

The Washington Post

Bangladeshi swimming program seeks to combat too-common drowning deaths

By Kem Knapp Sawyer
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MONOHARDI, BANGLADESH - The boy's arms flailed above the water, and his head bobbed up and down. On the shore, several screaming children waved and pointed, but no one jumped into the pond. Then a girl and a boy grabbed a long pole and ran to the water's edge.

The children were demonstrating what they have learned in a swimming program here in rural Bangladesh, a country where 17,000 children drown every year - 46 each day. The program teaches girls and boys how to swim and safe ways to rescue others.

Rivers, lakes and ponds abound in Bangladesh, which also has a long coastline, and flooding during the monsoon season leaves many people homeless. The leading cause of death among Bangladeshi children ages 1 to 17 is no longer infectious diseases but injury, with drowning accounting for more than half of these deaths.

The Center for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB), an organization that works with the Alliance for Safe Children and UNICEF, started the SwimSafe program in 2005. In the past year, 320 instructors were trained and 130,000 children learned to swim at an average cost of \$9 per child.

"Learning to swim works as a vaccine," said Saidur Mashreky, an epidemiologist for CIPRB.

The program recently received funding from the Royal Life Saving Society in Australia to expand.

The lessons take place in a pond where a bamboo floor is submerged a meter underwater. Floating bamboo poles delineate a shallow end. Throughout the country, 550 swimming centers have been constructed at a cost of \$80 each.

Shumona Shafinaz, an injury prevention specialist at UNICEF, said that without formal instruction, most Bangladeshi children would not learn to swim until they were teenagers and that many girls would never learn. The program targets younger children - and girls as well as boys.

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Imram Hossain teaches swimming and survival skills in Monohardi. On a recent day, 10 boys and five girls were in his class, all between the ages of 5 and 14. With the temperature reaching 99 degrees, the best place to be was in the water.

The children used a kickboard to glide, they floated, they practiced freestyle. Only one child appeared fearful, and Hossain gently helped ease him into the water.

Most students complete 14 two-hour sessions - those who need more practice stay on. To graduate, they must be able to tread water for 90 seconds and swim 25 meters. Male and female instructors receive training from CIPRB and a stipend of 7 cents per student.

"Previously, drowning was a common problem," Hossain said. "But at this moment, children learn swimming and it is not a problem."

CIPRB also provides free swimming lessons for children who live in the slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital. At a large modern pool at the National Swimming Federation facility, students practice swimming and survival techniques. Their instructor, Amirul Islam, teaches competitive swimming and has invited the better students to practice with his racing team.

But drowning among children younger than 5 remains a serious problem, one that Mashreky also wants to prevent. He noted that most

accidents among toddlers occur between 9 a. m. and 1 p.m., when fathers are at work, older siblings at school, and mothers busy with household chores.

To help keep the youngest children safe, Mashreky has also worked to establish child development centers in rural areas for children 18 months to 4 years old. CIPRB provides a five-day training session for mothers in the community to teach groups of 15 to 20 children in their homes. The centers are called "anchals"- named for the end-piece of a sari that can cover or protect a baby.

At an anchal in Monohardi, Hasna Akter led the children in a dance. Familiar with the steps and proud to perform, the children laughed and sang.

"Oh look! A forest peacock is dancing with bells on his feet," Mashreky translated. They played what appeared to be a Bangladeshi

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version of "Simon Says." One small child with special needs looked on but did not participate.

Mashreky explained that the children are not only safe but are also developing language and motor skills. They learn basic hygiene as well. Before lunch, Akter took them outside to wash their hands.

When the anchal program first started five years ago, Mashreky said he worried that the idea would not catch on. But parents were more than satisfied, he said, and attendance remained steady. The number of anchals has increased to 640, serving 17,000 children. The teachers have also benefited. "They used to be very shy. Now they are different people," Mashreky said.

Kem Knapp Sawyer reported from Bangladesh as part of a project assessing water and sanitation issues by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

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