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As always, the arrival of summer this year was heralded by the sound of children laughing and splashing in neighborhood pools, or, if you're lucky, a pool in your very own yard. But what safety precautions should you be taking?

Pool ownership comes with responsibility. You may want to talk to your insurance agent about what your responsibilities are and what, if any, pool-related risks are covered by your homeowners' insurance. Also, it's a good idea to educate guests to your home about what your expectations are with regard to the pool and surrounding area.

You might even consider emailing out a list of the rules before your get-together, so that everyone comes prepared with an understanding of the rules. You can also print out a copy of those rules and distribute them to guests as they arrive at your home. You will also want to conduct an informal meeting about your expectations before anyone is permitted to begin swimming. Not everyone will have read the email, and some children will be too young to have read the paper they were handed at the door. But no one is too young to learn the rules governing safe pool use. Talk about the rules for your pool area, and explain the reasoning behind each one. This activity will be a good refresher for your immediate family, too.

Install barriers around your pool or spa to prevent people, especially children, from using them unattended. A five-foot fence should completely surround a pool to prevent a small child from slipping into the pool unseen. Fences should be climb-resistant (i.e., without footholds or handholds) and shouldn't have anything nearby that can be used to hoist oneself up to climb over. (Chain-link fences, for example, are easy to climb and should not be used as pool fences.) In general, fences should have no more than four inches between vertical slats. A fence gate should be well-maintained, self-closing, and self-latching. It should only open away from the pool, and its latch should be higher than a height a child can reach (i.e., at least 54 inches from the bottom of the gate). Never prop open the gate to a pool area. Above-ground pool ladders should be locked or removed when they aren't in use to prevent access by children.

Here are some safety tips to bear in mind before you send your children or your guests into the water – or jump in yourself:

- Don't assume you'll hear a drowning child; most drownings are silent
- For those who cannot swim, ensure that they are accompanied by a competent swimmer providing "touch supervision" (i.e., at arm's reach or closer) or a flotation device like a life vest, puddle jumper, pool noodle, etc.
- Teach children to avoid drains, pipes, and other openings inside a pool, and make sure that pools you visit or own have appropriate drain covers
- Dry off before returning inside. Tracking pool water inside makes floors treacherous for those who follow
- Don't run around the pool deck; this increases the risk of dangerous falls around or into the pool
- Don't swim under the influence of alcohol or drugs; they can impair your swimming ability and affect other motor skills like breathing
- Keep toys away from pools when the pool isn't in use to avoid presenting attractive nuisances to children