



INJURY BULLETIN

c/o Mater Hospitals, South Brisbane 4101
Ph 61 7 38408569 Fax 61 7 38401684 E-Mail Mail@qisu.qld.gov.au
Website: <http://www.qisu.qld.gov.au>

THE 10 MYTHS OF TODDLER DROWNING

A detailed survey of 139 near-drownings in Brisbane has demonstrated that commonly aired attitudes to childhood drowning have no basis in fact. Swimming pools were the site of immersion in 80% of the total and backyard pools were involved in 90% of these. Over 40% of immersion incidents occurred at a private site other than the family's primary place of residence although in only 3% of cases did a child wander into a neighbour's yard. In the cases where the child wandered to the pool or was meant to be playing beside the pool, 40% of pools were totally unfenced and most of the remainder was inadequately fenced.

1. DROWNING IS NOT-A COMMON CAUSE OF CHILDHOOD DEATH

The backyard pool is responsible for more deaths in the toddler age group (1 to 4 years) than any other cause. Pool deaths exceed pedestrian deaths, motor vehicle deaths and medical deaths in common categories such as pneumonia or leukaemia. Not only is drowning the commonest cause of death under 5 but over 80% occur in backyard pools.

2. CREEKS AND RIVERS ARE JUST AS DANGEROUS AS SWIMMING POOLS

The fact is that children are 10 times more likely to come to grief in a pool than in a natural body of water (river, creek, canal, or the sea) in the Brisbane area. Dams are more of a problem in rural areas but even here, pools are starting to predominate.

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* QISU data is based on emergency department presentations to the following hospitals: Mater Children's Hospital, Mater Adult Hospital, Mater Private Emergency Care Centre, Queen Elizabeth II Jubilee Hospital, Redland Hospital, Logan Hospital, Royal Children's Hospital, Mt Isa Hospital and Mackay and district hospitals.

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3. CHILDLESS COUPLES DON'T NEED SWIMMING POOL FENCES

Over 40% of immersions occurred in a relative's or friend's pool while the family was visiting. Pools are installed to entertain and will consequently attract young families even if the owners are childless. It is highly unlikely that the original owners will be the only users during the life of the pool. Childless couples will sell houses to young families and it is difficult to incorporate an entirely adequate fence if it was not included in the original design.

4. I DON'T NEED THE SWIMMING POOL FENCE UNTIL MY CHILD IS 18 MONTHS OLD

It is the one year old child who is at greatest risk accounting for over 40% of the total. Nearly all childhood immersions are less than 4 years of age. Some children are mobile from an early age and on one occasion a 9 month old baby crawled across a patio and up steps into an above-ground pool.

5. ABOVE GROUND POOLS DON'T NEED SWIMMING POOL FENCES

Never underestimate the speed with which a toddler can get themselves into a dangerous situation or the height to which they can climb. Just as many children are hurt in above-ground pools. They climb steps and ladders or use adjacent pipes or filtration equipment.

6. IF PARENTS WERE CAREFUL DROWNINGS WOULDN'T OCCUR

It is a simple fact of life that young children will wander no matter how vigilant the parent. Every parent loses track of their two year old at some time during each day. It only takes a few minutes for a child to drown. It is axiomatic that a breakdown in parental supervision contributes to most drownings but this is relatively meaningless in terms of injury prevention. Blaming poor parenting is unlikely to save a single life and this approach serves only to distract from effective action.

7. CHILDREN DESERVE WHAT THEY GET IF THEY TRESPASS INTO A NEIGHBOUR'S PROPERTY

In only 3 of the 100 cases did a child wander from an adjacent property and fall into a neighbour's pool. All of the remaining children were on the property with the pool owner's permission (40% were visitors and the rest were the children of the owners). This illustrates the critical importance of isolating the pool from the rest of the property.

8. THERE ARE OTHER METHODS OF MAKING A POOL SAFE FOR A TODDLER

Unfortunately, alarms and pool covers rely upon the "human factor" and are far from fool-proof. The alarm must be turned off when the pool is in use and then someone has to remember to turn the alarm back on afterwards. At some point on a hot summer day a family pool is sure to go unprotected. Few reputable swimming coaches claim that it is possible to "drown-proof" young children. In this study, 5 toddlers who had received "swimming lessons" were admitted to

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hospital after a near-drowning. On national TV, a top Olympic swimming coach recently equated having a pool to having a loaded gun in the backyard.

9. PROPER FENCING DOESN'T PREVENT DROWNINGS ANYWAY

Not once in this study of 100 near-drownings did a child go over an approved swimming pool fence or through a functional self-closing, self-latching gate. Numerous studies have confirmed the fact that nearly all of these tragedies could be prevented by providing a fence-gate combination constructed to the Australian Standard on all four sides of the pool.

10. CURRENT LEGISLATION IS ADEQUATE

Pool fencing ordinances are a local government responsibility and no two shires in Queensland have the same requirements (except for the 67 shires that do not require fencing). In the Greater Brisbane Region neither Redcliffe nor Ipswich have pool fencing ordinances. No shire in Queensland requires a fence on all four sides of the pool and in nearly all areas pools built before the introduction of the ordinance do not have to comply. For the Brisbane area, the net result is that 80% of pools are inadequately fenced.

SUMMARY

An unfenced backyard-pool is as dangerous as a loaded gun but the young child finds it so much more attractive and accessible. The only guaranteed measure that puts it out of reach is a 4-sided pool fence and safety gate maintained in good working condition. Brisbane is the pool drowning capital of the world but in 100 consecutive pool immersions not one child went over, under, or through a functioning fence-gate combination. Backyard-pool drownings are unique because, unlike every other major killer in today's society, we know how to prevent them. We simply lack the will to act.

SOURCE

Dr. Robert Pitt, Director of QISPP and Director of Accident and Emergency, Mater Children's Hospital.