



Toddler drownings rising

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On average each week two children aged under four die or are seriously injured after falling into a pool, lake or being left alone in the bath tub.

Figures just released by the Royal Life Saving Society forecast toddler drownings to increase by 20 per cent this year.

Transcript

KERRY O'BRIEN: A child escapes attention, wanders away and falls into a backyard swimming pool.

It might take just a moment, but it can change a family's life forever.

On average every week, two children under the age of four drown or are permanently injured after falling in a pool, a lake or being left alone in a bathtub. That's the current statistic for Australia.

Eight years ago, thanks to a major public awareness campaign, the rate of toddler drownings began to fall.

Now, according to figures just released by the Royal Life Saving Society, it looks like they're on the way back up, with toddler drownings forecast to rise by 20 per cent this year.

Mark Bannerman reports.

KATHERINE PLINT, MOTHER: She was our purple princess. She loved the colour purple. She loved The Wiggles. Loved to count. Loved to draw. Hannah could have been the Prime Minister of Australia if she wanted to be.

MARK BANNERMAN, REPORTER: Her name was Hannah Plint. Her future full of possibility until October last year when this cheeky two year old dragged a chair from the side of her parents' house and opened the pool gate. Minutes later, she fell into the water.

KATHERINE PLINT: It's like being trapped in this big black hole. Like, I was screaming for help and nobody was coming. And I was pushing on her chest and I was blowing in her mouth and somehow I'd managed to call triple 0 on the phone that was in my pocket. That's what I did and I kept rolling her over and I just waited for the ambulance which seemed like an eternity.

MARK BANNERMAN: Despite her mother's best efforts, Hannah Plint died that day. Outside their house, an empty space marks the place where the pool and the pool deck used to be. But demolition cannot take away memories.

KATHERINE PLINT: It's affected me so much that I actually tried to take my life.

MARK BANNERMAN: Were you blaming yourself?

KATHERINE PLINT: I blame myself every day – who wouldn't? Every mother has mother guilt. Every father has father guilt as well. It's in-built into us.

ABC NEWSREADER 1: The death of a girl in a home spa has prompted calls for a review of safety regulations.

ABC NEWSREADER 2: There's been another backyard swimming pool tragedy in Sydney with a child drowning today.

ABC NEWSREADER 3: Two children have drowned in a dam on a property in Queensland.

MARK BANNERMAN: It now seems the story of Hannah Plint is part of a lethal trend. As these statistics show, eight years ago, thanks to a major public education campaign and due to the impact of pool fencing legislation, toddler drownings started to come down.

In 2005, they reached an all-time low. But during the next two years, that trend began to change. And now after a recent spate of toddler drownings, those numbers are forecast to rise again.

ROB BRADLEY, ROYAL LIFE SAVING AUSTRALIA: I think that we're gonna see a jump up to over 40 toddler drownings this year. And you need to remember that it's not only drownings, it's near drownings. For every drowning, there's probably four hospitalisations and of those, one to two will have permanent neurological damage.

MARK BANNERMAN: If the Royal Life Saving Society's predictions are correct and the number of drownings and near drownings is going back up again, there's a very simple question: why is it happening? To try and answer that, we've come to Westmead Hospital here in Sydney to talk to someone who's been looking at that issue very closely.

Doctor Gary Browne is the head of emergency medicine at the hospital. He treats thousands of children like this young boy each year for many different complaints. But in 2007, he became alarmed at a spike in the number of toddlers who'd been rescued from backyard pools turning up in his hospital. He was so concerned, he decided to study eight of those incidents. To his amazement, in four cases, he found parents might have saved their child but didn't try resuscitation.

GARRY BROWNE, WESTMEAD CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL: We actually found that parents were actually quite concerned in administering basic life support, even though some had been trained because they thought they could do more harm than good. And our message there is that, again, any life support is better than no life support and the parents should get in and give this a go.

MARK BANNERMAN: But his report, published in the Australian Medical Journal, makes two other key points that would chill any parent. In each case, there was a lack of parental supervision. But the fact that really shocked him was this: in every incident, the child's safety fence around the pool or the gate failed or was faulty.

GARRY BROWNE: These toddlers were all – had all been unsupervised and had all got through pool fences which were not in appropriate working order into backyard swimming pools.

MARK BANNERMAN: If the failure of pool fences rocked Dr. Browne, it changed the life of Samuel Morris and his family forever.

MICHAEL MORRIS, FATHER: You have children, you have this imagined life for them that they'll grow up and have a family, good education, that sort of stuff. Now, you live with a constant, 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week care role for Samuel.

MARK BANNERMAN: Samuel is now four years old. He cannot speak, he cannot walk and he is fed through a tube in his stomach. When his parents bought their house, they thought they had a safe pool with a strong fence. They were wrong.

Two years ago, the toddler made his way along the family pool fence. Coming to this corner, he lent and then pushed against the railing. Incredibly, the relatively new fence collapsed. Minutes later, his sister raised the alarm, but by then, he was already in the pool.

JO-ANN MORRIS, MOTHER: He was floating just a few centimetres under the water and it was the most – no one should see this sight. It was just horrible.

MARK BANNERMAN: Why was that?

JO-ANN MORRIS: He had foam coming out of his mouth, his eyes were rolled and bulging. Um, he was a strange colour. Um, it didn't look like my son. And so, it just – it did not feel like this was real. Just did not feel that way.

MARK BANNERMAN: Back at home, the family made a shocking discovery.

MICHAEL MORRIS: When we purchased the place, we requested that the fence be put in. We assumed that the fence was put in to comply with the Australian standard. Tragically, after Samuel's accident, we found out that it wasn't the case. We were contacted by council to indicate that the DA had never been finalised and council had never actually inspected the pool fence.

MARK BANNERMAN: If this seems like simply a case of bad luck, the figures tell another story. In 2004, Choice magazine ran a survey that showed 18 different types of pool fencing material out of 31 surveyed did not meet Australian standards. In another major report, the New South Wales Water Safety Taskforce found that of 1,000 pools surveyed, nearly 50 per cent had defective fences.

Now, does that surprise you?

ROB BRADLEY: No, it doesn't surprise me. We've had some statistics from local council areas; one in Queensland, for example, where there was 85 per cent non-compliance of the pool fence and the gate. 85 per cent that's, you know, that's just staggering.

ANDREW PLINT, FATHER: We had the Australian standards. They're not enforced in shires, in council evenly right across the board.

MARK BANNERMAN: If there is one message that comes out of all this, it is simply that the pool fence is the last line of defence.

ROB BRADLEY: Parents are becoming a little complacent, perhaps. They are aware of the message. But they don't seem to be able to ensure that there is constant supervision of those children. But at the end of the day, it is the parents' responsibility, not the child's.

MARK BANNERMAN: Those who should know say there's a way to stop toddler drownings, and they know the consequences too if their warnings are not heard.

JO-ANN MORRIS: The result'll be a lot more drownings. There will be a lot more cases of a child with severe brain damage because of drowning.

KATHERINE PLINT: There's no immunisation for drowning. It can happen to doctors' kids, lawyers' kids, police officers' kids - we're proof of that. It can happen to anybody.

KERRY O'BRIEN: That report from Mark Bannerman.