



# Double coverage or double trouble?

by Tom Griffiths, Ed.D.

Although the drowning rate in the United States is actually decreasing, we are hearing more and more about drowning and other accidents when large, organized groups visit aquatic facilities. Considering that church groups, school outings, boy scout troops, etc., usually provide plenty of adult supervision, it's sometimes hard to believe that drownings and accidents can occur in such situations.

In theory, the safety of children visiting aquatic facilities as part of large groups should be double that of regular guests — adult chaperones team up with on-site lifeguards to create twice the supervision and authority.

Rather than doubling the coverage, however, doubling the risk is what often occurs when the adults and lifeguards both relax their responsibilities while assuming that the other party is watching the children.

## A dangerous scenario

Teachers, parents and adult volunteers enjoy taking large groups of children to guarded beaches, waterparks and pools because, in addition to being a fun field trip, professional lifeguards are on duty. The adults often do not closely supervise their charges because they perceive the lifeguards to be more experienced in water safety and rescue, and view them as baby sitters for the day. This situation also affords teachers and volunteers a chance to take a break and have some fun themselves.

Unfortunately, lifeguards often share a similar view, albeit from the opposite perspective. Because teachers and parents accompany these groups, lifeguards often

mistakenly assume that the adults in attendance are responsible for watching their children, and they can relax a little bit. And so the dangerous scenario unfolds where, rather than having the double coverage of lifeguards and adults, *no one ends up watching the children.*

When this situation occurs, a young child can drown within minutes of arrival at the waterpark or pool. And for younger children, forget about the buddy system: it

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doesn't work, and may actually worsen the situation. When one child gets in trouble, the buddy is often scared or thinks he or she may get punished; alerting the teacher or lifeguard is therefore delayed.

## Develop a written policy

It is crucial that owners, supervisors, managers and lifeguards understand this hidden danger when formal groups visit their facility. A dangerous lack of communication can exist at an aquatic facility that does not have a written and enforced policy covering groups and private parties. This written policy can greatly aid in the prevention of injuries, deaths and resulting lawsuits.

Before scheduling the group's visit, go over all rules and regulations both verbal-

ly and in writing. Prior to the actual visit, invite representatives from the organization to your facility for a walk-through that covers parking, entrances and exits, bathrooms, eating and drinking areas, proper use of slides and other play equipment, avoiding sunburn, emergency procedures, and so on.

In addition to any rules specific to your facility, the following guidelines should be incorporated into a written group-use policy:

1. Lifeguards are in charge at all times, and adults in attendance are expected to assist the lifeguards.
2. Lifeguards may have other guests, in addition to the group, that they must supervise. Depending on the size of the group and the layout of the facility, lifeguards may be specifically assigned to the group and remain with them throughout the visit.
3. All groups must check in with the facility manager or head lifeguard immediately upon arrival at the site.
4. Any children with disabilities or otherwise requiring special attention should be brought to the attention of the aquatic staff.
5. The group should provide one adult supervisor for every six to eight children, *both in and out of the water.*
6. A head count should be taken every 15-20 minutes and a rest break every hour.

Group outings and field trips to aquatic facilities can be great fun for everyone involved. Large groups, however, can tax the lifeguard staff, particularly when teachers, parents and volunteers depend on the lifeguard staff while they take a break from their normal workday. Only by having a written group-use written policy in place, making the policy clear to visiting groups, and working together with the groups can we ensure safety at our aquatic facilities. ●

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