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Parent/carer experiences and challenges in redeeming the First Lap swimming lesson voucher in New South Wales, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Rationale: Swimming is a popular, enjoyable, and important form of physical activity. Swimming skills play a vital role in water safety and drowning prevention, particularly among young children. The First Lap program is a New South Wales government swimming lesson subsidy voucher program for preschool-aged children. This study examined parent/carer program views and experiences in 2021–2022, specifically reasons for voucher non-redemption.

Approach: A thematic analysis examined 1031 parent/carer qualitative responses concerning reasons for voucher non-redemption and overall views and experiences of the program in an online parent/carer survey. Findings: Voucher non-redemption was evident through: seasonal, weather and health; program parameter; parent/carer (user); and swim school (provider) themes. Despite non-redemption, parent/carer program views were additionally evident through: positive feedback about the program and its objectives; evidence of knowledge and awareness of the importance of water safety and learning to swim; lesson affordability concerns.

Practical implications: Swim school and lesson availability, accessibility, and affordability can be addressed through clear engagement and communication with both the user and provider sides.

Research contribution: Reasons for First Lap voucher non-redemption represent barriers to swimming lesson participation for preschool-aged children.

Originality: Voucher programs must consider the impacts of the broader socio-ecological context and ecosystem.

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Swimming; drowning; education; preschool; child; evaluation

Introduction

Swimming is a popular, enjoyable, and important form of leisure-time physical activity across the life course (Stubbs, 2017). Swimming lesson participation is important for safety and survival, physical activity and enjoyment and

leisure (Mahony et al., 2017). The aquatic industry is a key driver of health, economic and social benefit (PricewaterhouseCoopers Australia, 2022).

Swimming skills play a vital role in drowning prevention (AWSC, 2021; Rahman et al., 2021)

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and learning to swim is one component of a broader strategy to reduce drowning that is promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2014). Young age is one of the main risk factors for drowning globally and drowning is the leading cause of unintentional injury death in children aged 1–3 years in Australia (Royal Life Saving Society – Australia, 2023; WHO, 2021). Preventing drowning in children aged 0–4 years and promoting swimming and water safety skills feature in two of the five priority areas of the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030 (AWSC, 2021). There has been progress made in reducing drowning deaths in children aged 0–4 years in Australia (Royal Life Saving Society – Australia, 2023) and this demonstrates the importance of continual investment in prevention (Peden et al., 2021). This population group, which includes preschool-aged children, remains a priority in Australia as high rates of drowning deaths continue compared to other age groups (AWSC, 2021). In 2022–2023, children under 5 years old had a fatal drowning rate of 1.06 per 100,000 population, although this has decreased from previous years (Royal Life Saving – Australia, 2023). Children under 5 also record the highest ratio of fatalities to hospital admissions for a non-fatal drowning with 7.63 hospitalisations for every fatality (Peden et al., 2018).

Australia uses national benchmarks to measure key swimming and water safety skill milestones and there is concern regarding a decline in these skills for children in Australia (Royal Life Saving Society – Australia, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic may have disrupted children's development of swimming and water safety skills (AWSC, 2021), with some children missing up to two years' worth of swimming education (PwC Australia, 2022). The impact of the pandemic on families and the learn-to-swim industry is one of the main reasons the NSW First Lap learn to swim voucher program was created. The program aims to increase participation of preschool-aged children (who did not participate in the

previous 12 months) in learn to swim programs and to build parent/carer knowledge and awareness of the importance of (this age group) learning to swim (Macniven et al., 2023). Program challenges include reaching the target population as well as ensuring equitable reach to priority populations, including children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children living with a disability and children who live in regional and remote or low socio-economic areas (Foley et al., 2020; Macniven et al., 2023).

An analysis of barriers of parent/carers who created a voucher and whose preschool-aged child had not participated in learn to swim programs in the previous 12 months identified seven overarching reasons (Ananthapavan et al., 2023). These were: (1) child's disability or health needs; (2) swimming lesson affordability; (3) family or personal circumstances; (4) lack of or poor availability of swimming lessons; (5) parent/carer availability, including to fulfil participation requirements; (6) related to COVID-19 and (7) low prioritisation of formal swimming lessons due to parent/carer perceptions of its importance (Ananthapavan et al., 2023). This research identified pre-existing barriers to swimming lesson participation and this paper further explores these barriers by analysing the parent/carer experiences of voucher non-redemption and the voucher program as a whole.

The NSW Government's First Lap voucher program provides two \$100 vouchers for parents/carers of preschool-aged children (3–5 year olds) to contribute to swimming lesson costs (Macniven et al., 2023). The practical value of two \$100 vouchers equates to approximately 12 lessons. This is based on an average cost of \$15.50 per 30-min lesson for preschool-aged children (Pidgeon et al., 2019) and more recent data indicates that the average cost of a lesson in New South Wales is \$17.50 (Royal Life Saving – Australia, 2022). In the financial year (FY) 2021–2022, the

program also included children in Kindergarten (5–6 year olds) in 2021 and 2022, who missed out on vital water safety education during their preschool years due to COVID-19 restrictions. The process for voucher redemption involves logging in to the government Service NSW app, selecting the First Lap voucher and applying for it. Once the voucher has been received via email, parents/carers must present the voucher QR code for the participating swim school business to scan at payment (or parents/carers without a mobile device) can provide the printed voucher or voucher code instead (NSW Government, 2023).

