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Oh, Baby, Baby: Examining Claims for Water Safety and Drowning Prevention of Infants

Stephen J. Langendorfer, Editor

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Because of the omnipresence of the Internet in our lives, I expect that most readers are like me and receive all manner of photographs, videos, stories, and humor online. As much as I have a reputation for enjoying and sharing jokes, two things I have received online that definitely are not funny, but, also potentially very dangerous, are videos and photos touting the importance of drownproofing programs for babies and young children, an area in which I have extensive background and interest. Many of you may have seen a widely disseminated video showing an unsupervised toddler wearing one-piece pajamas opening up a sliding glass door and walking out into the backyard swimming pool area. The toddler tries to reach a beach ball floating in the pool and falls in. As portrayed by the video, fortunately, this toddler had received drownproofing lessons and was conditioned to roll over onto his back and float until his parents discovered him and rescued him from the water. I have lost count how many times I have been sent this video by a well-meaning parent who inquires whether I think these lessons are good ideas! If you want to drive me crazy or hear me scream, just send me a link to this video and ask me this question.

Like those parents who have inquired, perhaps you are wondering yourself what possibly can be wrong with teaching a baby what appears to be an important survival skill. For starters, let me remind you that you cannot believe many things you read or see on the Internet! This video was constructed and widely edited by persons who are trying to sell their drownproofing lessons. It features a single instance of one child and the video has been highly edited. Think of all the camera angles used in the video; there likely were several cameras and videographers and probably a large production team creating the video who you purposefully cannot see. In my experience, to make a video of several minutes in length, there may have been many hours of raw footage edited into these few minutes. Like the perennial email letters you have received from a Prince in Nigeria asking for your help in return for millions of dollars, if it seems too good to be true, it probably is.

The promoters of these programs often claim that the program and its methods are based upon extensive “research.” I challenge anyone to locate a single published research article in a peer-reviewed journal over the past 40–50 years that represents this so-called “research”; these studies simply do not exist. Even Liselott Diem’s longitudinal study of infant swimming and Myrtle McGraw’s much earlier paper in *Pediatrics* did not purport to support methods that make young children “water proof” or “drown proof.” In the nine volumes of *IJARE*, not only have we never

published any such supporting research, but no one has ever even submitted a manuscript. My request to receive such manuscripts stands unaccepted.

I wrote earlier that I considered videos like this that promote infant drownproofing to be dangerous. Let me explain why. The video was constructed to convince parents that there is one single best means to protect their young child: Enroll the child in the drownproofing program and pay for a series of lessons. I believe the video is dangerous because it obscures other, more important and well-established drowning prevention factors and principles. First, the video features an unsupervised child. Principle #1 in child drowning prevention is always, always maintain constant supervision of children despite the challenges required to do so; it is simply good parenting. Second, in the video, the child easily opens the sliding glass door to enter the pool area. Principle #2 in home drowning prevention is that all doors and windows for the residence must have childproof locking devices. Again, this should be standard operating procedures for all parents just as is covering electrical outlets and locking up hazardous supplies. Principle #3 in home drowning prevention is that any body of water such as an in-ground or above-ground pool or backyard pond simply must be completely enclosed by an adequate four-sided fence with all gates featuring childproof locks. It is not clear whether the pool featured in the video has any fence at all, but it is evident that the home itself constitutes one of the sides of any enclosure and that defeats the preventative nature of such an enclosure. Third, the enclosure area and pool itself obviously have no alarms or other warning devices that could alert parents to an errant child accessing the area. Today's technology features a wide variety of alarms, cameras, and other security devices that need to be part of any pool equipment. If you can afford a pool, you need to afford the safety devices.

Finally, and most seriously, the drownproofing program assumes that complex voluntary motor skills such as floating and rolling over are either reflexive in nature or able to be easily conditioned. Further, the drownproofing program methods assume that all drowning situations are alike and that stereotyped responses such as rolling and floating are sufficient to prevent drowning in all situations. There is very strong research evidence that this assumption is false. In fact, the very first research paper in this issue, a study conducted by Dr. Kevin Moran, illustrates that something as simple as the presence of clothing alters one's actual and perceived water competence substantially compared to wearing swimming attire.

The drowning prevention research literature has made a great deal of progress over the past decade. I am proud of the number of high quality research studies that have been published in the *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education* alone along with a number of other journals. Despite this steady increase in our knowledge base, it is critical that we help all people acquire a much more discriminating sense of what is valid research and challenge everyone to constantly question what is presented in the mass media. The lives of our youngest may depend upon it.

Steve Langendorfer
Editor