



In this photo provided by Daniel Johnson, USA Swimmer Cullen Jones helps Tavion Traynham with the kick board while giving swim lessons to six eight-year-olds at the Butler-Gast YMCA in Omaha on Friday, March 14, 2008. Jones was giving a lesson as part of USA Swimming's Make A Splash program. Jones also spoke to students at the Skinner Magnet Center School before the swim lesson. Nearly 60 percent of African-American children can't swim, almost twice the figure for white children, according to a first-of-its-kind survey which USA Swimming hopes will strengthen efforts to lower minority drowning rates and draw more blacks into the sport. (AP PHOTO/Daniel Johnson)



New study: 58 percent of black children can't swim

By DAVID CRARY – 3 days ago

NEW YORK (AP) — Nearly 60 percent of African-American children can't swim, almost twice the figure for white children, according to a first-of-its-kind survey which USA Swimming hopes will strengthen its efforts to lower minority drowning rates and draw more blacks into the sport.

Stark statistics underlie the initiative by the national governing body for swimming. Black children drown at a rate almost three times the overall rate. And less than 2 percent of USA Swimming's nearly 252,000 members who swim competitively year-round are black.

To alter the numbers, USA Swimming is teaming with an array of partners — local governments, corporations, youth and ethnic organizations — to expand learn-to-swim programs nationwide, many of them targeted at inner-city minorities. One of the key participants is black freestyle star Cullen Jones, who hopes to boost his role-model status by winning a medal this summer at the Beijing Olympics.

USA Swimming's motives are twofold, executive director Chuck Wielgus said.

"It's just the right thing to do — making an effort so every kid can be water-safe," he said. "And quite frankly it's about performance. We're something of a niche sport and for us to remain relevant, considering the changing demographics of the population, it's important we get more kids involved at the mouth of the pipeline."

As part of the initiative, USA Swimming commissioned an ambitious study recently completed by five experts at the University of Memphis' Department of Health and Sports Sciences. They surveyed 1,772 children aged 6 to 16 in six cities — two-thirds of them black or Hispanic — to gauge what factors contributed most to the minority swimming gap.

The study found that 31 percent of the white respondents could not swim safely, compared to 58 percent of the blacks. The non-swimming rate for Hispanic children was almost as high — 56 percent — although more than twice as many Hispanics as blacks are now USA Swimming members.

The lead researcher, Professor Richard Irwin, said one key finding was the influence of parents' attitudes and abilities. If a parent couldn't swim, as was far more likely in minority families than white families, or if the parent felt swimming was dangerous, then the child was far less likely to learn how to swim.

Irwin said this means learn-to-swim programs in minority communities should reach out to parents.

Among black children, the study found that girls overall had weaker swimming skills than boys and were less comfortable at pools. Irwin said this might justify experimenting with single-sex swim programs, comparable to single-sex academic programs now spreading through some schools.

The minority swimming gap has deep roots in America's racial history. For decades during the 20th century, many pools were segregated, and relatively few were built to serve black communities.

John Cruzat, USA Swimming's diversity specialist, said these inequalities were compounded by a widespread misperception — fueled by flawed academic studies — that blacks' swimming ability was compromised by an innate deficit of buoyancy.

"There are people who still give credence to these stereotypes, even in the black and Hispanic community," said Cruzat, who wants to break the cycle that passes negative attitudes about swimming from one black generation to another.

"These long-held beliefs are still so potent," he said. "If you don't teach your children to swim, you're putting your grandchildren at risk."

Cruzat was pleased by one finding in the new study — that most black and Hispanic children do not disdain swimming as a "white sport." The study also found that swimming ability, regardless of race, increased in relation to parents' income and education.

The findings will be used by USA Swimming to fine-tune its steadily expanding Make a Splash program, in which it teams up with local partners to offer lessons and water-safety classes. Programs are starting this year at YMCAs in Philadelphia, Omaha, Neb., Raleigh, N.C., and San Jose, Calif.

Wanda Butts of Toledo, Ohio, is participating in the program. Her 16-year-old son, Josh, drowned last year in a lake as he played with friends on a raft despite his inability to swim.

Butts, 54, said her father once witnessed a drowning and passed on a fear of swimming to her, and she in turn never made efforts to have Josh learn to swim.

Butts now travels periodically to preach the importance of learning to swim — in fact, she's taking lessons herself. She's also launched an initiative called the Josh Project, which ensures that lessons are free for families unable to afford them.

"The best way is to start the children as young as possible," she said.

Olympic hopeful Jones is the highest-profile Make a Splash campaigner. In 2006, he helped break a world record with the U.S. 400 freestyle relay team. He hopes to qualify in July for the Beijing Games, and knows that winning a medal there in the glamorous 50 meter freestyle would be a huge boost for the efforts to lure more black children into swimming.

"There are African-Americans who swim, but they're in the background," Jones said. "People only pay attention when you're in the limelight."

He still hears skeptical comments sometimes from adults in the black community, even from some of his relatives — but he sees little hesitation in the children he mentors in the pool.

"I've done lessons with white and black kids — there's no kid out there who doesn't like jumping into a pool," he said. "When you're 6, you are fearless. That's the time to teach them."

Among Jones' admirers is Pablo Morales, a son of Cuban-born parents who won Olympic swimming medals in 1984 and 1992 and now coaches at the University of Nebraska.

"He can have an amazing impact," Morales said of Jones. "I cheer for him — and hope he can stay on top for a long time."

But Morales acknowledges that swimming diversity has improved only marginally since his first Olympics.

"Has progress been made? Yes," he said. "Has it been as extensive and as quick as we'd hoped? Definitely not."

On the Net:

- <http://www.google.com/url?q=http://www.usaswimming.org/&usg=AFQjCNG2t1QeuOrVTCJ0aFw8tQUkFaO99w>