Exploring barriers to voucher use forms part of the program evaluation and will inform decision-making about the First Lap program and other similar programs in Australia and internationally (Macniven et al., 2023). Analysing reasons for voucher non-redemption with additional qualitative responses about overall program experience provides insight into the reasons for preschool-aged children missing out on learn to swim education. This study aims to examine reasons for First Lap voucher non-redemption, parent/carer views and experiences of the First Lap program, and potential actions to help remove barriers to both redeeming the voucher and swimming lesson participation more broadly.

Methods

Qualitative research seeks to understand the perspectives or experiences of people (O'Brien et al., 2014). This study follows the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) (O'Brien et al., 2014).

Study design

The study design encompasses qualitative thematic analysis. The value of conducting qualitative research is that it explores the meaning (the “why”) and people’s experiences (Ritchie,

2001). Thematic analysis allows for an iterative process that is guided by the qualitative data and can provide a comprehensive description of data while also capturing its complexities and nuances (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants

Participants of this study were parents or carers of preschool-aged children in NSW who registered for the voucher program through Service NSW and then consented to participate in the evaluation and responded to the invitation to complete the survey (Macniven et al., 2023).

Data collection

Data collection occurred through the parent/carer online survey for FY 2021–2022. This survey was conducted in July 2022 and focused on voucher use in FY 2021–2022 as well as parent/carer knowledge and awareness of learn to swim programs and water safety. In total 221,218 First Lap vouchers were created (registered) during FY 2021–2022. Of the 121,609 (55.0%) parents/carers who consented to being contacted for the evaluation, there were 21,292 (17.5%) responses to the survey. The approach to address non-redemption information capture focused on qualitative responses to two survey questions. Firstly, data was collected from open-ended responses under the “something else” option for the question: “What were your reasons for not redeeming the voucher”. Secondly, for all these responses, data was then collected from the final survey question: “Is there anything else you’d like to say about your experience with the First Lap voucher program?”.

There were 2707 responses to the question asking why the voucher was not redeemed and parents/carers could choose more than one option. Six of these options included cost of lessons, unable to find suitable lessons, unable to find a suitable pool, no time for

lessons, child unwilling to do lessons, and distance to travel to lessons. Of the 1031 parents/carers who provided an open-ended response under the seventh option “something else”, 938 responses were analysed for this study. 93 responses were excluded for three main reasons: the voucher had been redeemed, as determined from objective program participation sources (Macniven et al., 2023) (9), it was an unclear or incomplete response (7), or the response only mentioned “COVID” with no further clarification or elaboration or “COVID lockdown / restrictions” which were already easing throughout the voucher timeframe and

survey completion time (77). In addition, 550 of the 938 analysed responses provided an open-ended response to the final question asking if there is anything else they would like to say about their experience with the program. The study participants are outlined in Figure 1.

Data analysis

Analysis commenced with a review and systematic organisation of the qualitative data (Ritchie, 2001) using Microsoft Excel. Detailed coding of the responses was then used to

