

This Pool Season: One More Drowning is One Too Many

by Phyllis Agran, MD, MPH*



An unfenced backyard pool: A source of fun but a source of danger too!

It's that time of the year again — pool season! As temperatures rise, there's nothing more fun for kids to do than splash away in the nearest pool.

As pediatricians, parents and grandparents, we must also be aware of the dangers that come with access to swimming pools.

In fact, drowning is the No. 1 cause of death among children ages 1-4, here in Orange County, California and across the United States.

Just weeks ago, emergency crews here in Irvine were able to save a child because an adult had quickly pulled him out of the water.

However, we also hear tragic stories every year about accidental drownings. Here is what Nicole Hughes shared with us: "This June will mark three years since we said goodbye to our three-year-old son, Levi. He was our third child and only son. This brown-eyed boy who brought silliness and fun to our lives, who was doted on by his big sisters, and who was snatched from our family on an unsuspecting Sunday afternoon. Water took our son's life. Levi wasn't swimming, He was sitting on the couch wearing khaki shorts and surrounded by friends when he somehow slipped out of the door unnoticed and reached water alone. Despite immediate attention from the six physicians on our trip, including my husband, we lost Levi that night."

Nicole continued, "We were so careful around water. We didn't know the real truth about drowning. But, now we do, and we are determined to help spread this message to other parents. Thanks to each of you who make water safety a priority every day for your families. It matters."

Drowning can happen to any family.

For residential pools, the only evidence-based best practice that has been documented through research to prevent the death or disability of a child from unsupervised access to a swimming pool is installation of a 4-sided isolation fence.

What about Our Community Pools and Spas?

Watching a child at *any* pool is critical! We must be vigilant and remain within an arm's reach of young children. We cannot be distracted by cell phones or conversations with others. If you have more than one child, consider having 2 adults. This should be 1:1 supervision.

And, when you go to the pool, put a U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket on young children and unskilled swimmers. You may even need one!

If you are there with other families, assign a "Water Watcher" to watch the water for any child who may be in distress and need help.

Here are the strategies to prevent childhood drowning:

- **Barriers: An isolation fence is critical, as well as supplementary barriers such as door alarms for layers of protection**
- **Supervision: With no distractions such as cell phones**
- **Swim Lessons: High quality, low-cost lessons which are typically available through your city, the local Y or the Red Cross**
- **Life Jackets: U.S. Coast Guard-approved for open bodies of water and at pools for young children and unskilled swimmers**
- **CPR: Immediate resuscitation at the submersion site with a focus on the airway and rescue breathing before compressions**

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Resources

[Should my children take swim lessons if they are too young to get the COVID-19 vaccine yet? \(from Healthy Children parent page of the American Academy of Pediatrics\)](#)

[AAP Policy Statement: Prevention of Drowning](#)

[American Academy of Pediatrics Drowning Prevention Toolkit](#)

[AAP-OC Drowning Prevention Initiative](#)