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Child drownings in Canada

May 24, 2013

The data contained in this document is based on water related fatalities research and a Canadian opinion poll conducted by Ipsos Reid. Researchers identified factors of child drowning from all accidental immersion deaths among children younger than 19 across Canada, for the years 2001-2010. The Canadian Red Cross also commissioned Ipsos Reid to conduct a study gauging Canadian parents' opinions on matters relating to water safety. Ipsos Reid conducted the study from April 29 to May 7, 2013, using a sample of 1,003 parents with children under 19 in the household. The study is considered accurate to within +/- 3.5 percentage points had every Canadian parent with children under the age of 19 in the household been surveyed.

National stats:

- In the last 10 years for which data is available (2001-2010) more than 570 children drowned in Canada. Two thirds of children who drowned were younger than 15.
- Among children younger than 15, those aged 1 to 4 are the most at risk in or near water. 1- to 4-year olds drown at twice the rate of children aged 10-14.
- 60% of child drownings occur in just three months: June, July and August. If past trends continue, 34 kids in Canada will drown between today and Labour Day.
- Children drown in private pools 5 times more frequently than they do in public pools.
- The highest numbers of immersion deaths occurred among children from Ontario, followed by the Prairies (AB, SK, MB) and Quebec.
- Nearly 4 in 10 child drownings occur between 3 and 8 pm.
- According to 2013 public opinion polling conducted by the Canadian Red Cross, 1 in 5 Canadian parents say they have rescued someone struggling in water. Among those, more than three quarters (76%) intervened to help a drowning child.
- The past 10 years of unintentional drowning data shows that children most commonly (34%) drown at private residences and recreational properties. The second most frequent location was parks and conservation areas, where 13% of children drowned.

Adult supervision:

Water depth

- Two thirds of Canadian parents say water depth is a "major factor" when determining whether their child needs supervision while around or in the water, believing

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shallower water to be safer. 98% of parents with children younger than 4 cited water depth as a consideration in determining the level of supervision.

- However, children can drown in just a few centimetres of water. Toddlers and young children often can't regain their balance after stumbling in water, and water depths can vary suddenly along natural shorelines.
- In cases where the depth of water was known, nearly 4 in 10 (37%) child drownings occurred in water depth of one metre or less. More than 90% of children who died in these conditions were not with a supervising adult.

Unintentional immersion (child didn't intend to, or wasn't expected to be in the water)

- Among drowned children under 19, only one third (35%) had intended to be in the water (for example, swimming or wading). A nearly equal number (33%) drowned after entering the water unintentionally, for example, by falling in from a dock or pool deck.
- Only 10% of children aged 1-4 who drowned were participating in aquatic activities at the time of the incident. The rest resulted from unintentional immersion, bathing, boating and other activities.
- 1 in 5 Canadians say they would allow a child under 6 to play near the water without a lifejacket on, believing them to be safe so long as they are not swimming. In reality, 4 out of 5 (79%) children this age who drowned entered the water unintentionally.

When supervision is required

- 6 in 10 (58%) children younger than 19 who died from immersion were not with an adult. 76% of children younger than 10 who drowned were not with an adult.
- Fewer than half (49%) of Canadian parents believe that children always need supervision around water, regardless of their ability to swim.
- 4 in 10 parents believe they can supervise their children without constantly watching them, and half (47%) believe they can prevent injuries by spot checking from time to time.
- Half of Canadian parents (48%) believe they can effectively supervise children in the water by listening for signs of problems. However, drowning kills silently. There are usually no audible signs of distress.
- 85% of parents say that the presence of a swimming buddy (another child) factors into whether their child needs supervision around water.
- Swimming with a buddy is not enough to prevent drowning. While a third (35%) of children who drowned were alone, another quarter (24%) were with a buddy. In fact, among children aged 5-14 who drowned, nearly twice as many were swimming with a buddy (34%) as were alone (18%).

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- More than 6 in 10 Canadians (62%) believe they can effectively supervise a child in the water while they are under the influence of alcohol.