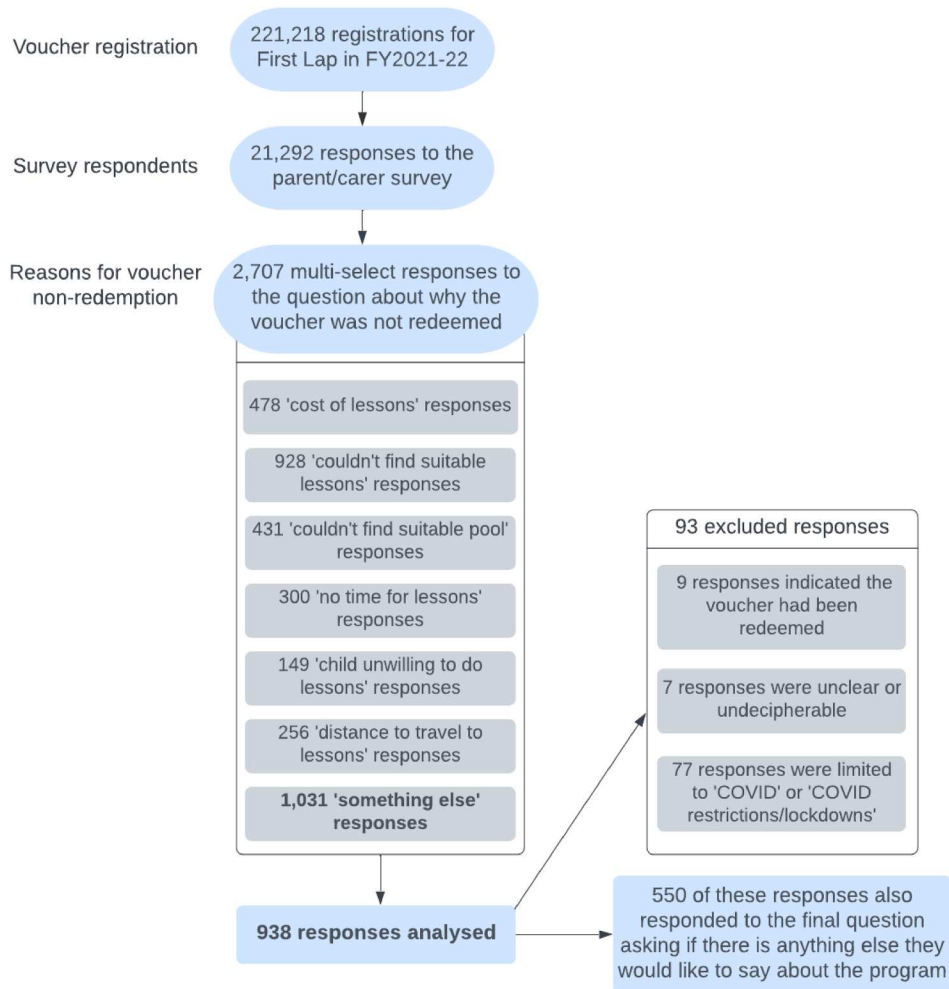


Figure 1. Participant flowchart.

develop common themes based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. The first step focused on data familiarisation, followed by generating initial codes. The qualitative responses to the question about reasons for non-redemption were analysed and then connected with responses to the final question about parent/carer wider views and experiences. The first author familiarised themselves with the responses and, alongside the last author, independently generated codes for a sample of 100 responses. These codes were compared and aligned with some minor changes to the language or terms used. The first author then coded the remaining responses as well as the 550 responses to the final survey question.

The coding steps remained flexible and iterative throughout the next three phases focused on theme development: searching for themes, reviewing themes, and then defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Unclear responses were discussed and addressed by the two authors together and codes were adjusted to ensure consistency of language and terms used. Codes were categorised into candidate themes and a thematic map was created to visually represent the themes and sub-themes and how they related to each other. The final survey question responses were also thematically coded under the same themes and the analysis demonstrated three additional codes as well as three additional themes that did not relate to the study aim. The themes were primarily identified at the semantic level of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as the coding and analysis of responses did not focus on demographic or other data attached to each response. The results were presented with verbatim quotes from the survey responses to illustrate the themes and sub-themes, and are represented by age of child, Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) quartile, and remoteness classification (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018a, 2018b).

Ethics

The First Lap evaluation and this study obtained university ethics approval (ID: HC220282). All participants provided informed consent to take part in research during the registration process by ticking a box to opt into participation in follow-up surveys. A recruitment email invitation to the survey included a summary of the project, a link to the survey and a participant information statement and consent form at the start of the survey where implied consent was achieved through survey submission.

Results

Four overarching themes were identified as challenges to voucher redemption: seasonal, weather and health factors, program parameters, parent/carer "user" factors; and swim school "provider" factors. Each of these themes included sub-themes (Figure 2; Table 1) to capture the specifics of the parent/carer experience and perspective. Table 1 summarises the codes identified within the themes and the number of times they were mentioned in responses, noting that they are inter-related, and some respondents mentioned more than one reason for non-redemption. The secondary phase of analysis identified three broader related themes beyond the specific redemption challenge themes: (a) positive feedback about the program and its objectives, (b) evidence of parent/carer knowledge and awareness of the importance of water safety and learning to swim, and (c) parent/carer concerns about the cost and affordability of lessons.

Seasonal, weather and health factors

Seasonal, weather and health factors were commonly mentioned as reasons for non-redemption, either in isolation or with other reasons, raised 254 times (27.1%). The most referenced reason was seasonal including the timeframe

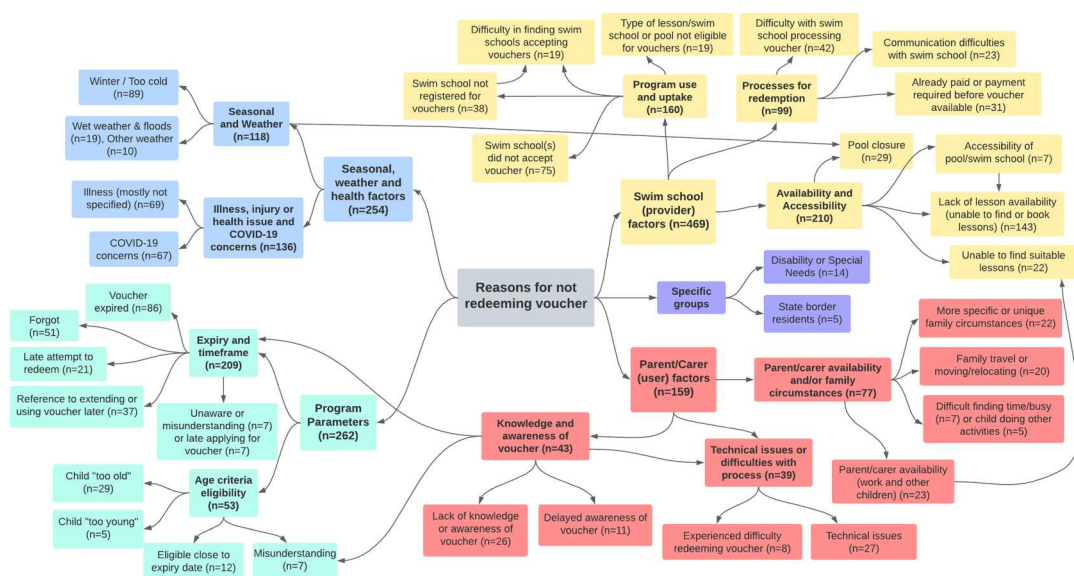


Figure 2. Thematic map of reasons for not redeeming the First Lap voucher.

