



# WATER SAFETY ACROSS AUSTRALIA

Issues of water safety for young children



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2017, the Kids Alive team undertook a formal evaluation of the Living with Water DVD that is provided to new mothers via the Bounty Bag scheme. The evaluation was very favourable in terms of providing new parents with an awareness of water safety, but it was found that the DVD format may not be the best medium for providing parents with the message. It was found that a book format would be more desirable for new parents. While providing parents (and children) with the water safety message, the book format also supports government and educationalists who advocate for better literacy through support for families to read to children in the years prior to schooling.

The research has two research questions:

1. What are water safety issues for children under 5 across the diverse contexts of Australia?
2. What are important features of a book to engage under 5s?

## Method

The research was conducted across various contexts — from Tropical regions where there is ample water, through to dry arid regions with limited water; from urban cities to regional and remote areas; as well as across states. Five states were included in this study. The study included various cultures including migrant and Indigenous communities along with mainstream Australia. In total 48 people were interviewed.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded in a qualitative software package — NVivo — that allows for a grounded theory approach to be used. This approach allowed for themes to emerge from the data.





## Findings

The most salient finding to emerge from the data are

- The need to differentiate between *controlled* environments that are typically found in urban/city contexts and *uncontrolled* environments typically found in regional/country/remote areas. Being able to control an environment — such a pool in the backyard — is very different from the uncontrolled environments — such as rivers, water holes, dams — found in regional/country areas.
- Supervision of children applies to every context across Australia. The supervision may vary depending on the context, but families must be vigilant with young children.
- Being aware of the local context and the dangers present in that context.
- Teaching respect (not fear) of water is important
- Swimming lessons should be available to parents regardless of context or background
- Providing forums for parents to talk with other parents on water safety and swimming is important but appears to be absent in many non-urban settings.
- All participants said that they would read the book to children and that the water safety message is important for all sectors of Australian society.




# BACKGROUND

In 2017, Kids Alive undertook an evaluation of the Water Safety DVD given to new parents via the Bounty Bag scheme (Jorgensen, 2017). The Bounty Bag aims to provide new mothers with a gift bag that contains product information relevant to new parents. It seeks to give every new parent the Bounty Bag, in which the Kids Alive Water Safety DVD provides parents with key water safety messages, and to encourage parents to consider enrolling their young babies in swimming/water safety classes. The evaluation was conducted in concert with Bounty Bag as they have access to confidential client information which is not accessible to researchers for ethical and personal reasons. Bounty distributed an on-line survey to parents who had received the Bounty Bag and sought information about their experiences relevant to the Water Safety DVD. The key findings of the evaluation showed the following:

- The DVD is very successful in terms of its goal for introducing the water safety message with 84% of respondents reporting that it was a valuable source of water safety information and 93% recommending it.
- Within this cohort, over 30% of recipients reported that they had watched the DVD.
- While the viewing rate was low, 62% of respondents indicated that DVD prompted them to think about water safety.
- The DVD appeared to prompt 1 in 5 mothers to learn CPR.
- The DVD has also had a profound positive impact on those who have watched the DVD being 2.5 times more likely to take action and increase their awareness on water safety.
- Parents who watched the DVD are 4.5 times more likely to better understand how to make the environment safer for children under 5 than those who haven't watched it.

These data were a positive affirmation of the inclusion of a DVD in the Bounty Bag and that the DVD had a positive impact on new parents' awareness of water safety. Clearly for parents who watched the DVD, the importance of the water safety message had a significant impact with 2.5 times more parents reporting that they had enacted the water safety message than those who had not viewed the DVD. To this end, the inclusion of the water safety message in the Bounty Bag is a worthwhile endeavour and should be continued

However, within this evaluation, it was the case, that the viewing rate was quite low (30% reported viewing the DVD) which suggests that the media may not be the most appropriate for new parents. Within the evaluation, there were very positive recommendations that a book would be a better medium for distribution to new parents to promote water safety to this cohort of the Australian population.



This research is based on the proposal to develop a water safety book for inclusion in the Bounty Bag as it would appear to be a much better medium for conveying water safety to new parents. To ensure that a comprehensive book inclusive of all Australian children is forthcoming, this research investigated what were the water safety issues across the nation.

## Water Safety and Inclusion of All Australians

Accidental drowning is the most common risk of death for children under 5, and where swimming pools account for the largest proportion of drowning deaths. According to a major review published by Royal Life Saving Australia (RLSA) (2016) over the past 10 years, on average, 30 children under 5 drown each year (Royal Life Saving, 2017). In 2015, over half of the accidental drownings of under 5s occurred in swimming pools. In NSW alone, 128 children drowned in private swimming pools between July 1 2002 and June 30 2015. Most of the deaths occurred in backyard pools. Similar to the Kids Alive “Do the Five” message RLSA recommend that supervision of children and adequate fencing of pools is critical to reduce the accidental drowning of young Australian children. While the figures are alarming, many children have survived drowning and have significant and permanent life-long injuries.

Many new parents may not see water safety to be a part of their lives. This may be the case particularly for people who have not had water in their own lives as children or adults. The RLSA (2017) claimed that Indigenous, migrant and refugee communities are most at risk of drowning. Increasingly migrant parents who have had little contact with water in their earlier lives may not be aware of the potential dangers in the home and wider community that are posed for young children. This is borne out in the research conducted by royal Life Saving Australia (2017) who have reported that many Australians are now not able to swim the length of the pool. They hypothesised that this was due to many migrant families being unaware of the importance of swimming and water safety. To combat this growing trend, it is important for new parents, particularly those for whom water safety is not seen as a priority, to receive the water safety message. Targeting families for whom water safety is not part of the familial circumstances becomes a much greater priority given the emerging trends in the profile of the Australian public.



## From DVD to Book


The DVD evaluation (Jorgensen, 2017) showed that the DVD medium was not being taken up by parents in large numbers but was rather a catalyst for parents to think about water safety. Many parents commented on the viability of books to read to young children. The clear message in the book is to advocate and promote water safety for under-5s. Not only will the book aim to identify issues of water safety, but also have strategies to help support parents with their children.



## The Importance of Reading to Young Children

There is a corpus of research that shows the value of parents reading to young children. In some research, there are clearly identified cognitive and literacy benefits. For example, reading to young children under 3 (Fletcher, Cross, Tanney, Schneider, & Finch, 2008). In her work as a librarian, Elkin (2014) argued that the power of reading to young children is a powerful influencer on their later life chances, a view reinforced by others (Fahey & Forman, 2012; Gottfried, Schlackman, Gottfried, & Boutin-Martinez, 2015; Goux, Gurgand, & Maurin, 2017). Interventionist studies (e.g. Conner, 2018) have also shown that making literacy resources available (at no cost) to low income families assists parents to build the language and literacy skills of their children through reading to them. This is particularly important considering that many children from low SES backgrounds often struggle with literacy learning in school so making resources available to them in the home prior to school may help ameliorate some of differences observed in different social strata (Niklas & Schneider, 2013) but as Pollard-Durodola and colleagues (2011) caution, books alone may not be sufficient. Effective strategies are important, so parents may need support in how to read to their children as much as the provision of literacy resources per se.

There is a diverse research literature on strategies to support literacy development in pre-school children including reading aloud to the child/ren (Duursma, Augustyn, & Zuckerman, 2008); posing questions as the books are read to the child (Gavora, 2016); careful selection of appropriate books for the child (Dwyer & Neuman, 2008); the use of informational texts (Beatson, 2000); Other studies have focused on pre-reading skills including letter recognition and phoneme awareness (Brabham, Murray, & Shelly Hudson, 2006). While reading to the child, it was found that meaning making while reading was a key skill in building strong language skills (Hindman, Skibbe, & Foster, 2014). Reading to young, preschool children has been found to positive and significant effects on children in their later years – even up to 10 or 11 years of age (Kalb & van Ours, 2014).



Reading to young children, regardless of background, has a positive effect on literacy as established in the preceding sections but also on the quality of the interactional relationship between parents and children (Levy, Hall, & Preece, 2018; Santos, Fettig, & Shaffer, 2012), as well as the socio-emotional development of children (Santos et al., 2012). The frequency of reading to young children has been found to have a direct causal effect on their schooling outcomes regardless of their family background and home environment (Dept of Education and Early Childhood and Development, Vic, ND)

What the current research suggests is that reading to young children is highly beneficial. In this context, the proposal for a new resource — a book — for the Bounty Bag seems to be well placed. The 2017 evaluation of the Bounty Bag reinforced the value of a book over than the current DVD. Collectively, this suggests that a book is a much better option for the New Mothers Bounty Bag than the current DVD.



# THE CURRENT CONTEXT: WATER SAFETY ACROSS AUSTRALIA

Based on the outcomes of the Bounty Bag evaluation, the Kids Alive team have initiated a process to develop a children's water safety book. To ensure a comprehensive account of the diversity of contexts and needs across a very geographically, culturally, and climatic diverse nation, the Kids Alive team commissioned a research project to access the needs and diversity across the nation. The intent of the project was to capture the diversity of the nation to ensure that the book would be relevant to as many new parents as possible.

