

**Gardens**

# Potential perils of a pond

By Elizabeth Walker

During the summer months it is important to be aware of the potential dangers of children drowning in the garden. Statistics show that with the warm summer season comes a corresponding increase in child drowning, a number of which occur at home in and which can be prevented.

Water holds a particular fascination for young children under the age of five. Whether the water is in a garden pond, a rainwater butt, a paddling pool or a bucket, a young child will invariably investigate.

Due to this natural inquisitiveness, between 1993 and 2003, 131 children under the age of 15 drowned in a 'small body of water' such as a village pond, garden pond, water container, paddling pool, or ditch.

Drowning often occurred within the space of a few minutes of the supervising adult being momentarily distracted. It is impossible for any parent to supervise a toddler 100 percent of the time, making it essential that steps be taken to remove the hazard from the garden where the child will play.

Children aged between one and two are particularly at risk, with the potential risk decreasing as age increases. This is likely due to the following reasons:

- Between the ages of one and two, an infant's mobility increases at a terrific but irregular rate, allowing them to escape parents' supervision and get into difficulties unexpectedly quickly.
- While mobility may increase, stability and co-ordination remain poor.
- It is not until the age of four or five that children begin to understand the concept of danger and begin to heed warnings given to them.

Even the shallowest of ponds can be lethal. A child is unlikely to be able to climb out of a 500mm deep pond, which is equivalent to an adult falling into 1,800mm of water.

Our research has shown that in 76 per cent of these drowning

cases the child was reported to be unsupervised at the time of drowning. Half of the drownings reportedly occurred when the child escaped supervision after wandering off, and most relate to the adult being distracted. Reasons for lack of supervision within these cases have been cited as:

- Momentarily distracted (e.g. by answering telephone), 63 per cent
- Being supervised by other children, 13 per cent
- Left unattended for more than a few minutes, 11 per cent
- Assumed child to be playing inside, six per cent
- Doing another activity at the time (e.g. working), four per cent
- Adult socialising, two per cent

Water can easily gather in various ways to be a potential drowning trap. Parents should check the garden regularly ensuring containers holding rainwater are emptied or sealed to prevent children gaining access.

Paddling pools should always be emptied and turned upside down after use. In Australia safety grilles on garden ponds or fencing around swimming pools have been shown to reduce the rate of drowning. In the UK only 10 per cent of garden ponds or private domestic pools where children drowned over the years 1993-



**A barrier from Pond Guard protects children**

2003 had a fence or barrier protecting them.

The safest option for a household that has young children is to temporarily fill in the garden pond with sand, however if parents wish to retain a pond, rigid mesh or a grille can be used to create a secure cover. This cover should be left in place until the child can recognise and understand danger.

Drowning incidents have occurred in less than 300mm of water making it essential that the mesh or grille can support the weight of a child, remaining above the surface of the water at all times.

Ideally it should be heavy duty (i.e. 6-8mm diameter wire)

and thereby self-supporting. Thinner wire mesh will require supporting with a frame. Depending on the size of the pond, a frame may also be required to provide stability and anchor points.

The frame needs to be clear of the maximum water level height of the pond taking into consideration any deflection or sagging which could occur.

Grilles beneath the surface do not remove all of the risk of drowning especially to toddlers and crawling babies who could still end up face down in water and not be able to get themselves upright. Fencing materials such as chicken wire are unsuitable, as they will sag in the centre with the child's weight.

A number of tragic accidents have also occurred when children have managed to crawl beneath the wire or pull the wire aside. The mesh should have a grid size of no more than 80mm x 80mm, and any method used to secure and lock the frame in place should ensure that there is no risk of entrapment between any moving parts. The mesh must be firmly secured and regularly checked for signs of deterioration.

Child home drowning research was conducted by the SWIM research group.

## Further information and resources

RoSPA Pond safety fact sheet  
<http://www.rospa.com/waterandleisuresafety/factsheets/pondsafety.htm>  
 RoSPA Water safety fact sheet  
<http://www.rospa.com/waterandleisuresafety/factsheets/watersafety.htm>  
 RoSPA Drowning statistics  
<http://www.rospa.com/waterandleisuresafety/drownings/2002statistics.htm>  
 National Water Safety Forum - Water safety at home  
<http://www.nationalwatersafety.org.uk/watersafetyathome/index.htm>  
 RoSPA leisure department available at [help@rospa.com](mailto:help@rospa.com) or 0121 248 2000.