

Health & Fitness

Safety program, lifeguards create fun summer

Parents are urged to never let children swim in retention ponds.

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Now that summer weather is here, kids are flocking to outdoor pools. Here, kids crowd Fishers YMCA. Fishers Fire Department officials warn parents to never leave their kids alone.

Tammi Metcalf doesn't have to worry so much about her kids' safety in the water anymore.

For one thing, her four kids have been taking swim lessons for years at Fort Benjamin Harrison YMCA. When she takes them to open swim at the Y, she has another safety net: the lifeguards.

"I didn't even get in the water today," she said last week while watching Joshua, 12, Jake, 9, Joelle, 7 and Jessica, 5. "I can sit on the side and watch the kids swim around me."

Local officials are reminding all parents to keep an eye on their kids, now that the summer heat has finally arrived. And area YMCAs in June hosted a free week of swimming and safety instructions.

More than 300 showed up at the Fort Harrison branch and 400 at the Fishers branch.

David Tillar, senior program director for the Fort Harrison Y, said the No. 1 rule is to know the swimming area.

He said parents should know all the dangers and make sure an adult is present with children.

He said his lifeguards practice preventive guarding by making sure kids don't run, dive or roughhouse. In lakes, he said parents should make sure there is no undertow before allowing kids in the water.

Shannon Russell, Fishers YMCA aquatics director, said her lifeguards watch for tired swimmers.

"We closely watch people who use any type of floatation device or people who have been swimming for a few hours," she said.

The guards also require everyone to leave the pool for 10 minutes at the end of every hour.

"It lets us clear the pool, and it lets parents reconnect with their kids," Russell said. "The kids get to take a breather, and the guards get a chance to get out of the chair and get some ice water."

The guards also offer a swim test for anyone wanting to swim in the deep end. She said too many kids jump in who can't swim.

Retention ponds, she advises, are one of the summer's biggest dangers and should never be used as swimming areas.

Both YMCAs are part of an initiative by fire departments called Water Awareness in Residential Neighborhoods (WARN). Franklin Township and Fishers fire departments formed the not-for-profit after two boys died in separate suburban retention ponds in 2000.

Fishers Deputy Fire Marshal Ron Lipps said retention ponds offer a variety of dangers. For one, they can change from shallow to deep suddenly. They also often contain refuse such as construction wire, concrete and tires.

WARN was formed after 6-year-old Jackson Van Hook drowned Aug. 18, 2000 in a Fishers pond within eyesight of his home. He was in deep water off the edge of a shallow section.

There have been no retention-pond drownings in Fishers since that time.

An Indianapolis boy, Richard Dean Haarbye, 8, was found dead July 9, 2000, his jacket tangled in wire at the bottom of a retention pond in Franklin Township.

As part of WARN, Lipps goes to schools and neighborhood association to teach water safety.

"Stick to designated swimming areas," Lipps warned. "You never know what is under the surface, especially in retention ponds."