

'Instant' pool risk

Fencing loophole has lives in danger

Sarah Vogler and Suellen Hinde

ONE in every five backyard drownings in Queensland involves a toddler in a wading pool or occurs in an inadequately fenced above-ground pool, an investigation by *The Sunday Mail* has found.

With new materials and technology providing bigger, deeper and cheaper inflatable and portable above-ground pools, authorities fear safety is being increasingly overlooked amid the excitement of getting an "instant" pool in the back yard.

The rules for above-ground pools in Queensland are clear. Pools that can be filled to a depth of 300mm or more require permanent fencing, except those defined as portable wading pools — ones that can be filled to a depth of no more than 450mm, contain no more than 2000 litres and have no filtration system.

But many retailers advertise "portable" and "inflatable" above-ground pools with catalogue photographs that show no fencing.

Much of the advertising carries enthusiastic encouragements that some pools can be inflated and filled in just hours and the buyer could be swimming in their back yard in "less than a day".

While some pool company websites warn about the requirements for fencing for their larger models, most salesmen do not offer advice to buyers and instead refer them to their local council, *The Sunday Mail* found after visiting several stores last week.

The danger posed by unfenced backyard pools and unattended wading pools underlines the importance of *The Sunday Mail's* Safe Summer campaign, which is raising awareness of the importance of pool safety compliance and being vigilant when children are around water.

Royal Lifesaving Society Australia chief operating officer Justin Scarr said the popularity of cheap, easy-to-construct inflatable pools was of great concern as anecdotal evidence supported fears that many buyers were not aware of fencing requirements, could not afford a fence or just did not want to erect one.

DANGEROUS MESSAGES



ONE SMALL STEP: The dangers of wading and above-ground pools is evident (above) — which is why Albany Creek pool owner Anthony Morris (right) insisted his above-ground pool was properly fenced on all sides.



CLAIMS made in some advertising pitches for many above-ground pools often sidestep fencing requirements, *The Sunday Mail* found. Examples include:



- CAN BE erected in 1-2 hours . . . you and your family can be swimming in no time.
- POOLS are ready for plumbing and filling, all within 2-4 hours.
- ONLY takes two people an average of 10 minutes to set up. Just wait for the pool to fill then go swimming.
- IMAGINE a pool that installs in just hours and lasts a generation.
- EASILY relocateable when empty — perfect for keeping an eye on the kids.
- YOU can electric pump this pool up during summer, and in winter when you don't use it, drain it out.
- VERSATILE — pool in summer, sandpit in winter, fish pond in spring.

Source: Various manufacturers' websites, brochures and instore advertising



Many think their boundary fence is suitable, researchers found. "But these pools pose a great risk to children (in the home) and also potentially children passing by if the yard is not fenced properly," Mr Scarr said.

Dr Ruth Barker, a Mater Children's Hospital paediatrician and a Queensland Injury Surveillance Unit researcher, said wading pools were the most dangerous type of above-ground pool as they cost as little as \$10 and there was no requirement for wading pools to be fenced.

"I don't think they should be banned, but people need to be aware (of the dangers)," Dr Barker said.

She said six toddlers drowned each year and typically their deaths occurred in the summer months.

But, for every toddler who drowned, Dr Barker said four were rushed to

hospital and survived, and 10 were rescued before harm came to them.

Just last weekend, Dr Barker said, two children were rushed to the Mater's emergency department after nearly drowning.

"Welcome to summer," she said.

About 20 per cent of pool drownings in Queensland occurred in wading pools, she said.

Mr Scarr, the parent of a four-year-old, said he would never consider an inflatable pool for his child.

"It's virtually impossible to secure those pools from entry of inquisitive children," he said.

Mr Scarr said if a parent was considering buying a wading pool, they should never leave the child unattended and should always empty the pool immediately after use.

Laws misunderstood

A POOR understanding of pool fence laws and misconceptions about how they apply to everyone are the most common reasons given for inadequate safety fencing, council inspectors say.

Reasons commonly given for safety fence breaches include:

- A pool fence is not needed if there are no children living in the house.
- Pool fencing can be removed if a home has self-closing doors.
- Spas and swimming pools do not need to be fenced if they have a lockable cover.

Gold Coast councillor Ted Shepherd, a strong advocate for pool safety, said the best rule of thumb for

pool owners was that only the shallowest of wading pools were exempt from fencing rules.

"All outdoor spas and pools, including above-ground pools, must have compliant fencing," Cr Shepherd said.

"The reality is that young children don't understand trespass laws.

"A fully-fenced swimming pool or spa greatly reduces the risk for young children climbing boundary fences to retrieve a ball or frisbee.

"With summer on the way, residents also need to ensure they remove any large toys or objects near their pool fences which might make it easier for a child to climb over."

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