

Eyes on the water

Kids aren't waterproof. As prudent as they might be in the pool or at the lake, danger lurks. Experts offer some safety tips

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It's only five steps from the spot where Kim Ricci was sitting when her 4-year-old son, Joshua, nearly drowned in the family's pool one hot afternoon last month.

Mother and son had come outside together and Ricci had opened the gate to the wooden fence that divides the above-ground pool from the rest of the deck of the family's Brossard home.

Joshua, who is not yet a swimmer, doesn't get into the pool on his own and knows to wait for one of his parents to help him into the float toy he sits in when he's in the water. He was beside his mother, the inflatable toy with him.

Ricci was pumping up another inflatable toy, this one for Joshua's younger brother, who was inside napping. All of a sudden, she didn't hear Joshua. She looked up and didn't see him. She stood up and saw he was underwater. She dove into the 4-foot-deep pool and grabbed him. Mouth open, eyes open. He wasn't breathing.

"I looked at his face," she recalled. "It was a frozen scream. It maybe took five or six seconds to get to the ladder to get out ... I laid him on the deck. I pushed once or twice on his chest and stomach. Water came out. Then he yelled."

Ricci, 32, chose to share her story because she wants parents to think about how things can go wrong in a heartbeat and understand that supervising children means not letting them out of their sight. "You assume they will cry if there is a problem and you will go to them - but they can't necessarily call for help."

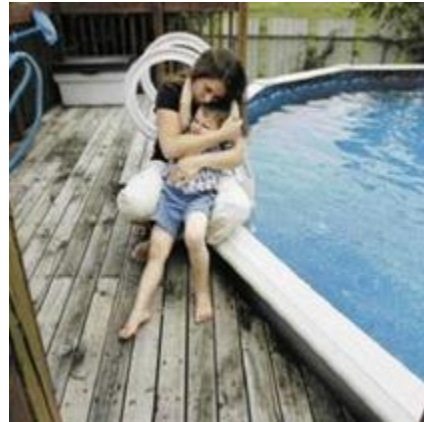
Many young children who drown just fall in and slip under the water, silently. Their lungs fill with water; they can't make a sound.

"And it happens fast," Ricci said. "You need to be there 100 per cent. You see adults watching kids sometimes and you know they are distracted, that their focus is not there."

According to Safe Kids Canada, 58 children younger than 14 drown in this country every year and another 140 are treated in hospital after near-drowning incidents. The Canadian Red Cross found that

42 per cent of the children age 5 to 14 who drowned between 1991 and 2000 did not have an adult watching them.

"It's not enough to just know how to swim," said Debbie Friedman, director of the Trauma Program at the Montreal Children's Hospital. "Supervision is essential - and so is being aware of the potential risks, knowing how to prevent injuries and what to do in an emergency."



CREDIT: ALLEN MCINNIS, THE GAZETTE
Kim Ricci of Brossard and her son Joshua sit by their backyard pool, where Joshua nearly drowned last month.

In the coming weeks, children and teens will be spending a lot of time in or near the water. That's fine. "We want kids to have fun and to be very active, but also to be informed and to make wise choices," said Friedman.

"In our approach as a trauma centre, we feel a strong responsibility to alert the public to incidents that can be avoided."

Some advice from the centre:

Pool safety: The perimeter of a home pool should be entirely surrounded by fences at least

4 feet (1.2 metres) high, with self-closing, self-latching gates. Three-sided fences allowing access from the patio are not enough.

Kiddie pools should always be emptied when not in use.

Pool filters should be covered and checked regularly.

Rules on no running or pushing should be clear - and enforced.

Backyard trampolines should never be used as launching pads into the water.

Swimming: Designate people to watch kids in the water. Stay alert. Don't drink, and don't go inside when kids are in the water - not to answer the phone, not for any reason.

Children and teens should take swimming lessons and swim only in areas appropriate to their skill levels. Those younger than 5, as well as older non-swimmers, should wear life jackets or personal flotation devices.

Diving: In lakes, make sure there is a minimum depth of

3 metres before diving.

A high (3-metre) diving board should not be used for general recreational purposes, Friedman said. Proper training and skill are needed.

In his report on the fatal fall of a 7-year-old Lachine boy from a 3-metre diving board at LaSalle Park in 2005, coroner Jacques Ramsay concluded the death could have been prevented had access to the board been safer. Among changes he recommended was the replacement of ladders by staircases with landings.

It's up to municipalities to make sure these measures are implemented, Friedman said, and it's important for residents to push their communities to see that it happens.

Water parks: A 7-year-old boy lost both legs below the knee last summer at a Quebec water park after he was sucked into a water-intake pipe leading to spinning turbine blades. Such incidents are rare, but serious water-slide injuries to the head or stomach do happen.

Park equipment must be checked throughout the day and park staff must be trained, Friedman said.

Kids should know to clear the bottom of the slide quickly.

Boating: Children should not go out alone in a boat.

Regardless of swimming ability, all boaters should wear proper-fitting life jackets that meet safety standards.

No one should get out of a boat until it is docked.

The updated water-safety brochure of the Trauma Centre at the Montreal Children's Hospital is available from the hospital (514-412-4307) and online at www.thechildren.com.

The Lifesaving Society offers a Prevent Drowning at Home course as well as free counselling, in your own backyard, about the safety of your pool. Call 514-252-3100.

Check Safe Kids Canada water-safety guidelines at www.safekids.canada.ca.

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