

Childhood Drowning

Drowning: the statistics

Drowning is the most common cause of accidental death in Australian children aged less than 5 years, and 70% are aged between 1 and 3 years.

- Although the number of children drowning in Australia is currently decreasing, 35 children under the age of 5 years drowned in a 12-month period during 2002 / 2003.

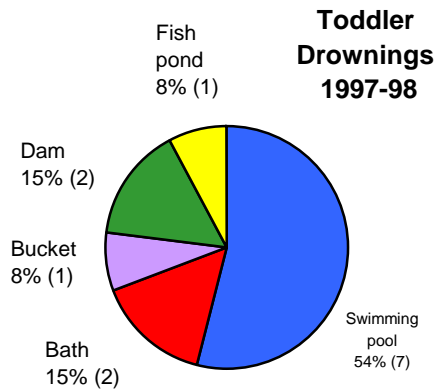
- Studies show that for every child under the age of 5 years that drowns in Australia, up to 10 children are admitted to hospital as the result of a near-drowning incident. The near-drowning of a child is the result of a submersion, where the child has been immersed in water. There are serious consequences associated with immersion, such as brain damage.



Kidsafe conducted a study of child drowning in WA between 1987 and 1996: -

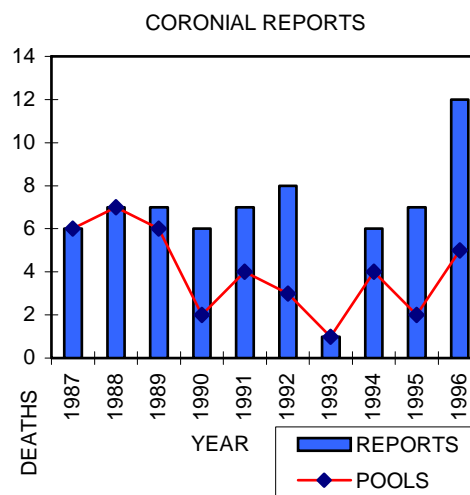
- There was a yearly average of 7.9 drownings in children aged 0-4 years.
- 41% of drowning cases occur in children aged between 12-23 months.
- Infants under one year old most frequently drowned in baths or buckets.
- Children in the country are three times more likely to drown than those in the metropolitan area.
- 41 % of drownings occur in summer.
- The majority of drownings occur between 4 - 6pm (31%) and 10am - 12noon (21%).

- The majority (61%) of swimming pool deaths occur in backyard swimming pools.



Drowning Deaths of children 0-4 years, 1987-1996

Note the dramatic drop in drowning incidents in 1993 following the 1992 introduction of mandatory isolation fencing for all new backyard swimming pools. In 1993 the legislation was repealed.



How Drowning can happen:

Collections of water such as swimming pools, bathtubs, ponds, buckets, dams, rivers, lakes, oceans, tanks, are all potential drowning hazards for children.

The Australian lifestyle means that water sports and activities form much of our relaxation and activities on weekends.

Children are naturally attracted to water. Children often have little fear of water and no understanding or awareness of the danger that water can be.

A child can drown silently in less than two minutes.

Infants are top heavy; their heads are heavier than the rest of their body so they can topple easily into water hazards.

There is insufficient evidence to suggest that a child under the age of three years can develop adequate swimming skills to prevent drowning.

A child can drown in 5 cm of water

A child can drown in 1 litre of water. A swimming pool can hold tens of thousands of litres of water.

The majority (77%) of drowning reports state that the child was clothed at the time of immersion. Wet clothing is very heavy.

Sometimes parents and carers have unrealistic expectations that children would obey instructions and stay away from water hazards.

Sometimes parents or carers mistakenly believe that a child can be left safely unattended for 2-5 minutes.

Most of the studies into childhood drowning revealed that there was a direct lack of adult supervision, because parents and carers often believed that they had safety measures in place, such as fences and gates with self-closing mechanisms that worked.

Parents and carers' mistakenly believe that a younger child can safely play or be in the care of older children. Nothing replaces adult supervision.

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A Christmas Story

A couple of families joined together to celebrate an Australian Christmas around the swimming pool.

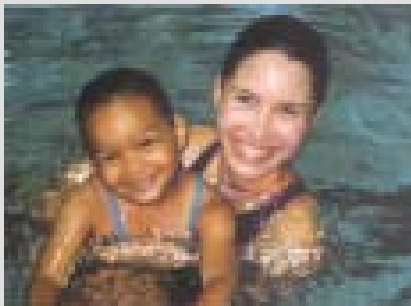
There were lots of adults, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, grandparents, cousins and children of all ages.

The pool was filled with blow up floats, balls, and beanbags. Sounds of laughter and splashing filled the air.

Swimming always works up an appetite. All the family moved indoors, keeping safely out of the midday sun to enjoy a family Christmas lunch.

Suddenly, someone noticed the 2 year old was missing. Everyone searched the house. He was found floating drowned in the swimming pool. This pool had an isolation fence; the toddler was still wearing his floaties. How did this happen?

The gate was not shut properly, which allowed the access to the pool area. How he came to be in the water is unclear, he either jumped in or fell. Children naturally topple forward when wearing floaties. The toddler also became stuck underneath the pool floats and toys.



Priorities for prevention

To prevent childhood drowning: **Keep Watch Supervise**

Constant adult supervision is needed, not occasionally glancing at your child while you read or snooze.

If you are holding a pool party, or there is a large group of people swimming allocate one or two people to be the "life guard" for 20 minutes at a time. This person does not join in conversations; make tea, coffee or food. They are totally dedicated to watching everyone in the pool. Swap "life guards" at 15- 20-minute intervals so everyone can enjoy the day.

Fence your swimming pool.

Seventy five percent (75%) of swimming pool drownings could have been prevented had isolation fencing and functioning gates been in place. Install an isolation fence that meets Australian Standards AS 1926: -

- Fences must be **1.2 metres** high.
- The gap under the fence **100mm or less** from the ground to prevent a child from crawling underneath.
- The vertical bars should be **closer than 100mm** so a child cannot slip between them.

Once a fence and self-closing gate are installed, they must be kept in good working order.

- Check that your gate latches are working properly.
- Check is there anything leaning against the swimming pool fence, which could help a child climb over the fence. Take it away or cut the bush or tree down.
- Always shut gates and never prop them open.

Water Skills

Familiarise your children with water; start swimming classes or aqua start program. Water familiarisation skills are an important start to a child's life around water, but they will not make the child drown-proof.

Learn Resuscitation

The first few minutes in an emergency are vital and can make a difference between life and death. In many rural areas, help may be miles away- it may be up to you.

- Learn CPR (Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation) and update your training regularly.
- Keep CPR instructions on the pool fence and in the first aid kit.
- Keep emergency numbers by the phone or two-way radio, or program them into the phone.

CPR posters and training are available from your local:

- **Royal Life Saving Society**
- **St Johns Ambulance**
- **Surf Life Saving Association**

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For more information:

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Royal Life Saving SA

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Poisons Information Centre

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