

What is the required adult to child ratio for supervising children in a pool?



There are no mandatory regulations which govern pool safety in New Zealand, with the exception of pool fencing regulations and pool water quality standards. However there are useful guidelines provided for schools by the Ministry of Education and Water Safety New Zealand. These resources make it clear that any organisation using a pool should have a clear policies and guidelines for pool safety and supervision, including rules for swimmers.

In all the guidelines we have reviewed, there are no recommended ratios for the number of adults that should be supervising groups of children in the water. Pool safety experts are usually reluctant to recommend a ratio, because children, even of the same age, can have very different levels of ability in the water. The provision of “active supervision” is often seen as a far more significant factor in preventing water safety incidents.

Each OSCAR service should consider the particulars of their situation and set a suitable supervision level that takes into account the age and ability of the staff and participants, as well as the types of activities that will occur. We also strongly recommend that a sensible limit is set on the maximum number of swimmers in the water at any one time.

Where only some of the children in a programme are swimming, as many staff as possible should be allocated to the group that is swimming, with non-swimmers engaged in activities that need much less supervision.

Any ratios set down in your own policy document (or required by a pool operator) must be adhered to. You should take into account the characteristics of the pool, whether it is accessible to the general public, and the ability/experience of staff. To supervise effectively it is essential to avoid a “one size fits all” approach to staffing levels. In some instances it may be necessary to have more adults than what is required to meet your ratio.

From our experience with OSCAR services, we would be concerned if there are over-long periods of “free play” during swimming sessions. Fun, structured activities such as relays, volleyball or something as simple throw and catch with a circle of children can further increase staff interaction and make pool sessions more manageable and safe.

Above all else, staff must practice a very high standard of supervision at all times and stay alert to the real dangers that pools present.

Further reading: [The OSCAR Water Safety Handbook](#)