

Danger in the pool

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The stories are chilling, and so often the same.

The child, tiny and teeming with curiosity, escapes his parents' sight for just a flash.

He wanders outside.

He finds the pool.

This year in Tampa Bay — a place bordered by ocean and paved with pools — it keeps happening.

May 25: Brayden Lague, 18 months, left his parents for a couple of minutes at home in Tarpon Springs. His father found him floating in the pool.

May 26: Mariah Kras, 2, got out of her family's mobile home in Spring Hill and climbed a deck to the above-ground pool while her mother slept.

June 11: Matthew Mannix III, 1, drowned in a Dunedin pool after he left his crib and opened a bathroom door leading outside.

June 16: Kevin Walker, 18 months, drowned in Odessa after wandering out of his mother's view and falling into a partially emptied pool.

This month, two more boys nearly drowned, one at Fort De Soto Park and another at a St. Petersburg pool party.

The number creeps up every year.

Summer has just begun.

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In Florida, enough children drown every year to fill four classrooms.

Though they drown in ponds and creeks and bathtubs, the grim setting is typically the most idyllic family location — backyard swimming pools. In Florida, it happens there three-quarters of the time, according to the Florida Department of Health.

Sometimes, there is true child neglect at hand. But usually, unintentional drownings happen to otherwise good families during a phone call or a nap or while a back is turned.

Most happen in less than five minutes.

"We don't want to say that they're bad parents and they don't watch their kids because we believe they do," said Pat Vines, rescue program coordinator for St. Petersburg Fire and Rescue. "It's impossible to watch your child 100 percent of the time. How would you do laundry? How would you go to the bathroom?"

Florida law says every new pool built must have a safety feature. Parents can establish family rules, lock doors, set alarms.

But what about the unthinkable?

Can a toddler unlock a sliding glass door?

Sandra Testo-Michaud didn't think so. In 2004, the Pasco mother put her 2-year-old daughter Katelyn down to watch *Dora the Explorer* and eat cookies and milk. She went into her home office to check voice mail.

Katelyn was an old soul, her mom said. She was quiet, always with a pacifier in her mouth. She had a smart curiosity for the world. By 2, she had learned to say, "French fries, please," at the drive-through window.

That day, while her mom checked messages, curious Katelyn unlocked the sliding glass door and went into the pool.

About three minutes later, her mother found her floating. Katelyn died at the hospital.

"When it first happened I was afraid to get out there, because I didn't know what people would say," said Testo-Michaud, 38. "There are a lot of judgmental people out there, and the first thing that comes to people's minds is, 'What were you doing? Where were you? It can never happen to me.'

"That's not true."

Katelyn's mom is on a mission to educate the public. She started the Katelyn Foundation to bring awareness to accidental drownings and help provide families with swimming lessons and safety fences.

She swam with her older daughter, Lexi, in the same pool where Katelyn died, so Lexi wouldn't fear water. Eventually, the family built a new home in Trinity near the cemetery holding Katelyn's ashes.

She is saddened with every drowning death she reads about.

"I think that we have an epidemic this year," she said. "There are people out there who are working second and third jobs, they have a lot on their minds, whether they're going to have a job next week or a home to live in. It is more important now than ever to really keep an eye on your children."

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Wednesday morning, kids splashed in the pool at St. Petersburg's North Shore Park for swimming lessons.

Rebecca Hansen, the pool's facility supervisor, had a special swimmer that day, her 9-month-old daughter, Karrington.

Between naps and strained bananas, Karrington took an infant swim class, swirling in the pool with an instructor, singing *Old McDonald* and *Ring Around the Rosie*, learning to float and understand the feeling of water.

It's vital, Hansen said.

"We're surrounded by water," she said. "Everyone you know has a pool. Family members have pools, we all have pools. It's just so scary. It happens so darn fast."

Nearby, a 4-year-old with brown pigtails named Vasilisa dried off after a swim lesson.

"If you turn away for a second, you want to know they'll be okay," said her mother, Anne Ingram.

After a recent swim lesson, Ingram turned to dress her other daughter, 1-year-old Julianna.

Splash.

Vasilisa was gone.

"I got scared and I screamed," Ingram said. "I was just a couple steps away."

Vasilisa, a strong swimmer, grabbed a toy on the bottom and swam to the surface.

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