Table 1. First Lap voucher redemption challenges: Theme and sub-themes codes.

Codes by theme and sub-theme	Number (n)	Percent (%)
Theme 1: Seasonal, weather and health factors	254	27.1
Sub-theme 1.1: Seasonal	89	9.5
Winter	31	3.3
Too cold	31	3.3
Preference <i>not to do</i> lessons in winter/cold or <i>to do</i> lessons in warmer months or spring/summer	18	2.0
Other*	9	1.0
Sub-theme 1.2: Weather	29	3.1
(No further reason/detail provided)	6	0.6
Wet	10	1.1
Floods	9	1.0
Other*	4	0.4
Sub-theme 1.3: Illness, injury, or health issue	69	7.4
Child – Virus(es) including cold/flu/RSV	6	0.6
Child – Ear, nose and throat (ENT)	6	0.6
Child – Not specified	17	1.8
Not specified	19	2.0
Other*	21	2.2
Sub-theme 1.4: COVID-19 concerns	67	7.1
(No further reason/detail provided)	46	4.9
COVID and/or flu/virus/sickness/illness concerns	11	1.2
Indoor or crowded pool	5	0.5
Other*	5	0.5
Theme 2: Program Parameters	262	27.9
Sub-theme 2.1: Voucher expiry and timeframe	209	22.3
Voucher expired	86	9.2
Forgot	51	5.4
Late attempt to redeem	21	2.2
Reference to using voucher later	37	3.9
Unaware or misunderstanding of voucher expiry	7	0.7
Too late to obtain or applying for voucher	7	0.7
Sub-theme 2.2: Age criteria eligibility	53	5.7
Too old (6 years old and over or at school)	29	3.1

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Codes by theme and sub-theme	Number (n)	Percent (%)
Too young (under 3 years old)	5	0.5
Eligible close to expiry date	12	1.3
Misunderstanding	7	0.7
Theme 3: Parent/Carer (User) Factors	159	17
Sub-theme 3.1: Knowledge and awareness of voucher and redemption process	43	4.6
Lack of knowledge or awareness of voucher	26	2.8
Delayed awareness of voucher	11	1.2
Other**	6	0.6
Sub-theme 3.2: Experienced technical issues or difficulties with process	39	4.2
Difficulty in using or redeeming voucher	8	0.9
Technical issue with code (no code/unable to scan)	16	1.7
Experienced unknown technical issue(s)	11	1.2
Other**	4	0.4
Sub-theme 3.3: Availability/family circumstances	77	8.2
Parent/carer availability – work commitments	7	0.7
Parent/carer availability – other children/baby	16	1.7
Family travel, moving or relocation	20	2.1
Difficult finding time, not organised or busy	7	0.7
Child doing other activities/sport	5	0.5
Used other voucher for lesson	5	0.5
Other (specific to family/child e.g. disability, health)	17	1.8
Theme 4: Swim Schools (Provider) Factors	469	50
Sub-theme 4.1: Availability and accessibility	210	22.4
Unable to find or book lessons (lack of availability)	143	15.2
Unable to find suitable lessons (including swim school, teacher and time of lessons)	22	2.3
Pool closure	29	3.1
Pool accessibility (including distance or transport)	7	0.7
Other***	9	1.0
Sub-theme 4.2: Program use or uptake	160	17.1
Swim school(s) did not accept voucher	75	8.0
Swim school not registered as provider	38	4.1
Hard to find local swim schools accepting voucher	19	2.0
Type of lessons/pool/swim school not eligible	19	2.0
Other***	9	1.0
Sub-theme 4.3: Swim school process/es	99	10.6
Swim school did not process voucher	42	4.5
Payment required before voucher available	31	3.3
Communication difficulties with swim school(s)	23	2.5
Other***	3	0.3

*Other codes that were mentioned less than 5 times each relating to Theme 1 included: child cannot do swimming lessons in winter, no swimming lessons available or only offered outdoors in winter, or “unsuitable” or “poor” season/weather (sub-themes 1.1; 1.2); child – broken arm or leg, child – asthma, child – hospitalised, family or parent – virus(es), family or parent – not specified, virus(es) (sub-theme 1.3); COVID-19 isolation, and other COVID-related issues or impact (sub-theme 1.4).

**Other codes mentioned less than 5 times each relating to Theme 3 included: did not know/unsure of eligibility and lack of awareness or misunderstanding about redemption process (sub-theme 3.1); experiencing difficulty in applying for the voucher or other technical issues like unable to validate due to website traffic or name not recognised by system (sub-theme 3.2).

