



Preventing a tragedy

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By MARTHA McKAY
STAFF WRITER

Parents of young children like to share stories, especially the heart-stopping kind that typically begin: "I took my eye off her for a second and she just disappeared."

Knowing that kids wander off with astounding speed, it makes sense for anyone with a swimming pool to be extra-conscientious.

And these days, technological advances have provided a multitude of ways to protect kids from drowning.

One such device is the Safety Turtle. It uses a water sensor that's worn on a child's wrist. If the child falls into a pool, the device sends a one-way radio signal to a receiver typically placed inside a home that triggers a loud alarm.

Called the Safety Turtle because the sensor is encased in a colored plastic turtle that kids will enjoy wearing, the device is the brainchild of Canadian wireless and satellite communications expert Bob Lyons.

Lyons, who has a Ph.D. from Carleton University in Ottawa, was haunted by the pool drowning death of a friend's toddler. After several years working on various mobile communications systems, Lyons decided to "tackle this problem."

"I'd always noticed every summer that kids would drown in pools," he said. "It seemed so needless."

He and some partners developed the patented sensor system and introduced it in 1998.

This summer, his company, Terrapin Communications Inc., will introduce a pool gate alarm that works with the Safety Turtle system to help secure a gate surrounding a pool area.

Safety Turtle's technology has won a slew of Canadian honors as well as accolades from the Good Housekeeping Institute. But Consumer Reports recently pointed out what its testers see as a drawback: the fact that a grown-up must place a Safety Turtle wrist band on a child.

Other pool alarm systems work by sounding an alarm when anyone enters the water or walks past an electronic invisible fence surrounding the pool.

Initially, Lyons said, his product met with resistance from consumer groups, experts, the pool industry -- "everybody," he said.

But that has slowly changed, as people, including pool builders, recognize the value of offering a safety system when they sell a pool.

I don't own a pool, but Lyons' system makes sense to me. I'd want a secure fence around the pool area. But what about the times when the pool is "open" and kids come over? Anything from beer to barbecues to chatting with friends can turn a parent's attention away from a child tottering at the edge of a pool, reaching for a toy in the water.

Safety Turtle is a "system of last resort," Lyons explained. It protects the child and also reminds parents that kids need protecting, much like a car seat belt. You can also bring the system to a friend's pool if you visit.

"Some people are reckless and give their kids many opportunities to drown," he said.

Other companies are using Lyon's invention to improve boating safety.

Several years ago, Lyons was contacted by a Redding, Calif.-based company in the business of high-tech boating equipment.

He cut a deal and now sells his water sensor circuitry to Maritech Industries, which developed a man overboard safety device called a Virtual Lifeline.

"We came up with the idea to merge our technology with Bob's to create a marine-grade virtual kill switch," said Keith Jackson, president of Maritech, who sits on the technical board of the American Yachting & Boating Council, a group that works with the federal government to set boating safety standards. The Virtual Lifeline, which was developed at the request of the U.S. Coast Guard, is a small sensor worn by boaters which can be attached to a swimsuit or life vest. If they fall into the water, it sends a signal to the ignition, immediately shutting it off and stopping the propeller.

Boaters use physical tethers that attach to an ignition kill switch, but it's hard to imagine a bunch of recreational boaters attaching themselves to the craft.

According to Jackson, police and other public safety departments that use boats are interested in the device since officers are rarely tethered to their crafts.

Maritech also repackages the Virtual Lifeline for sale to competitive anglers (it's called CAST Wireless Lanyard) who are often required by fishing tournaments to be "attached" to a kill switch.

Ten years ago, the 2-year-old son of a close family friend fell into a neighbor's pool, where he lay submerged long enough to damage his brain severely. The family still suffers from the tragedy, and I'm reminded of it every time I read about a little kid falling into a pool.

There are other good pool safety devices on the market along with the Safety Turtle. Summer is about to begin. If your life involves little kids and pools, please use one.

E-mail: mckay@northjersey.com