

How to Prevent Child Drowning: A Must-Read Guide for Parents

By Ari Brown, M.D., Pamela Kramer, Kate Lawler. *Parents Magazine*

The sad truth about drowning is every kid is at risk — even if she can swim. Learn the latest child and baby drowning statistics and 10 live-saving steps you can take to prevent tragedy from striking.

Colin Holst was an adventurous, fun-loving little boy who had always been cautious around water. When the 4-year-old completed swimming lessons on June 12, 2008, his confidence soared. His father, Jeff, took a picture of his proud son wearing his swim goggles and beaming. Colin said it was "the best day ever!" The next day, his mom, Jana, took him and his 6-year-old sister to join two other families at a popular community pool.

Colin and the other children played and splashed in the fountains and sprinklers in the shallow end of the pool — under the supervision of several parents and lifeguards. Before his last trip into the water that day, Colin gave Jana a kiss and went to play under a mushroom waterfall.

Then within a few minutes, he was out of sight. It's difficult for his parents to describe the events of that day, but Jana remembers frantically scanning the pool, searching for him. Moments later he was pulled from the shallow water by another swimmer, lifeless. CPR performed at the poolside could not bring him back.

Perhaps most disturbing of all is the fact that Colin's death wasn't so unusual.

Drowning Facts Parents Need to Know

Young children can drown silently in as little as 25 seconds, even in the shallow end or in a baby pool, says Lois Lee, M.D., M.P.H., an emergency-medicine specialist at Boston Children's Hospital.

"Most children drown because their parents turn their head for just a second or have no idea that their child is even near the pool," says Druann Letter, who founded Water Watchers, a water-safety program run by Phoenix Children's Hospital, to honor her son Weston who drowned at only 3 years old.

In nine out of 10 drownings, parents or caregivers say they'd been supervising the child at the time, according to research by Safe Kids Worldwide. But kids — especially toddlers, who are at highest risk — are impulsive and fast. They'll dart out a screen door, crawl through the doggy door, or wander into the pool area to get a toy.

And when a child drowns, it's nothing like what you might see on TV or in the movies.

"Toddlers don't yell or splash, and they sink fast," warns Steven Kernie, MD, a pediatric critical-care physician at Children's Medical Center Dallas. Ironically, many drownings occur at parties with plenty of adults around because everybody assumes that someone else is watching the water, says Dr. Kernie.

Drowning is the leading cause of injury death in U.S. children ages 1-4 years and the third leading cause of unintentional injury death in children and adolescents ages 5-19 years, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In fact, in 2017 drowning killed 1000 children, and in March 2019, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) released updated guidelines for drowning prevention to combat the dangers of water for children.

In their latest update, the AAP outlines in detail the role of parents in particular when it comes to preventing drowning, including supervision, enrollment in swim lessons, requiring and modeling life jacket use, having effective barriers in place and knowing CPR. Read on for 10 steps you can take now to prevent your child from drowning:

10 Steps to Prevent Child Drowning

1. Always stay within arm's reach.

The AAP advises that supervision of children in and around the water must be close, constant and attentive.

Kids who are not yet experienced swimmers need constant touch supervision when they're playing in or near a pool or at the beach. That means you (or another responsible adult) should stay in the water with your child at all times, within touching distance, giving him 100 percent of your attention.

"When your child is in or near the water, you need to keep your eyes on her at all times," says Tom Krzmarzick, MD, medical director of the Regional Pediatric Trauma and Emergency Center at the Children's Medical Center of Dayton. If you need to leave a pool area, take your child with you. Don't let babysitters take her swimming unless you're confident that they'll watch her constantly.

Once your child has learned to swim long distances and float on his back, he won't necessarily need you right next to him, but you should always keep him in sight, no matter how old he is. Kids of all ages can get stuck underwater, grow tired, or become panicked.

2. Ignore your phone.

Make a pact with yourself: When you're at the pool or the beach or the lake, silence your phone and stow it out of reach in your bag so you're not tempted to use it.

"If you hear a text message come in and turn to your phone for five seconds, that's long enough for a child to be submerged," says Anne Beasley, M.D., a pediatric hospitalist at Phoenix Children's Hospital.

This doesn't mean, however, that you should leave your phone at home; it's best to keep it fully charged and within reach in case of emergency. You should also memorize the address of wherever you're swimming so you can easily give your location to a 911 operator.

3. Don't rely on water wings. Period.

According to the AAP, Small children and nonswimmers should always wear a well-fitting U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket when they are near water and when swimming.

