

Age-Appropriate Rescue Training Toolkit



Toolkit to assist practitioners to tailor water-based rescue training to the characteristics of trainees, to ensure training is safe and age-appropriate

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Introduction

This guidance has been developed to assist practitioners in developing age-appropriate water rescue training programs based on the characteristics and abilities of trainees.

Rescue training should be adapted to the age and characteristics of trainees to ensure that the content is appropriate, and there is a reasonable expectation that trainees would be able to carry out the rescue safely. It is also important that training programmes take into consideration the capabilities of trainees to ensure that they can safely take part in the training itself.

The World Health Organization publication, "Preventing Drowning: Practical guidance for the provision of day-care, basic swimming and water safety skills, and safe rescue and resuscitation training (2022)," recommends that rescue training should be taught from the age of 10 years old, and techniques suitable for higher-risk situations should be taught as trainees get older.

Research shows that in low-resource settings, it is often children that are first on the scene during a drowning incident and attempt water rescues. Although a child's ability to learn and safely apply rescue techniques may be limited at a young age due to their stage of physical and mental development, it is important that children understand what to do in the event of a drowning incident to keep themselves, and the victim, as safe as possible.

This toolkit is designed to help practitioners train community members of different ages and abilities in water safety and safe rescue by providing guidance on appropriate training content for different stages of physical and mental development. As one of the most likely demographics to be involved in a rescue, this toolkit will also provide guidance on how younger children can be equipped with the basic skills and knowledge to react safely and appropriately to a potential drowning incident.

How to use this toolkit

This toolkit contains five key sections that can be used to assist with the development of age-appropriate water rescue training.

Tool	Use	Page
Characteristics to consider	Description of three key characteristics that could be used to help determine a trainee's ability to safely partake in rescue training.	5
Components of rescue training	Description of four key components of community-based rescue training to guide the development of age-appropriate training content.	7

Learning stage flow diagram	A flow diagram that uses key characteristics and skills to help determine which stage of training an individual should participate in.	9
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Characteristics to consider

Effective water rescue training should be tailored to the age and capability of the trainees, ensuring that content is not only relevant, but also aligns with the cognitive and physical developmental stages of the individuals involved.

Five developmental stages may be used to determine the level of knowledge and skills taught to trainees. These stages are based on three characteristics typically influenced by age. In other words, the progression through these stages is informed by specific traits that typically change as individuals grow older.

1. Physical Ability

Physical ability in water rescue encompasses a person's overall physical fitness and aptitude for carrying out different levels of response actions, from simple to more complex. This can depend on a person's capability in terms of physical functioning, mobility, dexterity, or stamina.

In the context of water rescue, it specifically relates to an individual's capacity to practice a range of skills, from the basic ability to throw an object to more advanced capabilities, such as performing a water-based contact rescue.

Physical ability tends to be low in young children, reaches its peak in teenagers and young adults, commonly aged between 13 to 30, then subsequently declines in later life, particularly aged 60 onwards. This impacts an individual's strength and rescue capacity in the water.

Consideration should also be taken to ensure the waterbody being used to teach water-based rescue is appropriate for the swimming ability of trainees. Deep water or water with additional dangers (such as tides or rip currents) should not be used or should be modified to ensure they are safe for rescue training.

2. Learning needs

Several factors relating to education and mental development may impact an individual's ability to engage with and retain training content. Of relevance to rescue training is a person's attention span and their literacy skills.

- **Attention span** refers to the duration a person can focus on something before becoming distracted. Learning more complex rescue skills and techniques demands a longer concentration period. Typically, young children have a shorter attention span, making it challenging for them to grasp intricate skills. Similarly, as individuals age, their cognitive ability tends to decrease.
- **Literacy skills** refer to a person's ability to communicate effectively, including the ability to read, write, speak and listen. While literacy skills themselves may not impact a person's ability to safely rescue a person from the water, they may impair

the ability to engage with the lessons and carry out a safe rescue based on training content. Therefore, trainees must have literacy levels appropriate for the format of content delivery used in training. Where possible, training should use different mediums (such as written documents, presentations, pictures and/or demonstrations) to help engage trainees with a range of literacy levels. If a trainee's literacy skills make them unable to take part in the class, or there is a low level of literacy within the community, effort should be made to use alternative means to safely train trainees in rescue. Where training is adapted, literacy criteria may be lowered for each stage as appropriate for the method of training delivery. Additional attention should be paid to ensuring participation and consent forms are shared in an appropriate format for the trainee or their guardian's literacy levels (for more information, please refer to the toolkit on informed consent, available [here](#)).

