

# To Sell and Protect

Pools are a major factor in child drownings—as a REALTOR®, you can help prevent a tragedy.

| BY TESS RAINES

Loosing a child to drowning is a parent's worst nightmare, and because of Florida's water-centric environment, these tragedies happen all too often. According to the Florida Department of Children and Families, 88 children died by drowning in the state in 2018.

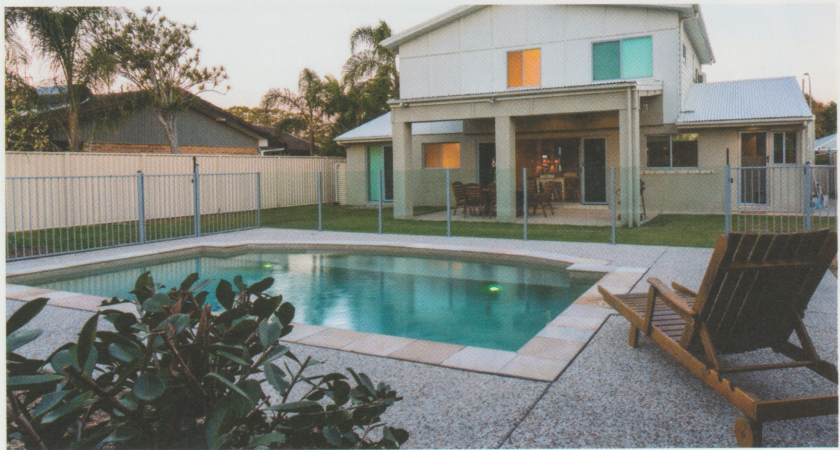
Child drowning often occurs when parents are busy or when there are no layers of protection in place, according to Paula DiGrigoli, executive director of NCH Safe and Healthy Children's Coalition of Collier County.

"It happens to the best parents," she says. "That's why we have to have these barriers. Children are very curious."

The Safe and Healthy Children's Coalition works with over 70 local and national agencies and engages with the community regularly to ensure families are aware of all water safety measures. They have established Life Jacket Loaner Stations at local beaches and hold the annual Great Naples Duck Race and Safety Festival. The funds from this event go toward swimming lessons and providing water safety materials and door and window alarms for families with young children.

DiGrigoli explains that many incidences of child drowning occur when a parent or grandparent believes that the child is with another family member. "A lot of people feel that 'I'm a great parent and I know where my children are going to be.' You can't," she

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Barriers will give you time  
to avoid a tragedy.  
—Paula DiGrigoli, executive  
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of Collier County  
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says. "A lot of drownings are when parents are cooking or mom is using the bathroom (while the children are watching TV)." Simply turning away for a minute is enough time for a tragedy to take place.

She emphasizes the importance of multiple layers of protection for families in a home with a pool or neighboring pond. Door alarms sold on Amazon and Home Depot work well to alert parents that a child might have wandered outdoors, but DiGrigoli advises parents to attach them high up on the door so a child can't reach and potentially disable them. Any mesh or aluminum pool fence works to deter children as well, but patio furniture and toys—anything a child can climb—should also be put away when the pool is not in use.

However, one of these layers alone is not enough to prevent a drowning. A child's curious nature can lead them to figuring out how to get past a baby gate or through a door with an alarm that has weak batteries. Because of this, DiGrigoli recommends implementing additional safety measures, such as a "designated water watcher"—someone whose duty at family gatherings or pool parties is to keep a close eye on the pool for short periods of time before assigning another adult to supervise.

In the event that a child is missing, parents are encouraged to check every source of water first—bathtubs, pools or neighboring ponds and canals. Don't just glance from a distance—go to the edge and look to the

bottom.

"The last layer that we recommend is learning to respond in case of an emergency," DiGrigoli says. "Learn CPR and call 911. Those seconds count."

There were three child drownings in Collier County during 2019, and two of those were children of families visiting from up north. DiGrigoli says that out-of-state families typically don't have pools and are often unaware of the dangers. This puts REALTORS® who are renting and selling homes to these families in a powerful position to reverse the statistics.

"REALTORS® can maybe provide the water safety booklets that we have and emphasize the four points of protection (barriers, supervision, learning to swim and first aid response) to guide them to us," DiGrigoli says. REALTORS® can access these materials by emailing [info@safehealthychildren.org](mailto:info@safehealthychildren.org) or calling (239) 624-4033. To avoid scaring families out of renting or purchasing house with a pool, she adds that REALTORS® can even hold the conversation on child water safety until after the closing of the home.

She's thankful for the first responders and other agencies collaborating for child safety awareness in the county, but she acknowledges that REALTOR®s are a vital link in this equation. The ultimate goal, she says, is "for REALTORS® to say, 'we want everyone to buy homes with pools—and we want them to be safe.'"