

# Barriers and Supervision Are the Key to Avoiding Accidental Drowning

By Jennifer Wake



Pool fences are just one of four protective barriers recommended by the CPSC

Photo Jennifer Wake

Swimming pools and wading pools offer a great way to cool off from summer heat. But without the right precautions, these cooling tools can become hazards for young children.

Last year, approximately 283 children under the age of five drowned in backyard pools and spas in the United States, according to the US Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC) – an increase from the prior year, with an even higher number of accidents in warm weather states such as California.

The problem often comes from a lack of barriers to the water and a lack of proper supervision.

“Many parents have the best intentions of close supervision,” said Donna Sjöberg, Learn-to-Swim Program Director at Moraga Valley Swim & Tennis Club. “Then they get caught up in a conversation, watering the garden,

reading a magazine or they are too far away from the pool and their child to really help right away should something happen.”

According to Safe Kids USA – a network of organizations whose mission is to prevent accidental childhood injury – drowning is a leading killer of children under age 5 and usually occurs “quickly and silently.”

“Most children who drown in swimming pools were last seen in the home, had been missing from sight for less than five minutes and were in the care of one or both parents at the time of the drowning,” the organization states on its Web site. The majority of children who survive are discovered within two minutes following submersion.

If a child is ever missing, the CPSC says to always check the swimming pool first. It also recommends adding protective barriers to every swimming pool: Pool

fences and barriers with self-closing, self-locking latches, and door alarms on doors leading from the house directly to the pool area. They also suggest having rescue equipment by the pool, having a phone poolside when possible with emergency numbers posted, and being up-to-date on CPR training.

The Moraga Orinda Fire Department offers CPR training at Station 41 on Moraga Road the second Saturday of each month at a cost of \$50 per session. Other classes are offered locally through the American Red Cross, and swim lessons or classes like Learn-To-Swim are offered at swim clubs such as Orinda Park Pool and Moraga Valley Pool & Tennis Club.

If your child is too young for swim lessons, however, Sjöberg warns against using floatation devices without close supervision. She consistently sees parents put their children in water safety vests or arm “floaties,” assuming their children are ‘water safe’ in them, but she warns these floatation devices give parents a false sense of security.

“Parents should know that those arm floaties are very dangerous,” she said. “The best thing that they could do is play with children in the water, teach them to blow bubbles and how to float on their front and back unsupported.”

In addition to these beginning swimming techniques, Sjöberg teaches her young swimmers what she calls “the Kangaroo.”

“The Kangaroo is a safety technique I use with the young ones who cannot keep their heads above

water and touch the bottom at the same time and have not yet mastered the back float,” she said. “It is for shallow, but still not shallow enough water. They utilize the BOB technique (holding onto the wall and/or going underwater and blowing bubbles slowly, coming to surface to get a quick breath and then back under slowly blowing bubbles again) but with a bounce towards the pools steps or the closest edge. I do this because should they slip off a water floating device or slip into the pool, they know how to bounce to safety.”

For the past 13 years, Sjöberg has helped children learn water safety, following the American Red Cross Learn-To-Swim Program Guidelines. The most important suggestion she can make to parents with children around any water – be it swimming pool, wading pool, bathtub, or bucket – is simple: Supervise them.

“Once children are 3 ½ years old,” Sjöberg said, “find a good swim program for your child and have them take lessons or begin teaching them yourself.”

For more information about how to keep your children water safe this summer, visit <http://usa.safekids.org>. For information about local CPR classes and Learn-To-Swim classes, visit [www.bayarea-redcross.org](http://www.bayarea-redcross.org).