

BASIC POOL SAFETY:

When most people think of pool-related injuries, they think of drowning and water aspiration. Diving injuries also occur and can be very serious. However, older children and adolescents account for most of these. In younger children, falls and cuts are common when children slip on wet surfaces.

Toddlers are at particularly high risk for drowning. Their size makes even a small amount of water hazardous. In addition, they are often unsteady and fall easily, and they seldom know how to swim.



Toddlers are at risk of drowning or water aspiration because they can't swim.

One step, then, to preventing drowning is to teach your children how to swim. The value of toddler swimming lessons has been debated, but lessons can be worthwhile -- especially if the disadvantages to them are understood. Children who have had some form of swimming lessons are only half as likely to need some type of assistance in the pool as children with no training. Also, toddlers who start swimming earlier are more likely to become competent swimmers as adults.

The biggest disadvantage to toddler swimming lessons is that, afterward, parents believe the child is water-safe and don't watch her as carefully as they might if she had not had lessons. Although your child may be more comfortable in the water after taking lessons, she really can't swim well, nor can she be expected to know how to react to emergencies.

Infant swimming lessons have other drawbacks. Prolonged lessons have been associated with water intoxication (drinking too much water). Therefore, the YMCA recommends prohibiting forced submersion and limiting inwater time to 30 minutes. In addition, when children are still in diapers, it becomes difficult to maintain the effectiveness of the pool's chlorination. There have been reports of epidemics of diarrhea diseases from infant swimming classes.

Besides swimming lessons, other precautions may help prevent pool accidents. Fences and self-locking gates around public and private pools may prevent a toddler from toppling in while unattended. Floating alarms that sound a loud tone when water is disturbed may be a good idea. Pool covers may help, too, but remember that they can collect rainwater and become a drowning hazard themselves. Adequate supervision, from both parents and lifeguards, is a necessity. Teach your child to follow rules in the pool area, such as no running and no diving in shallow water. Finally, use life jackets on young children who don't know how to swim, but don't become complacent-life jackets, too, can fail.

Similarly, bear in mind inner tubes, air mattresses, and other flotation devices are for fun only; do not trust them in deep water or if your child is out of your sight. Toys break, inflatable devices deflate. Don't place your child in unnecessary peril by trusting such devices. And never use any device to help your child stay afloat that is not

certified as a personal floatation device; some inflatable toys and devices may actually increase the risk of drowning by making a child float face-down in the water.

Generally speaking, childhood accidents will happen, usually on a smaller scale, and while ensuring physical safety is important, over-protectiveness is not a virtue because it scares the child into fearing the world while stunting a healthy curiosity. Read about handling a childhood accident next.

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