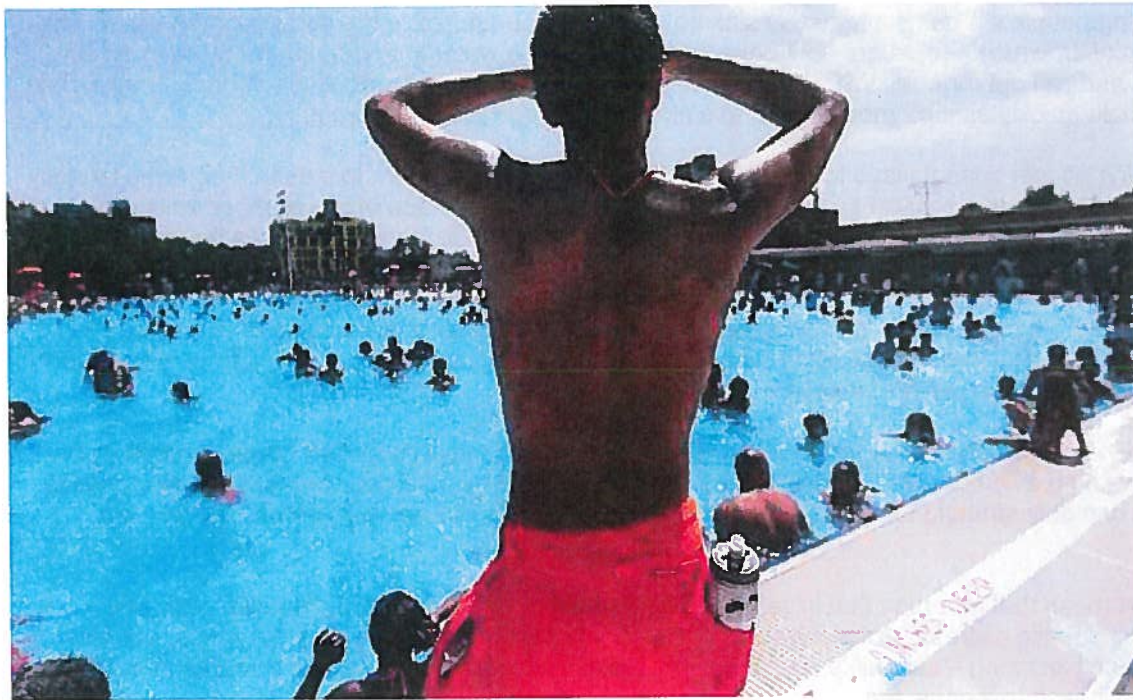


Drowning Doesn't Look Like Drowning

In many child drownings, adults are nearby but have no idea the victim is dying. Here's what to look for.

By **Mario Vittone** | Posted Tuesday, June 4, 2013, at 7:14 AM



A lifeguard keeps watch on opening day of the newly renovated McCarren Park Pool on June 28, 2012, in Brooklyn, New York. Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images

The new captain jumped from the deck, fully dressed, and sprinted through the water. A former lifeguard, he kept his eyes on his victim as he headed straight for the couple swimming between their anchored sportfisher and the beach. "I think he thinks you're drowning," the husband said to his wife. They had been splashing each other and she had screamed but now they were just standing, neck-deep on the sand bar. "We're fine; what is he doing?" she asked, a little annoyed. "We're fine!" the husband yelled, waving him off, but his captain kept swimming hard. "Move!" he barked as he sprinted between the stunned owners. Directly behind them, not 10 feet away, their 9-year-old daughter was drowning. Safely above the surface in the arms of the captain, she burst into tears, "Daddy!"

How did this captain know—from 50 feet away—what the father couldn't recognize from just 10? Drowning is not the violent, splashing call for help that most people expect. The captain was trained to recognize drowning by experts and years of experience. The father, on the other hand, had learned what drowning looks like by watching television. If you spend time on or near the water (hint: that's all of us) then you should make sure that you and your crew know what to look for whenever people enter the water. Until she cried a tearful, "Daddy," she hadn't made a sound. As a former Coast Guard rescue swimmer, I wasn't surprised at all by this story. Drowning is almost always a deceptively quiet event. The waving, splashing, and yelling that dramatic conditioning (television) prepares us to look for is rarely seen in real life.

The Instinctive Drowning Response—so named by Francesco A. Pia, Ph.D., is what people do to avoid actual or perceived suffocation in the water. And it does not look like most people expect. There is very little splashing, no waving, and no yelling or calls for help of any kind. To get an idea of just how quiet and

undramatic from the surface drowning can be, consider this: It is the No. 2 cause of accidental death in children, ages 15 and under (just behind vehicle accidents)—of the approximately 750 children who will drown next year, about 375 of them will do so within 25 yards of a parent or other adult. In some of those drownings, the adult will actually watch the child do it, having no idea it is happening.* Drowning does not look like drowning—Dr. Pia, in [an article in the Coast Guard's *On Scene* magazine](#), described the Instinctive Drowning Response like this:

1. "Except in rare circumstances, drowning people are physiologically unable to call out for help. The respiratory system was designed for breathing. Speech is the secondary or overlaid function. Breathing must be fulfilled before speech occurs.
2. Drowning people's mouths alternately sink below and reappear above the surface of the water. The mouths of drowning people are not above the surface of the water long enough for them to exhale, inhale, and call out for help. When the drowning people's mouths are above the surface, they exhale and inhale quickly as their mouths start to sink below the surface of the water.
3. Drowning people cannot wave for help. Nature instinctively forces them to extend their arms laterally and press down on the water's surface. Pressing down on the surface of the water permits drowning people to leverage their bodies so they can lift their mouths out of the water to breathe.
4. Throughout the Instinctive Drowning Response, drowning people cannot voluntarily control their arm movements. Physiologically, drowning people who are struggling on the surface of the water cannot stop drowning and perform voluntary movements such as waving for help, moving toward a rescuer, or reaching out for a piece of rescue equipment.
5. From beginning to end of the Instinctive Drowning Response people's bodies remain upright in the water, with no evidence of a supporting kick. Unless rescued by a trained lifeguard, these drowning people can only struggle on the surface of the water from 20 to 60 seconds before submersion occurs."

