

Water Safety: The Ultimate Life Skill

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The summer season is starting, complete with vacations, barbecues, parties and trips. It's also the time to keep cognizant of the one thing most kids on the autism spectrum love... water! Water play, water activities, water fun – it can all be a great experience for our kids, but it can also be a constant reminder to those of us who are responsible for them (as parents, educators, or service providers) of how vulnerable these kids are and how dangerous this “fun” can be. It is up to us to make sure that, regardless where our kids fall on the spectrum, they are taught appropriate skills to enjoy and more importantly, survive around water.

According to the National Autism Association, drowning is the #1 cause of injury-related deaths in children with an autism spectrum disorder. In 2005, 14 children with ASD died from drowning, when these children wandered off and were attracted to the water. Children with ASD do not fear “death” the way we do. At early ages, they do not understand the finality of death nor are they afraid of those things that could cause death, like water.

We know:

- Kids drown without a sound.
- It takes approximately one inch of water to drown in – a frightening statistic.
- 90% of drowning deaths occur while the child is being supervised.

Therefore, it is critical that right from the very beginning when our kids are young, we teach them water safety and how to swim. Learning this lesson too late can be tragic and heart-breaking, as the following story illustrates.

I had the great fortune of attending a fundraising event for the Autism Society in

Jacksonville, Florida several years ago. During the event I met the most wonderful woman, a grandmother of a child on the spectrum. We spent several hours discussing many topics, including her grandson, about whom she had written a children's book. And here is where the story sinks. Her book was about teaching kids to seek out help in emergency situations, and it was based on her own personal experience. One day her son was outside watching his children play; one was on the spectrum. He was distracted for no longer than one minute and when he turned back to them the kids were gone. A frantic search ensued, ending in catastrophe; his son had drowned in the nearby shallow stream. The other two children had panicked and just ran away. The courage this grandmother had to turn their family's loss into an education for others was commendable. For me it highlighted yet again the importance of water safety and the need to make it a priority for our spectrum kids.

Teaching Water Safety and Swimming

A significant proportion of kids with an ASD have sensory issues, which complicates how we teach them to swim. The old-fashioned way our parents did it (throw you in and see what happens) just doesn't float. (Yup, that's what my father did, and I'm lucky I made it!) Kids with an ASD may need to ease into the pool and get used to the water before they are able to enjoy the experience enough for concrete lessons to start. Others may love the pressure they get from the water and just jump right in, not cognizant of drowning as a danger. It's important we make the experience enjoyable from the start. From there you can teach them what they need to do once in the water.

Teach Swimming

The same teaching strategies that make kids with an ASD successful in the classroom will also make the child a successful swimmer.

- **Minimal Distractions**

Make every attempt to minimize distraction while the child is in the water. If there are a lot of people in the pool turn the child around, so she can't see what is going on at the other end of the pool. Also, pool areas echo, so be prepared if the child has any vocal "stims" and try to redirect the child back to the swimming. Or schedule lessons on off times, when less people are present, or if needed, do private lessons.

- **Use of Visuals**

Use pictures to show the child steps involved in swimming. Combining the visual with your explanation will give him multiple ways of understanding the sequence of steps and your expectations. Laminate the pictures and bring them in the pool. You may also want to show the child a video of swimming prior to getting in the pool. Video modeling is a great way to teach new skills. If you can't find a pre-packaged teaching video, create one of your own using a neurotypical sibling or friend as the "actor."

- **Consistency**

Whatever approach you decide to use (there are tons of examples on the web) make sure you use it consistently every time. Spectrum children learn through repetition, and lots of it!

- **Task Analyze**

Break down the steps to swimming and teach each one until the child can do the skill with little or no guidance. Do not overwhelm the child with too much information all at one time. Just putting his face in the water may be a huge accomplishment in and of itself!

Teach Water Safety

Swimming and water safety are not synonymous. They are different skills and should be addressed differently. All children, whether or not they ever want to put their little toe in the water, should be taught water safety skills. And the #1 rule is this: unless an adult is present the child should never go into any body of water, be it a kiddie or adult pool, a fountain, a stream, a pond or



Find more information about swim instruction at one of these websites.

- American Red Cross. www.redcross.org
- NCPAD Swimming Resource. www.ncpad.org/videos/fact_sheet.php?sheet=315&view=all
- Swim Lessons.com. www.swimlessons.com
- YMCA. www.ymca.net/programs

lake, or the ocean. They need to be taught this very specifically and concretely.

The more able child: Many children on the autism spectrum are highly rule driven (sometimes to a fault). In this instance it is a great thing! Make specific rules around water.

- You do not go near water without an adult with you. You may even make it more specific, adding distance to the water, how near the adult should be (i.e., an arm's length away, in visual sight, holding your hand, etc.) and/or citing specific people, like Mommy/Daddy/Grandpa.

After the rule is established, *practice it*. Don't assume the rule on paper makes complete sense to the child in a real life situation. Take the child around water and see what happens. You *want* to know if there are loopholes in your thinking and make necessary adjustments in your teaching. Each time the child follows the rule, heap on the praise and reinforcement.

The less able child: We still use rules for the less able child, but we may break them down more concretely and use more visuals to teach them. For instance, the rule might be something like this: "You do not go into the water without a familiar adult holding your hand." Have the child take your hand, walk to the pool and jump in with you. Every other time the child is around a stream, pool of any sort, lake or ocean, have her take your hand, walk to the water and go in together. Again, reinforce the child when he follows the rule and does what is expected.

Water is an awesome sensory experience for children with an ASD. It can foster language, social skills, and fine/gross motor development. It can also be a place where tragedy can strike at any moment. Remember, enjoy the water, but also respect it. Teach your child what to do around water and how to be safe. Then go out and have a wonderful summer! 🏊