



National
Autism Safety
Council™

Autism & Water Safety

A Guide for Caregivers



Featuring
SAFESWIM
FOR AUTISM™

About This Guide

This guide was created in collaboration with families, clinicians, educators, first responders, and service professionals.

It integrates knowledge from:

- **Current research**
- **Field expertise**
- **Lived experience**

The content reflects proven practices and the most up-to-date knowledge available at the time of publication.

This guide is for informational and educational purposes only. It is not intended to serve as medical or legal advice and should not replace consultation with qualified healthcare providers, behavioral specialists, or legal professionals.

Every child, individual, and family is unique, and decisions about safety planning and intervention should be made in collaboration with trusted professionals familiar with your individual needs.



National
Autism Safety
Council™

*Advancing Autism Safety Through
Science, Expertise & Collaboration*



Autism and Water Safety

Water Safety is Essential

Children and dependents with autism are at increased risk for wandering or elopement, and water poses a uniquely high risk when this occurs. Even young children who are usually well supervised can move quickly toward nearby ponds, pools, lakes, or drainage areas. Because water incidents can become life-threatening in minutes, understanding and managing these risks is essential for every caregiver.

Water safety is essential, but it goes beyond teaching swimming skills. It involves careful supervision, environmental planning, and proactive strategies to reduce access to hazards. Caregivers can benefit from practical tools such as creating a water-safety plan, establishing clear supervision responsibilities, and using monitoring technologies when appropriate.

Early awareness and preparation can dramatically reduce risk. This toolkit is designed to provide guidance, practical strategies, and resources to help families create safer environments around water, both at home and in the community.



Quick Facts



*In 2025, drowning accounted for **87% of autism-related wandering/ elopement fatalities**¹*



*Children with autism will typically head straight to the nearest body of water, usually **within a few hundred feet**¹*



*According to Columbia University, children with autism are **160 times more likely to die from drowning than the general pediatric population**²*

1. McIlwain, L., Hudgins, C., & Heaps, J. (2026). 2025 Review: Autism-Related Elopement Fatalities in the United States (Report in prep)
2. Guan, J., & Li, G. (2017). Injury mortality in individuals with autism. *American Journal of Public Health*, 107(5), 791–793. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2017.303696>



Understanding the Autism/Water Connection

Why Are Children with Autism Attracted to Water?

Research shows that missing autistic children are often found in quiet and calm places that feel soothing (regulation.) Water can be especially soothing because it quiets overwhelming sensory input, but also provides sensory appeal (stimulation) with predictable sights, sounds, and movement.

Even if a child dislikes baths or swimming, this does not mean they will avoid water outdoors. Many children described as afraid of water have still been found in ponds, lakes, or pools. Always search nearby water first, regardless of type or temperature.



Keep Water Safety in Mind

- Ensure swimming competence and maintain hypervigilant supervision.
- Remember that swimming skills can greatly reduce risk but do not eliminate it.
- Secure pools and spas with self-closing, self-latching gates that your child cannot reach.
- Remove toys or objects that might attract attention when pools aren't in use.
- Inform trusted neighbors about your child's wandering/elopement tendencies and water safety needs.

Key Takeaways

- *Missing children with autism are most often found in quiet settings, particularly in or near water.*
- *Water provides quiet comfort (regulation) but also sensory appeal (stimulation.)*
- *Even children who demonstrated fear or discomfort around water were found in water.*
- *Swimming lessons help, but do not eliminate risk.*
- *Hypervigilant supervision & water safety skills are essential.*
- *Always search nearby water first if a child or dependent with autism is missing.*



Teaching Early Water Safety



When Can a Child Learn About Water Safety?

Children can begin water safety instruction as early as 6 months. The American Academy of Pediatrics supports parent-child water safety classes for infants 6 to 12 months, focused on comfort and safety, not independent swimming.¹

At this stage, lessons aim to:

- Help babies feel comfortable in water
- Teach parents safe handling in and around water
- Introduce floating and breath control through play

Some programs, such as Infant Swimming Resource (ISR), teach infants 6+ months self-rescue skills like holding their breath, rolling onto their backs, and floating until help arrives.² These lessons must be taught by certified instructors and tailored to development.

