

Prevention of childhood drowning

Information for parents and caregivers



Kidsafe SA Inc. • September 2010

Children, especially toddlers, seem to be drawn to water whether it is in the bath, the toilet, buckets, swimming pools, puddles, dams etc. Water to most young children means fun, play, and adventure. However, child safety takes on a new meaning near water.

Children and water, without adult supervision, do not mix.

A child can drown silently in as little as 5 cm of water, in less than 2 minutes.

Children can drown in a few centimetres of water at the bottom of a bucket, in the bath, toilet, or in any number of different types of outside water environments. Examples of these are swimming pools, spas, dams, rivers, animal troughs, rain water tanks, wells, pits that fill with water when it rains, fish ponds and septic tanks, just to name a few.

The backyard swimming pool is the single most dangerous water environment for young children.

What the statistics show

Drowning is one of the most common causes of unintentional death in Australian children aged between 0-4 years, with children aged between 0-2 years being the most vulnerable. Australia has the second worst record in the world for preventable toddler drowning. This is a record that we are not proud of.

- On average, 40 children aged 0-4 years are involved in near drowning incidents each year in South Australia, with 4 of these children dying, and many others being severely affected by lack of oxygen to the brain.
- The majority of children who drown are in the 0-2 year age group.
- Whilst children drowned in a variety of water environments, the backyard swimming pool was where the majority of drowning deaths occurred.
- A lapse, or an absence of parental or adult supervision, was apparent in the majority of drownings.
- Security of the gate to the swimming pool was a big problem. In some cases, the safety latch on the gate was broken, in others the gate was left open, and in some instances the child had stacked up chairs/toys to climb over the gate.
- Children over 1 year are mobile, very quick and inquisitive, but still too young to know what is dangerous.
- The relative risk of drowning for children 0-4 years of age is 6 times that of children aged 5-14 years of age.

- Most young children who drowned in a pool were last seen in the home, had been out of sight less than five minutes, and were in the care of one or both parents at the time.
- Parents often underestimate the risk of their child drowning, and think it will never happen to them.
- Inadequate supervision is the most significant factor that contributes to a young child drowning.

How to prevent a young child from drowning

There are 4 ways to prevent young children drowning. They are 1. Supervision; 2. Eliminating the hazard; 3. Environmental measures; and 4. Education.

1. Supervision: Keeping a close watch

Young children should never be left alone or with another child, in or around any body of water. Inadequate supervision is the most significant factor that contributes to young children drowning. Constant adult supervision means ensuring you can see your child all the time and are close to them. **Keeping a close watch on your child when they are around water is the most effective way to prevent drowning.**

A particularly risky time is at social gatherings around a pool, where there are several adults and children. It is important during these types of social gatherings that adults take turns being the 'designated watcher' or 'life guard'. However, it is also important that the adults supervising are not under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and take their role seriously. A good idea is to swap 'life guards' regularly so everyone can enjoy the day.

2. Eliminating hazards

Where possible, eliminating hazards is the most effective prevention method, since it does not rely on barriers or other protective measures which may be ineffective. For example, buckets and baths should be left empty when not in use.

3. Environmental measures

Fence it in: A survey by CHOICE found that over half of all Australian pool fences tested failed to meet a key safety aspect of the Australian Standard for pool fencing. It is essential to maintain the pool fence in good working order.

It is recommended that a swimming pool be surrounded with a fence that is at least 1200mm tall. Slatted fences should have no gaps wider than 100mm, so young children cannot squeeze through.



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Installation of self-closing and self-latching gates with latches that are beyond a child's reach (usually 1500mm) is vital.

A barrier isolating a pool from all other structures, e.g. a four-sided fence, has been shown to be far more protective than perimeter fencing, or a three-sided fence where the house or another structure forms the fourth side of the barrier.

Under changes to the Building Code of Australia, effective from the 1st May 2010, the use of child resistant door and window closures will no longer be considered acceptable barriers to access swimming pools. This means that all new outdoor backyard swimming pools from this date will be required to be surrounded by a pool fence.

Alarms: Alarm systems signalling that a child has wandered beyond predetermined limits from the home are available, as are underwater pool alarms. However, Kidsafe SA does not recommend the use of alarms as we strongly recommend adult supervision at all times when a child is near water.

Block pool and spa access: A rigid, motorized safety cover can be used to block access to the pool when it is not in use. Covers can be used on spas as well. However, it is important that water does not collect on top of the pool or spa cover. Remove above-ground pool steps or ladders, or lock them behind a fence when the pool is not in use.

4. Education and developing skills:

Teach children to swim: Most children can learn to swim from a young age – however, swimming lessons alone will not drown-proof a child. Do not rely on flotation aids such as floaties or bubbles.

Remove toys: It is important to remove pool toys from the water. A child may fall into the water while trying to retrieve a toy.

Beware of drains: Do not allow children to play near or sit on pool or spa drains. Body parts and hair may become entrapped by the strong suction. Use drain covers, and consider installing multiple drains to reduce the power of the suction. Do not buy a spa which has a filter drain installed on the floor. This type of drain has caused child deaths.

Learn resuscitation

The first few minutes in an emergency can make the difference between life and death. In many cases, help may take too long to arrive, so it will be up to you to know what to do.

- Learn CPR (cardio-pulmonary resuscitation) and update your training regularly.
- Keep CPR instructions on the pool fence and in the first aid kit.

- Have a mobile phone with you at all times around the pool
- Keep the emergency number by the phone, or program 000 into your phone for speed dialling.

CPR posters and training are available from your local:

- Royal Life Saving Society www.royallifesaving.com.au/www/html/189-sa-website-home-page.asp
- St John Ambulance www.stjohnsa.com.au/
- Surf Life Saving Association www.surfrescue.com.au/
- Red Cross www.redcross.org.au/sa/

The Legislation in SA

New swimming pool safety regulations came into effect on 1 October 2008. The new rules require all homes with pools to have up-to-date child-safety barriers in place before the property can be sold.

It is the responsibility of the pool owner to make sure that the latest pool safety requirements are met prior to the settlement date when selling a property with a swimming pool. Specific pool safety requirements are set by Australian Standards adopted by the State Government.

Under the Standards, all swimming pools must have a continuous safety barrier that is maintained by the pool owner and which restricts access by young children to the pool and the immediate pool surrounds. There are specific requirements in the Standards regarding fences, gates and any doors or windows which provide direct access to a pool.

See the earlier reference to changes to the Building Code of Australia from 1 May 2010, in relation to pool fencing requirements.

For more information about the legislation, go to: www.planning.sa.gov.au/go/swimmingpools

For more information, contact:

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