

Investigation exposes pool hazards

Wednesday, July 23, 2008 | 10:51 AM



By Michael Finney

SAN FRANCISCO (KGO) -- The stories we've heard are almost too incredible to be true, but they are. The suction of the drain in both pools and spas can be so powerful, children's hair and body parts are sucked into them -- leaving them underwater and entangled in a death trap.

A joint 7 On Your Side and ABC News investigation exposes the hazards beneath a swimming pool near you.

Bruce and Sue Maroney watched closely as their grandchildren swam in their backyard pool in the Yosemite Foothills. It was nearly 11 years ago today, when their son TJ died in a swimming pool mishap. He was swimming in a pool at the San Benito County Fairgrounds when his friends noticed he was in trouble.

"And then there was people that were jumping in when they realized something was going on. You know people that were just watching their kids were jumping in to try to save him," said Sue Maroney.

"And they couldn't, they couldn't pull him out," said Bruce Maroney.

"They couldn't pull him," said Sue Maroney.

TJ's arm got sucked into a swimming pool drain, trapping him underwater. The grate of the drain TJ got sucked into had been left off while being repaired.

"When August comes and his birthday comes, I just think about - he's not here anymore," said Sue Maroney.

TJ is one of at least 35 children who have died in similar accidents since 1984. The Consumer Product Safety Commission says another 100 children have been seriously injured. The number one cause of death in these accidents -- the hair gets sucked in by the 500 pound force of the drain.

Paul Pennington of Santa Rosa is with the Pool Safety Consortium. He helped demonstrate just how strong that force can be.

"So what happened - I took a wig which represented a full head of female's hair and when I sat it down, the suction force on that drain was enough to mat it all the way down. And as you saw in the picture, I let go of it, it was being held down on its own. Had I let the ends of it go into the

sides, which I could have very easily, that hair would have tangled into a knot; and that person, representing a person, would not have come back up," said Pennington.

The Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act goes into affect in December. It requires all pools at hotels, apartment, clubs and other public facilities to have federally approved anti-entrapment drain covers. Currently only new pools or pools being renovated are required to have those drain covers.

The act is named after the granddaughter of former secretary of state James Baker. She drowned after sitting on a flat drain cover on the bottom of a pool.

We found one of those covers at a Days Inn in Redwood City. Pennington of the Pool Safety Consortium immediately notified the owner of what we found. The manager promised to look into replacing it.

"We have a pool service here, right. We want to consult them. We need to check what we can do," said Sam Uppala, Days Inn.

But the Days Inn wasn't the only place we found a problem. We randomly inspected the pools of 9 hotels in San Mateo County, and all 9 of them had issues; either drain covers that must be changed or automatic shutoff valves that must be installed by December. The new safety act also requires pools with only one main drain to have a system that automatically shuts that drain off when it becomes plugged.

That's something the Maroneys say would have saved their son.

"If they would have had them at that time, our son would be alive," said Bruce Maroney.

But there's a good chance California will not be enforcing these new safety requirements come December.

Tonight on ABC7 News at 6, we'll tell you why and how local officials feel about that.

(Copyright ©2008 KGO-TV/DT. All Rights Reserved.)

Copyright ©2008 ABC Inc., KGO-TV/DT San Francisco, CA. All Rights Reserved.