There are two aspects of the current projects. First is to access the water safety issues for under-fives across the diverse contexts in Australia. To access this diversity, research was conducted in many contexts that come to constitute the breadth of the geographical locations of the country included major cities, regional centres, and specific geographical/climatic areas (e.g. remote top end, pastoral regions, coastal areas). While the Kids Alive program has actively promoted water safety through the "Do the Five" campaign, the contexts in rural settings include water safety issues that are not encountered in the city. For example, it is not possible to fence dams, rivers or waterholes, so what are the issues confronted in the diverse settings across Australia. Collectively accessing insights into peculiarities of regions and the issues of water safety in the range of areas that constitute the Australian nation is important to recognise and celebrate. Ensuring the recognition and inclusion of the voices and experiences of Australians was basis for this research. The experiences of the respondents in these areas helped to provide a comprehensive account of the diversity of water safety across the nation that is shaped by geography and climate.

The second aspect of the project was to access views on what was the best format for a book for young children that would have the most impact on learning about water safety. A clear intent of the book was for parents to engage in reading to their children so that there was mutualistic learning about water safety for both parents and children. This is very important in a nation where there is a significant multicultural where immigrant parents may not be aware of the nuances of water safety across the nation.

## Water Safety Issues

The Kids Alive message is well received across Australia. The Kids Alive message has been actively taken up in public service announcements in various media including television (urban and regional), and radio. Along with media coverage, The Kids Alive team actively promotes water safety through their characters (Boo, Lifesaver Lil, Wise Owl, etc) in plays and books. Recently, a series of four books were distributed to every child care facility/education facility in Australia that works with children under 8. This saturation of the water safety message has resulted in widespread acknowledgement of the 5 step Kids Alive message:

- Fence the pool
- Shut the gate
- Teach your kids to swim — it's great
- Supervise — watch your mate
- And learn how to resuscitate.

The Kids Alive message is a strong one with an established market and brand message. This research extends the existing program by identifying water safety in regions across Australia. This will be used to inform the Kids Alive team on the most effective images/text and messages to include in the new book.

## Water Safety Book

The Kids Alive Team has already published a series of children's books — *Boo's Adventures* — that have been distributed to child care facilities across Australia. The series of four books covers four different settings found across Australia — farms, homes, pools and the beach — where water safety is an issue. The format of the proposed book will complement these existing books. The genre will align with the design of the former books so that there is a potential segue from the proposed book to the existing four books.

The Kids Alive team did not want to pre-empt the structure of the book, so the research was a catalyst for conversations to identify the breadth of water safety issues found across the nation. However, there is a strong sense from the Kids Alive team that the book should be based around the key events in a child's life (prior the child's birth, coming home from hospital, baby's first bath etc) and water safety issues of which parents need to be cognisant (checking for water hazards around the home, enjoying swimming lessons, establishing bath and bed time routines, etc).

The desktop publishers were asked to create four draft pages that would be used as part of the interviews to seek input from the participants. Based on four key aspects of under-5s experiences, the mock pages were baby's first bath in the hospital; bath time at home — including the water



conditioning experience; swimming with parents; and swimming without parents. The four pictures were designed to represent water safety issues but also as an example of the potential format for the book. These pages were used as the stimulus to access participants' feedback on design and whether (or not) they felt the books would be of interest to parents and children if they were to continue with this design. This iterative process aligns with the design used in the previous series which was productive in terms of a quality design that would appeal to families.

The desktop publishers were provided with a brief to capture the four key events; to ensure that the pictures were visually engaging particularly for young children; and they should represent the multicultural nature of Australian society.



Figure 1: Baby's first bath in hospital



Figure 2: Baby's bath at home 1



Figure 3: Lessons with parent in pool 1



Figure 4: Swimming independent of parent 1

The two-part research design thus sought to identify water safety issues across Australia and to seek input into the design of the book. There were two research questions guiding the evaluation. These two questions were:

## Research Questions.

1. What are water safety issues for children under 5 across the diverse contexts of Australia?
2. What are important features of a book to engage under 5s?



# THE RESEARCH PROCESS

To capture the diversity across the nation, participants were sought in various locations that represented the diversity of the nation. This included participants in major cities; large regional centres; coastal through to the desert areas; various lifestyles from urban to rural/agricultural.

## The Sample

The project used a purposive sampling process where specific cohorts of families were sought. Cohorts were sought that would provide insights into the diverse water safety issues endemic to their geographical location. The research team travelled to specific locations that would represent most the water hazards found across the nation.

Participants from a spread across the community was also sought. While it was not possible to ensure representativeness within any community due to the variation in sizes of communities, there is a sense that a range of perspectives were sought across the project. These included swim teachers, school teachers, parents, council representatives, community leaders (medicos, police), business operators. Participants were people who would have an informed view of water safety issues in their location based on their experience/role in that community.

Region	State	N	Issues
Major regional settings	Qld	4	Flash flooding, drains, water play parks, fountains, paddling pools (shells).
Regional settings	Qld	2	Flash flooding, drains.
Remote Indigenous communities	Qld WA	10	Supervision, crocodiles, water borne bacteria, water traps in fast flowing water.
Wet season	Qld	6	Crocodiles, supervision, flooding, fast moving water, changes in water (logs).
Desert Regions	NT WA	5	No real water issues, play with hoses, water very limited/scarce, occasional floods but young children don't go there.
Waterholes, rivers	Qld	2	Supervision, hot/cold spots in water holes, flooding, respect for water, clarity of water belies the fast flow.
Coastal communities	NSW Qld	6	Supervision, being beach aware — tides, waves, currents, difference between confidence in the pool and the beach.
Farming communities	Qld	2	Dams, supervision, vigilance, setting boundaries for young children.
Fishing communities	NT	3	Water safety associated with boating — lifejackets, crocodiles, vigilance and supervision — on land, boat ramps, and in the boat, overloading boat with people.
Urban Settings	Qld NSW	8	Supervision, water hazards in the home — pool, bath, buckets — swimming lessons, parents on phone not watching children.



## Interviews

Interviews were conducted as either a single interview or a small group interview. The context determined the format of the interview. Interviews were conducted in places identified by the participants and were shaped by the context – swimming centres, places of employment, coffee shops, schools, and so on. The interviews were informal and loosely structured. The clear majority of interviews were face-to-face, although there were a limited number of phone interviews (3). The interviews were conducted with two members of the research team and the participant/s, with the interview recorded and subsequently transcribed. Once transcribed, the audio files were deleted.

The interview consisted of two main sections. The first was associated with accessing water safety issues in the context. Participants were asked to discuss the water safety issues in their local environment. The questions were open-ended so as not to lead participants in their responses. The general format was to ask the participant “What are the major water safety issues in this region for young children – those not yet attending school?”.

The second section involved feedback and input into the proposed book. Participants were shown the four stimulus pages that have been developed for the book. They were asked to comment on the style of the illustrations; appeal to young children; suggestions for other pages that would be relevant to their context; and whether (or not) they would find the book/pages something that would motivate them to read the book to children.

## Data Analysis

Data consisted of transcripts of the interviews which were uploaded and coded using a grounded theory software package -NVivo. This package allows the researcher to code the data in categories as they emerge from the transcripts. Only after more than twenty interviews were conducted was it possible to identify potential emerging categories. As more interviews were undertaken, the database of categories increased. There was minimal refinement of the categories as the researcher waited until a comprehensive number of interviews had been undertaken across a wide cross section of the Australian demographics. NVivo allows counts of particular nodes or categories to be undertaken and for uploading relevant quotations.



# ISSUES OF WATER SAFETY

The results from the study showed that there is quite a difference across regional areas in Australia. This is hardly surprising given the proximity to water and the variation in water in different geographical locations. In the far northern regions where the weather is warm, tropical and subject to torrential downpours, the water safety issues are vastly different from the dry desolate regions of Central Australia where there is limited water and indeed where water is often very scarce. The research design enabled voices from the diverse geographical, cultural, and social areas to be included in the study. This enabled a reasonable representation of the breadth of experiences across the nation to be included.





# REGIONAL FEEDBACK

Tropical North | Farming Regions | Central Desert | Urban Settings | Beach Regions



# TROPICAL NORTH

The tropical north of Australia appears to have a number of inter-related themes. With this climate, there is a deluge of rain, particularly in the wet season, that creates flooding scenarios. These flood situations may vary across locations but the issues are similar. Intertwined with the flooding are issues around crocodile awareness and safety. While there is ample signage around crocodile awareness, participants alerted the team to the issues around crocodiles per se but also their appearance with flooding. The issues can be summed in the comment below:

*Youth Worker/ Swim Pool Manager: We've got kids in the rivers so there are safety issues there around crocodiles obviously and currents and that. Then also during the wet season we have a lot of flood water around. Kids love to play in the flood water, there is obviously problems to do with contamination and diseases there.*

## Crocodile Safety

In the northern coastal regions, there was a very large contingent of people (all participants) noted the issues around crocodile awareness and safety. Crocodiles inhabit the waterways in these areas so that families and children need to be aware of these animals. This applied particularly in playing in and around waterways and structures (such as boat ramps).

As these sites were in the northern parts of Australia where during the tropical wet season there is widespread flooding. With these deluges, the water often comes into, or close to, residential areas.

*Youth Worker/Pool Manager: ... during the summer months you'll find plenty of kids just jumping in the river and moving about the rivers and they all know what's in there but they go swimming the crossing a lot, even when the flood waters come in, they'll just sort of play in the flood waters all the time and don't really realised that when the floods come up the crocs come in too.*

Along with the water, comes crocodiles and other animals. Families reported having to go from one area, such as a home or farm, into town via a boat as places were isolated. It was commonplace to see crocodiles. Being vigilant and aware of them was essential for these areas.

