The Ultimate Guide to Water Safety for Parents and Caregivers of Children with Autism

According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, out of every 4 million children born in the U.S., 36,500 will be diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. And as the CDC notes, ASD diagnoses are on the rise. As more children are diagnosed with autism, it’s important that their parents and caregivers have the knowledge needed to protect these young people from danger.

One area that is particularly dangerous for children with autism is water. Drowning is a leading cause of death for kids with ASD. The reasons drowning is such a threat for this population are related to the condition itself:

1. As this New York Times article explains, children with ASD have a tendency to wander off.
2. And when they do wander, notes the Albuquerque Journal, they’re often drawn to water.
3. Though children with autism can absolutely learn to swim, factors associated with the condition, such as sensory processing disorders and poor motor skills, can make doing so difficult without specialized swim lessons.

Water safety lessons are important for all children. But because the odds seem especially stacked against kids with autism, they become even more necessary. In this resource guide, parents and caregivers of children with autism will find water safety tips, lessons, advice, and more especially suited for teaching their children how to stay safe around the water.
Water Safety Tips for Parents and Caregivers

Many water safety tips are universal. But there are some special areas of concern where parents and caregivers of children with autism should take special notice. These tips provide a great foundation for keeping your child safe around the water:

Swim lessons are a must. Drowning is one of the leading causes of death among children with autism. One of the best ways to protect your child is for them to learn how to swim. The National Autism Association offers a comprehensive list by city and state of YMCAs that offer swim lessons for people with special needs. Each listing includes the appropriate contact and an email address.

Start with sensory integration. One problem you may run into as you start your child in swim lessons are sensory issues related to water. As SensorySwim.com explains, if your child has a sensory processing disorder, it is best to find a swim lesson program designed to address the disorder.

Ease children into a swim program. Before your child’s first swim lesson, PathfindersforAutism.org recommends taking them for a tour of the pool where they’ll be taking lessons. This will give them a chance to get used to the sights, smells, and sounds they’ll find there. The brochure also recommends having an instructor blow their whistle prior to the first lesson so that your child can begin to get used to how loud it is and learn why it’s necessary.

Take steps to prevent wandering. Many children with autism have a tendency to wander. Naturally, if a child wanders to a body of water, they could find themselves in great danger. May Institute provides tips on how to prevent wandering. For example, you should place alarms or chimes on doors, always be sure to lock access points around pools, and place “Stop” signs on doors.

Understand your child’s fascination with water. This news story explains that some children with autism are especially attracted to water because of its “reflection and movement.” If you understand this about your child, you can take steps to educate them about water and protect them from danger.

Stay near your child when around water. An accident can happen in a split second. That’s why SpiritofAutism.org recommends being within an arm’s reach of children with autism when you are near any kind of water, whether it’s a swimming pool or a bath tub.

Teach them about other dangers associated with water. The AutismConsortium.org points out that children with autism may not always recognize dangers that are obvious to others. When you’re teaching your child about water safety be sure to also go over related threats, such as “water depth, water temperature, current, and slippery surfaces.”

Take advantage of the Big Red Safety Toolkit. The toolkit, produced by the National Autism Association, is a comprehensive, excellent safety guide for parents of children with autism. It includes resources that can be a great help in keeping a child with autism safe around water. For example, it includes a “Family Wandering Emergency Plan” and a four-step process for finding swim lessons for your child.

Install fence/gate with an alarm. In its presentation on autism and safety, the University of Colorado-Denver notes that installing gates with alarms is an effective way to prevent a child with autism from getting near a pool or outside your home’s yard without you noticing.

Involve your neighbors. Perhaps you don’t have a pool at your home, but a neighbor does have a pool or other body of water in their yard. Because this may be the case, PacificChild.com recommends informing your neighbors that your child has autism. Encourage them to always keep their pool fence secured and ask if you can contact them if your child ever wanders.
Swim Aids

Certain tools may make it easier for your child to learn how to swim. Here are a few aids you might want to consider incorporating into your lessons:

**Accessible pools.** If your child has physical disabilities that prevent them from entering the pool via the main access points, find a pool that meets your needed accessibility requirements. The Department of Justice provides information on the ADA requirements for accessible pools.