***Other codes that were mentioned less than 5 times each relating to Theme 4 included being a border resident that limited eligible pool options (sub-theme 4.1); short time period when swim school was registered provider (sub-theme 4.2); pool brought expiry period forward (sub-theme 4.3).

being over winter or it being too cold for swimming lessons ($n = 89$ or 9.5%). Weather was also identified separate to seasonal reasons ($n = 29$ or 3.1%), primarily wet weather ($n = 10$, 1.1%) and floods ($n = 9$, 1.0%). Together parents or carers who referenced seasonal and weather barriers accounted for 118 responses (12.6%).

Winter and didn't want to sign them up. Will be signing them up after winter. (Parent/carer of child aged 6 years, Quartile 3, Metropolitan NSW)

Other circumstances identified as reasons for not redeeming the voucher included illness, injury, or health issues ($n = 69$ or 7.4%). Of

these responses, 36 (3.8%) were not specified and 15 (1.6%) mentioned viruses including COVID-19, cold, flu, or respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). A further sub-theme was COVID-19 concerns where respondents expressed a concern or fear of the risk of COVID-19 ($n = 67$ or 7.1%). Together, illness, injury, or health issues and COVID-19 concerns were raised 136 times (14.5%). Seasonal or weather-related reasons were sometimes combined with illness and viruses including COVID-19 ($n = 30$, 3.2%).

Concern of covid and the surge of winter viruses in public swimming pool[s]. (Parent/carer of child aged 3 years, Quartile 4 (Least disadvantaged), Metropolitan NSW)

Program parameters

Some responses ($n = 262$, 27.9%) mentioned a program parameter as a reason for not redeeming the voucher. Two sub-themes were evident under this theme: voucher expiry and age criteria. Firstly, the expiry and timeframe to use or redeem the voucher was cited 209 times, or in 22.3% of responses. These responses included voucher expired ($n = 86$, 9.2%), parent or carer forgot ($n = 51$, 5.4%), a late attempt to redeem, where the voucher could not be used or accepted very close to or on the expiry date ($n = 21$, 2.2%), a hope or belief to use the voucher later or in spring/summer after FY2021–2022 ended ($n = 37$, 3.9%), a lack of awareness or misunderstanding about voucher expiry ($n = 7$, 0.7%), and being late in applying for the voucher, leaving limited time for redemption ($n = 7$, 0.7%). The descriptions of voucher expiry included “ran out (of time)”, “didn’t get a chance to use (the voucher)”, “not able to/did not use in time”, the voucher expired “too quickly” or “too soon”, there was limited or “not enough time” to use the voucher or “not long to use (the voucher)”, and the voucher was “not early enough” to enrol in a lesson near home or was applied for “too late” to organise lessons.

Secondly, age criteria eligibility was mentioned 53 times (5.7%). The most common reference was to the child being “too old” ($n = 29$, 3.1%), while the child being “too young” was mentioned less frequently ($n = 5$, 0.5%). Another reason was that the child reached the eligible age close to the voucher expiry date ($n = 12$, 1.3%). Some parents/carers demonstrated a misunderstanding about the age criteria ($n = 6$, 0.6%). It was unclear if there was confusion or misunderstanding of the age criteria or why age was perceived as a reason for non-redemption.

Didn’t think he was eligible at 6yrs of age. (Parent/carer of child aged 7 years, Quartile 3, Metropolitan NSW)

Parent/carer (user) factors

Reasons relating to the parent/carer or user side of the program were mentioned 159 times, or in 17% of the responses. One sub-theme was parent/carer knowledge and awareness of the voucher or redemption process ($n = 43$, 4.6%), including a lack of knowledge or awareness of the voucher ($n = 26$, 2.8%) and delayed awareness of the voucher ($n = 11$, 1.2%).

Didn’t know about voucher until late in program. (Parent/carer of child aged 6 years, Quartile 3, Metropolitan NSW)

The second sub-theme was parent/carer experiencing technical issues or difficulties with the process ($n = 39$, 4.2%). This included difficulty in using or redeeming the voucher ($n = 8$, 0.9%), but most expressed a reason related to technical issues: experiencing issues with the code ($n = 16$, 1.7%) or experiencing an unknown technical issue ($n = 11$, 1.2%). In some cases, there was a combination of parent/carer delayed awareness with technical or lesson availability issues.

When I tried to redeem the voucher it didn’t have a code and it was the last day to redeem and therefore could not use it.

(Parent/carer of child aged 3 years, Quartile 1 (Most disadvantaged), Regional NSW)

A final sub-theme under the parent/carer theme was their availability and/or family circumstances ($n = 77$, 8.2%). Parent/carer availability around commitments with work or other children was cited 23 times (2.4%), while travel or relocation was mentioned 20 times (2.1%). Other reasons each mentioned in smaller numbers included difficulty in finding time for swimming lessons, being busy or the child doing other activities ($n = 12$, 1.3%), having already used another voucher for the swimming lesson ($n = 5$, 0.5%), and other more unique family circumstances such as living with a disability or health condition ($n = 17$, 1.8%).

Limited available options for swimming lessons that had times for full time working parents. (Parent/carer of child aged 7 years, Quartile 2, Metropolitan NSW)

Swim school (provider) factors

Many reasons for non-redemption concerned the swim school provider side of the program ($n = 469$, 50%) and this included three sub-themes: swim school availability and accessibility ($n = 210$, 22.4%), swim school program use and uptake ($n = 160$, 17.1%), and swim school processes ($n = 99$, 10.6%).

