

Free YMCA swimming lessons get grant boost

Gender reveal parties

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1 / 16



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Florida Blue gives \$100,000 to help Boca kids learn to swim

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A \$100,000 grant from Florida Blue will allow the YMCAs in **Boca Raton** and **Boynton Beach** to continue giving free swimming lessons to 5,000 more children from ages 3 to 18.

Liz Schmidt, director of Community Water Safety for the YMCA of South **Palm Beach County**, considers the money a shot in the arm for the program. She oversees all drowning prevention efforts at the Peter Blum Family YMCA of Boca and Devos-Blum Family YMCA of Boynton Beach.

"We were approached by Florida Blue and their Beth Johnston is a board member and they offered that much money," Schmidt. "If we gave you \$100,000, what would you do with the money?"

"So far to date we have served 7,000 children at our Ys in Boca and Boynton and 12 off-site facilities that are county and city run," she added. "In Boca, we bus kids to the Y at no cost."

Their community partners in Boca are the Pearl City Cats [an after-school and summer camp program] and Florence Fuller Child Development Centers with campuses in the city and West Boca.

"We work closely with the city of Boynton Beach, and we offer swimming lessons for all their parks and rec summer camp children and for summer camp groups at Crosspointe, Galaxy, Citrus Cove elementary schools and the John H. Densen pool in the city of Boynton," she added.

The children also come from Boys & Girls Clubs in Delray Beach, Riviera Beach and West Palm Beach and other locations.

"We work year-round and they can contact the YMCA directors or through their after-care program," Schmidt said about parents who may want to enroll their children.

The new approach to swimming lessons is part of a national YMCA campaign called "safety first, swim second." It teaches children how to swim and float, simulate a fall and reach out or push off for safety, according to the YMCA. Then the instructors teach strokes and stroke technique. The program is open to children starting at 6 months with parents in the water up to 13 and can be adapted for teens and adults.

Florida has the highest number of drownings for children from babies to 4-year-olds, and Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade are the top five counties in the nation for drowning fatalities, according to YMCA statistics.

"Florida loses more children under the age of 5 to drowning, more than any other state in the country," Jason Hagensick, YMCA of South **Palm Beach County** president and CEO said in a statement. "With the support of key partners such as Florida Blue, the YMCA is hoping to help positively impact that statistic."

Four Florida YMCA associations received more than \$300,000 from Florida Blue.

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