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Clover Connection

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Texas A&M AgriLife experts remind Texans to teach children water safety

With temperatures hitting triple digits and more children headed to backyard and community swimming pools, lakes and beaches, now is a good time to teach kids about water safety, said Texas A&M AgriLife experts.

According to Safe Kids Worldwide, drowning is the leading cause of unintentional and preventable death in children ages 1-4. Organization data showed children in this age range are more likely to drown in a pool, while children 5 years old and older are more likely to drown in open water, such as a lake, creek or river. Additionally, the risk of drowning in open water increases with age.

Brad Urbanczyk, safety officer for Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, College Station, said whether it's a backyard pool or the ocean, parents can help ensure their children are protected by following these basic water safety tips:

— Always keep children within an arm's reach. Constantly pay close attention to a child's whereabouts if near water, and avoid distractions. "It's difficult not to be distracted, but when there's a child around water, especially a toddler, bad things can happen in a matter of seconds," Urbanczyk said. "It's important to avoid any distractions, especially since a small child can drown in as little as an inch of water."

— Give children swimming lessons as soon as they are ready, depending on age, physical development and the frequency with which they are expected to be around water.

"Parents can begin introducing their children to water as early as 6 months old," he said.

— Teach children essential water survival skills, such as floating to treading water, staying close to the shore, being able to return to the surface after getting in water over their head, turning in circles in the water to find an exit, and how to properly exit the water. Urbanczyk said it is especially important to teach children to swim with an adult, whether in a pool or open water.

“From the first time you teach your children to swim, make sure they know to never go near water unless an adult is with them,” he said. “Even older, more experienced swimmers should still swim with a partner to help ensure their safety, especially in open water.”

He said young people who plan to swim in open water need to be taught about such things as sharp or uneven surfaces, marine life, riptides, currents, undertow and other factors.

Mark Carroll, AgriLife Extension specialist and director of the Texas 4-H Conference Center in Brownwood, said the center offers both pool and open water activities, making the teaching of water safety a top priority.

“Those swimming in open water should only swim in designated areas and should check water and weather conditions before entering,” he said. “Be vigilant and watch the weather as it is not prudent to swim if rains or thunderstorms are expected. And be aware of your surroundings, including boats, other swimmers and water conditions.”

“We suggest young people only use public or community pools that offer adult supervision and have a trained lifeguard on duty,” he said. “Children should be taught how to exit a pool without using the ladder in case it’s essential they exit the pool immediately.”

Carroll said in private or public pools as well as some open-water recreation areas, children need to know about the risks of being entangled in or trapped by a drain grate or suction outlet.

“Regularly check to make sure drain covers are secure and have no cracks, and replace flat drain covers with dome-shaped ones,” he said. “Other protective measures include anti-entrapment drain covers and a safety vacuum release system in the event someone becomes entrapped.”

Carroll also noted one of the best things a parent or guardian can do to help protect a child in the event of a water-related emergency is to learn CPR. “A number of locations, including the Red Cross, hospitals, fire departments and recreation departments offer CPR training,” he said. “Learn CPR and have your children learn it as well. It will provide peace of mind and is a skill that could someday save a life.”

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