

Pool Barriers & Entrapment Prevention

By BRUCE BARKER, ACI

ONCE AGAIN, The Word invites you to travel into the dark realm of terms that often are misused or misunderstood in home inspection reports. The Word hopes you will find this trip informative and maybe a little entertaining.

The Word's terms today are pool barriers and their cousin, entrapment prevention. The Word is assured that there are pools in the arctic regions of the country north of Phoenix, so most inspectors will occasionally see pools and some of us will see lots of them.

Why Pool Barriers?

In The Word's world, the swimming season lasts almost all year and a year never goes by without several children being hurt or killed in pools. Granted, there's more opportunity for pool accidents in a place like Phoenix, where builders sometimes offer free pools as a sales incentive, but accidents happen all over the country. Nationwide, over 250 children under five years old die every year and many more are injured in pool accidents. Drowning is a leading cause of accidental death at home for children under five, and children can be under water and drowning in less than five minutes.

Looking at pool barriers and entrapment-prevention components doesn't take much time and if a problem you report saves a life, well, there's no way to place a value on that.

Pools and ASHI Standards

Pools and pool barriers are out of scope for an ASHI home inspection. It's a good idea to disclaim the pool and pool barriers in your inspection agreement and in your report if you elect not to inspect a pool on the property. That said, looking at pool barriers and entrapment-prevention components doesn't take much time, and if a problem you report saves a life, well, there's no way to place a value on that.

Pool barriers and entrapment-prevention components definitely are in scope for an ASHI pool inspection. This column gives you some basic information about these components, and you should become more familiar with these components before performing an ASHI pool inspection.

What is a pool?

This seems like an odd question, doesn't it? Everybody knows what a swimming pool is. Well, the question is a bit more complex than it seems, and the answer is important because pool barrier-requirements are triggered when a body of water is defined as a pool.

A pool, for barrier-requirement purposes, usually is defined by three attributes. A pool is intended for swimming or immersion. This usually disqualifies water features, fishponds and similar bodies of water. A pool is a permanent or semi-permanent structure. This usually disqualifies plastic wading pools. The most important attribute is the water depth. The trigger depth varies depending on who's writing the rules.

Children can drown in relatively shallow water, so when The Word encounters permanent artificial bodies of water more than 18

inches deep, he likes to inform his clients about the potential danger and recommend that they take appropriate precautions. The Word does this regardless of whether the water technically qualifies as a pool.

National standards

The International Residential Code Appendix G is one national standard for pool barriers. Remember that a code appendix is not part of the code in a jurisdiction unless the appendix is adopted in the enabling ordinance. The Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act is a federal law that influences pool barriers and entrapment-prevention components. Brochures containing recommendations that influence many local regulations are available from The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CSPC) publication numbers 362 and 363 are good references and some inspectors include these brochures, or at least references to them, in their home inspection reports for homes with pools. This is a good idea. You may find these brochures and others at www.cspc.gov.

Local standards

Many states and local governments have regulations addressing pool barriers and entrapment-prevention components. State and local regulations usually are based on national standards, but the details can vary widely and can be more stringent than the national standards. We don't inspect for regulatory compliance, even during an ASHI pool inspection, but you might want to be familiar with your local pool barrier and entrapment-prevention regulations if you perform inspections on homes with pools.

Reporting on pool barriers

How you report problems with pool barriers is critical. Never state or imply anything about a component's adequacy to perform its intended function or about whether it complies with any standard or regulation. Such statements might be misinterpreted. Just describe the component's condition, make a generic statement about the condition being a drowning safety hazard, and recommend either repair or further evaluation as appropriate.

General pool barrier requirements

Consult your inner child when inspecting pool barriers. If there's a way a small child could get under, over, around or through the barrier, there may be a problem worth reporting.