Swim lessons never replace constant supervision or safety barriers like pool fencing.



Key Takeaways

- Infant programs focus on comfort, confidence, and basic floating.
- 6 months is typically the earliest recommended age to start.
- Regardless of skill level, supervision and safeguards are essential.
- National programs include Infant Swimming Resource (ISR), Infant Aquatics, and Swim Float Swim.²



1. American Academy of Pediatrics. (2024, May 29). Swim lessons: When to start & what parents should know. HealthyChildren.org. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Swim-Lessons.aspx>
2. Infant Swimming Resource. (n.d.). Infant Swimming Resource™ <https://www.infantswim.com/>

What are Adaptive Swimming Lessons?



Swimming is not only a valuable life skill, it's a critical safety tool. For autistic children and dependents, the risk of drowning is significantly elevated. Learning to swim in a supportive, adaptive environment builds confidence, increases independent mobility, and can dramatically reduce risk.

Adaptive swimming lessons are specially designed swim programs tailored to meet the needs of children/dependents with developmental, physical, or sensory differences, including autism. These lessons focus on accommodating each individual's abilities, comfort level, and learning style.

In adaptive lessons, instructors use techniques such as step-by-step instructions, visual cues, small group or one-on-one teaching, and sensory-friendly approaches to help children/dependents gain confidence in the water. The pace is adjusted for comfort, and repetition is used to reinforce safety skills and swimming techniques.

Beyond teaching basic swimming skills, adaptive lessons emphasize water safety, including recognizing hazards, entering and exiting water safely, and floating or treading water in emergencies.

Key Takeaways

- Adaptive Swimming Lessons are customized to meet each individual's abilities, learning style, and sensory needs.
- Small groups or one-on-one instruction help children/dependent feel safe and build confidence.
- Instructors use visual cues, repetition, and clear instructions to reinforce skills.
- Lessons include the critical basics: floating, treading, and safe entry/exit
- Children/dependents gain confidence and skills to navigate water safely in a variety of settings.
- Structured, adaptive instruction supports overall water safety.



Where to Find Adaptive Swim Lessons

Adaptive Swimming



Swimming is not only a valuable life skill, it's a critical safety tool. For autistic individuals, the risk of drowning is significantly elevated. Learning to swim in a supportive, adaptive environment builds confidence, increases independent mobility, and can dramatically reduce risk.

Where to Find Adaptive Swim Lessons

Here are some national swim facilities and local places to ask about adaptive or special-needs swim lessons:



- **Write us for a list:** info@autismsafetycouncil.org
- **SafeSplash Swim School:** Offers Adaptive Aquatics at participating locations. safesplash.com
- **Big Blue Swim School:** Provides Adaptive Swim Lessons using the Swim Whisperers® method. bigblueswimschool.com
- **British Swim School:** Provides Adaptive Swim Lessons at participating locations. britishswimschool.com
- **Local YMCA:** Many YMCAs offer adaptive swim or “special needs” swim lessons. Ask your local YMCA branch or search online.
- **Other Local Options:** Check community recreation centers, parks & rec departments, or disability-focused organizations in your area for adaptive or inclusive swim programming.



Tips & Recommendations for Families

Tour the pool during a lesson, meet the instructor, and share your child's needs. Start with private or small-group lessons to reduce overstimulation, use visual supports, and break skills into manageable steps.

It's always wise to keep the same instructor and schedule for consistency, as well as focus on core water-safety skills. Be sure to use your child's interests to keep lessons engaging. Consider full clothing for the final lesson to practice realistic self-rescue skills.

Teaching Basic Safety Skills



Teaching basic safety skills to children and dependents with autism is a critical, lifesaving priority that requires proactive, individualized support.

By using clear routines, visual aids, repetition, and strengths-based teaching, parents and caregivers can help children build practical water safety while respecting sensory needs and communication differences.

Early, consistent education empowers families to reduce risk, increase confidence, and create safer experiences around water at home and in the community.

Tips for Teaching:

- **Schedule supervised water play** and swim lessons at consistent times.
- **Use visual aids to teach** safety skills like “wait,” “stop” and stay with an adult near water; place stop signs at eye-level of the child or dependent.
- **Provide routine, predictable outlets** to meet sensory needs in a safe, controlled environment.