**Swim Teacher:** *It would be about one of the things, would be about awareness of where you are swimming. Of the river or creek, being aware of crocodiles and snakes and that sort of stuff.*

While crocodiles were cited by nearly all the Far North participants as an issue, the floods and seasons brought other animals out and hence awareness of these was also important. Only one parent commented specifically of the dangers of the other animals (snake) but it is noteworthy.

**Parent:** *<name> is a little girl and she was about 5, she was down in the shallow water here with a friend and she looked like a happy meal for a snake. So yeah a python decided that she was a small enough meal. .... so yes I guess what I am saying is snakes even though they do tend to stay away, it is still part of the natural environment. More so here than crocodiles.*

The theme of crocodiles was a very dominant one across all sites in the Far North. While there are 'croc aware' notices across the region, the crocodiles inhabit much of the landscape of the region. Local people were cognisant, and sometimes complacent, about crocodiles.

**Council Youth Manager:** *There are warning signs there about the swimming and that, I guess those too need to be kept up and regularly checked. During the flood we don't get a lot of visitors here, we are pretty isolated but during the dry we do get them here and they go down to the boat ramps or river edges and that. That is concerning with crocs*

However, as the above comment illustrates, many participants also noted that they would often see tourists engaging in behaviours that would put them and their families at risk of a crocodile attack. The more ferocious crocodile, the saltwater croc, posed a serious threat in these regions. In some areas, there were freshwater crocs which are less dangerous but still need to be approached with caution.



## Flooding

With the wet season comes a lot of rain and flooding. This impacted differently across the data sites. For many of the younger people in the communities, flood time was a time for fun and adventure with a lot of risk-taking behaviours.

**Council Youth Manager:** *Rocky Creek that floods or rises and the kids stand on top of the bridge there on the rails and jump in. That's a huge concern for us. There is only certain amount of time through the day that we can be there and get them out of there. We can't police it and the police can't police it. So, what they do is they'll sit up one end of the river sometimes and then they'll raft down on tyres or anything they can get hold of. We have them injuring themselves, cutting themselves, getting speared with sticks.*

## Flash flooding

In some regions, flash flooding resulted in drains and waterways being filled very quickly resulting in children either being swept up in the current, or children electing to play in the rapid waters. Some of the issues identified by the participants included:

- Playing in drains
- Playing in natural water flows, such as spillways or waterfalls
- Playing in low lying areas, such as backyards or playgrounds
- Jumping from bridges into swollen rivers/creeks
- Playing in eddies at the edge of a fast-flowing water source

Typically, these applied to older children but also meant that parents and caregivers needed to be aware of water safety for younger children and to be vigilant around these scenarios.


## Hidden obstacles

The floods bring with them a range of debris – logs, branches, foreign objects of all sorts. These can lodge in the river in places which had previously been clear. Being aware that the water course can be very different with the potential to trap, or in some cases impale people. Being trapped against a submerged log can result in water washing over a person.

**Business Owner:** *It is a flood area so in the wet season the water can come up quite rapidly and so you have trees and whatever washed down during that time.*

While there were concerns expressed about hidden debris, there were comments also made about the debris floating through the waterways and causing dangers for locals.

**Council Youth Manager:** *So when the wet comes, it's almost like a clean out for the countryside, so you've got logs, you've got everything floating through the river all the time.*



## Changes in the water

The flooding can create very different water courses. What may have been gentle streams or calm ponds, became raging torrents with currents that can potentially sweep children away. Being in a calm eddy, may be fun, but coming too close to the fast-flowing water can create dangerous situations.

*Park Owner: There is a current here even though it's only slow. It does change, the water can change a lot, a lot can be brought down. Just teaching awareness and not to be complacent and that it isn't a swimming pool and it does change and that where there wasn't a log yesterday there could be a log today.*

## Crocodiles

As noted in the earlier section, crocodiles figured predominantly in the responses of participants in the northern coastal regions. The flooding brought water levels closer to homes, and with that, came crocodiles.





## FARMING REGIONS

While there were issues around flooding noted by those working on the land, the main theme from farming communities was the 'uncontrollable' nature of water in farm areas. Unlike the Tropical North, farming regions could not control *access* to water. It was not possible to fence the waterways on properties such as dams and rivers, so families need to be vigilant with children.

### Uncontrolled Water Environments


Water access was an issue noted by farming communities. There was a need for livestock to access dams, rivers and water troughs/tanks that meant water sites cannot be fenced. This meant that water safety in these areas is very different from the Kids Alive message of "*fence the pool, shut the gate*" as this is not possible to fence these areas.

*Manager: ... it's a natural habitat we can't put fences up. I think it would detract from why people come here to which is for children's safety yeah maybe it [fencing] should be done but this is the natural environment. You can't fence every waterway in Australia.*

For some people on the land, the only option to control water access was to fence the house block to keep children in a controlled area.

### Creeks, Rivers and Lakes

The natural environments of the land posed threats to young children. Supervision was important for safety. There were the obvious issues with drowning in water ways and the need to be vigilant. These are noted across this report. However, as one parent noted, there were other issues associated with the natural water ways that were not so obvious. In her case, the muddy banks were not deep with water, but were slippery and 'sucked' her child down so that he could not release himself from the mud which was dangerous when he was face down in the mud.



**Parent:** *I had an incident with one of my kids, they were playing around a little creek, didn't have a lot of water in it but they were all just on the grass from the embankment and one of them slipped down because it was a muddy edge and slipped down and got stuck in the mud, his feet were on the embankment but he went face down with hands in the mud and the mud, I pulled him up and the mud was just sucking him down. So it was like basically lifting him up by his shirt, I said take a breath you are going back down because I couldn't hold on, I let go and got a good grip but the mud just suctions them in. It was shallow water but he was face down in muddy water.*

Being aware of the changes in the water was seen as important in uncontrolled areas. The rise of water, the speed at which the water is flowing, crossing rivers, and hidden debris were frequent references. They are summed up in the following comment:

**Community worker:** *I think just about the hazardous water and when crossing things, it's something that they have to do every day when it's wet season but a young kid to really understand about the flow of the river and the height and where to and where not to cross and what could actually be in the water.*

## Wandering Off

For most people on the land, their biggest concern was children wandering off and going to the water. This was a very common concern noted by the participants who lived in uncontrolled water areas. Most participants had a story of their children 'disappearing' in the blink of an eye and their first point to check were the water sources. For many rural participants, the fear of their children (or young ones) wandering off and into water was a very real fear and danger.


## Develop Respect for Water

When families cannot control access to water, many said that they developed healthy attitudes towards water in their children. For some this meant that from an early age they taught their children to be a bit 'fearful' of the water so that they would not venture near it. For some families, they told their young children that snakes lived in the dams so that they would not venture near them. The setting of boundaries either overtly or covertly featured in their discussions on how to manage children around water.

**Farmer:** *In Central NSW, we had a creek behind us, ... and it was normally a dry creek but when it flooded it came up and we moved there with little kids and we gave them a limit of where they could go to and we told them there were crocodiles in the creek, which apparently everyone did for their dams but 5 years later when they were 10 and 11... 'Oh we're bored.' 'Well go down and play then in the creek.' It was dry. 'But we're not allowed in the creek.' So, we had installed that message to them and it had stuck. Setting limits. We were amazed that they still stuck to it.*

It was stressed that making children water-aware was important, it was equally important to develop a love (not fear) of the water. One family would put life jackets on their children, throw them into the fast-flowing creek, while another parent waited at a point to 'catch' the child. This process was a fun activity but at the same time made the children very aware of the feeling on being in a flooded and





fast flowing water body; made them aware of what do to in such situations (swim across, not against, the water); and showed them not to panic if they ever found themselves in the swollen waterways.

**Manager:** *xx had two babies while working by being here, they were raised in this environment with the creek behind us so one thing that they used to do when the kids were little was when the water was flowing but not really fast would be to put them in the water and teach them how to survive in flowing water. Teaching them to flip onto their back to rest. Not to fight the current and eventually they would end up at the bank, the water would automatically take them back to the bank.*

Setting boundaries and rules for being near water was also seen to be important. Instilling water safety rules in young children was seen to be an important skill to develop in young children

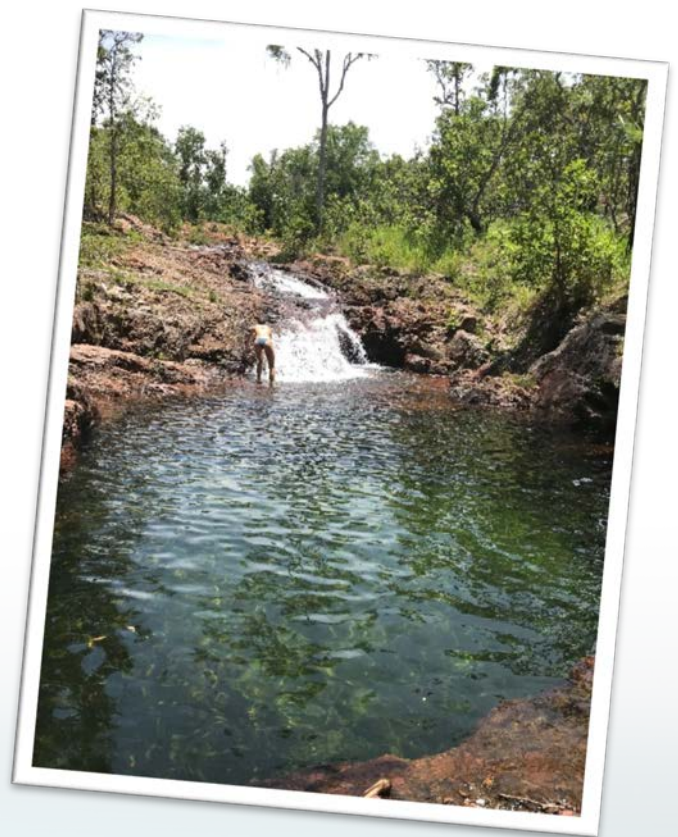
**Parent:** *Teaching your kids to respect the water, setting boundaries of you don't go past here without a big person and teaching them to respect the dangers of water while still loving water and they do.*



## CENTRAL DESERT

Being an arid climate, issues with water safety were not as evident in the comments offered by the participants from the desert regions. Due to the scarcity of water, few people had access to regular, natural bodies of water or swimming pools. Few people used backyard play pools but did say that the children might access a hose for water play. Being sandy soil, the water drained away quickly so that there were minimal safety issues in terms of bodies of water.

