

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



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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.



Via Flickr - by [Jeffrey](#)

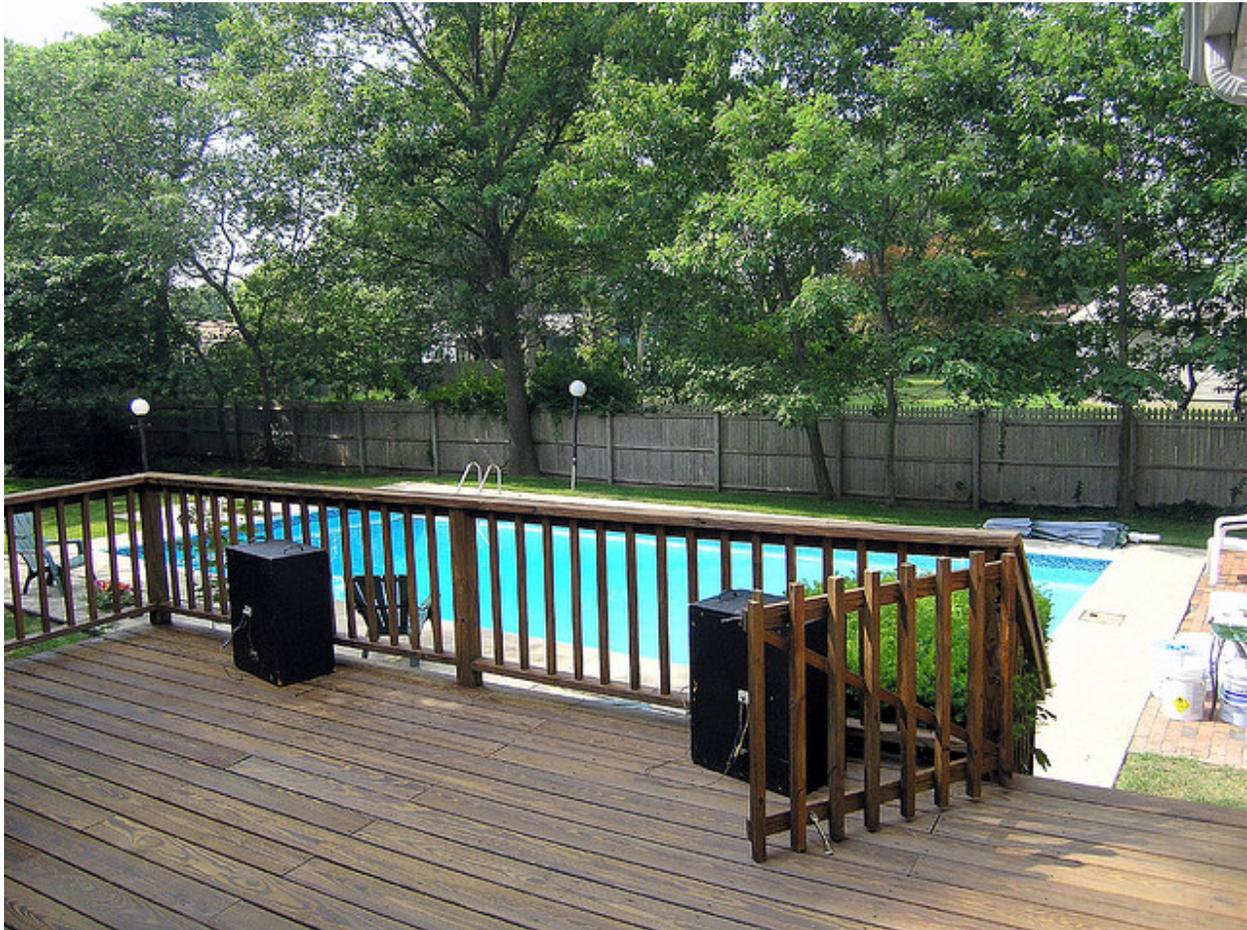
Understand your child's fascination with water. This news story explains that some children with autism are especially attracted to water because of its ["reflection and movement."](#) If you understand this about your child, you can take steps to educate them about water and protect them from danger.

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.



Via Flickr - by [Gail Frederick](#)

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.

Safe Swimming: Lesson Plans for Children with Autism

As with learning any new skill or concept, [consistency and repetition](#) will be important as you begin to teach your child about water safety. Here are a few additional teaching tips and lessons and activities on water safety to help you get started.