**Kick boards.** LiveStrong.com explains the benefits of kickboards, which can help keep a new swimmer afloat while they practice their leg kicks. If your child has trouble gripping, the article explains that some boards have handles that make it easier to grab the board.

**Swim gear.** When your child is in the beginning stages of learning to swim, you may want to put them in a life vest or other flotation device to help them stay afloat. This blog post provides information on what to consider when choosing a device. For example, it recommends choosing flotation devices that have been approved by the U.S. Coast Guard and paying close attention to comfort and fit.

**Goggles.** If your child is bothered by getting water in their eyes, see if they’re okay with wearing goggles. MedicineNet.com provides information on how to be sure you get goggles that are the right fit.

**Water noodles.** As Enjoy-Swimming.com notes noodles are colorful, which can make them fun for kids to use. The article also provides instructions on how to use a noodle when learning to swim.

**Ear protection.** If ears are an area of sensitivity for your child, you might want to consider finding a way to protect their ears from the water when they’re swimming. This blog post offers a few options for products that can be worn to block water from reaching the ears.

**How to Avoid Common Pitfalls: An Expert Explains**

Dr. Varleisha D. Gibbs, OTR/L is an Assistant Professor and Director of the Entry Level Doctoral Program in the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of the Sciences Philadelphia. Below she offers advice to parents and caregivers of children with autism on how to overcome common obstacles that may pop up as you teach your child about water safety and swimming:

**What can parents do to make swim lessons go as smoothly as possible?**

First, find a way to introduce the child to the water before lessons begin. This will be dependent upon the child’s specific needs. However, a few examples are as follows: watching videos of children taking swimming lessons, taking a tour of the facility once or twice (or three times or more if needed) before starting any lessons, introduce water play with specific toys during bath time to use as transitional/representational objects when introducing the pool. If you are unable to take a tour, you can do a virtual tour with video or pictures of the facility. The same/similar methods can be used to introduce the child to the swimming instructor.

**What should parents do if their child absolutely hates being in the water?**

Panic is always a concern. Hence, parents desire to teach their child safety skills to use in case of emergency such as falling into a pool. This may be more of a challenge than expected. The child may need an extended period of time to be desensitized to the experience. Utilizing occupational therapy and sensory-based techniques can assist in this
process. In the meantime, the parent should take other precautions. For example, identify a swim vest, or suit, that the child tolerates. Ensuring the child has on a flotation device should occur whenever around water. Be sure that personal pools, including those in the neighborhood, are secured with fences or alarms. While that may be a challenge, there are water alert alarms your child can wear. This may be helpful during the warm weather months. Yet, any device should not replace human attentiveness, including educating neighbors and family members.

What are tips for making sure the child understands and is absorbing what they’re being taught (especially for non-verbal children)?

Even if the child is nonverbal, they can be demonstrate what they have learned. Social stories can be used with pictures to allow them to answer questions related to water scenarios. Children typically respond to rules and routines. Therefore, ensure that they are clearly explained in a procedural method (I.e. Step-by-step rules, or mnemonics).

What can parents do ahead of time to avoid problems?

Parents can become educated on their current context and environment. If another family member is caring for their child, are there pools, lakes, or even beaches in the nearby areas? Be aware that all children run the risk of eloping from a home. Use your technology. Alarms, videos, and simply talking to your child can be initial steps.

AUTISM & WANDERING PREVENTION TIPS
promoting safety in the home & community

Similar to the wandering behaviors in seniors with dementia or Alzheimer’s, children and adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are prone to wandering away from a safe environment. Because many children with ASD have challenges in areas of language and cognitive function, it is critical for parents to understand ways to keep their child or adult with autism safe.

