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**RISKMANAGEMENT**

**Killer Parties**

New data shows that the majority of drownings happen at pool parties. Here's why, along with seven ways to keep your parties safe.

by Dr. Tom Griffiths

**P**ools provide the perfect platform to host parties: water, spacious decks, ample chairs and tables for lounging and socializing. When it comes to parties, whether for toddlers, teens or adults, pools are cool. No wonder they're such an important money-maker for many facilities.

But handled improperly, they can be deadly.

For more than a decade, I've been addressing the problems with group usage of aquatics facilities and, in particular, birthday parties. In fact, failure to properly supervise pool parties and other large groups has been a perennial member of my "Seven Deadly Sins" lectures. Now, more than ever, parties seem to be a greater problem than I anticipated. Two recent and independent studies collecting data about drownings clearly illustrate this point.



Dr. Annie Clement, professor of sports management, department of business at Saint Leo (Fla.) University, reviewed 182 court cases litigated between 2000-2006. Of all the cases involving minor children as victims, one-third occurred at pool parties.

Similar statistics come from a totally different source. The Redwoods Group, the largest insurer of YMCAs, which maintains an excellent and aggressive drowning prevention program for its clients, collected even more startling data during its accident investigations. During the past five-year period, the Redwoods discovered the majority of pool deaths — nearly two-thirds — occurred during a planned group swimming activity, typically a pool party.

These two independent sources reveal that aquatics managers do have a significant safety problem in this area.

Most hotel/motel pools are exempt from lifeguard requirements. But if they attract group functions at the pool, they are acting like a public pool. At least for such an occasion, I believe they should supply a lifeguard.

For some reason, many parents balk at paying for an additional lifeguard specifically for their parties. At Penn State University, where we do in fact host birthday parties for community members, we found that hosting parents were much more willing to pay for "Game Masters" who help organize the party and play with the children in the water than a lifeguard. Our "Game Masters" are certified lifeguards who work with the other lifeguards already on duty to better supervise, educate and protect members of the group in the water.

Now let's look at why pool parties can be so dangerous.

The first problem is that when parents get an invitation to a children's birthday party, regardless of whether their own children can swim or not, too often they drop them off, assuming either the host parent or the "professional" lifeguard will watch the kids. If the party is at a residential pool, parents tend to think the host parents and other guests will watch their child. The trouble is the hosting parents simply are too distracted to watch kids in the pool. They're more concerned with the birthday cake, presents and activities as well as socializing with the other adults in attendance.

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Other attending parents likewise are too distracted by socializing or with their own children to watch someone else's. If lifeguards are on duty, too often they assume the parents attending the party will be supervising the youngsters.

At the same time, attending adults and lifeguards do not know which children can swim and which cannot. Non-swimmers usually don't wear protective Coast Guard-approved personal flotation devices (life jackets). So when a child does become distressed in the water, adults and children figure the child is playing and not drowning.

As you can see, the problem is a deadly mix of assumptions and lack of supervision. Fortunately, the solutions to that problem are not all that difficult or costly.

The recommendations should be applied to all groups scheduling the pool and not just parties. School, church, scouting and all other groups should adhere to the same safety rules. If these seven safety standards for groups are followed, most certainly the pool function will not only be safer, but more enjoyable:

**1 Require parents to attend.** This should be particularly true for non-swimmers. Attending parents need to be told what their specific duties are and who specifically they are watching in the water. Identify parents who can swim and who cannot. If lifeguards are not present, the hosting parents should know how to swim and be CPR-certified.

**2 Assign additional lifeguards.** These guards should be specifically assigned to the swimming group, in addition to the other guards normally scheduled at the pool. For pools not normally guarded, at least one guard and preferably two certified guards who are not friends or family members of the party hosts should be hired for the event. Remember, head counts save lives. Count the children in the pool every five minutes.

**3 Present a short safety lecture.** Use 10 to 15 minutes prior to the beginning of the party for all those in attendance. Talk about the buddy system with the children and teach them how it works. Hazards and risks at the host facility should be cited as well. All participants should be swim-tested in shallow water at the very outset of the party. As part of the party, offer a group swim lesson for the non-swimmers by a qualified instructor.

**4 Mark and float non-swimmers.** Identify them with a wrist band or temporary tattoo or similar marking to note "non-swimmer" and then place them in a proper-fitting life jacket. When swimmers and non-swimmers are in attendance, every attempt should be made to keep the entire group in shallow water, if possible.

**5 Employ a group use policy.** Require the hosting group to read and sign the policy well in advance of the party, preferably at least one week ahead. Additional, aggressive signage should be added to the pool specifically for the event.

**6 Keep the swimming segment of the party short.** The ideal time for swimming activities seems to be 1 1/2 to 2 hours. At the end of the aquatic period, switch to dry-land activities, and clear and close the pool. A total ban on alcohol should be in place, or at least until the pool is cleared and closed.

**7 Encourage hosting parents to contact a water safety agency, group or consultant.** This is especially important if guards are not present. These experts can help plan the pool party a few weeks in advance. They can assist with the planning and actual supervision of the pool party. A safety handout should be provided to all guests at least one week prior to the party.

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