“Parents put too much faith in flotation devices that were never made to be life preservers,” says James Callahan, M.D., a pediatric emergency physician at The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia. If your little one is a nonswimmer, it’s okay to let her use floatie toys, but only if you’re right there next to her in the water.

And just say no to toy mermaid fins; they can trap your child’s legs, preventing her from easily kicking her way to the surface from beneath the water.

All children should be also be required to wear one whenever they are in or on watercraft, and all adults should wear life jackets when boating to model safe behavior and to facilitate their ability to help their child in case of emergency.

4. Install the proper water barriers.

Families should install a four-sided fence that separates a pool from the house and the rest of the yard with a self-closing, self-latching gate, says the AAP. This includes inflatable and plastic pools.

Experts caution against using large kiddie pools because they're too heavy to empty after each use and are usually not protected by fences and covers. If you use a smaller baby pool, be sure to drain it afterwards, and don't leave it outside where it can accumulate rainwater. Watch your child even when he's in very shallow water.

"Most parents think that a 3- or 4-year-old can just stand up and get out of a baby pool," says Dr. Krzmarzick. "But if he falls and gets a mouthful or a lungful of water, he can get scared and not know what to do. Even a child that age can drown in a few minutes."

5. Sign up your child for swimming lessons.

The AAP advises that all children and parents learn to swim. Basic water competency swim skills include ability to enter the water, surface, turn around, propel oneself for at least 25 yards and then exit the water.

So what age is best to start swim lessons? The AAP does not recommend formal swim programs for children under the age of 1. At this age, parent/infant swim classes are a form bonding as opposed to a safety lesson.

"The decision to enroll a child over age one in swimming lessons should be made by the parent based on the child's developmental readiness and exposure to water," according to the AAP.

"Your child needs to be ready both physically and mentally," says Thomas Heneghan, a water-safety expert at the American Red Cross, in Washington, D.C. "He needs to have a certain amount of strength and coordination to be able to get in and out of a pool, take direction from the instructor, wait his turn, and cooperate with other children."

Look for a program that has certified instructors and groups kids according to their abilities. It's best for your child to take lessons every year to refresh her skills and learn new ones, but don't let her comfort in the water make you lax about safety. "If a child panics, the skills she's learned may not come back to her," Heneghan says.

6. Make older kids buddy up.

As an extra layer of protection, experts recommend that kids follow the buddy system. Pair your child with a friend or a sibling, and explain that each kid is responsible for knowing where her buddy is at all times.

But don't forget that a pal doesn't replace adult supervision; the system serves as a supplement.

7. Have the appropriate safety gear in case of an emergency.

You should keep a telephone and equipment approved by the U.S. Coast Guard (e.g., life buoys, life jackets and a reach tool, such as a shepherd's crook) near pools, according to the AAP.

8. Teach your child water rules.

For easy memorizing, stick to these five:

1. No running
2. No diving in the shallow end
3. No pushing people in
4. No pulling other kids under the water
5. No swimming without adult supervision—ever

And remember: Children aren't the only ones who shouldn't swim alone; it's not particularly safe for adults to swim solo either, says Dr. Callahan.

9. Learn CPR.

If the worst happens and you have to rescue a distressed swimmer, conducting CPR while you wait for an ambulance to arrive could save that person's life. When the heart stops, continuing to circulate blood to the brain helps prevent a bad outcome, explains Dr. Beasley.

"In a perfect world, all parents would be trained in CPR." You can find a class through a community center or hospital, or via the American Heart Association or the American Red Cross.

If you're untrained or rusty on CPR, do chest compressions (100 per minute), and skip rescue breathing, also known as mouth-to-mouth. When it comes to drowning, doing something is always better than doing nothing.

10. Be aware of the hazards at home.

Most deadly accidents affecting young kids happen in backyard pools, but there are also sneaky hazards around the house and at the beach. That's why being

aware of drowning dangers and safety precautions is so important. Here's where to start:

Bathtubs: Never leave a child under 4 alone in the tub or near a running bath. A school-age child can bathe by himself — but a parent should stay within earshot.

Baby bath seats or rings: Never leave your child unattended in a bath seat — he could slip down into the water and get trapped underneath, or the ring could tip over.

Buckets and containers: A curious toddler can fall headfirst into a water-filled bucket and be unable to get out. Even a cooler filled with melting ice can be a drowning hazard. Always make sure to empty after use.

Toilet bowls: Keep toilet cover down and bathroom door closed at all times. Install a toilet-cover safety latch.