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WATER SAFETY | PROGRAMS BOOST YOUTH SWIMMING SKILLS



STEVE EARLEY PHOTOS/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

From left, Gary Whitaker, Tyrone Gillion, Benjamin Cobb and Nequel Williams work on their kicking skills at the Huntersville Pool in Norfolk. The children are taking part in Summer Plunge, a Norfolk program that teaches youngsters how to swim. The program largely targets black communities because they tend to have little access to swimming pools.

Norfolk children face their fear of the water, and in the process, they have some fun.

LEARNING TO TAKE A SAFER PLUNGE



Swim instructor Cherrod Taylor teaches younger children how to swim in the shallow end of the Huntersville Pool.

FINDING A PROGRAM

Summer Plunge is a Norfolk program that reaches out to children in neighborhoods without public swimming pools. This program launched after some drownings last year.

A **Splash program** is offered by the YMCA to expand youngsters' access to pools and water safety. The YMCA in Great Bridge uses it to expose fourth-graders to the water. It works with the Chesapeake Redevelopment and Housing Authority to bring children from public housing neighborhoods in South Norfolk to the YMCA for their lessons.

Online Watch a video report on water-safety instruction at the Huntersville Pool at pilotonline.com.

BY LAURA GIRRESCH
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

NORFOLK — Twelve-year-old LaRita Floyd seemed panic-stricken when she was asked to jump into 9-foot-deep water into the waiting arms of a lifeguard.

But she did it.

"Oh, man, that was scary," she said, climbing out in a hurry. Sometimes, she said, she just likes to dangle her feet in because she's afraid she's going to drown.

Around her, the Huntersville Pool was full of children lingering in the wading pool or swimming only where they could cling to the side. Like LaRita, they were there to overcome their fear and learn to swim.

The Red Cross, the YMCA of South Hampton Roads and some city officials are worried about the number of children who don't know how to swim. Black children who can't swim are a particular concern.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that black children between the ages of 5 and 19 are more than two times more likely to drown than white children. Environmental factors, such as access to swimming pools, may contribute to the disparity, the CDC said.

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Water safety: Program aims to teach children to swim

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From 2001 to 2006, 25 children drowned in South Hampton Roads, according to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. Eighteen were black, six were white, and one was designated as "other."

Summer Plunge, a Norfolk program that reaches out to children in neighborhoods without public swimming pools, started last year, following a series of drownings.

Using school buses, the program takes children to three public pools for free two-hour swim sessions five days a week. This year, city organizers more than doubled the number of pickup sites to seven.

Organizers expanded the program because they said there was a need.

"The first couple days were a little slack, but especially since the weather's gotten hot, the buses were really full," said Senior Recreation Supervisor Jo Anne Jones.

Buses stop at places such as Ballentine, Poplar Halls and Coleman Place. Jones, who helped start the program, said it largely targets black communities because they tend to have little access to pools.

Lessons are included in the program, and the focus is on water safety - knowing how to stay out of dangerous situations and stay safe in the water.

"Drownings were a big issue with us," said Beverly Evans, also a senior recreation supervisor for Norfolk who helped start the program. "We'd had several drownings over the past couple summers - they were going past their capabilities."

Preventing drownings is a concern in other cities, too.

Former Chesapeake Mayor



STEVE EARLEY/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Justyn Brooks eases himself into the cool water at the Huntersville Pool. He is taking part in a program that teaches children to swim.

William Ward said he tried during his term to bring public pools to the city. It's been two years since he left office, and there still aren't any.

He worries that many children are tempted to swim in "dangerous, unregulated borrow pits."

Nationally, the YMCA offers a free Splash program to expand youngsters' access to pools and water safety. The Great Bridge Family YMCA uses it to expose fourth-graders to the water. The branch works with the Chesapeake Redevelopment and Housing Authority to bring children from public housing neighborhoods in South Norfolk to the YMCA for their lessons.

Ibni Shaw is the aquatics director at that branch, and she said it's geared toward those who don't normally have access to pools.

The YMCA also will help pay for regular swimming lessons for qualified families.

At the Huntersville Pool, LaRita's 9-year-old sister, Tashara, was huddled in a corner of the 4-foot-deep pool while friends played in deeper water. She said she was too scared to follow them.

"Some kids aren't afraid,

and sometimes you have kids that won't even put their face in the water," lifeguard Danielle Plauga said.

The Floyd sisters' mother, Michelle Floyd, said their fear of drowning came from her.

Michelle Floyd always told them not to go in water above their chins. As a child, she had her own traumatic experience when her flotation device sprang a leak.

"I was just going under and under, so that made me shy away from water," she said.

She had swimming lessons a few years later, and when she noticed her girls' lack of skill as they tried to swim with friends, she knew, they, too, should get swimming instruction.

Her daughters seem to enjoy the swimming program; they tell her what they do at the pool every day, she said.

"I'm just glad they did it," she said. "Now, they've got me in Target picking out bathing suits. They want different bathing suits every week."

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