

Child drowning tragedies can be prevented

May 1 2023, by Cara Murez



Drowning isn't always accompanied by the stereotypical flailing and cries for help.

It can happen wherever there's water, including streams, lakes, water parks, bathtubs and even toilets.

It's also often preventable, according to an expert from Penn State Health, who offered tips for parents as water recreation season begins.

"A child can drown in less than 2 inches of water," said Jen Lau, manager of the Pediatric Trauma and Injury Prevention Program at Penn State Health Children's Hospital in Hershey, Pa.

About two-thirds of drownings among infants happen in a bathtub, Lau noted. They should always be supervised and within arm's reach while bathing.

"We've seen cases where the briefest distractions have led to tragedy," Lau said in a health system news release.

Parents should teach their young [children](#) that water can be dangerous, like cars, because sometimes [parents](#) may not be aware that the risk is there, such as with a neighbor's small fish pond.

"Explain to them, 'You know how you don't cross the street without a grown-up? You shouldn't go in or near water without a grown-up, either,'" Lau said.

Get children comfortable with water skills early on. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends starting swim lessons between the ages of 1 and 4, depending upon when the child is developmentally ready.

"The goal is to get [young children](#) comfortable in the water," Lau said, "and start building their swim-readiness skills."

Pools are better than [open water](#) for young or inexperienced swimmers, Lau advised.

"Oceans, creeks or lakes can have uneven surfaces, unpredictable depths, waves and currents that make swimming much more challenging," she said.

Lau also recommends designating someone to watch children whenever they are around water. Don't rely on lessons or flotation devices.

"Parents may have a false sense of security that there are all these moms and dads around so they feel like everyone's watching the kids," she said. "But when everyone's watching, no one is. Tragically, we've seen how a distracted parent has missed that their child was in distress and drowning just a few feet away."

Children drown quickly, Lau said, often when they are vertical in the water with their head tipped back.

Parents should watch their children even when there's a lifeguard on duty.

"The lifeguard's there watching everyone's kids," Lau said. "Look after your own for added safety."

Dress your child in bright-colored swimsuits such as orange or yellow, Lau recommended. Don't choose blue or green, which will blend into the water and make kids hard to spot.

Make pool areas childproof with fencing that is four-sided and separated from the house and backyard.

Don't leave toys in the pool area when swim time is over. They can be

tempting. Drain small wading [pools](#) and place them out of reach of small children when not in use.

Don't use mermaid tails in the water.

"Sure, it looks fun," Lau said. "But it's not the best idea to put your child in a pool with their legs bound together and no way to stand. These mermaid tails greatly limit their mobility in the water and can be really dangerous."

Learn CPR so you will be prepared in case of emergency.

Knowing how to resuscitate a child can be the difference between a near-drowning and death.

"Every parent should know how and when to do CPR so they can act immediately until help arrives, instead of waiting for emergency responders to get there," Lau said.

More information: The American Academy of Pediatrics has more on [water safety](#).

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