Committee on Pediatric Aspects of Physical Fitness, Recreation, and Sports

Swimming Instructions for Infants*

Children less than 3 years old are most vulnerable to drowning, and organized efforts to reduce the toll are indicated.

Heretofore, swimming instruction has concentration on school-aged children, but in recent years some emphasis has been placed on teaching younger children to swim, even during the first year of life. Although it may be possible to teach young infants to propel themselves and keep their heads above water, infants cannot be expected to learn the elements of water safety or to react appropriately in emergencies. No young child, particularly those who are preschool aged, can ever be considered “water safe.” Parents may develop a false sense of security if they feel their young child can “swim” a few strokes.

Additional problems may be associated with admission of infants to public swimming pools. Incontinent infants pose an aesthetic problem and make it difficult to maintain the effectiveness of chlorination.

The Committee recognizes the increasing popularity of swimming programs for infants and the enjoyment of the parent and child in this shared activity, and makes the following recommendations:

1. If a parent wishes to enroll his/her infant in a water adjustment and swimming program, it should be on a one-to-one basis with the parent or a responsible adult. Organized group swimming instruction should be reserved for children more than 3 years old.

2. Instruction should be carried out by trained instructors in properly maintained pools.

3. Infants with known medical problems should receive clearance from their physician.

4. Controlled studies clarifying the possible risks to infants from swimming programs should be carried out as soon as possible.

5. People who own pools should be encouraged to receive cardiopulmonary resuscitative training.

6. Efforts to reduce the number of drownings in children should concentrate on three methods of proven effectiveness: (a) More adequate fencing and other protective measures to exclude infants from pool areas and areas of excavation. (b) The assurance of constant parental or other adult supervision for nonswimmers in swimming areas. (c) The use of flotation jackets for all nonswimmers close to bodies of water or in boats.

* This statement has been reviewed and approved by the Academy's Council on Child and Adolescent Health.

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