

Pulling on the same oars together – we can make a difference

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Summary

Context: The surveys conducted by TASC and alliance partners have unequivocally shown that drowning is the leading killer of children in Asia. In fact, about half of all child deaths after infancy are due to drowning, and a large number of serious disabilities result from drowning as well. There are major constraints to intervention in this leading child health problem, from inadequate water safety infrastructure (both human and physical), lack of water-safety awareness in parents, especially mothers, and daily exposure of young children to water-bodies as a normal feature of their lives.

Methods: Six large, community-based surveys in five countries in Asia: Bangladesh, China, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam have been conducted to understand the risk-factors for child drowning and to develop interventions that would be appropriate and sustainable in the current low resource settings. Building on the knowledge from the surveys, TASC and alliance partners have done formative research to understand how to develop suitable interventions that are culturally acceptable, low-cost and sustainable in the different environments of East and South Asia.

Results: The surveys clearly show two strategies to be most likely to effect significant reductions in child drowning: 1) water safety programs targeting new mothers to make them aware of the dangers to their infants and children and thus to increase close child supervision; and 2) the need for all children over the age of five years to have mastered survival swimming as a basic life skill. TASC, in partnership with RLSSA, UNICEF and national organizations in Bangladesh are piloting interventions suitable for national use, and are developing a similar pilot in Vietnam for East Asia. The drowning prevention programs are intended to be of a scale sufficient to show a measurable impact on child drownings in the region.

Discussion/Implications: We have assisted with national scale surveys in the major developing countries proving drowning is the leading killer of childhood after infancy. TASC has used this to advocate for national drowning prevention strategies. In partnership with UNICEF, RLSSA and national partners, pilot intervention programs are underway in Bangladesh and Vietnam. TASC is seeking alliance partners to scale these up in as many national venues as possible in Asia and developing countries elsewhere. To this end, we are developing “A Million Children Swimming” campaigns. A goal of one million children taught survival swimming early in childhood, and their families taught basic water safety knowledge and skills over five years in each country would provide a measurable impact on child drowning in each country. Once shown to be effective at the national level and combined into regional programs, it will be possible to achieve major reductions in this leading child killer, similar to what has been done in wealthy countries.

Learning Outcomes

1. Drowning is the leading killer of children after infancy in Asia but large-scale prevention programs are lacking as of yet.
2. TASC and alliance partners are pioneering simple, resource-appropriate and sustainable intervention programs in both East and South Asia designed to target this leading child killer.
3. Our current goal is “A Million Children Swimming” campaigns in countries in Asia to meet this challenge on the scale necessary to have a measurable impact. We invite all to take up the oars with us.

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