

# Just the Facts: Water Safety for Kids



Pools, lakes, ponds, beaches and water parks mean cool relief from hot Florida weather. But water also can be dangerous for kids if parents don't take the proper precautions. Nearly 1,000 kids die each year by drowning. And most drownings happen in home swimming pools. It is the second leading cause of accidental death for people between the ages of 5 and 24.

The good news is there are many ways to keep your kids safe in the water — and make sure that they take the right precautions when they're on their own. First, teach kids never to swim alone. Using the buddy system means there's always someone looking out for you. Make sure your kids understand that swimming in a pool is different from swimming in a river, lake or the ocean — there are different hazards for each.

## Be Prepared

If you're expecting a baby or you already have a child, it's a good idea to:

- Learn cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and the Heimlich maneuver.
- Keep the following numbers near the phone (for yourself and caregivers):
  - » toll-free poison-control number: **(800) 222-1222**
  - » doctor's number
  - » parents' work and cell phone numbers
  - » neighbor's or nearby relative's number (if you need someone to watch other children in an emergency)
- Make a first-aid kit and keep emergency instructions inside.
- Install smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors.

## Home Pools

Having a pool, pond, spa or hot tub on your property is a tremendous responsibility when it comes to safety.

- **Hot tubs may feel great to adults, but kids can become dangerously overheated in them and can even drown — so it's best not to let them use them at all.**
- Having a fence (one that goes directly around the pool or spa) between the water and your house is the best safety investment you can make and will help prevent pool-related drownings. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), fences should meet these standards:
  - » Fences should stand at least 4 feet (130 centimeters) high with no foot or handrails for kids to climb on.
  - » The slats should be less than 4 inches (110 millimeters) apart so a child can't get through, or if chain link, should have no opening larger than 1¾ inches (50 millimeters).
  - » Gates should be self-closing and self-latching, and the latch should be out of kids' reach.
- Consider installing a pool alarm or cover, but realize these devices are not substitutes for fencing and adult supervision.
- Remove toys from the pool when kids are finished swimming to prevent them from trying to recover them when unsupervised.
- Inflatable flotation devices such as vests, water wings, rafts and tubes can give a false sense of security in the pool and are not effective in protecting a child from drowning. Never use these as a substitute for constant adult supervision.
- Dump out all water from a wading pool when you're finished using it.
- Remove any ladders from an aboveground pool when not in use.
- If you leave your child with a babysitter, make sure he or she knows your rules for the pool.

## Waterborne Illnesses

Waterborne illnesses can happen when someone has contact with, swallows or breathes in water that is contaminated with germs. This can happen in a swimming pool, hot tub, water fountain, water park, river, lake or ocean.

Most such infections are diarrhea-related and often are caused by the parasite *Cryptosporidium*, which normally lives in the gastrointestinal tract and is found in feces (poop). Other infections can affect the skin, eyes, ears and respiratory tract. Kids, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems can be the most affected by these infections.

A few tips to protect against recreational water illnesses:

- Kids with diarrhea should not swim.
- Take kids on bathroom breaks often and change swim diapers often (not at the poolside).
- If you are taking a baby in the water who is not potty trained, use a swim diaper.
- Wash hands after using the bathroom or changing diapers.
- Avoid swallowing or getting water in your mouth.
- Keep a pool's water clean by showering before entering the pool.
- After swimming, dry ears well with a towel/washcloth, tilting each ear down to help water drip out of the ear canal. This can help prevent swimmer's ear (an ear infection due to trapped water in the ear canal).

## Rivers, Lakes and Ponds

- Don't let kids swim without adult supervision — rivers, lakes or ponds might be shallow near the bank, but increase in depth sharply farther out from shore.
- Rivers, lakes and ponds may hide jagged rocks, broken glass or trash.
- Make sure kids wear foot protection; even in the water, they should wear aqua socks or water shoes.
- Watch out for weeds and grass that could entangle a leg or arm.
- Most boating accidents, particularly among teens, are related to alcohol. When you and your family are boating, assign a designated driver who won't drink. Be sure teens know about the dangers of alcohol, on and off the water.

## Beaches

Teach kids to always swim when and where a lifeguard is on duty. They shouldn't swim close to piers or pilings because sudden water movements may cause swimmers to collide with them.

- Unlike the calm waters of a swimming pool, the beach has special dangers like currents and tides. Check with the lifeguard when you arrive to find out about the water conditions.
- Don't allow kids to swim in large waves or undertows, and tell them never to stand with their back to the water because a sudden wave can easily knock them over.
- Teach kids that if they're caught in a rip current or undertow, they should swim parallel to the shore or should tread water and call for a lifeguard's help.
- The stings of jellyfish or Portuguese man-of-wars can be painful, so tell kids to watch out for them in the water and to tell an adult right away if they're stung.

Whether at the lake or at the beach, teach your child to get out of the water during bad weather, especially lightning.

## Water Parks

Water parks can be a lot of fun for kids, as long as you keep safety in mind. Before you go, make sure the park is monitored by qualified lifeguards. Once there, read all posted signs before letting your child on any rides (many rides have age, height, weight or health requirements, and each has a different depth of water).

Teach your kids to follow all rules and directions, such as walking instead of running and always going down the water slide in the right position — feet first and face up. A Coast Guard-approved life jacket is a good idea, too.



Know which rides are appropriate for your child's age and development. For example, wave pools can quickly go from calm to rough, putting even a good swimmer in over his or her head. Younger children can be intimidated by older kids splashing and roughhousing.