3. Decision-making ability

Rescuing someone from the water is inherently risky, requiring potential rescuers to make informed decisions about the dangers involved and the best actions to take. An individual's capacity to assess risk is largely shaped by training, knowledge of different risks, and experience making risk assessments, which tend to increase with age.

It's important to recognise that young children may lack the ability to make informed decisions about risks and, therefore, depend on guidance from older individuals. All rescuers should understand that every rescue involves some level of risk and be able to make informed decisions, weighing the potential for success against the associated risks.

Additional considerations

It should be noted that developmental/educational delays or physical disabilities may lead to an individual not reaching the required level for certain characteristics or reaching it at a later age than is typical. It is important to take into consideration individual abilities to ensure trainees can participate and follow training instructions safely. Additional support or an adapted curriculum should be considered to ensure that trainees with developmental or physical disabilities are able to learn appropriate water safety and rescue techniques in a safe manner.

Components of rescue training

Water rescue training refers to the process of instructing individuals on the techniques and skills necessary to perform rescues in aquatic environments and respond to potential drowning incidents. This type of training is particularly important for individuals who live near unrestricted waterbodies or who are more likely to find themselves in situations where they need to respond to emergencies on or near water.

WHO guidance recommends community-based training rescue and resuscitation training, which involves training lay members of the public, including children over the age of 10 years. Introducing concepts of self-rescue and dry-rescue could start earlier than this, particularly in low-resource areas where children may have regular exposure to water.

Water rescue training typically covers a range of topics including:

1. Risk Assessment

Trainees are trained to assess the risk of undertaking different types of rescues. This should include an assessment of:

- **The aquatic environment** – the water temperature, the flow of the water, any hazards in the water (such as dangerous animals or pollution).
- **The threat to the person in the water** – whether the victim is injured or in immediate danger, their distance from shore, their level of fatigue.
- **Their own proficiency in the water** - whether the rescuer has swimming and rescue skills appropriate to conduct a rescue.
- **Accessibility of further assistance** – whether further assistance can be acquired that is likely to reduce the risk to the rescuer, or lead to a better outcome (such as the availability of professional emergency services, or someone with more training or more able to make a more informed decision on the risks).
- **Availability of rescue equipment** - whether objects nearby could be used for rescue, and their appropriateness for the type of rescue being conducted (such as sticks for 'reach' rescues).

When training trainees in how to conduct a risk assessment, local risk factors specific to local geography and water use, should be considered to ensure content is as relevant and applicable as possible.

2. Self-Rescue

Trainees are trained to be able to help themselves if they come into difficulty in water, including the ability to float and survive a fall into water. This training is often a component of a broader 'learn to swim' programme. Trainees may also learn how to use equipment that will help keep them safe, such as a lifejacket, and basic water safety skills. Water safety messaging and education can be integrated into rescue training to highlight key risks and reduce drowning incidents among trainees.

3. Dry-Side Rescue

'Dry-side water rescue' typically refers to rescue techniques that are conducted from a location that is not in direct contact with water. This may include the shore, riverbank, or a boat. These techniques are generally safer than entering the water and are often taught from a younger age, as they do not require the rescuer to be a proficient or strong swimmer.

Dry-side rescue techniques include:

- **Communication** - Rescuers can guide individuals in the water by offering clear instructions and reassurance, providing information on actions they can take to navigate their situation. This may include directives like "kick your legs" or calming statements such as "stay calm, help is on the way."
- **Reach** - A reach rescue may be used when a person is in difficulty in the water, and very close to land/ a place of safety. Rescuers can use objects such as a stick or pole to reach out to the person and safely pull them to safety.
- **Throw** - A throw rescue is undertaken when the person in the water is too far away to perform a reach rescue. Rescuers might throw objects to aid individuals facing challenges in the water. This can involve deploying tools or items that extend the person's reach, like a rope, to facilitate bringing them to a place of safety. Alternatively, a buoyant object such as a bottle may be thrown to help the person stay afloat until additional assistance arrives.

