

GUEST VIEW

Protecting swimmers from danger

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Article Launched: 07/12/2008 06:29:21 PM PDT

SWIMMING pools have always been associated with summertime fun and relaxation for families across the country - until the unthinkable happens.

At a quiet pool in Panorama City, young Jessica Balcazar, 11, was enjoying an afternoon of swimming with her friend when she became pinned to the bottom of a hot tub and nearly drowned as a result of suction entrapment. With more children drowning as a result of suction entrapment, the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) recently released its guidance document outlining new safety standards as per the Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act, which affects all public pools and spas.

Not all children are as lucky as Jessica Balcazar, who was saved after being underwater for over 2 minutes by her quick-thinking friend, who promptly turned the spa off. A frightening and often underreported occurrence, suction entrapment can result when a swimmer is "sucked" onto a pool or spa's powerful water circulation system much like the way the hose of a vacuum cleaner will stick to a person's palm. The force of this suction can be tremendous - up to 500 pounds of pressure or more for a main drain with a standard pump. Despite this risk, pools can still be enjoyed safely when the proper safety precautions and devices are in place.

The Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act was a necessary step toward eliminating the risk of entrapment in pools and spas around the country. Unfortunately, there continues

to be a shocking number of child deaths and injuries resulting from suction entrapment. Therefore we must continue to develop Federal and state legislation in support of pool and spa safety.

This law preempts all state laws regulating public pools. Those not complying risk fines up to \$1.8 million and/or criminal prosecution, after December 18, 2008. According to the Pool Safety Consortium, drowning is the second leading cause of death among children ages one to 14. In addition to the basics such as safety fences,

pool covers, alarms and drain covers, additional anti-entrapment devices must be added to all public pools and spas.

Public pools and spas with a single main drain (other than an unblockable drain) must be equipped at a minimum with one complying anti-entrapment device or system, as well as a drain cover. Since drain covers can become broken or deteriorated, additional anti-entrapment safety devices are required. The most popular anti-entrapment device is the Safety Vacuum Release System (SVRS) which ceases operation of the pool or spa pump and reverses the circulation flow when a blockage is detected. This device is easily installed into existing or new pools in under an hour for about \$500-\$700.

Most other options are not practical for pool reconstruction and are only practical during initial pool construction options. These options include the Suction-Limiting Vent Systems and Gravity Drainage Systems the Automatic Pump Shut-Off System. A final option is Automatic Pump Shut-Off System, a device that shuts off the pump system in a pool or spa.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) also strongly recommends SVRS in their Guidelines for Entrapment Hazards. The International Code Council (ICC) and Safe Kids Worldwide, the only international nonprofit organization dedicated solely to preventing unintentional childhood injury, also mandate the layers of protection. In addition, parents should teach children to stay away from pool and spa drains and tie back long hair to protect against entanglement.

www.poolsafetyconsortium.org

Paul Pennington is a founding member of The Pool Safety Consortium, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C.