In some regions, there was flooding particularly in the wet season. Much like their peers in tropical areas, the floods posed similar issues around currents, submerged logs, changes in the water etc as noted by those participants in the tropical areas. Perhaps unique to the desert context was access to waterholes – some which were permanent while others were seasonal.



## Waterholes

While the desert areas may be arid and very dry, there is often a surprise little oasis in the middle of a gorge. These can be very tempting, particularly when the weather has been hot, and the water looks inviting. Being aware of the nuances of water holes is important, not only in flood times, but also when they are fed by natural water sources such as springs. The temptation of cooling off should be tempered with a knowledge of the potential dangers of these holes. While submerged branches, debris, etc have been mentioned in other sections of the report, they also apply to waterholes, but as parents and local people noted, there are other more nuanced dangers of these sites, in particular the changes in temperatures as well as the very cold water.

*Parent: If you don't know the country and you look at it and it looks dry and to a certain extent uninviting but there are so many wonderful little places that there is water. So we went for a drive, ... and found a nice little spring and went for a swim, however, it only got the sun for an hour a day so on the edges it was warm but once you swam out into the shade it was actually really cold. That's another thing to be aware of that your kids could get into trouble with cramps and it was very deep. So that's the other thing if you don't know what the depth is it can be sharp drop offs, there could be mud that you could get stuck in and water temperatures can vary from one spot to another.*

The changes in the temperatures of the water holes was specifically noted:

*Parent: And it wouldn't take much to get into trouble at those temperatures. So, in the summer we swim around looking for the cold spot and in winter we are swimming around looking for the warm spot and it happens overnight. So that's another thing. A kid might jump in the water one day and it's warm and the next day, relatively freezing and they could get into trouble then.*



## URBAN SETTINGS

Supervision was seen to be the most salient issue cited by the participants. All urban participants made reference to this point. Water hazards in the urban context were seen to be those around the home – the swimming pool; bath time; water containers such as buckets and dog bowls. The mantra of the Kids Alive program was evident in the comments made by all participants – fencing the pool, securing the water, supervision, and first aid.

### Supervision Around the Pool

Most of the participants had access to a personal pool or via family or close friends so the pool. There were many comments pertaining to the need for close supervision of young children around the pool area.

**Grandparent:** *As a grandmother, I never let the children into the pool without me. They know that they are not allowed near the pool if I am not there as I know they can climb the fence – they are very resourceful.*

**Parent:** *Just don't leave your kid unattended and make sure you have some sort of fence up. A friend of mine was at a kids' party and they had kids in the pool and then on a patio a little while away they had parents having lunch and totally having a great time and the parents weren't, they could see the pool from the room but they weren't actually actively supervising the pool. So, nothing happened thankfully but you just think in a situation like that if the parents weren't there. If you are supervising, you need to be actively supervising*

**Parent:** *Probably main game is around the pool and with; I mean you've always got to supervise them. That's the major thing, if you are, the fence is probably the most important thing around the pool, obviously kids are climbing fences and unlocking them. Parent discipline too around pools.*

## Toys in the Pools

Aside from the obvious dangers promoted in the Kids Alive message, a new danger was highlighted by a number of the urban parents. They drew attention to the dangers of big floatation toys in the pool. These toys posed a potential danger for children who may get trapped underneath them.

*Parent: Nowadays there are massive toys, massive blow up toys that go in the pools and I've seen a couple of times kids sort of come up and there was a toy above their head and they can't get up. So they are stuck under the water with a kid on top of the toy, you know, other kids at that age aren't aware of it. I think that's a major thing with pools in the backyards, is big sort of blow up toys. Small ones are alright, little rings and things like that but now you get these massive big swans that are 2 metres wide and they take up half your pool, just to sit in your pool and yeah the kids don't realise that when they dive under and come up and they can't get up. I've seen it a couple of times. I reckon that is one of the major things is major big blow up toys.*

There were comments related to the need to be physically and mentally supervising the children. The term used by the second parent in this series of comments uses the term “actively supervising” to signify the need to be engaged with the supervision of young children around water. Some parents commented on the impact of telephones, and social media, as being potential distractions to quality supervision.

*Parent: Parents should never be on the phone when their kids are near the water. It is too easy to get distracted while on the phone and before you know, the kid can be under the water. Drowning is silent.*


*Swim teacher: I see parents coming to swimming lessons and sitting on the side of the pool playing with their phones rather than focus on their children. It is only 30 mins of swim time. They should be interested in their child, and their child's safety. It would be easy enough for a child to slip off a platform and into the water. Parents and teachers are responsible for the child so it would be great if parents paid attention to their child when they are in lessons. The kids would love it.*

## Bath Time

Bath time was also described as an area of need for supervision. As noted in the most recent Surf Life Saving Annual report (2018), accidental drowning in the bath was the largest cause of death in under 5s, so this remains an area of concern. Some parents explicitly commented on the need to ensure supervision during bath time. Even as children aged, it was an area where they may lose their balance and go under the water.

*Parent: You can just become complacent and think they are fine in a swimming pool why wouldn't they be fine in a bath?*

*Parent: You've got the younger babies where you've got your dangers of the bath and bucket and all that sort of thing but I think the younger they are, hopefully, the more parents realised that they have to supervise because they are hands on with everything, that they are always close to them with everything that they do. Once the kids start to become a bit more independent that supervision starts to wane.*



**Parent:** Baths are a big thing where parents are ducking out for a minute cooking or doing something else. I've got a friend who has a four-year-old and she pretty much runs the bath half full, puts four-year-old in the bath and then goes and cooks dinner and she leaves her in there for half an hour. She's a beginner swimmer and she's not fully confident but I mean she's able to sit up and walk and talk and all that but what happens if she slips back and hits her head and is underwater and Mum's not going to check on her for another 5 minutes and it's just because they think okay, they are mobile.

Others were considered in the supervision of older children. They had strict rules in place for when older children were unattended in the bath.

**Parent:** Now that my kids are a little bit older, 6 and 4, we just let them have a bath by themselves and they are fine. There's always rules. No standing up. Slipping over and bumping your heads obviously are major concern for the bath but again we put the rules in place, they know not to do that, our kids know not to do that and no jumping around or standing up in the bath.

## Household Dangers

There were many obstacles around the home that can be potential hazards. These included the buckets of water that were left around; wading pools that were not emptied; eskies that had been filled with ice for drinks and where the ice had melted;

**Teacher:** It is easy enough to leave buckets around the yard – you know for the dog or just fill up with rain water. These are a potential hazard. It doesn't take a lot of water for a kid to drown in.

**Parent:** Those blow up pools or blue plastic pools are a real danger if they are not emptied out. Kids can easily wander into one, slip and drown. They need to be emptied or put in an area where kids can't get to them.

**Parent:** One of the big dangers I see are eskies. You know, you have the party the night before and the esky has been left out overnight. The ice had melted so it is now filled with water. The child has a look in and overbalances. They are top heavy as their heads are still a bit bigger than their bodies so they fall head first into the water. Parents need to be responsible and empty out the esky the night before.

## Mobile Phones

Closely related to the comments made across the study around supervising children, there were specific comments made in relation to mobile phones that seemed to be common in the urban interviews. Here, participants raised concerns that parents/carers would come to swim lessons or be seen at the pool but would be heavily engaged with their mobile phones rather than supervising or watching the children. Not only were they missing out on the children's enjoyment and successes in their swimming lessons, it was seen as important that parents/carers also keep a vigilant eye on their children while in lessons or at the pool. While supervision is provided by teachers and/or life guards, it is still the responsibility of parents/carers to watch out for the children.



## Uncontrolled Water Areas

As noted in other sections of this report, there are areas that cannot be controlled. In urban settings these varied but included canals, lakes, parks, and river walkways. For example, as one parent indicated, families can have all dangers in the home catered for but the natural environment posed dangers. Again, this pointed to the need for vigilance and supervision of young children.

*Parent: I guess on the Gold Coast you have got the canals in the back of the houses. We don't have one on ours but the houses across the road; it just goes down to the canal, so there is no real fence stopping you to walk to the canal. The pool is fenced but the canal is there. You can just walk straight down to the canal. So, say a two-year-old, who was out of the house and just wandered down to the canal.*

Like the Tropical North, urban areas also had water in drains that were enticing to young children. Teaching children of the dangers posed by these environments, along with supervision, was seen to be important for urban children.