This doesn't mean that a person that is yelling for help and thrashing isn't in real trouble—they are experiencing aquatic distress. Not always present before the Instinctive Drowning Response, aquatic distress doesn't last long—but unlike true drowning, these victims can still assist in their own rescue. They can grab lifelines, throw rings, etc.

Look for these other signs of drowning when persons are in the water:

- Head low in the water, mouth at water level
- Head tilted back with mouth open
- Eyes glassy and empty, unable to focus
- Eyes closed
- Hair over forehead or eyes
- Not using legs—vertical
- Hyperventilating or gasping
- Trying to swim in a particular direction but not making headway
- Trying to roll over on the back
- Appear to be climbing an invisible ladder

So if a crew member falls overboard and everything looks OK—don't be too sure. Sometimes the most common indication that someone is drowning is that they don't look like they're drowning. They may just look like they are treading water and looking up at the deck. One way to be sure? Ask them, "Are you all right?" If they can answer at all—they probably are. If they return a blank stare, you may have less than 30 seconds to get to them. And parents—children playing in the water make noise. *When they get quiet, you get to them and find out why.*

(See a video of the [Instinctive Drowning Response](#).)

This article is reprinted from [Mario Vittone's blog](#). [Join him on Facebook](#).

Middlesex District Attorney Marian Ryan Announces Swim Safety Program



Will learning how to swim with DA Marian Ryan, Karen Bush, Aquatics Director & Pamela Higgins, Asst. Recreation Director, and Mason Guarino, South Shore Gunite Pool & Spa, Inc.

Middlesex County pool companies join partnership to educate homeowners

CONCORD – Middlesex District Attorney Marian Ryan today launched a summer pool safety campaign and a partnership with four local pool companies to ensure that residential pools are safe for children this summer. The Middlesex District Attorney's Office has partnered with local pool companies to bring this safety message to

families as they open their pools for the summer. District Attorney Ryan launched the effort today at the Beede Swim and Fitness Center in Concord, a community swimming facility.

"This is a great time of year – the time of year when we clean up our yards, open up the swimming pool and head outside to enjoy the beautiful spring and summer weather," District Attorney Ryan said. "Unfortunately, this time of year can also have tragic results. We must take precautions to keep our children safe from drowning, not only at our lakes and beaches, but in our backyards as well."

The companies joining District Attorney Ryan in this effort are: South Shore Gunite of Chelmsford, Abramo Pool & Spa of Burlington, Aquatime Pool & Spa of Tyngsborough, and R&R Pool & Spa of Littleton.

The partnering companies all provide pool servicing, pool opening, and cleaning and maintenance for thousands of homeowners and commercial pools in Middlesex County. As part of this initiative, each company will distribute a pool safety flyer at every location in which they service.

The District Attorney reminds homeowners to make sure their backyard swimming pools must comply with state and local regulations. Massachusetts requires that residential swimming pools have: a 4-foot-high barrier must enclose the swimming area – even if you don't have children; access gates that self-close, lock, and open outward from the swimming area; opening/locking mechanism must be located 54 inches high or on the pool side of the gate; access ladders or steps should be removed, locked, or secured to prevent usage by children. Contact your city or town hall for additional requirements.

The "Splash into a Safe Swim Season" campaign also includes printed materials distributed to Middlesex County YMCAs, hospitals, and community organizations and an informative website feature with tips and helpful statistics for parents. This water safety initiative was developed based on the results of the Middlesex Child Fatality Review Team, which studies causes of child fatalities and deemed water safety education as a necessary tool to prevent fatalities or injuries.

In Massachusetts between 2006 and 2008, there were 31 unintentional drowning deaths of children, according to a report by the Massachusetts Child Fatality Review.

Each year, there are 3,500 fatal, unintentional drownings in the United States, averaging 10 per day, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Of these, one in five is a child under the age of 14.

Compounding these troubling statistics is the fact that, for every child who dies from drowning, four received emergency care for nonfatal submersion injuries. Of the estimated 5,000 children hospitalized each year due to unintentional drowning related incidents, 15 percent die in the hospital and 20 percent are left with permanent brain damage. Of all the preschoolers who drown, a staggering 70 percent are in the care of parents at the time, and 75 percent are out of sight for just five minutes or less. District Attorney Ryan reminds homeowners that it takes just 20 seconds in as little as two to three inches of water for a child to drown. Landscaped water features and koi ponds are also safety hazards for children.

Here are some additional water safety tips for parents and caretakers:

- Actively supervise children at all times.
- Never leave a child alone near a pool or other body of water.
- Teach children to swim.
- Stay within arms reach of preschool-age children.
- Provide locked safety barriers for swimming area when not in use.
- Keep climbable objects away from pool barrier.
- Teach children about water safety.
- Learn CPR – use infant CPR until age 1 then child CPR until age 8.
- Be alert when visiting homes with a pool.
- Remove toys from pool after use.
- Do not rely on air-filled or foam toys. They are not designed for safety.
- Always use US Coast Guard approved life jackets when boating.

For more information and water safety tips visit www.middlesexda.com or the Middlesex Children's Advocacy Center.