



Child Safety Series



Water Safety

Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service

When children are near water they are exposed to a dangerous situation. A child can slip from view and into the water in a matter of seconds. Any body of water, no matter how small or shallow, is a potential drowning hazard. Most drownings of children under 5 years of age occur because of inadequate adult supervision.

Home Water Hazards

Large bodies of water are not the only places drownings occur. Far too often, accidents happen in and around the home in such unlikely places as toilets, large buckets, diaper pails, basins and bathtubs.

Reports from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) during the past three decades show that more than 300 children have drowned in bathtubs, basins, showers and jetted tubs in as little as 2 inches of water. Another 49 drowned in toilet bowls, usually after falling in head first; 30 children drowned in diaper pails; and more than 200 have drowned in 5-gallon buckets.

More than 700 deaths in spas and hot tubs have been reported to the CPSC since 1980. About a third of those were drownings of children under age 5. There are other problems with some older models: Hair entanglement, body part entrapment and hot temperatures have been responsible for some deaths. The strong drain suction of hot tubs, spas, wading pools and larger pools has caused deaths. Young children can die from hyperthermia when water temperatures exceed 104 degrees Fahrenheit.

A pool is another deadly hazard for small children. It should have a fence surrounding it, with self-closing and self-locking gates. Pool alarms should be installed. No doors should lead directly from the house to the pool.

Even with secure fences, there are still ways for children to enter pool areas. For example, a 4-year-old child managed to open a gate into his baby sitter's backyard pool. He then rode his tricycle around the pool's

edge, toppled into the deep end and drowned. Gates can be left open, and often fences are so low that children can climb over them. Fences should be high enough to discourage children from climbing and should have slats no more than 4 inches apart.

When supervising swimmers, take these precautions:

- Have a life preserver handy.
- Do not swim or allow children to swim in stormy weather.
- Cover the pool in the off season.
- Closely supervise children who are in or around water.
- Do not allow poor swimmers to use noncertified flotation devices. Should the device float into deep water, the nonswimmer might fall off or lose hold of it and be unable to reach safety.

These steps are only a sampling. For a more complete safety guide refer to the *American Red Cross First Aid and Safety Handbook*.



Recreational Safety

With sufficient planning, boating is a popular activity that can be enjoyed safely. Parents should be sensitive to their children's abilities and plan activities that will safely involve them.

Between 75 and 90 percent of individuals who drown in boating accidents could have been saved if they had been wearing personal flotation devices. Infants and small children should not be in a boat unless they have been properly secured in such devices. Parents who think they can rescue a child or infant if the boat capsizes are overestimating their ability to react in an emergency. Small children and infants, once in the water, may never return to the surface.

The following boating tips will help you have a safe and enjoyable outing:

- Everyone should wear a personal flotation device while boating: No exceptions!
- Take care not to overload the boat with either people or gear. Seats do not indicate capacity of your boat; weight is the best indicator.
- Check the weather. Many boaters carry small AM radios for updates. If a storm comes up, get to shore.
- Do not stand up or change places in small boats. If someone has to move, see that other occupants help counterbalance the weight shift.
- Use caution and low speeds near the shore, dock, other boats and people.
- Never use alcohol while boating.
- Learn to swim.

Drown-proofing

To reduce the chance of drowning, any child who has learned to crawl should be taught to float. Parents can begin to teach drown-proofing skills by having the child dunk her face in the water in a basin, wading pool or bathtub. Next, she can learn to hold her breath and blow bubbles in the water. When she can comfortably do this, the child is ready to learn to swim.

Swimming instruction should wait until a child is at least 3 years old. A child who learns to swim at a younger age does not have the maturity to swim alone and should never be considered water-safe. Parents can encourage a child to learn to swim by providing praise and opportunity for water play. Playing in a bathtub or wading pool will help a child develop a healthy attitude toward water. Breathing skills learned at an early age will help a child feel more secure in water.

Emergency procedures:

- Call 911 or an ambulance.
- Try rescue if it can be done without personal injury.
- Administer artificial respiration or CPR.
- Treat for shock.

Water Safety Checklist

- **Always wear a PFD (personal flotation device) while boating.**
- **Never overload boats.**
- **Supervise small children closely, and never leave them alone in the bathtub.**
- **Restrict access to pools or ponds.**
- **See that all members of the family age 3 and older know how to swim.**
- **Learn how to perform artificial respiration and CPR.**

References

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- Consumer Product Safety Alert, U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, Washington, D.C. 1993.

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