*Parent: I remember when my own kids were boogie boarding in the street and they couldn't understand why I told them off about it, they just didn't understand the dangers. There is a lid on the drain, yeah but you can't see if that's popped up. The kids are oblivious about, they don't really have the education about it. They just think oh yeah that's big open drain... they think it's not going to happen to them and they're just having fun and mum is just being the fun police.*

Urban participants also recognised that there can be a lot of misperceptions of water in the urban settings. While surf may pose an obvious challenge, the still waters of an inland bay also have challenges that families need to be aware of for the safety of young children

*Parent: I think there is a false sense of security around the Bay area because when people see the surf they think; danger, it's rough. They don't want to take their families in there but I think they are not correct because when they are in the Bay area it is easy access, it looks safe, it looks calm but in reality, but I think they are not aware of the issues under the water. Different depth, currents. I could say currents but maybe not because the area that I am it is completely flat.*

## Disciplining Children

While there is a sense that parents must take the onus of responsibility for monitoring their children's whereabouts and safety, some parents also discussed the importance of children to be schooled in the rules around water safety and the notion of consequences if they disobeyed the rules.

*Parent: I think it comes back to controlling your kids' discipline. They know [that if] they do that they know they get punished. Our kids do anyway. Our kids haven't even tried to do that. I think it all comes back to the parents and educating and disciplining your kids to know the rules around the pool [and other areas].*



# COASTAL COMMUNITIES

While issues relating to the urban contexts were also cited by beach residents, they also cited hazards that were unique to the beach. Being aware of the tides and waves were at the forefront of many of the participants. Participants also were aware that the water movements at the beach were very different from swimming in still water such as a pool. Because of these differences, it was cited that parents/carers needed to be aware of the differences and that water safety skills learned in still water may not apply at the beach. Again, supervision was an important, if not key, consideration by participants in this cohort.


*Parent: ...obviously living 500m from the beach we're always at the beach, just being aware of when you are at the beach, being aware of the surf. They are obviously too young to be able to learn about the surf at that age so you are always going to be with them at that age.*

## Reading the Ocean: Rips, Currents, Waves

There was a strong sense that the beach participants were aware of the very nuanced context created by waves and how these can impact on water safety. Participants were aware of the potential of waves to become a threat to young children. Waves could easily knock children off their feet or overbalance them, thus submerging them. It was also the case that some participants were aware that waves could also wash children back into deeper water, and/or that the waves themselves created deeper water.

*Parent/Instructor: Then you've got, of course, the rips where they could be in the sea water, just swimming in the wrong spot and all of a sudden they get pulled out of their depth and often you'll have parents who have 2 or 3 year old, 4 year old and then they've got a baby as well. So they are letting the older just play around in shallow water and Mum is standing a metre or two back with baby in arms or they are sitting on the sand playing and as soon as that child loses their footing, or ends up face down, there is not much they can do they've got a baby in their arms and they've only got one hand to pick up that child and if that child is getting pulled out they are in a situation where they do put the baby doing in potentially shallow water and the same thing could happen to the baby while they go get the other child*





**Parent:** *I think the main thing in this area when there are so many beaches just parents being aware at the dangers of the beach and it's not just rips getting pulled out of their depth but I find in swimming lessons the parents get confidence in their kids once they can propel themselves or turn and get themselves back, they don't realise that at the beach they'll let them play in knee deep water and a little wave comes along knocks them off their feet and if it's too deep they can't touch the bottom and they can't get themselves back up and they don't to put their feet down to get themselves back up because they are so used to using their hands to push themselves up in the swimming pool or on the step or wall. If they can't get their hands down, their head is still under and you know it can take a while for the wave to come up and recede back down and meanwhile they are in a floating position they are not facedown floating, they don't realise that they have to get their feet underneath them to get them to stand up.*

**Parent:** *It is always important face to the water so that you can read the waves and ensure that the child is safe.*

There was also the issue of rips. Swimming between the flags was cited as a precaution that parents/families should heed when at the beach as many adults were unable to read the water conditions. This is discussed in more detail below in a separate section.

**Parent:** *Parents need to be aware of the rips. These can drag people out into waters where there is potential to drown. It is important for parents to get their kids to swim between the flags at all times.*

## False Confidence

The parents who participated in the beach component of the study all had children at swimming lessons. These lessons were all being undertaken in a swimming pool. Some participants recognised that was quite a difference between the still waters of a pool and the movement of water at the beach. Participants commented that parents need to be aware that while their child might be a confident swimmer in still water, the demands imposed by the beach are very different. The water safety skills of the pool – such as “monkey monkey” where the child shimmy around the edge of the pool – are not applicable in the beach context where they could be sitting at the edge of the water, get knocked over and have nothing to grab on to.

**Parent:** *I think it is important for parents to realise that if they are at the beach, the water safety skills learned at swimming lessons probably don't help if the kid is dumped by a wave, even a little wave knocking them over, can be a problem if the kid can't get back on their feet or bottom.*

**Parent/Teacher:** *The ocean, I think the main problem with the ocean is kids, they see the ocean and they think they can swim in it and go straight in and I'd say, like, you want to have your kids learn how to swim somewhere that is stable, that doesn't have waves and is safer and then you do surf safety after that.... It's just getting true basic swimming skills and then go in the ocean.*




## Swim Between the Flags

Even with supervision, it was seen to be important for families to remain between the flags. Playing in between the flags meant that the lifesavers were on hand and that the conditions of the water were more likely to be safer than when outside the flags.

**Teacher:** *It is important for parents to model good behaviour so talking about swimming between the flags is a good starting point. Parents should always teach and model to their children about swimming between the flags.*

**Parent:** *Swimming between the flags is a massive thing and a lot of people don't do it and they are normally the people that get rescued but from a child's point of view you've got to be there until they are confident and know about rips and teaching them. Obviously get them into surf lifesaving is a big thing. Both my kids, well one is now and when the other one is older enough next year she'll be in surf lifesaving. They learn about rips and the dangers of rips and all the other dangers and surf and they get their skills up and they are the ones that go out and save the other people*





# INTERIM SUMMARY FROM ACROSS GEOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL LOCATIONS

Across the geographic locations there were many differences that were shaped by the context. The most salient difference between urban and non-urban settings was the nature of the water access. In urban settings, there was far greater capacity to control access to water than for non-urban settings. The city/urban participants reinforced the Kids Alive water safety message particularly around pools - fence the pool, shut the gate etc. There was a greater propensity for urban families to have access to pools either in their homes or of families or friends. This made access to backyard pools a very common experience.


In contrast to the urban settings, participants in non-urban settings drew attention to the need for consideration of uncontrolled water settings. These were settings where access to water could not be controlled -such as dams, rivers, large water masses such as lakes or springs. In these contexts, vigilance needed to be exercised so that young children were always under supervision. There were many examples cited by the participants as to the challenges posed in contexts where access to water could not be controlled.

A further dimension was that of the tropical north of Australia. This area which can be roughly considered as being north of the Tropic of Capricorn (roughly the latitude north from Rockhampton) and extended through Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia. Crocodiles and flooding in the wet (monsoon) season were seen to be very important considerations for water safety for young children in these areas.

## Early Years Swimming and Water Safety Lessons

Across the study, there was a constant message about the importance of young children learning to swim and water safety for under 5s. Participating in early year swimming not only gave the children confidence in their swimming potential, but also gave access to water safety. Many participants saw this as important but also cautioned that such participation did not ameliorate for supervision. Parents need to keep a vigilant eye on their children when in or near water regardless of location.

Water safety/swimming lessons were more accessible in populated areas, but as communities become more isolated, access to formal swimming lessons was diminished. Some remote councils provided highly subsidised lessons for families but were constrained by the capacity to provide swimming instructors for early years. It was noted that access to formal swimming in remote locations was generally limited to non-Indigenous families. There were many comments on how to encourage Indigenous families to attend formal swimming for younger children. As one Indigenous community



member explained, Indigenous families do not access formal swimming lessons and it is taught mainly through a survival approach. Learning through experience, which was scaffolded, was how the children learned about their environment.

**Indigenous Parent:** *[they learn swimming through] Survival. If it's deep don't go there. That's how we do that, during a flood with a car and stuff like that... with the car and swim across, if you've got a river and want to get from this side of the bank to that side of the bank you can't just swim straight across, you've got to go up a couple of Ks up so you can swim... to get across.... No swimming lessons.*

# GENERAL COMMENTS

While there was considerable diversity across the geographic locations, there were many common themes that emerged from the data. The commonalities may have been represented differently/similarly across contexts, but they were on a theme. The most commonly expressed theme was around the need for supervision of children – whether in the external environment (such as pools, rivers, lakes or dams) or in the home (most particularly around bathing children). Within the theme of supervision, it was recognised that different contexts (such as the tropical north with flooding and crocodiles or urban settings with swimming pools) shaped different forms of supervision. Similarly, there was a recognition that families and communities had different ways of supervision. In the nuclear family of the urban setting there was close supervision by the immediate family. This was in contrast to rural or Indigenous families where the extended family/community took responsibility for supervision of young children.

## Supervision of Children

For different contexts, the concept of supervision varied. In mainstream Australia, the concept of supervision is often tied to parent/caregivers providing direct supervision of children. *Kids Alive* advocate that in the context of water safety, children should always be within arm's reach. Across the study, there was a strong awareness of supervision of young children. However, there were some issues with supervision and how this was enacted within/across various contexts. Supervision was seen to be the biggest issue across the study.

