

# Danger at Bath Time

## Safekids Position on Infant Bath Seats

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### Overview

Bath time drowning is an important and tragic component of child drowning deaths for the under five age group.

There is growing international concern about an association of infant bath seats with infant bath time drowning events.

Research shows bath seats can create a false sense of security about the safety of an infant in the bath and have inherent problems that can cause infants to become unexpectedly submerged, even with a caregiver present.

Safekids New Zealand believes that the use of infant bath seats pose an unreasonable risk of injury and death to children. Safekids strongly advises parents and caregivers not to use infant bath seats.

### Safekids Position

Based on a review of available research and discussion with experts, Safekids New Zealand believes that the use of infant bath seats pose an unreasonable risk of injury and death to children. Safekids strongly advises parents and caregivers not to use infant bath seats.

When a baby is in a bath seat, parents and caregivers can have a false sense of security, presuming that they can leave their baby unattended in the bath. Unexpected submersion or drowning can occur when an infant climbs out, tips the seat over or slips out. A collapsible version of the seat is also of concern because of the risk of failure of the locking mechanism.

Research suggests caregivers tend to fill the bath deeper when using a bath seat, which also increases the risk of an infant drowning<sup>1</sup>.

### Background

Child drowning happens in home pools, open water, buckets, and baths. It is quick, silent and deadly.

Children most at risk of drowning are aged between 0 to 4 years old. Numbers reduce as children reach school age and their developmental changes and acquired skills make them more capable of managing water environments and less susceptible to drowning<sup>2</sup>.

Infant drowning statistics show that bath time drowning is an important and tragic component of child drowning deaths for children under one<sup>3</sup>. Bath time drowning incidents typically happen when infants are left alone in a bath by their adult caregiver. Reasons children are left alone in the bath are both intentional and impulsive. These include the need to answer the phone, collect clean clothes and towels, or to attend to other children. Drownings also happen when an infant is left in the care of a young sibling<sup>4</sup>.

Water safety messages from child safety organisations stress that **in no circumstances should a child be left alone in water**<sup>5</sup>. It is particularly important that caregivers act on this message at bath time, which is often at a busy and stressful time of the day for families.

Since the mid 1980s, an item called an infant bath seat has been available for consumers. Primarily sold in the United States, they are marketed as a bath time aide for caregivers. They are most commonly a small plastic seat with a frame that is secured to the bottom of a bath with suction cups. They are designed to support an infant in a sitting position within a bath of water.

There is growing international concern about an association of bath seats with infant bath time drowning events. The American Consumer Product Association (CPSC) is aware of 78 deaths and 110 nonfatal incidents and complaints involving bath seats and rings from January

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1983 to May 2001. Of these non fatal incidents 41 happened when a caregiver was present. Other estimates of more recent years suggests that currently in America there are now up to eight infant drowning events a year that are associated with the use of infant bath seats<sup>6</sup>.

Because they are imported from various sources, the distribution and availability of bath seats in New Zealand is more difficult to determine. Further, as population numbers and drowning rates are smaller, estimation of statistical significance of risk is very difficult. However evaluation of the international literature and looking at the products on sale in this country provides sufficient information for Safekids to consider it important to alert New Zealand families to this danger.

### Injury Concerns

- **False Sense of Security**

The use of a bath seat increases the likelihood an infant will be left alone in the bath, increasing the risk of drowning. Focus group attendees reported the presence of the bath seat would make it more likely for them to engage in risk taking behaviour and leave an infant alone in the bath for brief periods to attend to other household chores<sup>7</sup>.

Comments made in focus group situations also suggest caregivers are more likely to think the child is restrained in a bath seat, was more secure and was less likely to attempt to stand up. However during this developmental stage infants will begin to grasp and attempt to stand at unpredictable times. The product's design means a child is able to stand up within the seat and is at risk of overbalancing into the water.

- **Inherent Design Problems**

Bath seats have some inherent design problems<sup>8</sup>. The stability of the bath seat relies on the performance of the suction cups to hold the seat firmly to the bottom of the bath. These suction cups can become detached at unexpected moments or not be able to be secured due to dirty or slip resistant bath surfaces.

Because they are not constrained within the bath seat, infants can become submerged when they climb out of the seat, slip through leg openings and if the suction cups fail, when the whole seat tips over. This risk compounded by the need to fill the tub deeper in order to cover the infant's groin and perineal area with water while they are in the seat.

A collapsible version of seat on the New Zealand market relies upon the secure latching of locking clips to keep the frame rigid. Failure to secure the main clip means the seat is at risk of collapse within the water. The danger of this situation is that the child would then become both submerged and trapped under the frame of the seat.

Safety messages currently adhered onto bath seats are small, easily removed and are only one language. Further, warning labels are the least successful way to address a hazard. This is particularly true when the object presenting the hazard is falsely perceived as benign<sup>9</sup>.

- **Limited Use**

Product advertising says bath seats are targeted for use with infants 6 to 24 month old. However New Zealand product instructions specify that the seat is not suitable for a child that is able to 'pull up to a standing position who may attempt to climb out'<sup>10</sup>. This would limit their use to children between approximately the ages of eight to twelve months<sup>11</sup>.

In a USA study of 36 deaths associated with the use of bath seats, both the mean and median age of infants who drowned was eight months old<sup>12</sup>.

**Safekids New Zealand reinforces the major water safety messages.**  
**ALWAYS keep within arm's reach of your child when they are in water. Infants and toddlers should NEVER be left in the bathtub unsupervised, even for brief moments.**

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### Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup> Rauchschwalbe R, Brenner RA, Smith GS. 'The role of bathtub seats and rings in infant drowning deaths' *Pediatrics*; 100:e1. 1997
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- <sup>4</sup> Consumer Product Safety Commission 16 CFR 1500 Federal Register / Vol 66 No. 148 'Baby Bath Seats and Rings; Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking; Requests for Comments and Information' 2001
- <sup>5</sup> Safekids - [safekids.org.nz](http://safekids.org.nz) , Child Safety Foundation - [childsafety.co.nz](http://childsafety.co.nz) , Water Safety NZ [watersafety.org.nz](http://watersafety.org.nz) , Watersafe Auckland [watersafe.org.nz](http://watersafe.org.nz) Accessed Sept 2004
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- <sup>7</sup> Consumer Product Safety Commission 16 CFR 1500 Federal Register / Vol 66 No. 148 'Baby Bath Seats and Rings; Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking; Requests for Comments and Information' 2001

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<sup>8</sup> Safe Kids Canada “What is Safe Kids Canada’s Position on baby Bath Seats?” (2003)  
[http://www.safekidscanada.ca/ENGLISH/IP\\_PROFESSIONALS/SafeKidsWeek2003/bathseats\\_position.html](http://www.safekidscanada.ca/ENGLISH/IP_PROFESSIONALS/SafeKidsWeek2003/bathseats_position.html) (Accessed Sept 2004)

<sup>9</sup> Consumer Product Safety Commission 16 CFR 1500 Federal Register / Vol 66 No. 148 Baby Bath Seats and Rings; Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking; Requests for Comments and Information” 2001

<sup>10</sup> Dream Baby Fold Away Bath Seat Care & Use Instructions, Purchased 2004

<sup>11</sup> Consumer Product Safety Commission 16 CFR 1500 Federal Register / Vol 66 No. 148 Baby Bath Seats and Rings; Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking; Requests for Comments and Information” 2001

<sup>12</sup> Rauchschalbe R, Brenner RA, Smith GS. ‘The role of bathtub seats and rings in infant drowning deaths’ Pediatrics;100:e1. 1997