



AQUATICS FOCUS

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It's Time to Promote Life Jacket Use in Swimming Pools

Old habits do die hard. In 2014 we are still primarily relying on the human senses (sight and sound) to protect non-swimmers in the vast majority of swimming pools throughout the country. We continue to do this while most other industries have supplemented human efforts with technology to promote safety. For example, Tennessee was the first state in the union to require child car seats way back in 1978. New York was the first state to require seat belts in 1984. California required children on bicycles to wear protective helmets in 1987. Research indicates these simple yet effective protective devices have proven to save lives and costly injuries at significant rates.

Looking at aquatics, it seems as if we are taking the opposite approach. Perhaps more aquatic facilities ban the use of life jackets rather than allow them. We have done our homework and have not been able to find *any* children drowning in properly-fitting, United States Coast Guard approved life jackets. Although the life jacket first became popular with sailors in the 1800s, the transition from open-water to the swimming pool has not yet been made in this country. Aquatic facilities still do not require life jackets for non-swimmers even though they are less expensive and more effective than seat belts, car seats, air bags and helmets.

Some aquatic professionals and parents have voiced concerns about life jackets in swimming pools. These criticisms include over confidence by the user and parent, a psychological crutch that will hinder learning how to swim, and kids possibly falling out of or tipping over in life jackets, but to be perfectly candid and honest, these concerns rarely if ever materialize. Becky Hulett, Aquatics Supervisor for the City of Phoenix, Arizona explains, "The City of Phoenix has encouraged non-swimmers to wear properly-fitting, Coast Guard approved life jackets while in swimming pools for several years. This year, we had the opportunity to implement the Note & Float program at one of our busy pools [requiring non-swimmers to wear life jackets]. Parents and swimmers embraced the life jackets which were available for use, free of charge."

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Dr. Tom Griffiths is the President and Founder of Aquatic Safety Research Group, LLC. Recognized as an international leader in water safety, he has spent 38 years teaching, coaching and managing aquatics at three major universities. Griffiths has produced videos, textbooks, articles, and presentations in various areas of aquatics focusing his efforts on safety. He has also conducted hundreds of aquatic facility and beach inspections across the nation and abroad and teaches full day Aquatic Risk Management seminars. Perhaps his most significant contributions are the Five Minute Scanning Strategy©, Griff's Guard Stations©, Disappearing Dummies, his research on Shallow Water Blackout, and the National Note & Float program. He has been an aquatic safety expert for more than 40 years and shares his knowledge, expertise, and experience worldwide. Griffiths just released the 3rd edition of the popular *The Complete Swimming Pool Reference*.



Rachel Griffiths, M.A. is the Communication Director for Aquatic Safety Research Group, LLC, conducting water safety research to help prevent drowning and providing education about water safety to the public. Rachel is also the President of Note and Float Life Jacket Fund, which donates life jackets to aquatic facilities to implement the Note & Float™ Program. Rachel publishes water safety articles, teaches Aquatic Risk Management seminars, and has conducted and written reports for a myriad of aquatic facility audits throughout the country. Rachel co-authored the 3rd edition of *The Complete Swimming Pool Reference 2014*. She is currently pursuing a doctorate in Public Health.



The benefits of wearing life jackets far outweigh the perceived disadvantages. Most importantly, non-swimming children simply are not going to drown when wearing them. Secondly, lifeguards and aquatic staff become more confident and less stressed knowing that an extra layer of protection has been added to non-swimmers. Thirdly, many swimming pools that have required life jackets for non-swimmers have noticed an immediate and positive double bonus: water rescues significantly decrease and swim lessons significantly increase. A Family Aquatics Facility in the Township of Upper St. Clair, Pennsylvania is just one of many Aquatic Facilities that has found these positive results. Christopher Biswick, Aquatics Supervisor, Township of Upper St. Clair, says "When my facility introduced the "Note and Float" requirement for birthday parties in 2010, we saw a decrease of water rescues by more than 80 percent. Adopting the Note and Float Program is something, I think all aquatics facilities should at least consider and hopefully adopt. By using this nationally recognized life jacket program, my aquatics facility cut its number of water rescues drastically and, in turn, made the center a safer place." Penn State University aquatics also had an increase in swim lesson enrollment as a result of their Note and Float life jacket requirement.



And if you think parents will not watch their kids when they are wearing life jackets, with all the handheld technologies available to them, they are not going to be watching them anyway! Most pools requiring life jackets also require supervising parents to be in the water with the child and many require the supervisor to be within arm's reach.

As expert witnesses in courts of law we have come to realize and appreciate the real need for life jackets by watching security camera videos of actual swimming pool drownings. There have been far too many children struggle and drown directly in front of and in close proximity to well trained, conscientious lifeguards and parents *simultaneously*.

For these reasons, it is time to change the water safety culture in America by encouraging the use of properly-fitting life jackets in ALL bodies of water including public and residential swimming pools. Our aquatic facilities would become much more enjoyable and safe if all non-swimmers, particularly those under 48 inches tall, were required to wear Type III, Coast Guard Approved Life Jackets, just like we require young children to wear seat belts and sit in child car seats. If requiring life jackets for all non-swimming children appears to be too difficult at your facility, consider requiring life jackets for the most at risk guests:

- Children under the age of seven who cannot pass the swim test
- Children under 48 inches tall who cannot pass a swim test
- Children in **pool groups** (birthday party, school, church, family reunion) who cannot pass a swim test

If you are still not convinced that *requiring* life jackets is the way to go, please consider encouraging their use amongst non-swimmers by having them displayed poolside. Finally, if even this last suggestion is not plausible, consider allowing parents to bring their own life jackets for their children. Please remember, the only safe flotation device in a swimming pool is a Coast Guard Approved life jacket; all others should be banned. "The life jacket is the car seat for water. Parents hold their children's hand walking across the street because it is dangerous; however, when it comes to the pool, the water is viewed as fun. The life jacket allows non-swimmers to enjoy the water and have fun in a safe manner," says Hulett. Life Jackets will help you and your staff to sleep better at night.

For more information about life jacket use in swimming pools please visit <http://www.aquaticsafetygroup.com>. To apply for a life jacket donation, visit www.noteandfloatlifejackets.org.

Photos on this page, courtesy of City of Phoenix Aquatics.



Do you have an idea for future topics you would like to see in the next Aquatics Focus Newsletter?
If yes, send a message to Tara Eggleston via NRPA Connect or tara.eggleston@pgparks.com!