Lifejackets:

Boating:

- Nearly all Canadian parents (98%) believe children must wear a lifejacket when on a boat, yet the majority of children who drown while boating are not wearing one.
- In drowning cases where the child's lifejacket use was known, more than 4 out of 5 (82%) children who drowned were not wearing one, or not wearing one properly. In nearly half of these drownings, there was not even a lifejacket on board for the child.
- The youngest children suffer most from not having a lifejacket on board. Among children under 5 who drowned while boating, 100% had no lifejacket on board, compared to 80% of children 10-14, and 53% of teens 15-18.
- Legally, appropriately sized lifejackets must be on board for every person on the boat. Lifejackets can only provide flotation when they are worn properly.
- While boating, more than a quarter of Canadian parents (28%) say they don't wear a lifejacket even if they're responsible for another person, and 1 in 5 (21%) don't wear a lifejacket when there is a child onboard.
- 16% of Canadian parents believe it is safe for them to not wear a lifejacket when underway in a boat, if the waves are calm. This perception has deadly effects for children. Among children who drowned while boating in calm water, not a single one was wearing a lifejacket. In nearly 8 in 10 of these cases (78%), a lifejacket for the child was not even present.

Other situations:

- While 98% of Canadian parents say they would require their child to wear a lifejacket when on a boat, only 4 in 10 would require one for a child who was playing near the water but wasn't intending to enter the water. 35% of children who drown in Canada had not intended to enter the water.
- 6% of Canadian parents say they would allow a child who doesn't know how to swim to be in or on the water without a lifejacket.

Pool safety:

Pool supervision

- 17% of Canadians would allow children under 5 to be alone, unsupervised around a pool, and 30% would allow the same for children aged 5-10. 70% of drowning deaths

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among children under 5 resulted from unintentional immersion. 27% of children who drowned aged 5-9 did not intend to enter the water.

- Canadian parents see adult supervision as the key to preventing drowning and water-related injury, yet only 50% say they always supervise their children around water.

Safety equipment

- Only 52% of Canadian parents believe that fencing a pool on all four sides is an important measure to prevent drowning. 72% of backyard pool drownings in Canada occur in pools that have no fence, or that have a fence that doesn't meet bylaw standards.
- Only 62% of Canadian parents with preteens at home believe that having a self-closing and self-latching gate is necessary for backyard pool safety. Yet, when backyard pool gates are assessed, nearly three quarters (72%) of child drownings occur in pools that do not have a self-closing and self-latching gate. In nearly a quarter (24%) of child drownings, there is no gate at all.
- 83% of parents cite 'telling a child younger than 5 not to be alone in the pool area' as a safety precaution. However, verbal messages alone are not enough; they must be backed up with fencing and other safety measures.
- Less than half (47%) of parents believe having a first aid kit by the pool is a necessary measure for backyard pool safety, while just four in ten (39%) say the same about having a supervising adult with first aid training.

Swimming ability:

- Only 3% of children who drowned in Canada from 2001-2010 were identified as strong swimmers.
- In drowning cases where the child's swimming ability was identified, two thirds of children who drowned while boating were weak or non-swimmers. Weak or non-swimmers made up 6 in 10 children who drowned while engaged in aquatic activities like swimming or wading, and nearly 8 in 10 (78%) who died while engaged in non-aquatic activities.
- Children who drowned while swimming or playing in the water were 1.4 times more likely to be weak or non-swimmers than to be average or strong swimmers
- The impact of swimming ability was even more pronounced among children who hadn't intended to enter the water. Children who drowned while engaged in non-aquatic activities were 3.5 times more likely to be weak or non-swimmers than to have average or strong swimming skills.

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Regional stats for localized releases:

Territories:

- Children in the Territories (YT, NT, NU) are 5.5 times more likely to drown than the average for children across Canada.