The most common reason expressed for non-redemption concerning the swim school provider side was availability and accessibility of swim schools ($n = 210$, 22.4%). A lack of lesson availability was the most significant reason for non-redemption ($n = 143$, 15.2%) with parents/carers unable to find or book lessons, especially due to full capacity ($n = 106$, 11.3%). In addition to not finding lessons, some parents/carers were unable to find suitable lessons ($n = 22$, 2.3%), where “suitability” was perceived as a balance between available lesson times and parent/carer availability.

I could not find the spots for the swimming lesson near my area. I tried to book in 3 cent

(res) 4 months prior to expiry date. (Parent/carer of child aged 4 years, Quartile 4 (Least disadvantaged), Metropolitan NSW)

Two other reasons related to swim school availability and accessibility included pool closure ($n = 29$, 3.1%) primarily due to floods ($n = 6$, 0.6%), renovations ($n = 7$, 0.7%), and winter ($n = 6$, 0.6%), and the accessibility of the pool or swim school ($n = 7$, 0.7%) including distance and transport. Some parents/carers experienced a combination of the provider sub-themes, such as lesson availability and communication difficulties or swim school registration, or swim school processes and seasonal pool closure.

Local providers only offer lessons over summer season and would not open bookings early so we could book in before vouchers expired. (Parent/carer of child aged 7 years, Quartile 1 (Most disadvantaged), Regional NSW)

The sub-theme of swim school (provider) barriers included swim schools not accepting the voucher ($n = 75$, 8.0% of all responses). Another similar reason for non-redemption was a swim school not being registered as a program provider ($n = 38$, 4.1%), including the provider citing not being eligible or able to register or having difficulty or delay in registering. Linked to these two codes, parent/carer difficulty in finding local swim schools accepting the voucher was also raised as a reason ($n = 19$, 2.0%).

My provider didn't accept vouchers / found that it was too onerous to apply as a small, sole trader. (Parent/carer of child aged 4 years, Quartile 4 (Least disadvantaged), Metropolitan NSW)

The type of lessons, pool or swim school not being eligible for the voucher was a barrier to redemption for some parents/carers ($n = 19$, 2.0%), who primarily referenced intensive lessons and swim schools attached to an educational school.

The provider would only allow use of the voucher for weekly swimming lessons. Would

not allow it to be used for intensive swimming lessons over one week in the school holidays. (Parent/carer of child aged 6 years, Quartile 2, Regional NSW)

The pool that my child does his swimming lessons is attached to [a] School and the business is not eligible. (Parent/carer of child aged 4 years, Quartile 4 (Least disadvantaged), Metropolitan NSW)

The third sub-theme, swim school processes for voucher redemption, was mentioned 99 times (10.6%). This included a swim school having difficulty processing the voucher ($n = 42$, 4.5%) and issues were highlighted between printed and digital vouchers.

The swim school was unable to administer the vouchers - it was too complicated a process. They expressed a lot of frustration. (Parent/carer of child aged 7 years, Quartile 2, Metropolitan NSW)

Other reasons for non-redemption associated with swim school processes included the payment for lessons being required or already completed before the voucher was available ($n = 31$, 3.3%) and communication or logistical difficulties with swim schools ($n = 23$, 2.5%).

My pool takes Direct Debit and couldn't accept the voucher. (Parent/carer of child aged 6 years, Quartile 3, Metropolitan NSW)

Feelings of disappointment span all three of these sub-themes, especially lesson availability and swim school eligibility and uptake of vouchers. This sense of disappointment was reiterated in responses to the final open-ended survey question.

I was very disappointed that my swim school would not accept the vouchers. (Parent/carer of child aged 4 years, Quartile 2, Metropolitan NSW)

The second phase of analysis provided insight into the perspectives of parents/carers who did not redeem their voucher and their experience of the whole program. Of the 938 responses analysed above, 550 responded to

the final survey question asking if they had anything else to say about the program. This additional analysis is presented in [Table 2](#). Many responses reiterated the same reasons or concerns raised for the question about non-redemption. The key additions were three other sub-themes under program parameters, representing requests for changes to voucher expiry and age criteria, and three further themes that go beyond the above themes and aim of the study ([Figure 2](#)). Two specific population groups were identified but these were in small numbers. Child disability and special needs were mentioned 14 times (1.5%) and state border residents were mentioned 5 times (0.5%).

This second phase identified requests or suggestions for extending the timeframe ($n = 96$, 17.5%), either stated or assumed to be linked to their reasons for non-redemption, while requests for no expiry date were mentioned 15 times (2.5%). Some parents/carers emphasised the importance of all Australian children learning to swim and there were requests for extending the age criteria for the vouchers ($n = 52$, 9.5%), connected to the age criteria sub-theme.

I think it's an amazing concept, every child should know how to be safe around water. Would love to see the voucher expanded to other age ranges. (Parent/carer of child aged 5 years, Quartile 2, Remote NSW)

Beyond these additions to the program parameters theme, the analysis of the final survey question responses established three themes not covered by the themes for non-redemption but broadly relevant to the study. Firstly, there was a significant amount of positive feedback about the program and its objectives ($n = 130$, 23.6%) with many parents/carers stating that the voucher is a "great initiative or idea" and expressing appreciation for the voucher and financial assistance. Of these, there were specific requests to continue the program and references to future vouchers ($n = 38$, 6.9%).

