

PRESS RELEASE

Drowning in numbers

Florence-Geneva-Bangkok-Delhi, 23 May 2012 – A new report states that although drowning is a leading killer of children across parts of Asia, highly effective and cost-efficient programs to reduce such drowning deaths are not being sufficiently embraced.

Child Drowning: Evidence for a newly recognized cause of child mortality in low and middle income countries in Asia surveyed four countries (Bangladesh, Cambodia, Vietnam & Thailand), together with two provinces in China (Beijing and Jiangxi). <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hyyHXdd4ok>

The research, conducted by The Alliance for Safe Children (TASC) in collaboration with UNICEF's Office of Research, finds that in these countries one of every four child deaths (1-4years) are due to drowning - more than the number who die from measles, polio, whooping cough, tetanus, diphtheria and tuberculosis combined. It also states that the cost of drowning prevention among children is no more expensive than interventions for these diseases.

"For too long drowning has been a hidden killer," said Gordon Alexander, the Director of UNICEF's Office of Research. "Over the past three decades countries have made strong, continuous progress on infectious disease reduction. However no impact has been made on drowning deaths. As a result, drowning is emerging as a leading cause of death for children after infancy (1year) in the countries surveyed for this report. And yet drowning is off the political radar."

The report finds that the vast majority of the drowning deaths are preventable. They tend to occur within 20metres of the home and are the result of unsupervised children wandering off and falling into local water hazards.

The report includes new evidence into prevention interventions in an operational research program in Bangladesh, showing:

- Drowning death rates among children attending village crèches were reduced by more than 80 percent as a direct result of having adequate supervision.
- Drowning death rates in children 4 years and older who participated in SwimSafe (swimming and safe rescue training) were reduced by more than 90 percent.

The UNICEF-TASC report states that drowning is not a new killer, but has remained undetected as a significant health issue due to counting methods. Previous figures resulted from a heavy reliance on reporting from hospitals and other health facilities. However, most children who drown are never taken to a health facility because their deaths are immediate, because facilities may be located far away from the community, or because those who may report the drowning fear financial repercussions. Thus, the Report argues that numbers have been markedly underreported. (For instance, in Bangladesh there was a more than 300% difference between estimates from the Global Burden of Diseases (2004) report and this study, which interviewed parents in their homes, thereby counting child deaths directly at households within communities.)

UNICEF's Gordon Alexander said the research suggests governments and development agencies can do more to support drowning prevention interventions through scaling up early childhood

education/crèche programmes, and with improved integration with ongoing public health, education and disaster risk programmes, together with better mapping of the true prevalence of drowning.

“This report makes clear that there is a serious – and until now, hidden – problem in the countries surveyed. It also provides evidence of affordable interventions that can save hundreds of thousands of children’s lives. We must now act where we have the evidence, and investigate whether similar underreporting and preventable deaths are happening elsewhere.”

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Read the full report – “*Child Drowning: Evidence for a newly recognized cause of child mortality in low and middle income countries in Asia*” download from the UNICEF Office of Research website www.unicef-irc.org

Watch the videos:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hyyHXdd4ok>

&

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpE22mKZCds>

&

<http://youtu.be/rcihQ0Qxru0>

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Contact:

Marixie Mercado

Spokesperson

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

phone: +41 22 909 5716 fax: +41 22 909 5908

mobile: +4179 756 7703

email: mmercado@unicef.org

James Elder

Chief, Communications

UNICEF Office of Research

Telephone: +39 335 758 2585

jelder@unicef.org

Twitter: @james_unicef

Rajat Madhok

Regional Communication Specialist

UNICEF South Asia Regional Office

Telephone: +91 9818103787

Email: rmadhok@unicef.org

Janine Kandel

Communication Officer

UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office

Telephone: Mobile: + 66 901 974 659

Email: jkandel@unicef.org

Twitter: @UnicefAsiaPac

Patrizia Faustini

Senior Communications Assistant

UNICEF Office of Research

Telephone: +39 055 2033 253

pfaustini@unicef.org