

Water safety

The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre, Melbourne 2008

Water is an essential part of all our lives – to bath, drink, cook and play. Young children are often drawn to water. Unfortunately and all too often, natural curiosity results in drowning or near drowning. Whether it is at the beach, in the backyard, the bathroom, or on a farm, children need to be protected from water.

It only takes a few centimetres of water for a child to drown, within a few minutes.

Learning to swim is to be encouraged, however it is important to be realistic about what babies and young children can hope to achieve, particularly in unfamiliar situations or in the event of falling unexpectedly into water. Swimming lessons for young children provide an opportunity for them to gain confidence ('water familiarisation') or simply to have fun. Lessons do not 'drown proof' children. There are many reasons to believe that children over the age of three years are better able to learn to swim, however it takes years for a child to reach a consistent standard. Children must be within an adult's constant visual eye contact at all times when near water.

Rates of injury

Most children who drown are under 5 years of age. One and 2 year olds are most at risk.

Main causes of injury

Private swimming pools/spas and baths account for most drowning or near drowning incidents (50%–65%).

Most drownings happen when a child falls or wanders into a pool or spa. When drowning has happened in fenced pools, the pools were found to have faulty gates or gates that were propped open. Children also use items such as outdoor furniture to enable them to climb over a pool fence.

Other places where children have drowned include baths, dams, creeks, wading pools, the beach, and even buckets.

Suggested ways to reduce the risk of injury

Children must always be within an adult's constant visual eye contact at all times when near water. Older children should not be responsible for younger children.

Start swimming lessons when a child is about 3 or 4 years of age.

Ensure that home ponds are covered by wire mesh.

First aid skills

Parents should ensure they have current training in resuscitation techniques, learning basic first aid and resuscitation skills (CPR or cardiopulmonary resuscitation).

Plan to do a CPR refresher course once a year, as first aid practices sometimes change and there is a tendency to forget when the skills are not used regularly. In the event of a child falling unexpectedly into water, quick rescue and resuscitation (if needed) will make a difference to the outcome.

It is a good idea to have a resuscitation chart by the phone or on the pool fence.

In an emergency dial 000, or use the memory dialling facility on your phone.

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Suggested ways to reduce the risk of injury – cont.

Pools and spas

Ensure all backyard pools and spas are fenced in accordance with AS1926.

Find out about pool fencing requirements from your local council.

A fence that entirely surrounds the pool is best, including a self-closing and latching gate.

The gate must be kept in good working order. Never prop open gates or doors leading to pools and spas.

Take floating toys out of the pool after use, as they can be a temptation to young children.

Ensure that there are no objects, ladders, garden furniture or other climbing equipment near the pool or spa, which children can climb on to gain access to the pool. Make sure toddlers can't get under your pool fence.

Empty a paddling pool immediately after use.

At the beach

Swim between the flags at lifesaver patrolled beaches.

School aged children will benefit from information and education classes that some life saving clubs offer, e.g. beach safety, and what to do in a rip or strong current. Contact your local branch of The Royal Life Saving Society of Australia, or Surf Life Saving Victoria.

Bathrooms and laundries

A child under 5 years of age must always be within arms reach of an adult when in the bath, not under the supervision of an older child.

Bath seats are not a substitute for adult supervision.

When bathing a child, leave the telephone answering machine on, or if you must answer the phone, take the child with you. A cordless phone with you in the bathroom may be a better alternative.

Choose a nappy bucket that has a firm-fitting lid and keep it off the floor. Nappy buckets should not be left within reach of a toddler.

Keep the door to the bathroom, laundry and toilet closed at all times.

On the farm

Children on farms should be provided with a fenced and safe play area. Children need to be separated from dams, lakes and creeks, as well as sump holes, irrigation channels and troughs.

Statistics are based on those provided by the Victorian Injury Surveillance Unit, Monash University. Figures have been rounded off for ease of reading.

For further information:

- Life Saving Victoria, (03) 9676 6900 or www.lifesavingvictoria.com.au
- Play it safe by the water, Department of Justice, Victoria, www.watersafety.vic.gov.au

For further information
about the Safety Centre
Telephone 9345 5085
www.rch.org.au/safetycentre

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