

Childhood Drowning

Drowning: the statistics

Drowning is the most common cause of accidental death for Australian children aged between 0-4 years.

Toddler Drowning in 2010:

- Four children under five years of age drowned
- All were Male and under two years of age
- 100% occurred in and around the home (none in swimming pools)
- Common contributing factors included poorly maintained barriers and lack of supervision

(Source: 2010 Western Australia Drowning Report Royal Lifesaving Society of Australia WA)

How Drowning happens:

Water based activities are part of the Australian lifestyle. Children are naturally attracted to water; they have little fear and no understanding or awareness of its danger.

Water contained in swimming pools, bathtubs, ponds, buckets, dams, rivers, lakes, oceans, water tanks are all potential drowning hazards for children.

**A child can drown in less than 2 minutes
in as little as 5 cm of water in absolute silence.**

Children less than 2 years are "top heavy" – their heads are proportionally heavier than the rest of their body. As a result they can easily topple into water hazards.

There is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that a child under the age of three years can develop adequate and reliable swimming skills to prevent drowning.

In over three quarters of reported child drowning cases, water based activity was not the intended activity as the child was fully clothed at the time of immersion.

Parents and carers often mistakenly believe that:

- children will follow instructions and stay away from water hazards
- that a child can safely be left unattended for short periods of time
- they have adequate safety measures in place
- younger children can safely play or be in the care of older children

Most studies reveal an absence of direct adult supervision.

Where children drown in a fully fenced pool, the barrier is usually found to be:

- faulty
- non-compliant or
- misused – eg propping open the gate

Priorities for prevention of childhood drowning

Keep Watch

Supervision

Adult supervision is constant, active and "within arms reach" of your child, not an occasional glance between reading or snoozing.

Example: When entertaining or where there is a large group of people in and around the water, allocate one or two people to be the "life guard" for 20 minutes at a time.

This person does not join in conversations, prepare drinks or food as they are totally dedicated to watching everyone in the pool.



Water Skills

Familiarise your children with water through swimming classes or an aqua start program. Water familiarisation skills are an important start to a child's life around water but they do not "drown-proof" children.

Learn Resuscitation

The first few minutes in an emergency are vital and can make a difference between life and death. In rural areas, help may be miles away- it may be up to you.

- Learn CPR (Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation) and update your training regularly.
- Keep CPR instructions on the pool fence and in your First Aid Kit.
- Keep emergency numbers by the phone or two-way radio or program them into the phone.

CPR posters and training are available from your local:

- Royal Life Saving Society
- St John Ambulance
- Surf Life Saving Association
- Red Cross

Restrict Access

A barrier that limits direct and unintended access to the water by children is an essential component of drowning prevention. Barriers must however, be checked on a regular basis to ensure they are working properly.



Sometimes it is not possible or practical to have a barrier around the water; for example fencing a dam on a farm means livestock cannot access water.

In these situations consideration needs to be given to alternative ways to limit a child's access to water hazards:

- Create a 'safe play area' on farms; a fenced area around the home, to separate the child from the workplace or water hazards
- Put strong mesh over ponds and pooled water in water features – strong enough to take a child's weight.
- Close doors to bathrooms and empty paddling pools, baths and buckets immediately after use.
- Set rules for your family when near water.

For home swimming pools and spas, the best option is to install separation barriers with a well maintained self-closing and self-latching gate.

Fencing your Swimming Pool

Seventy five percent (75%) of swimming pool drownings could have been prevented had isolation fencing and functioning gates been in place. Install pool barriers that meet Australian Standards (AS 1926: 2007):

- Barriers must be at least 1.2 metres high.
- Gaps under the fence must be 100mm or less to prevent a child from crawling underneath.
- Vertical bars should 100mm or less apart so a child cannot slip between them.

The standard was last amended in 2008. To find out the latest requirements visit:

www.poolsafety.com.au

Once a barrier with a self-closing, self latching gate is installed, it must be kept in good working order.

- Check that your gate latches are working properly.
- Remove anything that could help a child climb over a fence.
- Never prop a pool gate open

Legislation

A barrier is required for all pools and spas containing water to a depth equal to or greater than 300mm. The date your local government approved the Building Licence for your pool determines where your pool barrier must be located.

Category A: (All new pools since 4th Nov 2004)

- Restrict access to the pool or spa from outside the property through the installation and maintenance of boundary/dividing fences and gates.
- Install a suitable barrier that separates the pool or spa from any buildings that are on the same property, a wall may form part of the barrier.
- Not include as part of the barrier any wall that contains a door unless this door is permanently sealed.
- Ensure that windows that are contained within a wall that forms part of the barrier comply with the requirements of AS 1926.1.
- Ensure that gates that form part of the barrier open away from the pool/spa.



Category B: (1 July 1992 to 4 November 2001)

- Restrict access to the pool or spa from outside the property through the installation and maintenance of suitable barrier(s). Minimally these barriers include boundary/dividing fences and gates.
- Ensure that gates that form part of the barrier open away from the pool/spa. Restrict access to the pool or spa through the provision of a suitable barrier between any building on the property and the pool/spa.

The barrier may consist of:

- A barrier and gate that complies with AS1926.1; or
- The doors and windows that provide access to pool area may become part of the barrier if they meet section 2 of AS1926.1

From December 2006, owners of pools built prior to 30th June 1992 must comply with the minimum barrier requirements of Category B. For more detail visit: www.buildingcommission.wa.gov.au/bid/Pool_Barriers or contact your Local Government Authority.

Royal Life Saving Society WA conducts a number of programs and activities on water safety for children and adults including First Aid Courses.

Visit: www.lifesavingwa.com.au for more information

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For more information ☎ (08) 9340 8509

Child Safety Information Line ☎ 1800 802 244

Poisons Information Centre ☎ 13 11 26