

Water survival lessons help avert tragedy after Coatesville, Auckland pre-schooler falls in pool

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Willow Dando didn't know how to swim when she accidentally fell into the family pool soon after her third birthday. But she did know how to help save her own life.

The Coatesville pre-schooler, now aged 4, used the "bounce to breathe" method taught to her in swimming lessons she started aged 2 at Auckland's Albany Stadium Pool.

The method teaches children to bounce off the pool floor to reach the surface for a breath, if they find themselves out of their depth.

And now more children will learn the life-saving technique after not-for-profit YMCA Auckland partnered with Auckland Council and Plunket Auckland to run the YMCA's Swim School programme out of eight Auckland Council pools, instead of the current four.

Half price swimming and water safety lessons will also be offered from April 29 at all eight pools for Auckland pre-schoolers aged between 3 months and 5.

Willow's mum, Alanah Dando, this week shared her daughter's story of survival to encourage parents to sign their kids up for swimming lessons, and to remind everyone about the need for vigilance around water.

The family were entertaining friends when the near-tragedy occurred. As a barbeque began on a deck above the pool, Willow got into the pool area where older children were playing.

"We thought [the pool gate] was closed ... Willow ran into the pool area and was just being silly, trying to attract the attention of some older children, and fell into the pool.

"Our 9-year-old daughter saw it and she just screamed out. My husband and I just flew down the stairs, but there's a good 30 to 40 stairs to the pool."

Dando reached the pool as an older child pulled Willow from the water, but the toddler's sister had seen her pop up for air a couple of times before help arrived.

"We had to slap her really hard on the back and there was a lot of water that came out of her. But the first thing she said once she got that water out of her was 'Mummy, I bounced to breathe', and that for us was so phenomenal because in her swimming lessons she had been taught by her amazing teacher that, when the water was over her head, to bounce off the bottom of the pool to get up to get a breath.

"She'd been practising it all summer and she did exactly that."

YMCA Auckland Swim School quality services manager Karla McCaughan said bounce to breathe was among water safety skills taught to children, but came after other lessons, starting with teaching children to "hesitate" around water — learning only to go in the water when they were with an adult and to ask permission before going in.

Survival techniques, such as rolling on to their backs and floating, were also taught, and, later, once children had mastered breath control, they learned bounce to breathe.

The timing depended on the child, but could start from around the age of 2, McCaughan said.

New Zealand has one of the worst drowning rates for under-5s in the western world; hence the push to teach more pre-schoolers skills that could save their lives, she said.

Seven under-5s drowned in New Zealand in 2017, and five in 2016. Last year, the number dropped to three - but already this year four have drowned.

Drowning is also New Zealand's third highest accidental cause of death. In 2018, 68 people lost their lives to preventable drownings and the five-year average is 82 fatalities.

"We have a vision to reach zero drownings in under 5s in Auckland by 2020," said McCaughan.

As for Willow, she was happy to demonstrate bounce to breathe when the Herald visited this week.

The family were still "so proud" of Willow, her mum said.

"She instantly defaulted into 'I'm in trouble and I need to bounce to breathe', and instead of panicking and possibly taking in even more water, or it being a really traumatic experience, it was a positive experience for her ... she'd put into practice this lesson that she was just so proud to use.

"I don't think she even realised the enormity of the danger she was in."

Participating pools

The YMCA Auckland, Plunket Auckland and Auckland Council partnership will begin on April 29, with the Swim School programmes run out of Lagoon Pool and Leisure Centre, Onehunga War Memorial Pool, Cameron Pool and Leisure Centre, Glen Innes Pool and Leisure Centre, Tepid Baths, West Wave Pool and Leisure Centre, Albany Stadium Pool and Manurewa Pool and Leisure Centre.

All Auckland pre-schoolers aged between 3 months and 5 will have access to half price swimming and water safety lesson at all eight sites, with five more council pools to be brought into the partnership over the next three years.