Install Home Safeguards
- Install secure locks (exterior doors), door/window chimes; fence yard; secure gates; keep garage opener out of reach; use baby monitors and visual prompts like simple stop signs

Secure Personal Safeguards
- Have wearable identification on your child (RoadID.com): Temporary Tattoos are great for field trips and other outings; check with local law enforcement to see if they offer Project Lifesaver Tracking Devices (ProjectLifesaver.org)

Create Community Awareness
- Alert trusted neighbors, and introduce them to your child; fill out an alert form for local police; include a current photo and unique characteristics, likes, fears, and behaviors; alert the school, and bus drivers

Remain Hyper Vigilant
- Stay on extra high alert during warmer months, holidays, vacations, camping trips, transition periods; outdoor gatherings, a recent move to a new home or school, visiting an unfamiliar setting, public outings

Initiate a “tag, you’re it” system during family gatherings and transitions. Tag one responsible adult to closely supervise your child for an agreed-upon period of time

Identify Triggers/Teach Self-help
- Be aware of any known triggers that could prompt fleeing (loud noises, bright lights, fears, etc.) and work towards teaching your child safe alternative ways to respond

For an individual who demonstrates bolting behaviors due to fear or stress, etc., use aids, such as noise-cancelling headphones, and teach calming techniques using favorites topics or items

Teach Safety Skills
- Enroll your child into swimming lessons. Final lessons should be with clothes and shoes on. [YMCA listing, nationalautism.org]
- Use social stories to teach individuals with autism ways to stay safe, and use favorite objects or tools to demonstrate when it’s outside time versus inside time (social stories at aweare.org)

Call 911
- Remain calm and always call 911 immediately if an individual with ASD is missing; law enforcement should treat each case as “critical”

Law enforcement agencies are encouraged to contact the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) for additional assistance

Search Water First
- Immediately search areas that pose the highest threat first, such as nearby water, busy streets, train tracks, and parked cars

For more tips and resources, visit nationalautism.org.
The Autism Society of Michigan is Celebrating 40 years of Making Human Connections 1976-2016

The History of the Autism Society of Michigan
From MSAC to ASM
Through the Years - The First Decade

1976-Michigan Society for Autistic Children (MSAC) was formed.
1977-State Board of Education approved guideline for appropriate education of students with autism in Michigan.
1978-MSAC initiated class action lawsuit to guarantee minimum educational standards for students with autism. State planning council for Developmental Disabilities approved MSAC’s request for grant funds.
1979-MSAC hired an executive director and established a state office. First annual Spring Conference of MSAC, “Autism: The Other Developmental Disability”. Public hearings held on the proposed language for establishment of a separate category for the autistically impaired.
1980-Dr. Bernard Rimland, founder of NSAC, featured speaker at Spring Conference, “Autism in the 80’s”. MSAC received its first grant from the Skillman Foundation. United Way of Michigan approved application of MSAC on two-year grant status as a participation member of United Way of Michigan.
1981-First camp program initiated at Camp Happy Hollow. MSAC, along with many of her sister organizations, actively involved in fighting the Reagan administration’s attempts to weaken Public Law 94-142. MSAC entered into a consent decree with the State Department of Education which leads to passage of Autistic-Impaired Rules.
1982-Following the tragic loss of Barbara Lipinski, the Barbara Lipinski Memorial Award Fund was established by MSAC Board.
1983-Autistic–Impaired Rules approved by the Joint Administrative Rules Committee and became law in August. Family Support Subsidy Act was passed. MSAC gained full membership in United Way of MI.
1984-Dr. Lorna Wing featured speaker at MSAC’s Spring Conference. Amendment to Family Subsidy Act approved, enabling families with autistic children in rural areas to be eligible for the subsidy. MSAC joins with the State as an intervening co-defendant in a suit brought by MEA.
1985-MSAC member of coalition which receives Apple IIE computer grant. MSAC expands staff and leads agency for Project TRACE (Training and Resources in Autism, Cerebral Palsy and Epilepsy).
1986-Services of Autism Consultant Specialist become available to schools and other agencies. MSAC Board approves relocating State office to Lansing.

