

Document 25

Children's Hospital
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Water Safety for Your Special Needs Child

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Drowning is the second leading cause of injury-related death in children younger than age 14, and for every child that dies from drowning, another five require emergency care for submersion injuries. For children with a dual diagnosis of _____ and _____, the risk of drowning is more than double that of a typically developing child.

Drowning can occur anywhere there is water: Oceans, lakes, rivers, swimming pools, bathtubs and even small containers like buckets. Drowning can happen quickly and quietly, with a loss of consciousness occurring within two minutes of submersion.

To ensure children with Down syndrome can enjoy the health and wellness benefits of swimming and being in and near water, safety precautions must be used. Here are five tips to keep your child safer around water.

Provide supervision around water

For recreational swimming with very young children, you should practice “touch supervision.” This means that, regardless of other safeguards, you should be in the water with your child, never further than arms-length away. In particular, you should never rely on flotation devices as a substitute for your direct supervision.

For children at other ages, a designated adult should be actively watching the children under their care. Effort should be taken to avoid distractions, including reading a book, looking at a smartphone, or socializing. The supervising adult should not be consuming alcohol.

Introduce safe water play at a young age

Teaching your child to be safe around water should begin as soon as possible. This means setting and reviewing rules for behavior around any body of water. Encourage older children and adults that your child admires to observe these rules, as well.

Formal swimming lessons are suitable (and fun!) for children with Down syndrome. You may be able to find programs that are specifically designed for children with special needs; your local Down syndrome organization may be able to make helpful recommendations. But, if this arrangement is not available, an experienced swim instructor who displays patience and interest in learning about Down syndrome is also acceptable.

Swimming lessons offer added benefits to children with Down syndrome, such as enhancing functional skills, improving strength, coordination and body awareness, and building confidence. CHOP's Trisomy 21 Pool Groups, organized through our physical therapy department, welcome children as young as 1 year old.

Use Coast Guard-approved flotation devices

Flotation devices and adaptive swim aids can help position a child who is learning to swim. It should provide support and stability without restricting movement or limiting independence. Your swim instructor, occupational or physical therapist may be able to assist with choosing or fitting a device that meets your child's needs. A flotation device may make your child feel more confident, but, remember that it should never provide you with a false-sense of security or take the place of direct supervision.

Be attentive to safety provisions at your home swimming pool

Install proper fencing, gate latches, pool covers, and alarms on your home swimming pool. To maximize your child's safety, pool fencing should follow these requirements:

- Fencing around all four sides of the pool
- Fencing should separate the pool area and play area of the yard
- Fencing should be at least 48 inches high
- Spacing between fence slats should be no more than 4 inches, or if chain link fence, diamonds no larger than 1 ¾ inches

- A fence with a self-closing and self-latching gate that opens away from the pool

Remove toys from the pool area when your activity is completed so your child is not tempted to go back alone to retrieve them later. Keep a telephone nearby whenever you and your child are in the pool area.

Learn CPR

In the event of an emergency, your ability to intervene and provide CPR may reduce the severity of injury and improve the chance of survival.

Additional resources

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More safety tips

- [Pool Safety for Children with Disabilities](#) (overview)
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