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes from responses to the final survey open ended question (do you have anything else to say?).

Themes, sub-themes and codes	Number (n)	Percent (%)
Theme 1: Seasonal, weather and health factors	48	8.7
Sub-theme 1.1: Seasonal	11	2.0
Sub-theme 1.2: Weather	10	1.8
Sub-theme 1.3: Illness, injury, or health issue	10	1.8
Sub-theme 1.4: COVID-19 concerns	17	3.1
Theme 2: Program Parameters	187	34
Sub-theme 2.1: Voucher expiry and timeframe	20	3.6
<i>Additional Code:</i> Request for extended or longer voucher expiry or to use FY21–22 voucher again	96	17.5
<i>Additional Code:</i> Request for no expiry date	15	2.7
Sub-theme 2.2: Age criteria eligibility (see below)	4	0.7
<i>Additional Code:</i> Request to extend age criteria	52	9.5
Theme 3: Parent/Carer (User) Factors	32	5.8
Sub-theme 3.1: Knowledge and awareness of voucher and redemption process	1	0.2
Sub-theme 3.2: Experienced technical issues or difficulties with process	22	4
Sub-theme 3.3: Availability/family circumstances	9	1.6
Theme 4: Swim Schools (Provider) Factors	171	31.9
Sub-theme 4.1: Availability and accessibility	55	10
Sub-theme 4.2: Program use or uptake	71	12.9
Sub-theme 4.3: Swim school process/es	45	8.1
ADDITIONAL THEME A: Positive feedback	130	23.6
Positive feedback about the program	92	16.7
Requests to continue the program	38	6.9
ADDITIONAL THEME B: Parent/carer knowledge and awareness (importance of water safety and children learning to swim)	44	8.0
ADDITIONAL THEME C: Cost and affordability of swimming lessons	52	9.5
Other: Disability or Special Needs	9	1.6
Other: State border resident	4	0.7
Other (not relevant)	28	5.1

I think it's a fantastic way to help ease the financial pressure on families and allows them to access lifesaving education for their child. (Parent/carer of child aged 6 years, Quartile 1 (Most disadvantaged), Metropolitan NSW)

Secondly, parent/carer knowledge and awareness of the importance of water safety and learning to swim was more evident in responses to the final survey question ($n = 44$, 8.0%) than in responses to the non-redemption question.

I think the voucher program is excellent and should be continued, all children in Australia should learn to swim. (Parent/carer of child aged 6 years, Quartile 2, Regional NSW)

Thirdly, the cost and affordability of lessons was raised more in the final response ($n = 52$, 9.5%) compared to the responses explaining reasons for non-redemption. There was positive

feedback and appreciation for the financial help and easing cost of living pressures, yet there were also references to lessons being expensive and the voucher only assisting to a limited extent. Some parents/carers referenced that swimming lessons remain unaffordable and therefore inaccessible given that they did not redeem the 2021–2022 voucher.

I can't afford swimming lessons without voucher and feel we missed out on this opportunity because of lack of services in the area. (Parent/carer of child aged 4 years, Quartile 4 (Least disadvantaged), Metropolitan NSW)

Discussion

This analysis allowed for a deeper understanding of how parents/carers perceive and experience the First Lap voucher program, focused on the reasons for not redeeming the voucher in FY2021–2022. These data were enriched by the

open-ended responses of parents/carers who did not redeem their voucher concerning their overall experience of the First Lap program. Addressing the identified barriers to voucher redemption can facilitate voucher use, improve the parent/carer experience and contribute to incentivising parents/carers to enrol their pre-school-aged children in swimming lessons.

The first two themes encompass reasons that are specific to the timeframe. The context of the launch of the First Lap program in December 2021 includes NSW moving out of public health restrictions that had been in place for the COVID-19 pandemic (NSW Government, 2021). COVID-19 was identified as a major barrier to swimming lesson participation in the year immediately before this time period among parent/carers at the time of creating their First Lap voucher (Ananthapavan et al., 2023). In addition, NSW experienced a particularly wet summer and autumn, December 2021 to May 2022, with multiple and widespread flooding events (Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology, 2022). Another important consideration around these perspectives is the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and floods on the mental health and wellbeing of the NSW population (Impact Economics and Policy and NCOSS, 2022) and how these disruptions may have impacted parent/carer ability to redeem the voucher. These contextual factors account for many of the sub-themes under seasonal, weather and health factors.

The second theme of program parameters included a lack of awareness and misunderstanding on behalf of parents/carers. Consideration must be given to this being the first year of the First Lap program, where the concept and processes were new to users and providers. The voucher expiry date and age criteria were perceived as reasons for non-redemption by parent/carers, however this does not necessarily constitute a barrier to swimming lesson participation.

Moving to the final two themes, this analysis has a critical role in informing future

engagement with both program users and providers, acknowledging that some “teething problems” of the program may have led to these findings. Building on existing research of the First Lap voucher program, this paper considers how this program may alleviate identified barriers to swim lesson participation for pre-school-aged children. This research reflects some of the identified pre-existing barriers and where the vouchers may not have alleviated these barriers, including a lack of or poor access to swimming lessons, parent/carer availability, and family circumstances (Ananthapavan et al., 2023).