4. Water-Based Rescue

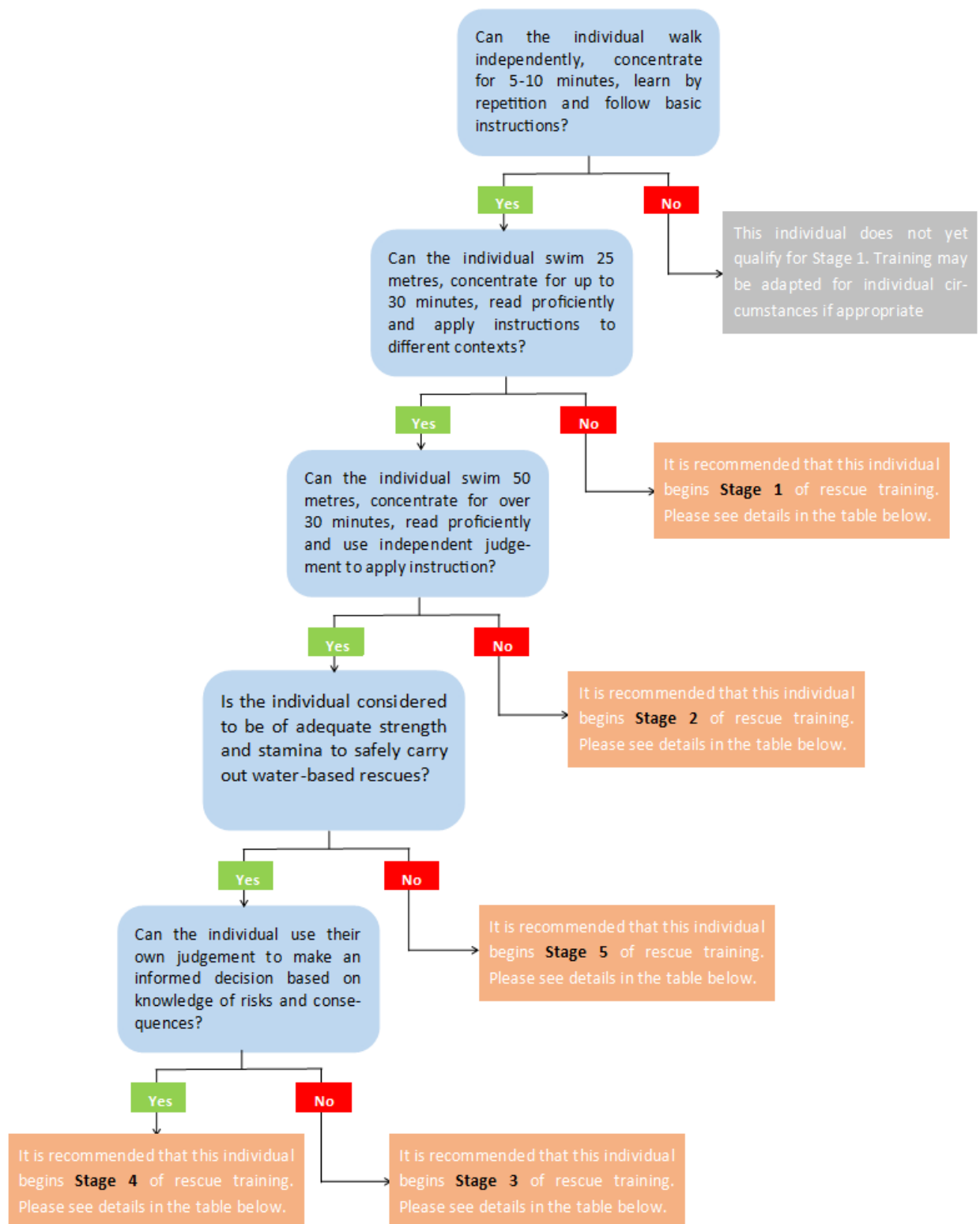
Water-based rescues are conducted while the rescuer is in the water. This may include instances where the rescuer must enter the water to conduct the rescue, or when the rescuer is already in the water with the person who gets into difficulty.