**Swim teacher:** *Supervision is a huge one, even with the awareness, the amount of times you see kids swim in the dam, or whatever they are doing, you know, and adults just aren't around and no one is really keeping a watch on those kids. I think that's the biggest one actually. Sending kids out, kids going out to play on their own and rocking up to the pool.*

There is often a strong sense of community in rural towns and Indigenous communities where people look out for each other. This can result in children playing in or near water without adult supervision, or young children going to the local pool with older siblings, that is, without adult supervision.

**Swim Teacher:** *I imagine my message is the same as everybody's. Keep watch! You're not going to let them go on their own until they are big enough to go on their own. That's a big issue here, is parents not supervising kids. You know I would imagine a lot of community's are similar. Kids are kind of wandering themselves, so you end up with nine and ten-year-old siblings taking their five and six-year-olds and four-year-olds to the pool and the pool is trying to manage that and not let them in but that's hard too because you know, you want to go to the pool and you've got your little sister hanging around and you still want to be able to do that so Mums and Dads have to got to be with your kids when they are little.*

This was particularly problematic in the wet season when water levels were high, changing, or quick flowing, and often with crocodiles. Being vigilant and supervising children needed to be a higher priority in these communities.

## Culture and Supervision

Within the remote/regional/Indigenous communities, there is a greater sense of community and looking out for each other than what is typically found in urban settings. This can be a positive, but it does have implications for water safety for young children. In some of the remote Indigenous communities, there is a strong familial tie where older siblings look after younger siblings.

**Indigenous Parent:** *Big kids go running and swimming and keep an eye on the little kids on the bank. The mothers and fathers are always on the banks with the little kids but if it's too deep then they don't go in.*

The notion of the family taking responsibility for children and siblings was a feature of the comments around Indigenous families.

**Swim Teacher:** *It's not only Indigenous families but probably more so and I think that's familial care I suppose is something that happens more in Indigenous families. It's not just Mum and Dad looking after kids, it's whole families looking after kids. So, it might be cousin, sister, uncle, aunty. It might be aunty who is only two years older than Mary but they are the ones looking after the kids, so that's a real challenge.*

This was not seen to be adequate supervision particularly, particularly in the current context of litigation and care, where the older sibling was primary school age and, in many cases, not a strong swimmer themselves. Some community pools had implemented regulations whereby supervising siblings had to be over a particular age (usually about 16 years) and had to genuinely supervise their younger siblings.


**Youth worker/Pool Manager:** *So, the issues of the pool, the big issues, there is little kids coming in by themselves. We have a rule in place that kids under the age of 10 have to be accompanied by a family member over 16. I know a lot of the kids don't like it that way but that's the way that we feel, that makes it safest for them around the pool.*

It is not that the issues relate to Indigenous families only. As some of the rural/remote families noted, in some of the communities and small towns there was a great sense that the community took responsibility for other people's children and there was an awareness of where children were. This was usually in the context of when a community/town was inundated with water in the wet season and children loved to play in the flood waters.

**Swim Instructor:** *Not as many [Indigenous] as we do white families [come to swim class]. As the kids get bigger, we get more Indigenous kids because can come themselves. Mum and Dad only have to sign them up, they don't have to bring them but when they are little and you're talking Water Familiarisation babies, toddlers, early learn to swim. They just start the kids with the really engaged parents who bring them along, you know, which is a real challenge.*

## Uncontrolled Contexts and Supervision

There were contexts where the natural environment – such as rivers, ponds, dams, lakes, or water holes – demanded greater supervision. The unpredictability of these uncontrolled environments requires close supervision of young children.



**Council Officer:** *We do have a lot of rivers in <this> Shire so we go camping a lot as well, so we have to be mindful that none of these rivers are fenced so that you've got, you've also got crocodiles in <this> Shire as people have mentioned here and there is a lot of wetlands and stuff so you do have to be mindful that when you are out camping you don't let your kids kind of have free range because there are swamp lands but really just a lot of waterways but unfenced with potential lethal animals in them.*

**Business Owner:** *This is a tourist destination, so I guess one of the areas of concern would be that it's a different environment for kids to be swimming in and just parents need to be aware that it's not a swimming pool. There is no lifeguards and they need to keep an eye on their kids.*

Some of the issues raised by the participants directly related to water, while others were a little indirect. In the quote below, the parent raised the concern of the general environment where children can slip over on rocks (or other features of the environment) and be at risk via these environmental factors.

**Park Manager:** *Rocks. Like we've got a little waterfall there ... but again it's getting over vegetated now but you know kids can slip on the rocks and hit their head so just supervision.*

While the contexts varied considerably across the study, there is a marked difference between urban and non-urban contexts in terms of the ability to control (or not) the water environment. While it is recognised that most deaths of young children occur in backyard pools in urban contexts (RLSA, 2017), these environments are more able to be controlled, that is, by fencing. Such practices are not possible in the natural environments.

## Life Jackets for Children and Adults

Often the water safety issues in 'uncontrolled' environments could cause problems for children, it was important that parents/carers also remained safe. Swimming in waterways, complete with the water issues identified across the study, parents need to ensure their safety. One of the ways that this was achieved in some places was through wearing life jackets by both the child and the parent. This kept both parties safe which was important in areas where the water could be a bit dangerous –either with currents or temperatures.

**Swim Teacher:** *Yes we were at Crystal Creek or somewhere and a child was in the water on a boogie board and he started getting swept out a little bit and the Dad thought that he would be able to walk and it just dropped off quite fast and I had <my young son> and he was just months old, we were just sitting there taking turns having a swim, I was holding <my son> and said <husband's name> you have to go in, he jumped in and brought them both back.*

One of the strategies shared in the project was for parents to wear life jackets or wearing safety vests when playing with their children in or near water. If the child/ren do experience problems, the parent/carer is better able to offer support if they are also safe.

**Parent:** *When the kids were little was when I would go swimming. I would also wear a life jacket because if the children got into trouble I would be better able to cope with helping rather than them dragging me down. So, I wore a life jacket.*

*Park Owner: We do get a lot of traveling parents here and most of them tend to bring their lifejackets for their babies.*

## Boat Safety

Within communities where there is a strong affinity with water; boating and fishing, there was a need to recognise water safety associated with boating. While there are laws governing the use of boats and safety, in remote areas, this could be difficult to police. This included making sure that boats were not overcrowded and that young children wore life jackets. Participants in the more isolated areas, in particular, noted issues around boat safety as being important considerations for water safety for all people, but particularly younger children.

*Community Youth Manager: Sometimes we've been out fishing and seen some of these small boats [over]loaded so some of them aren't [observing laws].*

There were also other issues around boat safety that were noted, including preparation for journeys. Usually in the Tropical North boating was in shark and crocodile water ways.

*Community Youth Manager: Knowing their boats, knowing if they've got enough fuel to get where they are going to because a lot of them go out to the islands. We've had not just Indigenous but non-Indigenous people that you think would have smarts about them, take a boat out and got stuck on a sand bar and then ran out of fuel. Trying to get back in, gave the wrong location to the ones that were going out to rescue them, they ran out of fuel trying to rescue them and had to come back.*

In many of the parks, there were water features on or near the property. Many tourists travel with, or hire on site, boats or kayaks so that they can enjoy the water. The comments again reinforced the importance of wearing lifejackets for young children when in the water.

*Park Manager: They [parents] don't ask about water safety. They ask about where they can swim but they don't ask necessarily about water safety and it is the law about any boat you have to wear a life jacket under the age of 12 so we provide those but I guess do parents know if they have their own boats and they take little kids out in canoes and they are easily flipped. So, life jackets are a big thing whether it's shallow or deep.*

## Backyard and Home Safety

There were a number of scenarios cited by participants that were not tied to a particular geographical context per se, that were potential problems across the sample. These were items that can be found in many homes and yards across Australia.

### Blow Up Pools and Blue Shells

Many of the participants recognised that homes often had water receptacles in their yards that were potential dangers for young children. The small pools that families had in their back yards were often left filled between plays and that these could be a source of danger. Supervision was essential or better still, it would be better to empty them between uses



## Buckets and Bowls

Simple and small receptacles were also cited as potential sources of danger. These included buckets used to soak clothing and bowls of water left for animals. Frequently these types of items are left on ground level, which is the level where young children are crawling or toddling around.

## Bath Time

Supervision in and around the bath was noted as an important part of water safety in the home. Young children should not be left alone in the bath or to supervise their younger siblings while in the bath.

## Shower Time

Some parents opted to shower their children rather than use the bath. This meant that the child was held by the parent. There was also a sense that the water running over the child felt good and prepared them for swimming and submersion. Some of the parents reported that they felt that showering with the water running over the child's face was good preparation but needed to be associated with the same prompting used in bath time (e.g. 1 2 3 ready)

## Water-Borne Bacteria

The risk of infection from water was a noted concern. There were a number of reported incidents where children (and adults) had serious infections from water-borne bacteria. In some cases, the infection was a result of entering the water with an open wound and the bacteria gaining entry into the body via the wound, or in other cases, a wound resulting from an incident in the water and the bacteria gaining entry into the body via the wound.

*Manager: The other things that I thought I would mention is not necessarily here but in hot springs, I have heard of a couple of incidences and one being <a relative> going swimming in a hot spring with a cut can actually be potentially dangerous especially for a little kid because there is bacteria in those hot springs and if they get into a cut that can lead to blood poisoning which can eventually lead to death. So, Mums don't take your kids into a hot spring if there is any cut at all.*

## Thermal Springs

With thermal springs where the water can be hotter than usual, the risk from infection can be increased. There has been reported cases where people had an infection from entering thermal springs with an open wound. Despite some places having notices not to enter the springs, these may not be heeded.