*Check out the Fall Horizon’s Issue for the Second Decade*
For the last few years, many memoirs about people with ASD narrated by parents have focused on that one magic bullet or “cure” that would help kids learn to better interact with others, to make friends, to learn more efficiently and to make their way in a frantic, competitive society. Then, triumph or disappointment would ensue depending on what treatment approach was used and how it was implemented. Suppose you were to read a parent account of a son or daughter with autism that didn’t focus on cure or recovery. One such book is *Ketchup is My Favorite Vegetable: A Family Grows Up with Autism*, by Liane Kupferberg Carter. She writes about her son Michael or Mickey as he is called, who has autism, but also has a seizure disorder so that he must live with the constant threat of storms in his head that could strike at anytime, anywhere. In addition, he is thought to have cognitive challenges, but nevertheless he’s verbal and has a real desire to understand the world he lives in.

The author writes a warm, loving and sometimes heartbreaking account of her family and how Mickey deals with the many challenges he faces with communication, sensory processing and socialization. Throughout the book I was struck by how he breaks the stereotype of people with ASD not being social and being aloof and uninterested in being with other people, quite the contrary! Mickey is a loving, funny and thoroughly social guy! The kicker is that his interactions haven’t always been appropriate but his mother is his teacher and guide, as were his teachers when he was younger. Mickey makes progress until ninth grade when he hits a major roadblock. The reader can see the cumulative effects of poor instruction, adolescence and a continuing problem with seizures and finding the right medications and the toll all of that can take on one person. Mickey continues to surprise us because he has such a strong desire to grow, learn and change and his warm, sunny personality just shines through! This is despite having to worry, taking one seizure medication after another and enduring educational placements that don’t always serve him well. His parents push on knowing that there must be that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow and as time goes on their efforts start to bear fruit.

As the book progresses, the reader can just see Mickey change and grow as he matures and is finally able to get into a transitional program that really works. Despite the depressing nature of Mickey’s problems and the complications they impose, his spirit, warmth, humor and the sheer love that his parents have for him shine through like a dazzling beam of sunlight that cuts through dark clouds. I found myself unable to stop reading this book because it was so well written and it was written with HEART.
SUMMER VACATION: I SPY GAME
Fun for the whole family! Whether on a staycation or vacation to a place away from home! Please cut, share and Enjoy!

SUMMER VACATION: I SPY GAME

Write down the number of each item you see.

____ Cameras
____ Pairs of Flip Flops
____ Palm Trees
____ Umbrellas
____ Suitcases
____ Pairs of Flippers
____ Life Preservers
____ Sea Shells/Starfish
____ Taxis
____ Ice Cream Trucks
____ Popsicles
____ Beach Balls
____ Crabs
____ Sunshine
____ Birds
____ Sun Block
____ Coffee
____ Stop Signs
____ Pizza
____ Beach Buckets

SUMMER VACATION: I SPY GAME

Write down the number of each item you see.

____ Cameras
____ Pairs of Flip Flops
____ Palm Trees
____ Umbrellas
____ Suitcases
____ Pairs of Flippers
____ Life Preservers
____ Sea Shells/Starfish
____ Taxis
____ Ice Cream Trucks
____ Popsicles
____ Beach Balls
____ Crabs
____ Sunshine
____ Birds
____ Sun Block
____ Coffee
____ Sunglasses
____ Stop Signs
____ Pizza
____ Beach Buckets

Have an awesome Summer!
Special Thanks To:

In Honor of Leo & Jane White-Flanagan:
Kathleen Mare Unti
Bill & Kathy White

In Honor of Robert Bazzy:
Vicki Ashker
Linda Bazzy
Melinda Bazzy
Mike Bazzy
Robert Bazzy
Allen & Amy Mulling

