

Hit the waves to survive



Dean Gladstone with daughter Lucy, 5, at the Water Safety Program at Bondi Beach, and (below) Bruce "Hoppo" Hopkins and Rodney Overby. Pictures: Craig Wilson

Stars turn out to support push for water safety program in bid to save young lives

Shaya Laughlin

TO stop beach drownings, get schoolchildren out of the classroom and into the ocean — that's the message from some of Australia's most celebrated lifesavers.

Bondi Rescue stars Bruce 'Hoppo' Hopkins and champion ironman Craig Riddington believe the best way to teach swimmers how to survive an ocean rip is expose them to one.

"A lot of programs just go to schools and talk about it with slides. But it's different once you're in the water," Mr Hopkins said.

The pair say education — one of the goals of NewsLocal's Swim Safe campaign — is crucial if NSW's rising toll of drownings is to be halt



They put their theories to work last week, holding a free hands-on session at Bondi Beach. Also helping out was Hoppo's fellow *Bondi Rescue* lifeguard Dean 'Deano' Gladstone, showing the basics to kids, including his five-year-old daughter.

For more than two hours, dozens of youngsters were shown how to navigate waves, paddle a board and float in the ocean.

"These guys actually ex-

perienced a small rip ... so they've felt the pull," said Mr Riddington, pointing at a group of young children, wearing red rashies. "Once they go away, they know what a rip looks like and how it generally behaves."

As president of Surf Educators International, Mr Riddington has been running water safety programs since 1998 and said children needed to build water confidence.

Given the high number of drownings in NSW over the summer, he believes hands-on water safety programs should be compulsory in primary schools.

"It's a must in Australia," he said, advocating every child spend at least a day a year at the beach or pool to learn vital skills.

Mr Hopkins said parents should also be encouraged to learn water safety.

"It is extremely important that children and parents are educated in all aspects of water safety," he said.

"We take kids as young as four years old into the water and, in a controlled environment, using flotation devices such as kickboards, we show them what to do if they are in a rip. Staying calm and floating is key and it is great to see the kids relax and learn how to respect the ocean."

Although last Friday's initiative was free, Mr Riddington said they normally cost about \$1000 to run.

"It's money really well spent," he said. "It should be a priority in schools."

So far this summer, there

have been about two dozen drownings with the toll including deaths at beaches, backyard pools and lakes.

The Swim Safe campaign is calling on the State Government to make CPR lessons and water safety compulsory in schools.

Experts have also called for more to be done to educate young people about life-saving techniques.

National statistics show 83 per cent of people who drown are male, 32 per cent are visitors to the location of the accident and the average age was 43.1 years.

Nearly a quarter of drownings in 2015-16 occurred at the beach, 21 per cent in rivers, creeks or streams and another 19 per cent in ocean or harbour areas.

Swimming stigma can be deadly



Petrina Liyanage.

Andrea McCullagh

A SWIM coach believes there is a social stigma attached to adults who cannot swim and is urging government to tackle the issue.

Petrina Liyanage was shocked and saddened by the drowning tragedies in NSW this summer.

She believes education is the key to prevent any further deaths.

"There should be more acknowledgment by the government on the fact that many adults lack the confidence and/or ability in swimming," she said.

"I believe that if there was more recognition and social acceptance of this, more people would be willing to take lessons."

Ms Liyanage's school — called Swim with a Smile — helps adults learn how to swim and conquer their fear of water.

She said lessons can prevent drownings as students learn survival skills and confidence in the water. She has taught adult beginners more than 70 years old.



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