Firstly, on the user side, reasons for non-redemption point to the delivery and use of the vouchers. Parents/carers experienced issues related specifically to the voucher – a lack of knowledge or awareness of the voucher or technical issues with the redemption process – or related to their and their child’s availability to attend swimming lessons more generally. Perceptions of voucher expiry and age criteria are inter-related to a lack of knowledge, awareness, or misunderstanding about learning to swim. While the optimal age for structured swimming education is debated (Taylor et al., 2020), the first national benchmark for swimming and water safety is determined at 6 years old (Royal Life Saving Society – Australia, 2019). This reflects the age eligibility for First Lap and the importance of program rationale and background being clearly communicated to parents/carers (Bellew & Young, 2017), particularly to priority populations groups (Macniven et al., 2023). While these priority populations were not specifically or individually analysed in this study, children with disabilities were identified as a group with reasons for voucher non-redemption associated with their specific needs or circumstances, consistent with evidence of pre-existing barriers to swimming lessons (Ananthapavan et al., 2023).

Secondly, on the provider side, a combination of swim school participation in the program and lesson availability must be

addressed for future program success, consistent with a lack of availability identified as a pre-existing barrier (Ananthapavan et al., 2023). The most often cited reason for non-redemption, the lack of lesson availability, included references to “no vacancy or spots”, “fully booked” or “booked out”, and “waitlist”. These experiences reflect the higher demand for swimming lessons following the COVID-19 pandemic (PwC Australia, 2022) and the workforce and recruitment pressures in the sector (Royal Life Saving Society – Australia, 2022). Preferred swim schools not being registered as program providers was also identified as a barrier to redemption among some parents. These barriers to voucher redemption and associated swimming lesson participation highlight the importance of whole-of-government approaches (De Leeuw, 2022) that the First Lap program adopts. An example of such collaboration between health and education/training sectors at the state and national level were initiatives to increase the swim training and coaching workforce to meet the demand for swimming lessons (Commonwealth of Australia Department of Health and Aged Care, 2021; NSW Government Education, 2022). Further research should explore provider perspectives of the First Lap program to better understand the (sub) themes of swim school program engagement and processes.

Swimming lessons affordability was also raised by some parents/carers who did not redeem their voucher in their responses to the final open-ended survey question, suggesting it was a barrier to program participation, in addition to a pre-existing barrier prior to program inception (Ananthapavan et al., 2023). Some parallels can be drawn with children’s participation in physical activity where cost is one of the key barriers yet there can be a positive impact of financial incentives and vouchers in increasing physical activity (Reece et al., 2020). Evidence from the NSW Active Kids voucher program for organised sport and physical activity participation highlighted cost

barriers of ongoing participation (Virgona et al., 2022). Similarly, this First Lap study identified parents/carers’ concerns about the ongoing cost and affordability of swimming lessons. A range of SEIFA quartiles and remoteness categories are represented in the quotes in this study, but further research could determine any specific or unique barriers for children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. Potential solutions include targeting voucher provision on a means tested basis to address structural barriers and social determinants of health (Baum & Fisher, 2014). Applying a social determinants of health lens can be effective for children who may face additional barriers to swimming lesson participation (Willcox-Pidgeon et al., 2021).

The reasons for non-redemption of First Lap vouchers span four spheres of influence from the macro to micro level of the socio-ecological model (McLeroy et al., 1998) of policy, community and social, parental and family, and individual child preferences. Policy influences include awareness of the voucher and its use and impact, community-level influences include providers and access to the activity locally, and parental/family influences include socio-economic status, family size and schedules, and cultural background (Virgona et al., 2022). This can also be conceptualised as an ecosystem that encompasses access to learning to swim programs, the providers (spanning public sector, commercial, and community), and infrastructure (PwC Australia, 2022). This ecosystem is pertinent to swim school availability and accessibility, the most frequently mentioned sub-theme of this study and can inform future swimming lesson voucher and water safety education program design.

Strengths and limitations

A strength of this study is a large sample size of participants from across Australia’s state jurisdiction. Participants were parents/carers who completed the process to create a First Lap

program voucher and were therefore aware of the program compared to those who may not have been aware. This study addresses barriers to voucher redemption from the parent/carer perspective but does not explore the perspective of swim schools, the provider side, that is recommended as an area of future research.

Conclusion

While parents/carers acknowledge the importance of learning to swim and the value of the First Lap voucher program, reasons for non-redemption represent barriers to preschool-aged children fully participating. This research reflects some of the identified pre-existing barriers to swim lesson participation including swim school accessibility and parent/carer availability, noting the vouchers may not have solely alleviated these barriers. The analysis then outlines considerations for voucher programs concerning engagement and communication with both the user and provider side. These aspects may assist in addressing the reasons for non-redemption and barriers related to program parameters, leisure industry engagement and support, and user knowledge and awareness. Enhanced communication and cooperation can address availability, accessibility, and uptake of voucher programs, as well as considering ecological and ecosystem factors influencing participation.

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