## Dirty water

Often flood water, or stagnant water, can contain bacteria. Waters that have come into towns due to flooding, or water lying in puddles or stagnant ponds can contain bacteria that run the risk of contamination.

## Swimming Lessons for Young Children

Across the country and across the various cohorts of participants, there was a strong recognition of the need for swimming lessons. In some cases, there was explicit reference to the value of swimming per se, whereas others noted that the interaction between swim schools and teachers with families, as well as the social interaction among parents within the swimming lesson were invaluable.

**Council Coordinator:** *There is education on water safety, educating the parents, or the Mums that have little ones so what we've done last Summer was we had days where playgroup, kindly came along, a few other little ones with their Mums and we did lessons on water safety around Mums and bubs and bubs and water.*

In isolated/rural/remote locations, access to early years swimming lessons were limited. In some cases, there were no facilities for lessons, in other cases, there were no staff to offer swimming lessons. There were cases where the community, either through activism within the community or lead from councils, where early years swimming/water safety classes were conducted. In some communities, access to swimming lessons and access to pools were heavily subsidised by the local council and hence affordable to families. Such access was seen as a priority in these locations.

**Swim Teacher:** *In a place like <isolated community> I would say that swimming lessons are for everybody, you know, we run our club so that it is super affordable, it is so, so cheap. If you've got a little kid it will cost you \$20 for a season and you do not pay another cent for a lesson for the entire season because we want people to be able to take their kids to the pool and make their kids safe and I know that not all communities and certainly not all cities are like that, in places like that maybe it's not achievable for a lot of families to take their kids in some places that maybe a problem you know because swimming lessons aren't necessarily inclusive of families that can't afford to take the kids along to them.*

Some remote communities were very pragmatic in their approach to access to lessons and pools. They developed strategies to motivate families (and children) to attend lessons and ensured that money was not a barrier to participation.

Being aware of the cultural aspects of the families and communities also impacted on attendance at lessons. In some communities, grandmothers were heavily involved in the child raising so finding ways to involve the Nannas was a consideration for those working to build family involvement in swimming.

**Swim Teacher:** *the other thing to maybe think about is getting Nannas involved, like that's something probably that we struggle with a little bit. That the older Indigenous women in town who maybe are looking after little kids sometimes they don't see swimming as something to even worry about. Yeah, yeah, it's not on their radar. I think for younger Mums that whole connection is much more important and you can kind of play on that a little bit. Take you kids along, it's a wonderful way to connect with baby, spend some time with baby, that kind of stuff but for Nannas they just don't even realise that it's a thing.*

# THE BOOK

To gain input into the book *per se*, participants were shown the four pictures that had been mocked up for the interviews. Participants were asked their views on the pictures. The general consensus was the style of art work was very conducive to engaging young children, the messages being conveyed were accessible, and the developmental process made sense to participants and hence potentially to children.

## Graphics

The comment below captures this nicely. Here the participant suggests that the graphics make the meaning easy to grasp as there is not a confusion in terms of colour and pictures.

**Council Manager:** *I think there is not too much graphics that it's just a short boldish type graphic with heaps of different colour which kinda makes it not confusing, the kid doesn't know where to look, it's kind of a like a good nice way that's simple to look at and grasp straight away without it being too many messages in the picture. I think I can kind of just see straight up what the general gist of the message is trying to be projected.*

**Parent:** *The colours are beautiful, beautiful, bright, they draw attention.*

The feedback on the genre/style of the drawings was very positive with all participants saying they would read the book to children and thought that children would find the pictures engaging. Specific comments included topics as those below:

- The colours used in the illustrations was engaging.
- The pictures were seen to be age appropriate.
- The style of artwork was appealing and was thought to be engaging for young children.
- The larger than usual eyes helped to create a sense of eye contact with the reader and that this was a positive.
- The scenarios were ones to which the children would relate.
- The people in the pictures looked like they were happy which suggests that they love being with water.

The feedback was highly supportive of the four pages that were used for illustrative purposes.

## Children's Interpretations of the Pictures

While it is one thing for adults to make comments about the suitability of the pictures, a small group of children (up to 7 years of age) were asked to describe what they saw in the pictures. From their comments, it was obvious that the messages intended by the authors were being taken up by the children. Some of the comments made in relation to the pictures as shared below and illustrate the comprehensive interpretation of the pictures.



The teacher showed the children the drawing of the baby having a bath and water being poured on the child (Figure 2: Baby's bath at home).

Teacher: *Look, you tell a story with the book, I'll show you the pictures ready. Here's the first page. What does the first page of the story say?*

Child: *Bath.*

Teacher: *Baby is having a bath. Who is holding the baby?*

Child: *Mum.*

Teacher: *Mum. Is he safe?*

Child: *Yes.*

Teacher: *Why is he safe?*

Child: *Because Mum is holding him.*

Teacher: *What else?*

Child: *And he likes washing with a cup*

From the interactions with the students, it was clear that young children were able to access the meaning behind the pictures. As this was a remote Indigenous context, the meaning being constructed by the students is significant given the very different life-worlds of the students with the picture being depicted. As such, there is some confidence that young readers will be able to interpret the meaning behind the pictures.

## Specific Suggestions for the Development of the Book

While the support for the book, the illustrations and intent were overwhelmingly positive, participants offered constructive feedback that could enhance the direction for the book. One of the key intents of the book was for inclusion so that all sectors of the Australian community could relate to the book.

### Inclusion


The general consensus was the current pictures are capturing the inclusive intent of the new book. A very specific directive had been given to the desktop publishers to create illustrations that were inclusive of the sectors of the Australian community. This appears to have been very successful.

Parent: *Yeah and they are covering all nationalities.*

However, there were comments that would enhance the breadth of inclusion.

- **Include fathers/men** in the pictures. The four beta pages that were used for the research were absent of male figures. With increasingly more fathers being actively involved in their children's care (and swimming), having men represented in the same ways as women was seen to be important.

Parent: *And, well, there's no men represented. So maybe one of these should be man. Or maybe Dad can be standing there too as well as grandma. A man's hand!*



**Swim Teacher:** *I don't see any Dads in these pictures, which I think is really important. I've been doing like water familiarisation, learn to swim swimming lessons, many, many, many years and one of the things that I always say to Mums and Dads with their kids is, just go with your kids, just bring your kids to the pool.*

- **Include Muslim women** so that they can see themselves in the pool/water with their children. These are new Australians who may not see swimming and water safety issues as important so getting the message to them and showing that the parents can be involved in swimming with their child would be a valuable message.

**Parent:** *That's probably hard with different types of religions especially the girls don't show their bodies and all that sort of thing... Is there a way that you could, you've got the different ethnicities there, is there a way that you could put that, in those sort of predominantly that sort of religion areas they could have women only classes maybe?*

- **Include Indigenous families** –Indigenous participants all commented that they think it is important to see Indigenous Australians being clearly identified in the book. For many Indigenous children, it is important for them to see themselves represented in the book.

**Indigenous Parent:** *It is good that you have brown people here but they could be anything – Indian or anything. You need to include pictures of kids are clearly Aboriginal. They need to see themselves in a book like this.*

Having representations of dark-skinned people is important to represent the various nationalities and cultural groups, but it was very clear from the comments by Indigenous Australians that the figures need to be clearly identified as Indigenous and not just be the colour of the skin.


## Non-Urban Representations

The Kids Alive message is understandably city-centric. The issues in country/regional/remote areas are more about an environment that cannot be controlled- such as rivers, streams, dams, ponds. Making children aware of the issues is important. Representing this 'uncontrolled' environment would be a valuable inclusion in the book. Participants had a number of suggestions as to how this could be included in the drawings.

**Parent:** *After having our conversations, these ones are, these pictures are about a controlled environment, so maybe something about natural environment, about a dam, or about a river, because there are rivers in Sydney too.*

**Parent:** *So, there's rivers in the cities and towns so probably that needs to be covered too. Storm drains. Setting boundaries. Stay away, somehow setting boundaries. Maybe a storm drain or a river and stay back, something like that.*

**Council Manager:** *[include a page] where there is a river in it with safety messages about being out in a remote area with, even flood waters and that here too we've got to be careful of and undercurrents in the flood where kids can get lost, we can go fishing off the road here in the wet season but if that water flowing through those culverts too is a potential hazard that you have to teach your kids as well yeah so we've got a few different but only at certain times of the year.*



The expression of a need to include 'uncontrolled' environments such as those found in the tropical north or on farms or in the inland areas was important and reflected in many of the comments offered by non-urban participants. Having pages that are relevant to non-urban settings recognised the nuances of these uncontrollable contexts.

*Youth Worker/Pool Manager: You've got a controlled environment, all these are sort of controlled environments but what you don't have is sort of dealing with river safety and ocean safety, something sort of more in the wild I'd say because the kids would sort of spend a lot of time around rivers fishing and swimming and going on boats and hunting as well around the water, so that could be something to do with safety around the rivers and around the lakes.*

## Flash Flooding

As the issue of flooding, and notably flash flooding was notable across the participants' input. This could be incorporated into revisions of the book/s. While there is flash flooding in the northern regions of Australia in the wet/monsoon season, flash flooding is not contained to this area. Areas south of the 23<sup>rd</sup> latitude also experience flash flooding (or flooding more generally) so it is a national issue.

