

Water safety for children

Drowning is a leading cause of death for toddlers. Around eight Victorian children under the age of five years drown every year, with almost half of these deaths occurring in backyard swimming pools and spas.

More than two thirds of toddler drownings occur in regional Victoria, typically in dams, creeks, rivers, irrigation channels, water troughs as well as home pools and baths.

It is estimated that for every child who dies, three or four survive but often with permanent brain damage.

Toddlers are most at risk

Toddlers aged between one and three years are most at risk, because they are mobile and curious but don't understand the danger of water. You can considerably reduce the risks by supervising your child around water at all times and by teaching them to swim.

Taking precautions to reduce the risk of drowning around your home is also very important. A toddler can drown in a few centimetres of water. A child can drown in five centimetres of water. Every exposed water source, no matter how shallow, poses a significant danger.

It is important to provide barriers to prevent access to water sources. You should also learn resuscitation techniques so that you know what to do if you are faced with an emergency.

Supervise your child

The most important preventive tactic is to supervise your child around water at all times. This means actively watching them, keeping them within arms reach and not just glancing up every now and then. Don't assume they will splash and yell for help if they get into trouble. Children can drown quietly in just a few minutes.

Learn to swim

Children can take formal swimming instruction from the age of four years. Water safety skills make up part of the tuition. Swimming programs are available for younger children and babies, but the emphasis is on building confidence and encouraging the child to enjoy water, rather than teaching them to swim. However, children under five years of age may not be able to use their swimming skills in an emergency, so never rely on this to keep them safe.

Flotation devices

If you buy personal flotation devices, like inflatable vests or 'floaties', make sure that they conform to Australian Standards – always check the label. You should think of these devices as something to help familiarise your child with water, not as a safety item.

A flotation device is not a replacement for supervision. Always supervise your child when they are wearing their personal flotation device, in case they tumble upside-down or slip through the vest.

Around the house

Suggestions for reducing the risks of your child drowning in and around the home include:

- Always supervise your child in the bath.
- Never leave an older child to supervise the younger child in the bath.
- Take your child with you if your telephone or doorbell rings while supervising your child in the bath.
- Empty the bath immediately after use.
- Always keep the doors to the bathroom and laundry securely closed.
- Use a nappy bucket with a tight-fitting lid, and keep the bucket closed at all times and out of your child's reach.
- Cover ponds, birdbaths and similar water sources with mesh.

- Keep pet water bowls, aquariums and fish bowls well out of little children's reach.

Backyard pools and spas

Suggestions to reduce the risks of your child drowning in the backyard pool include:

- **Install a fence** – swimming pools are required by law to be appropriately fenced (Australian Standard AS1926). Your local council can provide information on pool fencing laws.
- **Regularly check** – that the safety latch on the gate is in good working order.
- **Clear surrounding area** – don't leave any items or equipment close to the pool fence that would allow your child to climb up and over the fence.
- **Pack toys away** – don't leave floating toys in the pool or your child may try to reach for them.
- **Tip out water** – empty wading pools immediately after use.
- **Check your surroundings** – when visiting other people's houses, ask whether or not the owners have a pool, spa, pond or other body of exposed water on their land.

At the beach

Suggestions for reducing the risks of your child drowning at the beach include:

- Supervise your child at all times.
- Don't assume that a beach that was safe in the past is safe now, since the action of waves, weather and wind can influence depth and rips.
- Only take your child to beaches with surf lifesaving patrols.
- Make sure your child only swims between the flags.
- Teach your child what to do if they get into trouble: remain calm, float and raise an arm to signal for help from a surf lifesaver or lifeguard.

Dams and waterways

Suggestions for reducing the risks of your child drowning in dams and other waterways include:

- Supervise your child around waterways.
- Warn your child of the dangers of swimming in dams and rivers.
- Ensure you have safe playing areas for your child well away from any dam or waterway.

First aid courses for parents

Emergency medical treatment for young children or babies isn't always the same as for adults, which is why all parents should ideally take a course in paediatric (child) first aid, including cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local council
- In an emergency, always call an ambulance Tel. 000, and ask for assistance from any nearby people who may have resuscitative skills
- Life Saving Victoria (CPR and First Aid courses, Aquatic Education programs for toddlers and children) Tel. (03) 9676 6900
- St John Ambulance Australia, Victoria (CPR courses) Tel. 131 394
- Vicswim Tel. (03) 8843 2000
- Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (for baby bath safety information)

Things to remember

- Around eight Victorian children under the age of five years drown every year.
- Parents can reduce the risks by supervising their child around water at all times, teaching them to swim and taking precautions to reduce the risk of drowning around their home.
- All parents should ideally take a course in paediatric (child) first aid, including cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Life Saving Victoria

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