How to Teach Water Safety

Teach in a way that resonates. When teaching a child with autism about water safety, AutismDigest.com advises that you should use techniques that will help ensure they'll be able to take in the information. For example, give [water safety lessons](#) in a place with few distractions and repeat lessons and concepts.

Use a visual schedule. As the University of Indiana explains, [visual schedules](#) can be effective ways to guide children with autism from one task or activity to the next. Using a visual schedule during a swim lesson or water safety lesson can help ease their anxiety and make for a more successful lesson.



Via Flickr - by [Kenny Holston](#)

Try these water exercises. This video and accompanying article from the University of Kansas Medical Center explains the benefits of a child with autism learning to swim. In the video, parents and caregivers can also see [water exercises](#) that they can try with their own children.

Consider the specific needs of a non-verbal child. Some children with autism are non-verbal. While this raises the need for specialized swim lessons, it certainly doesn't mean the child won't be able to swim. This article from AutismSpeaks.org presents tips for [teaching a non-](#)

[verbal child a new life skill](#). Many of the suggestions can be easily adapted to work in the swimming pool.

Fun, Educational Water Safety Lessons

The Adventures of Splish and Splash. Splish and Splash are characters created by PoolSafely.gov to teach pool and spa safety. They are featured in [three interactive games](#) in which children can learn safety at a home pool, safety at a public pool, and how to make progress at swim lessons.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Water Safety Education Program. This [full curriculum](#) includes worksheets and exercises. The activities included are divided by grade and work for kids up to the sixth grade.

Kids Zone. Australia's [Royal Life Saving Society's](#) website has devoted a section to teaching kids about water safety through entertaining activities:

- [Games Zone](#)
- [Activities](#)
- [Aquacode](#)
- [Water Safety Quiz](#)

S.S. Safety. Oregon Health and Science University presents this game in which players are asked to [assist Lance the Lifeguard](#) by pointing out people who are taking part in unsafe activities at the pool and other natural bodies of water.

Waterside Safety Challenge. The Canal & River Trust presents [several games](#) to help teach children how to stay safe around canals and rivers. For example, "Safety Snap" asks players to match water safety hazards in a Memory inspired game and "Hazard Help" quizzes players on the right decision to make in different water safety emergencies.

Respect the Water. The Royal National Lifeboat Association provides [a variety of lessons and activities](#) to teach children about the dangers associated with water. Here is a selection:

- [Spot the Dangers on the Beach](#)
- [All Aboard](#)
- [Risky Business](#)
- [Storymaker](#)

Water Safety Games. Take your water safety lessons to the pool with one of these games presented by LovetoKnow.com. For example, ["Red Light Green Light"](#) gives children a chance to try out what they've learned in their swim lessons while also practicing listening carefully to instructions.

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](#).



Via Flickr - by [pang yu liu](#)

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 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.

About Varleisha Gibbs OTD, OTR/L



Dr. Varleisha D. Gibbs OTD, OTR/L began her career after receiving her baccalaureate degree in Psychology from the University of Delaware. She continued her studies in the field of Occupational Therapy. Dr. Gibbs received her professional degrees from Columbia University and Thomas Jefferson University. She has specific interest in to children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, Sensory Processing Disorders, cultural competency and inter-professional education.

In 2003, Dr. Gibbs founded *Universal Progressive Therapy, Inc.* located in New Jersey. The company was established with the focus of providing interdisciplinary and quality therapeutic services to families. As founding president of the company, she has had several opportunities to provide education, treatment, and study the areas of sensory integration, Autism Spectrum Disorders, as well as family-centered care. Dr. Gibbs has a doctoral degree in Occupational Therapy. She focused her doctoral studies on family-centered care, Autism Spectrum Disorders, and the use of tele-rehabilitation. This innovative topic led to a publication, "[Family-Centered Occupational Therapy and Telerehabilitation for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders](#)", found in the journal of *Occupational Therapy in Healthcare*.

Dr. Gibbs continues to lecture, and provided training, on sensory processing strategies and self-regulation throughout the country. As co-author of *Raising Kids with Sensory Processing Disorders*, she has provided families with strategies to understand and care for their children. She is a full time assistant professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at the

University of the Sciences, in Philadelphia, PA and the director of the entry level doctoral program. Her passions are to provide individuals with the tools that assist both the individual and the family system.