterfront equipment and facilities, assess pool, lake or ocean conditions as needed, and repair or remove hazards immediately. Maintaining a small warehouse of tools, supplies and equipment is critical in keeping an aquatic facility and program equipment fully operational and in tip-top shape throughout the season. Your last session's campers deserve as functional and safe a waterfront as the first session's campers. Moreover, you want to avoid liability for injuries that result from negligence. In my 25-year aquatic career, the most common programmatic mistakes I've observed are:

1. Failure to appropriately categorize swimmers
2. Failure to replace worn equipment, such as frayed PFDs
3. Failure to properly supervise special events on the waterfront.

Accidents are more likely to happen when weak swimmers are permitted in deep water, shabby equipment is used as a cost-saving measure, and waterfront carnivals are planned without regard for each activity's unique lifeguarding demands.

## 6. LEARN TO FOLLOW YOUR OWN RULES

**M**any camps excel at creating sensible rules and publishing those rules in a nicely formatted manual ... that nobody reads. Not to worry. You can dramatically

improve the safety of the waterfront by enrolling each staff member in an in-service aquatic training that incorporates a demonstration and explanation of each waterfront policy. Although it's no guarantee that all staff will follow all policies all of the time, a lively and comprehensive in-service training trumps reading out of the staff training manual any day. And yes, every staff member should participate, even the non-lifeguards. If someone plans to get wet, he or she needs to know the basics of waterfront management, safety and policy.

Finally, improve the aquatic staff to set a sterling example, both for their colleagues and the campers. What good is a buddy system when campers watch staff members swim alone during "Leaders' Swim" or "Staff Dip"? How can you expect campers to wear PFDs in boats when lifeguards use them as seat cushions? What course of action can staff members take to reprimand campers for horseplay when they regularly push each other into the water? You get the point. Do your lifeguards?

Most drownings of staff members occur when counselors and cabin leaders

swim alone, after dark or while intoxicated. Combine these risk factors, and you have a recipe for disaster. And because you can't keep a constant eye on every staff member, they need to create a sensible culture of safety, firmly grounded in the principle of mature leadership-by-example.

Camp waterfront management is complex and rewarding. Aquatic elements are among the most popular, classic and potentially dangerous camp programs. The lessons campers learn—to swim, play, and behave sensibly—last a lifetime. The lessons your staff learns—from this article and other resources—make it all safe and enjoyable, season after season. **CB**

*Dr. Christopher Thurber is a board-certified clinical psychologist, father and author of *The Summer Camp Handbook*, now available online for free at [SummerCampHandbook.com](http://SummerCampHandbook.com). He is the co-creator of *ExpertOnlineTraining.com*, a set of Internet-based-video training modules for camp counselors, nurses and doctors. He can be reached via e-mail at [chris@campspirit.com](mailto:chris@campspirit.com).*

To comment on this article, log on to [www.camp-business.com](http://www.camp-business.com)

This changes everything.

You've got to be kidding me.

**ExpertOnlineTraining.com**  
VIDEOS. QUIZZES. HANDOUTS.

**ANNOUNCING**  
**THE NEW FREE VERSION!**  
PRE-ARRIVAL LEADERSHIP TRAINING  
Call us today 877-237-3931