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Jivana Esposito, 7, plays at the East Lansing Family Aquatic Center last summer. The popular water park draws thousands of visitors each summer. Lifeguards are on duty, but experts say you still should supervise your own child.

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Swimming skills, supervision keys to summer fun

By Louise Knott Ahern
For Michiganmoms.com

Did you hear that? That big splash?

It's the official sound of summer for the Great Lakes state, as children run from the classroom to the cool waters of the pool, lake or backyard pond.

But before you let your kids dive in, it's important to take a refresher course on swim safety to make sure summer's tradition doesn't turn tragic.

Drowning is the second-leading cause of injury-related death for children in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And the USA Swimming Foundation reports that nine people die every day in the U.S. from drowning.

But experts agree that you can keep your families safe by following a simple list of guidelines. To get the best water safety tips for you and your children, we talked to three of the Lansing area's top swim safety gurus: Anne Fowler, aquatics manager at the Michigan Athletic Club; Theresa Sheridan, aquatics and sports director for the Westside YMCA; and Jim Jennings, recreation coordinator for the city of East Lansing.

Here is their advice for making swim time safe and fun this summer.

Enroll your child in swim lessons.

No. 1 safety rule?

"Make sure your child knows how to swim," Fowler says.

The best way to do that, she says, is to enroll your children in swim classes — even if you are a strong swimmer.

"Children tend to take it more seriously coming from an instructor or lifeguard than from their parents," she says.

That's one of reasons DeWitt mom Anna Schulz says she enrolled her three children in lessons at the Westside YMCA. Plus, she never had lessons as a child and wanted her children to be as safe as possible when they traveled this summer.

"It's about peace of mind," she says. "It's amazing to see their confidence level grow. It is a good feeling to know that they can keep their heads afloat and get to the side of the pool."

Swim lessons are available at myriad places in the Lansing area, including the M.A.C. and the Westside YMCA.

The American Red Cross also offers lessons, as do most city parks and recreation departments that have public pools.

Understand your child's abilities

Before you let your children into the water, make sure you know what they can and can't do.

Can they swim from one side of the pool to the other? Can they tread water? Can they dip underwater and blow bubbles?

"Children who can't swim the length of the pool on their front and back should stay in shallow water," says Sheridan of the YMCA. "Endurance is important."

The most important basic skill they will learn is how to float, she says. Even toddlers can be taught to roll in the water and float on their backs for an extended period of time — a crucial skill that can literally mean the difference between life and death.

Understanding their ability level will help you know how big of a "safety halo" to build around your kids, Fowler says.

For non-swimmers or weak swimmers, a parent should be within arm's reach at all times. The better your child's abilities, the more space and freedom you can give them.

But no matter what, always provide supervision.

"Parents sometimes take it for granted that their children can swim," Sheridan says. "Your child is never safe without your eyes on them."

Know the water environment

People are injured and killed every year by diving into too-shallow water, a sign they didn't understand the environment they were in. So before you enter any body of water, study the area, says Jennings, who is in charge of East Lansing's Family Aquatic Center.

In pools, look for depth markers so you know where the shallow side ends and the deep side begins. Check to see where the lifeguards are stationed. Find out what kind of rescue gear is available and where it is.

Remember there are big differences between pools and lakes. For one thing, you can see the bottom of a pool. Not so with lakes, which means it's hard to know for sure how deep the water is or what kinds of dangers lurk below.

Plus, lakes bring the added danger of undertow, which can quickly pull a child into deeper waters.

Jennings' advice? Whether it's a pool or a lake, enter the water feet first to verify the depth. Once you have a feel for the area, set rules for your children accordingly.

"When you get to the pool, go over the posted pool rules and then set specific rules for your own children," Fowler says. "Each child should have their own safety boundaries based on their own abilities."

Ease into it

Lifeguards at the East Lansing Aquatic Center expect to make their first rescue or assist within 30 minutes of opening the public pool. Jennings says it's because people often jump in assuming that they are in the same swim shape as they were last September and then get into trouble.

"It can take a couple of days or even a week to get back to the level you were at before."

Make sure your kids take it easy at first, he says.

And, Fowler adds, watch out for the "terrible too's."

"That's too cold, too tired, too much sun, too far out, too strenuous," she says.

Any one of those things can put a child at risk.

Be responsible for your child

One of the greatest dangers to children in water is a parent's false sense of security, Jennings says. Parents often assume their children are safe because there is a lifeguard on duty or because they are wearing lifejackets.

The lifeguard is there to keep the water safe for everyone, and he can't watch every child every minute. And even with a Coast Guard-approved lifejacket (which all three experts recommend), children can still get into trouble.

Bottom line: Nothing can take the place of a parent's eyes.

"Don't assume anything," Jennings said.

Enforce the buddy rule.

All three experts emphasized this one several times.

"Even if you're poolside, assign two kids to swim together," said Sheridan. "No swimming alone."

Period.

Test your child's swim ability

Before you let your children loose in the water, do a quick skill test to determine how much freedom they can have.

§ Can they float on their backs? This is the most basic lifesaving skill that a child needs to have any freedom in the pool. If they can't do this, you need to be by their sides at all times.

§ Can they submerge and blow bubbles? Both children and adults have drowned because they held their breath too long underwater and then passed out. Children should know how to dip under and exhale. If they can't, make sure they stay in water no deeper than waist-high. And do not allow any games in which children compete to see who can hold their breath the longest.

§ Can they tread water? The ability to stay afloat and stay vertical is another lifesaving skill that can mean the difference between going in the deep end or staying shallow.

§ Can they swim the length of the pool and back? This is a good test of a child's ability to get to the side of the pool if they are in trouble. If they can't do this, it probably means they aren't strong enough to play in the deep end or jump off the diving board.

Sources: Jim Jennings, Theresa Sheridan, Anne Fowler

Find a swim class near you

Swim lessons are available in several places throughout the Lansing area. You can check with your local parks and recreation department or your health club to see if they offer them.

Or check out the following links:

§YMCA: www.ymcaoflansing.org

§American Red Cross: www.midmichiganredcross.org

§City of Lansing: www.cityoflansingmi.com/parks/aquatics

Help a child learn to swim

Want to sponsor a swimming lesson for a low-income child?

The Make a Splash program through the USA Swimming Foundation allows you to donate money for swimming lessons. For information, visit www.makeasplash.org