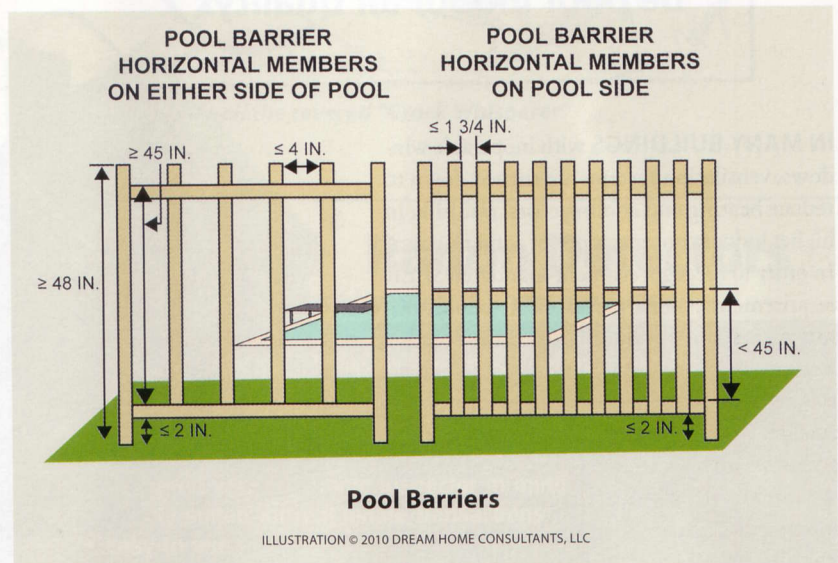
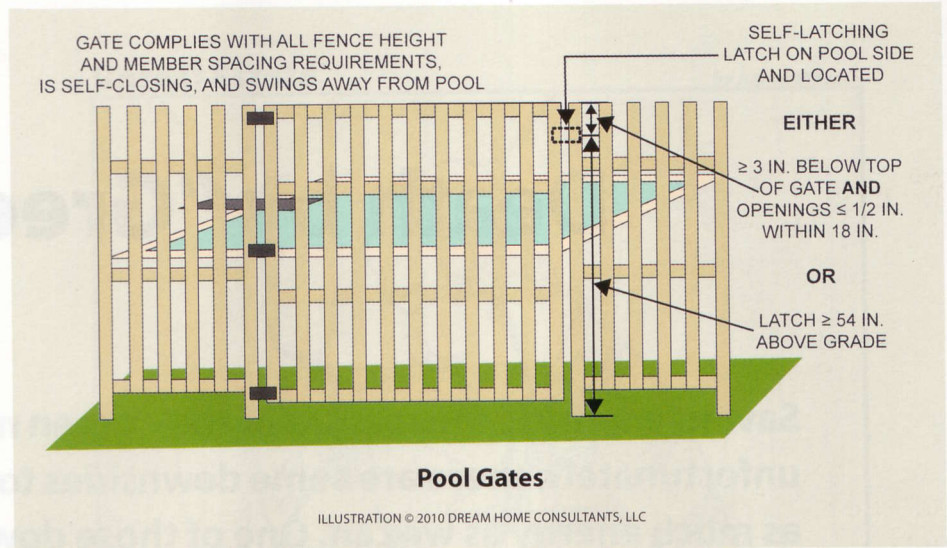
Pool barriers usually begin with a fence. The illustrations here show the basic IRC fence and gate requirements. Also, look for planters, benches and trees that a child could use to get a leg up and climb over the fence on the side away from the pool. By the way, we don't care if someone can get out of the pool area. Pool barriers keep children out of the pool area; they don't trap them in the pool area.

The home often provides part of the pool barrier. Doors with pool-area access should be self-closing and self-latching. Placing the door latch at least 54 inches above the floor is required in many, but not all, jurisdictions. Windows with pool-area access also should have the latch at least 54 inches above the floor, but again, this isn't required everywhere. Loud alarms that satisfy specific requirements may be substituted for door latches.

Entrapment prevention

Entrapment occurs when someone is held under water by the force of suction created by the circulation system pump. This force can be so strong that people have had their intestines sucked out of their body. That's pretty gross! Entrapment is rare, but it occurs often enough that there are requirements for devices that help prevent entrapment.

All pools should have anti-vortex drain covers on all drain outlets. New pools should have at least 2 drain outlets separated by at least 3 feet. You should recommend replacement of flat drain covers. This is an inexpensive safety improvement.



The bottom line

Pools can be great fun and swimming is great exercise. Pools also can be a source of unspeakable tragedy when a child drowns or is seriously injured. With a little knowledge and a few minutes, you may save a life.

Memo to Poseidon and any other water gods out there: The Word does not reside on Mt. Olympus (just at its base) and welcomes other viewpoints. Send your lightning bolts or e-mails to inspectorbruce@cox.net. The thoughts contained herein are those of The Word. They are not ASHI standards or policies. ■



Bruce Barker, Dream Home Consultants, Peoria, Ariz., has been building and inspecting homes since 1987. He is the author of "Everybody's Building Code" and currently serves as chair of the ASHI Standards Committee. To read more of Barker's articles or if you need a presenter at your next chapter event, go to www.dreamhomeconsultants.com.