BC:

- Children in BC are slightly less likely to drown than the average for children across Canada. On average, 6 children needlessly drown every year in BC.
- 1 in 4 BC parents say they have rescued someone struggling in the water. In 83% of these cases, the person they rescued was a child.
- 1 in 5 parents in BC say they would allow a child under 6 to play near the water without a lifejacket on (same as the Canadian average). 80% of children this age who drowned in Canada had not intended to enter the water.
- 49% of parents in BC believe they can effectively supervise a child in the water without constantly watching them.
46% of parents in Saskatchewan and Manitoba believe they can effectively supervise a child in the water without constantly watching them.
- 6% of Canadian parents say they would allow a child who doesn't know how to swim to be in or on the water without a lifejacket. This number rises to 7% in BC.

Prairies (AB, MB, SK):

- Children in the Prairie provinces (AB, SK, MB) are 22% more likely to drown than the average for children across Canada. On average, 13 children drown needlessly every year in these provinces.
- 1 in 4 Alberta parents say they have had to rescue someone struggling in the water. In 68% of these cases, the person they rescued was a child.
- 1 in 5 Alberta parents say they would allow a child under 6 to play near the water without a lifejacket on (same as the Canadian average). 80% of children this age who drowned in Canada had not intended to enter the water.
- 58% of parents in Alberta believe they can effectively supervise a child in the water without constantly watching them.
- 1 in 7 parents in Saskatchewan and Manitoba say they have had to rescue someone drowning or struggling in the water. In 80% of these cases, the person they recued was a child.

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- 13% of parents in Saskatchewan and Manitoba say they would allow a child under 6 to play near the water without a lifejacket on. This is the best percentage for any Canadian province or region. 4 out of 5 children this age who drown in Canada enter the water unintentionally.
- 6% of Canadian parents say they would allow a child who doesn't know how to swim to be in or on the water without a lifejacket. This number rises to 7% in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. [Alberta is 6% - average]

Ontario:

- Children in Ontario are slightly less likely to drown than the average for children across Canada. However, on average, 20 children needlessly drown every year in Ontario.
- 1 in 5 Ontario parents say they have intervened to help someone who was drowning or near drowning. In 68% of these cases, the person they rescued was a child.
- 17% of Ontario parents say they would allow a child under 6 to play near the water without a lifejacket on, slightly better than the Canadian average. 4 out of 5 children who drown in Canada enter the water unintentionally.
- 41% of parents in Ontario believe they can effectively supervise a child in the water without constantly watching them.

Quebec:

- Children in Quebec are slightly less likely to drown than the average for children across Canada. However, on average, 10 children needlessly drown every year in Quebec.
- 1 in 5 Quebec parents say they have rescued someone who was drowning or struggling in the water. In 89% of these cases, the person they rescued was a child.
- 22% of Quebec parents say they would allow a child under 6 to play near the water without a lifejacket on, slightly worse than the Canadian average. 4 out of 5 children this age who drown in Canada enter the water unintentionally.
- Parents in Quebec are the most likely (76%) to say that supervising a child in the water requires maintaining constant eye contact.
- 6% Canadian parents say they would allow a child who doesn't know how to swim to be in or on the water without a lifejacket. This number rises to 8% in Quebec.
- Quebec is the only province or territory in Canada that requires all new backyard pools to be fenced on four sides, and to have a self-closing and self-latching gate.

Atlantic Canada:

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- Children in Atlantic provinces are 30% more likely to drown than the average for children across Canada. On average, 5 children drown needlessly every year in the Atlantic provinces.
- 1 in 4 Atlantic Canadian parents say they have rescued someone from the water. In 88% of these cases, the person they rescued was a child.
- A quarter of Atlantic Canadian parents say they would allow a child under 6 to play near the water without a lifejacket on, significantly worse than the Canadian average. 4 out of 5 children this age who drown in Canada enter the water unintentionally.
- 34% of parents in Atlantic Canada believe they can effectively supervise a child in the water without constantly watching them.
- Atlantic Canadians were the least likely to say they would allow a child who doesn't know how to swim to be in or on the water without a lifejacket. 3% of Canadians in the Atlantic provinces would allow this, compared to 6% across the country.

Aboriginal communities:

- 9% of child drownings in Canada happen on Aboriginal reserve lands, yet Aboriginal people make up less than 4% of the Canadian population.