In Honor of Aaron Gunvaison:
David Lewis

In Honor of Joshua Keller:
Claudia Keller

In Honor of Megan Kotulak
Michel Kotulak

In Honor of Sean McCann
James McCann

In Honor of Lois Sandefer’s 90th Birthday
Betty Cayley

In Memory of Cynthia J. Beach
Judi Johnston
Sharon Linke
Bryan & Laurie Miller
Sue Nagy
Muriel Zenz & Jane Froedtert

In Memory of Brian Michael Chesnik:
Denise Leonard
Miller Canfield LLP & Employees
Ronald & Gloria Pouliot
Debra White

In Memory of Francis Markey:
Marilyn Markey

In Memory of Richard Thelen:
David & Michelle Barker
Brian & Dixie Bender
Sandra Cook-Lass & Sheryl Lass
Ann & Thomas Nurenberg
Larry & Sheila Sykora

In Memory of Sarina Light’s Father:
John Delphia

General Donations:
Amer1can Credit Union
AT&T
Booster U.S./Washington Elementary
Gerry Chirgwin
Calkins Hall/CMU
Nicholas & Donna Cantor
Eberspaecher, North America
Fantastic Sams Hair Salons, Canton, MI
Angie & Bob Guerin
Hill Elementary Staff & Students
Scott & Ellen Hulverson
Jamberry Nails
Virginia Killough
Judith Kindel
Susan Kirsch
Alyson McCormick & Painting with a Twist
Ray & Audrey Murphy
William Pavlik & Barb Rush
Jinan Safah
Ruth Wiechmann
Joseph & Michele Zdanowski
Sarah Zengerle

5k Sponsors:
Graff Chevrolet
Meijer’s
TMN Builders
Wright Beamer Attorneys

Those Who Donated Through:
Amazon Smile
Frontstream/United Airlines
JCPenney
TRUiST

United Way Donations:
Capital Area United Way
Pfizer United Way Campaign
United Way of Central Ohio
United Way of Genesee County
United Way of Greater Milwaukee & Waukesha County
United Way Greater Philly Southern New Jersey
United Way of Greater Toledo
United Way of Jackson County
United Way of the Lakeshore
United Way Metropolitan Dallas
United Way of Montcalm-Ionia Counties
United Way of Northwest MI
United Way of Saginaw County
United Way of Southeastern MI
United Way of Suncoast

Membership Renewals:
Jo Ellen Alvaraz
John & Maryanne Bednarski
Kathleen Blacker
Jeanne Brakhage
Helen Cannon
Tom & Gerry Chirgwin
Joann Collins
Clark & Sally Givens
Melissa Hendrick
Jack & Judy Holt
Scott & Ellen Hulverson
Susan Kaap
Irene Kasbohm
Virginia Killough
Judith Kindel
Sandra LaGrand
Barbara Laird
Mark & Rhonda Lindell
JD Marhevko & Mark Druckmiller
Marilyn Markey
Ray & Audrey Murphy
Clair, Josh & Jordan Neugeborn-Kahn
Frank & Mary Oziem
William Pavlik & Barb Rush
Susan Phillips
Janis Powers
Christine Rans
Catherine Richardson
Stephen & Stephanie Roth
Ann Sanderson
Kellie Shelton
Autumn Stinson
Jeffrey & Patricia Thelen
Ruth Wiechmann
Sally Wittler
Randy & Chris Wolverton
Ykimoff Family
Joseph & Michele Zdanowski

New Members:
Beth Weaver

In-Kind Donations:
AAPC Publishing
Jessica Kingsley Publishers
Sara Stup
Kirt Manecke

A Big Thank You to Our 5k:

Sponsors, Runners & Walkers, Volunteers,
Hawk Island Park Staff &
Michigan Running Foundation.
We are looking forward to our 2017 Event!

Thank you !!!
On the Road with ASM

★ April 30th – Waterford, MI
*Parent Empowerment Workshop*

★ May 14th - Lansing, MI
*ASM’s 5K Run/Walk*

★ May 21st – East Lansing, MI
*Child Development Conference*