*Parent: Flooding is another one I try and teach my kids about the safety of fast flowing water and water that's been a certain area for a while gets stagnant so the bottom gets slippery up on the causeways and things like that we have to still teach them too because if you slip in, it [the water flow] goes straight into the river*


*Parent: Probably <include> just one <page> where there is a river in it with safety messages about being out in a remote area with, even flood waters and that here too we've got to be careful of undercurrents in the flood. ..Kids can get lost, we can go fishing off the road here in the wet season but if that water flowing through those culverts too is a potential hazard that you have to teach your kids as well yeah so we've got a few different but only at certain times of the year so the flooding is another.*

As noted, the issues of flash flooding are not contained to non-urban settings or tropical areas as noted by some of the participants so this could be a point for inclusion as it applies across most contexts of Australia.

## Fishing

Fishing was a very popular activity for families and featured very strongly in the non-urban responses. However, it is not contained to the non-urban context with many families undertaking this form of recreation either in the day-to-day life or when on holidays.

*Parent: People do fish too close to the banks and you don't probably ... think about the crocodiles and how good they can leap out unless you've been on like a jumping crocs in Northern Territory where you can see the potential force that they can get and come at and grab you. People are a bit haphazard around here and get a bit complacent because they've always been here. We go out in boats. We have wet seasons. We have never had any dramas with crocs. No one has been taken here, so sometimes there can be that complacency as well. Fishing is another one as well because you've got this fish on a line and you're right near the water and you're pretty much enticing the crocs.*



For many in the tropical north, there was a sense that fishing can be a dangerous activity since it is often undertaken in locations where there are crocodiles thus compounding the danger of being near water. More specifically, a Manager suggested that some diagrams in the book could include representations of the no swimming signs that are commonplace

**Community Youth Manager:** *So, you could have them standing at the boat ramp and that with the parent showing the child the sign 'the Croc', pointing at it, or something like that, 'no swimming' sign on there, that sort of thing, bring it to the safety of community.*

## Genre

The genre for writing the book should be fun with the target being the child. Some of the participants were familiar with the Boo series and thought the genre that was used in the Boo series worked well with children (Lawrence 2017a; Lawrence, 2017b). This series was formally evaluated, and feedback was positive about the genre used in this series (Jorgensen, 2016). Many of the participants in this project were familiar with the Boo Series and the Kids Alive message and this flowed into their comments.

**Council Manager:** *Depends what the context of the information is that's going with them because Laurie is, it's a similar graphic style set up as his last ones and I really liked his content of the wording and the rhyming of it but it still had that message. I think he did quite a good job of the last one, it was good! These are visually easy and from the picture without even words you can kind of get a grasp of what the picture is already saying*

There were comments that the genre needed to be targeted at children (not parents) so as to engage young children. Overall the participants did not have any tangible suggestions on how to write the book but felt that the Boo series and the rhythm that was part of that series worked well.

## Overall Support for the Book

In summary, there was unanimous support for a book that promoted water safety for young Australians. The diversity of feedback across Australia is great but highlights the need for a non-urban orientation for a book or part thereof so that those people living outside major cities and towns have their life-worlds represented in a legitimate way. The promotion of water safety was warmly received across the study and is represented in the following comment:

**Youth Worker/Pool Manager:** *Sounds like a fantastic idea, especially running a swimming pool here in [this community] you know, anything that promotes safety around water is really good*



# UNINTENDED OUTCOMES/ LEARNINGS

As with most research, there are unintended learnings. While this research was focused on the development of a new resource for inclusion in the Bounty Bag for new mothers, there were incidents and comments provided by participants that are noteworthy and need to be included here.

## Support for the Kids' Alive Message

The Laurie Lawrence/Kids Alive brand power cannot be denied. It was very clear from this study that there is significant reach of the message. Every single participant in this study was very aware of the "Do the Five" message and were highly supportive of the intent of the message. Many of the participants – parents, early years teachers, school teachers, council employees, community member – were also aware of the Boo Series. This suggests very good saturation of the Kids Alive program. The comment below sums up the input from participants. Many commented how children would sing the Kids Alive song, complete with hand motions, when it was played on various media.


*Parent: His ads are quite engaging because I know my two-and-a-half-year-old, she copies. There is one at the moment where he has his granddaughters at the moment helping him and that and my little girl does like ... watch like this and does the hand actions and stuff and obviously she doesn't know how to resuscitate someone but she understands the concept of what he is saying even though I know she doesn't have the ability to do that but she understands closing the gate and watching out. So I do think he's got quite a catchy, even before this knew one that he's got, he used to have, it might have been his older granddaughter but she was a lot younger and my other daughter because she was younger then too because she was captivated by that ad and now they've made this new ad I find that now my other two daughters are given this new ad, especially my youngest one she does all the hand actions so he's doing a good job because they do engage their interest and mine do copy so it's good.*

Indigenous parents also reported that they found the Kids Alive message very powerful. One mother made the following comment that when her nephew hears the commercial, he runs to the television to watch and act with the commercial.

*Indigenous Parent: ... fencing... swimming... a little baby that size, my nephew's son.... commercial on swimming and he sees that commercial coming and rushes to the TV and sings it.*

Throughout the duration of the study, the research team worked and stayed in many remote and regional areas. The media saturation of the Kids Alive advertising was very frequent – often a few times every hour on regional television.





## Water Safety Provides Community Support for Families

There were considerable conversations around the ways in which forums for water safety provide a support network for families. For many new mothers, the need for support can be essential to their well-being. Having forums, including swimming lessons and informal meetings, can provide a means for new parents to meet and talk. In some communities, young parents' only support is with community. Transitioning to being a parent meant that workplace friends were replaced with being a stay-at-home parent.

*Parent: Once I gave up work, I had no contact with my work friends. Going to swimming lessons at the local pool was a Godsend for me. I could meet with other mums and have someone to talk to. It can be very lonely when you live in these places and don't have any family around.*

*Community Liaison Officer: The Council provides cheap lessons for families as we see it as important. It is really good to see new mothers coming to swimming and mixing with the other mums.*



# RECOMMENDATIONS

The research has produced a number of recommendations for the Kids Alive team to consider as they create the new resource for the Bounty Bag. It was very clear from this research that there is strong support for a child-centred book that families can share with their children. This reinforces the earlier research that led to this research – that is, the need for a book to replace the DVD that is currently provided in the Bounty Bag.

## 1. Develop a Book for Inclusion in the New Mother Bounty Bag

There is very clear support to produce a book for new parents/carers that promotes water safety for young children. The focus of this book should remain consistent with the original focus of the Living with Water DVD as that message was well received by families.

Given that drowning in backyard pools remains the major cause of death for under-5s, this message is very pertinent and should not be lost. Nearly 90% of Australians live in urban areas so the focus of the book is justifiably urban-centric. The urban cohort reinforced this message.

100% of the participants said that they would read the book to children so a book would be a preferred medium for promoting the water safety message.

Stylistically, the visual genre of the four story-book pages were very positively received. The authors should continue with this genre throughout the book.

The text should be written for the child (not the parent/carer).

The message within the book should emphasise water safety and participation in swimming lessons for young babies.

The creation of a new book for inclusion in the Bounty Bag could be used to introduce families to the Boo series and characters. While the Kids Alive characters may not be a strong feature of the water safety message at the commencement of the book, the inclusion of the characters could come at the end of the book. This would create a strong segue into the Boo series along with the other range of resources created by the Kids Alive team.

## 2. Expand the Urban-Centric Focus of the Kids Alive message

There is overwhelming support for the expansion of the water safety message to go beyond the city-centric view of 'controlled' environments that are currently promoted through the Kids' Alive program. This would be invaluable for those living and/or visiting non-urban contexts to be aware of the nuanced water safety issues in non-urban settings.

The non-urban inclusion in the book would be valuable for families as they travel to non-urban settings as many of the dangers in non-controlled settings may be unfamiliar to urban families. Urban families may not be aware of crocodile dangers, moving water (e.g. rivers, creeks, springs).

### **3. Differentiate between Controlled and Uncontrolled Water Environments**

The major water safety message is heavily focused on the controlled swim environment typically found in urban settings. While this applies to most Australian families, it is important to consider those water environments that fall outside the ambit of the Kids Alive program – that is, swimming pools that can be fenced. Not only will this show the need for supervision in these environments, but it is inclusive of the diverse geographic and social contexts of the Australian community. Inclusion of non-controlled water environments would ensure that non-urban families will be able to identify their contexts in the new book.

### **4. Create New Boo books**

Additional resources could be created to expand the Boo Series given that these are well known, well sourced, and used within urban and non-urban settings. It may not be possible to incorporate many of the messages or early water safety that were identified in this research. It may be useful to expand the Boo series to incorporate the messages found in this research.

### **5. Create Other Resources to Promote the Water Safety Message**


The data collected through this research has identified many issues across Australia that impact on water safety for young Australians. It may not be possible to include all these messages into a book format. The Kids Alive team may consider making the findings and recommendations available to the public via other means such as video, social networking media, on line resources, targeted television commercials. These media have been exploited well by the Kids Alive team and the messages could be specific to the geographical locations as the needs/dangers in particular geographical and socio-cultural locations can be unique to those contexts.

### **6. Maintain the Community Development Programs Promoting Water Safety**

The high media saturation of the Kids Alive message in non-urban/rural/remote/Indigenous communities has impacted on these contexts with all participants very familiar with the “Do the Five” message. Every participant across Australia knew of the Kids Alive “Do the Five” message and spoke very highly of the program.

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