

# The Coastal Star

Health & Harmony: Water safety goes so much deeper than learning to swim

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## By Jan Engoren

With a recent spate of Florida drownings in the ocean due to rip currents, as well as the June 13 death of an 8-year-old boy who fell off a sea wall and drowned in the Boynton Inlet — what better time to talk about water safety, especially for children.

With the sea and so many backyard pools surrounding us in Florida, keeping kids safe in and near the water is of prime concern.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, drownings are the leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 4 — and Florida leads the country in drowning deaths.

In Palm Beach County, according to the Florida Department of Health, between 2016 and 2019, adults ages 20 to 25 had the highest drowning rate based on population, followed by seniors 75 and older and children ages 1 to 4.

Keri Morrison, 47, and her husband, Roarke, 52, founded the Live Like Jake Foundation to raise awareness about childhood drowning prevention after their son, Jake, drowned in a pool in 2013, just shy of his third birthday.

Since then, the Palm Beach Gardens couple have dedicated their lives to the cause.

“We want to keep people from making the same mistakes we did and to see a day where one more child doesn’t drown,” says Morrison, who notes that Jake would now be 13.

She also has two girls, Josie, 9, and Julia, 10, both of whom she enrolled in Infant Swimming Resource classes before their first birthday.

The Live Like Jake Foundation encourages other parents to do the same and provides financial and emotional support for families who have experienced a drowning. It also offers scholarships for Infant Swimming Resource lessons.

Morrison says children’s drownings can be prevented via the following measures: effective supervision, erecting permanent four-sided pool fences with self-locking gates, alarming doors and windows leading to the pool, enrolling kids in lessons such as from Infant Swimming Resource, and knowing CPR.

The classes teach infants as young as 6 months old techniques such as rolling onto their backs to float, rest and breathe. Toddlers can learn to swim a short distance, rotate onto their backs to float, turn over to continue the sequence until they are rescued or reach the shallow end of the pool.

“All the layers must be in place,” says Morrison, who does not recommend children use flotation devices or puddle jumpers, because she says they provide a false sense of security and kids may over-rely on them.

According to the Drowning Prevention Coalition of Palm Beach County, the No. 1 cause of drowning in both the county and the rest of the country is unsupervised water activity.

“Drownings do not discriminate, and drowning is everyone’s responsibility,” the coalition states on its website.

“Expect the unexpected while engaging in water activities,” says Anna Stewart, manager of the coalition. “Even accomplished swimmers can drown.”

The coalition has a list of prevention recommendations on its website ([discover.pbcgov.org/drowningprevention](https://discover.pbcgov.org/drowningprevention)). For adults, they include to not swim alone and to swim in front of a lifeguard.

Stewart also encourages people not to jump right into the water to rescue someone in distress, but to “reach, throw, don’t go.”

Whether you are on a pool deck or in a boat, this means using your body weight as an anchor and throwing a rope or pole into the water for the person to grab.

Libby Moon, associate director of water safety at the YMCA of South Palm Beach County, says “we’re blessed to be surrounded by so many beautiful beaches here in South Florida. But, remember, regardless of age, race, gender, socioeconomic background and swimming capability, a drowning incident can occur.

“First of all, it’s important to know how to swim,” she says.

According to the CDC, almost 40 million adults (15.4%) in the United States do not know how to swim and over half (54.7%) have never taken a swimming lesson, with the rates higher in minority communities.

The CDC also recommends wearing Coast Guard-approved life jackets during water activities, especially boating and swimming.

“Make swimming be your first sport,” and learn how to do it well, Moon says. “It’s a sport and one that will save your life.”

She also emphasizes the importance of knowing how to use CPR when waiting for paramedics to arrive.

She agrees with Morrison about not using floaties or water wings. Further, Moon suggests that kids not wear goggles — because children need to know how to get to safety with or without them — but do wear brightly colored bathing suits so they can easily be spotted.

Water safety is more than just learning to swim.

It’s also important to heed warning signs, such as flags at the beach indicating which areas are safe to swim in, to know if a lifeguard is on duty, and to know about jellyfish or shark alerts, rip currents or other hazardous conditions.

And using alcohol, drugs or even prescription medications during water-related recreation can be a risk factor for drowning deaths.

“We want to be in the water and enjoying it,” Morrison says. “And we want children to be safe and have fun in the water, too.

“Just take these few extra steps of precaution to ensure everyone’s safe and having a good time.”

For more information on the foundation, visit [livelikejake.com](http://livelikejake.com).

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Keri Morrison started a drowning-prevention foundation with her husband after their 2-year-old son, Jake, drowned.  
**Photo provided**