Water-based rescues have greater risk than dry-side rescues as they require the rescuer to enter a potentially dangerous aquatic environment and be near, or in direct contact with, a drowning person. They require the rescuer to have a high level of swimming proficiency, strength and training on how to stay safe.

Water-based rescue techniques are typically split into two categories:

- **Non-contact rescues** - A non-contact rescue is a type of rescue that doesn't require the rescuer to be in direct contact with the person in difficulty in the water. Rescuers may use items such as floating objects to keep a distance between themselves and a drowning person.
- **Contact rescues** - A contact water rescue is where the rescuer makes direct physical contact with the person in difficulty in the water, who may be conscious or unconscious. This typically involves the rescuer approaching, reaching, and helping the person with limited use of additional equipment or tools.

Learning stage flow diagram



Age-appropriate learning outcomes

This table identifies at what stage new skills are recommended to be taught in training. Each stage should include all learning from the previous stages, as well as the additional skills identified (so for example, content for students at stage 3 should include the skills identified in stage 1, stage 2 and stage 3).

Stage 1 (Typically aged 3 – 6 years)						
Recommended characteristics			Learning Outcomes			
Physical Ability	Learning needs	Decision making ability	Risk Assessment	Self-Rescue	Dry-side rescue	Water Based Rescue
Be able to walk independently	Be able to concentrate for 5-10 minutes Learn by rote/repetition	Be able to follow basic instructions	Be able to identify emergency situations Know not to enter the water in the event of an emergency Know to seek help from an adult in the event of an emergency	Have experience of wearing a lifejacket Know basic safety messaging and knowing the dangers associated with water Be able to enter and exit the water safely	Know to shout or call for help Throw flotation object into the water, i.e. a ball	Water based rescue is not appropriate at this stage

Stage 2 (Typically aged 7 - 12 years)

Recommended characteristics			Learning Outcomes			
			Stage 2 training should encompass all learning outcomes identified in stage 1, with the following additional outcomes			
Physical Ability	Learning needs	Decision making ability	Risk Assessment	Self-Rescue	Dry-side rescue	Water Based Rescue
Be able to swim 25 metres	Be able to concentrate on a topic area for up to 30 minutes Be able to read proficiently	Be able to apply instruction to different contexts	Know the emergency phone number to call for help, if applicable Know when it is appropriate to assist using dry-side rescue techniques in different contexts	Be able to survive a fall into deep water Be able to float while waiting for assistance (on back and while holding onto a floating object) Be able to swim to safety & exit water	Know to talk to person in difficulty during rescue Be able to safely conduct a reach rescue Be able to safely conduct a throw rescue	Know how to do a non-contact rescue and the risks associated with non-contact rescues Have an awareness of what a contact rescue is, and the risks associated with contact rescues

Stage 3 (Typically aged 13 - 17 years)

Recommended characteristics			Learning Outcomes			
			Stage 3 training should encompass all learning outcomes identified in stage 1 and stage 2, with the following additional outcomes			
Physical Ability	Learning needs	Decision making ability	Risk Assessment	Self-Rescue	Dry-side rescue	Water Based Rescue
Ability to swim 50 metres +	Ability to concentrate on a topic area for over 30 minutes Ability to read proficiently	Ability to apply instruction based on independent judgement	Know when it's safe and appropriate to assist	Be able to float while waiting for assistance (without holding onto a floating object)		Be able to do a lifesaving stroke (side-stroke, lifesaving backstroke) Know how to do a contact rescue and the risks associated with it Know how to avoid the risks associated with contact rescues

Stage 4 (Typically aged 18 - 60 years)

