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Dunk, splash, stay safe

By: Michelle Miller, Journal Staff Writer

The first thing 12-year-old Serena Angelo wants to do when she gets home from school is swim in her Palm Terrace Apartment complex's pool. "But mom says we have to wait for her," Serena said Tuesday afternoon, finally getting to slip into the cool waters with brothers Isaiah, 10, and James, 8.

As the weather warms up and more families turn to community and backyard pools for solace from the heat, experts say it's a good time to take stock of swimming pool safety.

In 2003, 782 children ages 14 and younger died as a result of accidental drowning. An estimated 3,702 were treated in emergency rooms for near-drownings. Of drowning deaths, 40 percent occur in pools and hot tubs. Drowning is the second-leading cause of accidental death for children through age 14. However, according to Safe Kids Worldwide, an organization formed to prevent accidents in children ages 0 - 14, only a third of parents are aware of that grim statistic. So Safe Kids Worldwide has made "Safe Pools for Safe Kids" its campaign this year. Nothing is a substitute for having adult supervision, said Liz Honeycutt, a board member on the Placer County Safe Kids Coalition. Safe Kids recommends designating an adult "water watcher" to actively supervise the pool. A "water watcher" ID tag can be printed at the Web site, www.usa.safekids.org/water/ "While they're wearing the tag, (parents are) watching the water, They're not talking to other adults," Honeycutt said. "The tag gives them that identity and responsibility."

The organization is also focusing on awareness of entrapment, which occurs when a part of a child's body (hair, arm, swimsuit strings) becomes caught in a pool drain cover because of the powerful suction of a pool or spa's water circulation system. Honeycutt said in California, new building codes are quite stringent, ensuring safe covers and other safety measures are in place. However, in older neighborhoods, entrapment deaths are seen more often. From 1985 to 2004, nearly 100 children were injured and at least 33 died as a result of pool entrapment, according to Safe Kids Worldwide. There might be more as many entrapment deaths may be improperly classified as drownings.

Certified "anti-entrapment" drain covers can reduce suction and hair entanglement from drain covers.

Misconceptions about pool safety still persist as well, Honeycutt said.

Inflatable toys or float rings are not a substitute for supervision, she said. Pool covers do not prevent injury, either. They're not designed to hold weight and a child can walk on top and fall through, where they can't be seen, Honeycutt said.

Loren Cohodes, assistant manager of Forrest Pool Supplies and Spas in Auburn, special orders safety devices for pools. "It depends on the county's specifications and also what (the homeowner's) insurance company requires," Cohodes said Tuesday. "I usually tell people to contact either agency for a list of requirements, but people certainly go above those." Gate alarms, safety covers and portable fencing that blocks off the edge of the pool are some safety measures. "There's a lot of options. You can even do lasers that beam across the pool and sense anything that breaks them," he said. There's also the Safety Turtle alarm which children wear like a wristwatch. It sends an alarm to a base unit if the alarm is submerged in fresh water.

Another good idea for pool safety is to make sure children learn how to swim - and there are plenty of summer swim lessons this time of year. Brigitte Cary, a swim instructor with the Auburn Recreation District, said 4 is a good age to get in the pool for lessons. ARD offers swim lessons from parent-child lessons for children 3 and younger to "Stingrays" lessons for ages 11 and up. Skills taught include pool rules, floating and putting your face underwater. Lessons for older students progress to stroking, diving and more complicated strokes, giving children confidence to swim, she said.

"It's a must for little kids to know how to swim," Cary said. "Especially because everyone has a pool and they'll want to be in it this summer."

At the Palm Terrace Apartments Tuesday, the after-school pool crowd hit the water.

"Every day when they get home from school it's, "Let's go to the pool, Mom!" said Melinda Harrington, Serena's mom. "My they have to wait for me. That's totally something I enforce. And no running." Heather Walker, property manager for the Palm Terrace Apartments, said the pool has been quite popular since it opened over a week ago. Like many apartment complex pools, there's no lifeguard on duty, but parents are very good at supervising the pool, she said. "The parents all work together to be their own safety lifeguard," Walker said. "We have a good rule here where we like to see at least one adult over age 18 supervise per two children. We also have signs and tell the children they have to be 14 years old to swim on their own, and we keep that enforced."

Although Harrington enforced the rules from poolside Tuesday, there was one that was missing - the "don't splash Mom" rule. "The kids have a great time out here," she said.

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