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MAKE YOUR FAMILY WATER-SAFE

Drowning is the No. 1 cause of accidental death for young children in California. You can't waterproof your family, but you can lower the risk.

Lindsay and Ryan Karle, 6 and 7 years old, spend up to four hours a day in their family's pool, says their mother, Brigit Karle. "It's really a great source of joy at this age for them."

But she did think about filling the pool in when they moved to their Menlo Park home five years ago.

"It's a constant source of concern," says an Atherton mother. She and her husband considered filling in their pool before having their two children, but ended up keeping it.

Such concerns seem well-founded, particularly for parents of young children, given the statistics.

Drownings claim about 4,000 lives each year in the United States, about 500 of them in California, according to the National Safety Council's most recent data. The total has actually dropped since the mid-1970s, when the nation logged between 7,000 and 8,000 drownings per year.

Nationwide, drowning is the second-leading cause of accidental death for children under age 15, and in California, it surpasses even car accidents to rank as No. 1 for children under age 5, according to the national Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Drowning Prevention Foundation, an organization based in Alamo, California, that advocates for pool-safety legislation.

No age group escapes the risk -- a point made all too clear by two Bay Area cases this summer.

A 6-year-old girl drowned at a day camp in San Rafael in June. And just three weeks ago, 36-year-old Cynthia Schulz, a cadet with the Woodside Fire Protection District, was found floating in her San Carlos pool. Her death is still being investigated to determine if it was an accidental drowning, as police suspect, says San Mateo County Coroner Robert Foucrault.

For every fatal drowning, there are three to four near-drownings that may leave a victim unscathed, or with minor or major brain damage, estimates Nadina Riggsbee, executive director and founder of the Drowning Prevention Foundation. On the same day her 2-year-old daughter drowned in 1978, her 1-year-old son nearly drowned. He's 25 now, and still needs round-the-clock nurses, she says.

While no one can waterproof his or her family, experts say there are precautions every family can take to lower the risks.

HUGE RESPONSIBILITY

A child can drown in wading pools, bathtubs or buckets -- it takes only a couple of inches of water. But residential swimming pools are the top offenders, says Ms. Riggsbee.

The majority of children under 5 years old who drown do so in residential pools, and more than half of those incidents occur at the child's own home, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

"It's a huge responsibility" to own a pool, says the Atherton mother, who requested that her name not be used. She recalls one mother, a guest at her home, who objected to getting in the water with her child. "I said, 'Sorry, pool rules,'" says the homeowner. "It's not going to happen on my watch."

Constant, vigilant supervision was stressed by every expert the Almanac contacted. Some also added that even adults shouldn't swim alone.

"It's not usually a lack of supervision, it's a lapse of supervision," says Ms. Riggsbee. "People get distracted," or "Mom thinks Dad's watching, and Dad thinks Mom's watching," she says.

Of all preschoolers who drown, 70 percent are in the care of one or both parents at the time, and 75 percent are missing from sight for five minutes or less, according to a drowning-prevention program run by the Orange County Fire Authority.

"Always make sure you have an adult present at all times with children," preferably an adult who knows CPR, recommends Jon Johnston of the Menlo Park Fire Protection District, which provides fire and emergency medical services.

The Karle family had a scary experience about four years ago when Lindsay, 2 years old at the time, jumped into a Jacuzzi -- quickly followed by her mother, who pulled her out. Luckily, says Brigit Karle, she was only about 2 feet from her daughter at the time.

When the pool cover at the Atherton home of Jenny Redo and Kevin Brown comes off, "everyone's on high alert," says Kevin. At big gatherings, "we'll usually designate some adults as lifeguards, or I'll do it since I used to be a lifeguard," he says. It's not uncommon in this area for a pool owner to hire a lifeguard for parties, adds Brigit Karle.

Parents should never assume their kids are safe if there are lifeguards, says Ms. Riggsbee. "That's a no-no."

There can be four or five lifeguards sitting right by the poolside and they still wouldn't spot a drowning, given the crowds at most public pools, she says. She advocates an underwater device that sets off an alarm when it detects a still body.

"With the drowning of a small child, there is no noise, there is no cry for help," adds Ms. Riggsbee. "They just slip in quietly." Even an adult may go under silently if he or she is hit in the head or has a heart attack, she says.

The little girl who drowned in San Rafael this summer was in a pool with about 50 children, supervised by two lifeguards and seven day-camp counselors, according to news reports.

The "double check" of parent and lifeguard supervision "has really saved kids," says Jim Gorman, manager of the Ladera Oaks Swim & Tennis Club in Portola Valley.

'Layers of safety'

"The first and only answer to prevent (drowning) is no pools in the back yard when your children are small," insists Ms. Riggsbee. If a homeowner with small children does have a pool, however, Ms. Riggsbee recommends "multiple layers of protection around the pool."

The Brown/Redo family uses a "layers of safety" approach, says Kevin Brown.

The first layer is to keep kids away from the pool, he says. A 6-foot-high fence keeps neighborhood kids out, and all doors from the house to the back yard are kept locked so toddler McKenna can't open them. If a door is left unlocked and she does manage to open it, the alarm system chimes.

Outside there's a pool cover, which Kevin says has held the weight of three large men, and which is opened by turning a key in a keyhole next to the pool. The key is kept inside, and the pool can be opened only at poolside -- so no one can accidentally flip a switch to open or close it from the house, he says. The cover also has an automatic pump because, Kevin points out, "If you let a lot of rainwater accumulate on there, that can be a drowning hazard."

But covers aren't foolproof, as the other Atherton family can attest. "The other day I went out there and my 5-year-old was opening the pool cover," says the mother. Her son was just trying to help with the routine, she says, and someone had left the key in the keyhole.

The final layer of protection at the Brown/Redo house is swim lessons for McKenna (and one day, her 4-week-old sister, Alexa), as well as constant reinforcement that they're not to go near the pool without Mom and Dad.

Walt Cannon, aquatics coordinator for the city of Menlo Park's two public pools, recommends learning to swim "as early as possible, as young as possible."

The Ladera Oaks Swim & Tennis Club in Portola Valley has lessons for children as young as 3 months (with their parents), says Mr. Gorman.

Swimming lessons are a good idea, but shouldn't lull parents into a false sense of security, says Ms. Riggsbee. Children may forget their skills in an emergency, or be knocked unconscious.

SET RULES

"Whether it's a home pool or a community pool, you need to have a proactive approach (and) some common-sense rules," says Mr. Cannon. "The safety starts before they get in the water."

Some of Menlo Park's rules include no running or roughhousing, no diving in shallow areas, and no standing on people's shoulders. Children who want to go in the deep end or off the diving board (front dives only) are also supposed to pass a swim test so they're "in the right area of the pool, where they belong," says Mr. Cannon.

At the Karle house, the children aren't allowed to go into the fenced pool area without a parent, or to open the pool cover, says Brigit. There's no running, touching or hanging onto each other in the pool, and no flips off the diving board, she adds.

Her only remaining qualm about her pool is the potential for clunked heads, she says. "When I redo the pool, I probably will get rid of the diving board."

Resources

** Drowning Prevention Foundation drownprevention.com (925) 820-SAVE, dpf@pair.com

** American Red Cross www.redcross.org/services/hss/ (415) 427-8000 (Bay Area chapter)

** Centers for Disease Control <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/drown.htm>

** United States Lifesaving Association www.usla.org

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