Recommended characteristics			Learning Outcomes			
			Stage 4 training should encompass all learning outcomes identified in stages 1, 2 and 3, with the following additional outcomes			
Physical Ability	Learning needs	Decision making ability	Risk Assessment	Self-Rescue	Dry-side rescue	Water Based Rescue
Ability to swim 50 metres +	Ability to concentrate on a topic area for over 30 minutes Ability to read proficiently	Ability to make an informed decision based on knowledge of risks, consequences and judgement of own ability	Demonstrate a knowledge of injuries and specialist rescue equipment Be able to conduct a thorough risk assessment of the environment and conditions and determine what rescue techniques, if any, are safe and appropriate based on own ability/skills.	Demonstrate advanced competency in self-rescue techniques		Be able to use specialised equipment and know the risks associated with it Be able to conduct a contact rescue of an injured/unconscious person

Stage 5 (Typically aged 60+ years)

Learning Outcomes

At Stage 5 trainers should re-consider the physical ability of the trainee, which may have reduced due to age, injury or other physical impairment.

Trainees with lower stamina and physical strength may focus on learning outcomes identified in Stages 1 & 2 (dry-side rescue). Trainees with good stamina and physical strength may refer to stages 3 & 4 (water-based rescue).

Trainers should re-enforce the importance of trainees being able to conduct a risk assessment recognising their own limitations, and when it is safe and appropriate to assist.

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Health screening questionnaire

A pre-assessment of trainees' swimming and physical abilities, as well as any medical concerns, is vital to understand how their physical characteristics may impact their ability to safely engage with training and/or conduct a rescue. This is particularly important for the later stages of the training programme that involve water-based rescue or self-rescue techniques that require the demonstration of water-based skills (such as floating).

Assessments should seek to identify health concerns including seizures and breathing difficulties, as well as any physical or mental developmental delays that may impair a person's ability to safely engage with training or conduct a rescue.

If a potential trainee has a health condition that may impact their training, it may be necessary to increase the instructor to student ratios so that there is additional supervision, and they can take part in lessons safely and effectively. Some trainees may require one-to-one tuition. Trainers may require specific training to teach rescues safely and effectively to trainees with different health conditions. Due to known or potential health conditions, some trainees may only be able to learn parts of the rescue training – for example, some trainees may be able to learn dry-side rescue techniques but have a health condition that prohibits them from taking part in water-based rescues.

If the trainee has any medication that may be required in an emergency situation (for example, an inhaler if they are asthmatic), it should be ensured that this is always present and easily accessible while they are taking part in the training.

If a potential health issue is identified, professional medical advice should be sought where possible to help determine if a person can safely take part in rescue training. Adjustments should be made to accommodate specific health needs where relevant. The safety of all participants should always be the first priority.

A health screening questionnaire should be given to trainees, or their guardians, before training along with a consent form detailing the risks of participation. Please see reference below to the '**Informed Consent Toolkit**' which contains an example of an Informed Consent Form and a Health Screening Questionnaire, which can be easily adapted for rescue training.



Informed Consent
Toolkit v4.pdf

Glossary

Community-Based Training	Training targeting members of the community to provide bystanders with the skills to conduct a rescue/resuscitation if necessary. This does not include the training of lifeguards or other professional rescue personnel.
Consent Form	A form that is used to record consent.
CPR	Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation: a series of chest compressions and mouth-to-mouth ventilation intended to resuscitate a drowning victim
Guardian	A person with full responsibility to make all decisions on behalf of a child. Only the guardian and not the parents can make decisions for the child.
Health Screening	A process to determine whether a person potentially has any health conditions that could affect their ability to safely participate in an activity.
Informed Consent	Informed consent is when a person fully understands what they are agreeing to, including associated risks.
Learning Outcome	The knowledge or skills that a trainee is expected to gain during training.
Parent	A mother or father of a child.
Participants	All of those present and participating in the delivery of rescue and resuscitation training, including trainers, trainees, any additional support staff, assistants or managers.
Rescuer	A person performing a rescue and/or resuscitation.
Resuscitation	The action of attempting to revive a person from unconsciousness following a drowning incident.
Risk Assessment	A process of evaluating the likeliness of something causing harm
Risk	The likelihood and severity of something causing harm.
Trainee	A person receiving training.
Trainer	A person providing training.
Water-Based Rescue	Rescues conducted while the rescuer is in the water.