

What Parents Need To Know About Beach Safety

John Connolly, Honorary Secretary, The Lifesaving Foundation

On sunny days families often go to a beach. Here are beach safety guidelines based on my 50 years lifesaving experience, 30 years as a lifeguard, and 45 years as a parent.

Go to a lifeguarded beach when the lifeguards are working it.



Convenience is a common reason for choosing a beach. "I want to park where we sit so we don't have to carry our beach equipment far". **If you choose to take your children to an unlifeguarded beach you become the lifeguard.** You must identify hazards, take preventative actions, undertake rescues, and perform resuscitation. An event does not have to be life threatening to spoil your outing. Lifeguards treat more foot injuries than they perform drowning rescues. If you walk in shallow water wear footwear. You do not want to step on a weever fish, jellyfish tentacles, or a broken shell. Have a first aid kit with antihistamine cream for stings? **There is no such thing as a safe beach.** Lifeguards working a beach make it safer but cannot make a beach completely safe.

Lifeguards are not babysitters.

You are responsible for the safety of your children. You have to supervise them. **Children drown from a lapse in supervision, not a lack of supervision.** The phone rings and you are distracted. If you cannot concentrate on watching children in water take them out of it. Adults should be in the water with children, able to see all of them, watching two. You have only two hands so if more than two children are with you and you need to get them out quickly you will have to decide who you will leave to save themselves. Before entering the water the adults present should agree who each will watch. Drowning is often silent. It is common for pool lifeguards to rescue drowning children among swimmers who are unaware the child is drowning. **You cannot supervise children while sunbathing or reading.**



Swimming ability is not a vaccination against drowning.

It is our positive assumptions that kill our children. One deadly assumption is that children are safe because they can swim. **The majority of those who die by drowning in Ireland can swim.** If you experience breathing difficulty in water you are drowning. Drowning has four possible outcomes according to the length of time you are unable to breathe – survival without injury, survival with short-term injury, survival with long-term injury, and death. Often there is a child in a coma in hospital in Ireland with brain damage from drowning. Parents exercise a lower level of supervision of children who can swim than of non-swimmer children. Swimmers often overestimate their swimming ability. Young men can take chances based on a false assumption that if they get into difficulty they can swim to safety.



Big waves will come.

Newspaper headlines use the term 'rogue wave' but big waves are a regular feature. A wave doesn't have to be very big to knock over a child and roll them around underwater during which they may inhale water. Never stand with your back to waves. **Tell the children that if they are caught up in a wave they should turn themselves into a ball and hold their breath.** The wave will roll them about and they will return to the surface - like a ball.

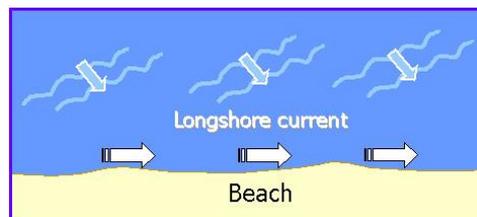
Do not be casual because the water is calm and flat.



There may be holes and sandbanks underwater. Flat water encourages the use of floating toys. The off-shore wind that flattens the water also blows inflatables out to sea. All inflatables should be attached by a rope to an adult or an anchor. Lifejackets should be worn. A lifejacket must be tight around the body otherwise there is a risk that having fallen into water the lifejacket stays up on top and the child sinks out of it. Swimming out after inflatables risk drowning. You can buy a new ball but not a new life.

Drowning individuals don't stay on top of the water for long.

Drowning casualties stay on top of the water for about one minute. Those searching for a child's body underwater often have to use their feet to feel for it. This is why it is so important to be in the water with children. If they submerge it can be very difficult to find them quickly and you need to find them quickly. The water often moves swimmers and bodies sideways. You may have experienced entering water directly in front of your clothes and finding out when you leave the water that you are a distance away from your clothes.



Lifeguards will have identified any rip currents present.

All of the water that comes onto a beach leaves it. The water will dig a narrow channel out into deep water creating a powerful current. If you enter the current it will bring you out into deep water until it loses power. Because the water is deeper in a rip current it is common not to have waves break there. The water colour is darker because it is deeper and the sand is disturbed. If you take children to an unlifeguarded beach you have to check for rip currents. The fact that there are no waves in a rip may lure innocent bathers into it wrongly believing that it is safer there for children. **If caught in a rip current - swim sideways or float on your back until the water releases you. Children should know how to float on their back. Tell them if they get into trouble float on their back** kicking their legs and wave for help.



Tidal flow is not uniform.

Most people know that the tide comes in (floods) and goes out (ebbs) regularly and may know that it is on a six hour cycle and that full tide is approximately one hour later the next day. The water does not flood and ebb at an equal rate. You could be on a beach for the last two hours of an ebbing tide and the first two hours of a flooding tide and the water appear to move very little. Come to the same place at the same time the next day and the tide will have moved on one hour. You will have the last hour of the ebbing tide and the first three hours of a flooding tide. There will be little movement of water for the first two hours and a very large movement of water during the second two hours. The tide is a bell shaped wave. The largest movement of water is in the middle hours.

Hour of tide	1 st hour	2 nd hour	3 rd hour	4 th hour	5 th hour	6 th hour
Curve shows volume of water, not height						
Twelfths	1/12	2/12	3/12	3/12	2/12	1/12
Percentage	8%	17%	25%	25%	17%	8%
Tidal flow	Weak	Medium	Strong	Strong	Medium	Weak

The Lifesaving Foundation CLG

The Lifesaving Foundation is a not-for-profit drowning prevention research organisation registered in Ireland as a charity. Donations may be made to
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