What Drowning Really Looks Like

It’s not the flailing, wailing, glug-glug drama of Baywatch. Here’s how to prevent the No. 1 water danger.

The captain of the new sport-fishing boat jumped from the deck, fully dressed, and started swimming fast toward the boat’s owners in the water. “I think he thinks you’re drowning,” the husband said to his wife. They had been splashing each other, and she had screamed, but now they were just standing, neck-deep on the sandbar. “We’re fine!” the husband yelled, waving him off. But the captain kept swimming hard.

“Move!” he barked. Not ten feet away, the couple’s nine-year-old daughter was drowning. Once she was safely above the surface and in the arms of the captain, she burst into tears. “Daddy!”

How did this captain know from 50 feet away what the father couldn’t recognize from just ten? The captain was trained by experts and years of experience to recognize drowning. The father learned by watching television. But drowning is not the violent, splashing call for help that most people expect, says water safety expert Frank Pia, PhD. It’s almost always a quiet event.

Drowning is the second-most common cause of accidental death in children ages 1 to 14 (just behind motor vehicle accidents). In a 2004 study by a national safety group, 90 percent of children who drowned did so while under the care of an adult or a teenager. In many cases, the study suggests, that person had a momentary lapse of attention. But the fact is that often those watching don’t know what to look for—because drowning doesn’t look like drowning.

To ward off a tragedy in the making, watch for the signs detailed at right.

8 Quiet Signs of a Person in Trouble

1. A drowning person can’t call for help—she has to be able to breathe before she can speak. When a person is drowning, her mouth sinks below and reappears above the surface of the water. There isn’t time for her to exhale, inhale, and call out.

2. She can’t wave for help either. A drowning person instinctively extends her arms to the sides and presses down to lift her mouth out of the water; a child may extend her arms forward. She can’t use her arms to move toward a rescuer or reach for rescue equipment.

3. A drowning person remains upright in the water, with no evidence of kicking. She can struggle for only 20 to 60 seconds before going under.

4. Eyes are glassy, unable to focus, or closed.

5. Hair may be over forehead or eyes.

6. Head is low in the water, with mouth at water level; head may be tilted back with mouth open. A child’s head may fall forward.

7. Sometimes the most important indicator that someone is drowning is that she doesn’t look like she’s drowning. She may just seem to be looking up at the sky, shore, pool deck, or dock. Ask her, “Are you all right?” If she can answer at all, she probably is. If she returns a blank stare, you may have less than 30 seconds to get to her.

8. Children playing in the water make noise. When they get quiet, you need to get to them and find out why.