Consider Honest, Simple Explanations About Dangers

Use visuals to help teach safety, and gentle but clear language to help your child/dependent understand specific dangers, connecting them to experiences they can relate to. For example, when talking about water, use plain language to convey the dangers of entering water alone, such as:

- “Going into water alone **can make us feel really sick**, like when we have a bad tummy ache.”
- “When we go into brown water or dirty water alone, **it can make us feel really bad.**”
- “When we go into water without Mom or Dad, **it can make us feel hurt** or very sick, and we might not get to have our favorite things, like chicken nuggets or Legos.”

Continue to speak about dangers in simple language, **even if your child appears to not listen or understand.**

Children and dependents with autism face unique risks around water, especially due to wandering/elopement and sensory needs. These **SafeSwim** tips offer steps parents can use to reduce risk and build safer water routines at home and in the community.



S – Supervision, always and actively: Assign a “water watcher” and backups. Their only job is watching the child/dependent, no phones, no distractions. Children/dependents with autism may wander silently or move quickly toward water.



A – Assess the Environment: Identify all nearby water hazards, including pools, ponds, drainage areas, and flood zones, and take steps to restrict access. Use **this tool** to help.



F – Fencing and Alarms: Install fences, self-latching gates, covers on pools, and water submersion alarms to prevent unsupervised access.



E – Educate and Enroll: Use visuals to teach skills like “wait” and “stop” and enroll your child/dependent in certified adaptive swim programs. Focus on basic skills first (floating, turning to wall, exiting water).



S – Sensory needs and triggers: Be aware of sensory triggers in the water environment (noise, temperature, glare). Prepare ahead with gradual exposure, ear protection, breaks and quiet swim times.



W – Wearables: Choose appropriate swim gear, such as a Coast Guard-approved life jacket. Avoid inflatables (floaties, noodles) for safety training.



I – Inform caregivers, neighbors, and first responders: Make sure babysitters, relatives, teachers, neighbors, and first responders know about the autism and water connection.



M – Make a plan for emergencies: Learn CPR, keep rescue equipment nearby, and search nearby water first if a child or dependent is missing.

Always **search water first** if a child or dependent with autism is missing.



Social Story: *Stay Safe Near Water*

Customize with your own images.

My Name Is: _____



Water is fun to play in,
like pools and splashpads



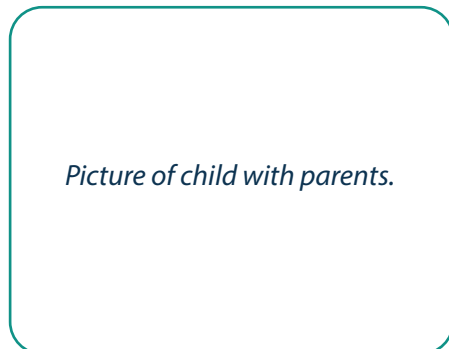
But water can hurt me
if I am alone.



If I go near water without
mom or dad, I could get
very sick or hurt.



Water that is brown or
dirty can make me sick.



Picture of child with parents.

If I want to play near water,
I will get my mom, dad, or teacher first.



*Picture of child at pool
with happy parents.*

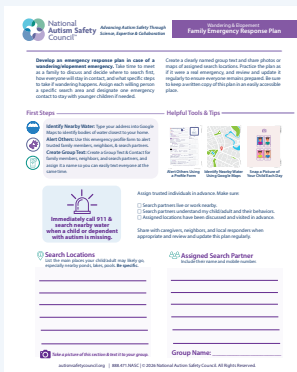
Mom & dad will be
happy that I am safe.



FOR AUTISM
DROWNING PREVENTION

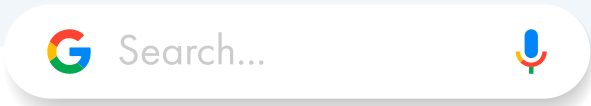
Be prepared for an emergency. Identify nearby water ahead of time.

Because many autistic children and dependents are attracted to water, it's important to identify and document nearby water locations. This will help adults, caregivers, and first responders know where to look first, instead of searching randomly. **Planning in advance reduces panic and supports faster, more organized action.**



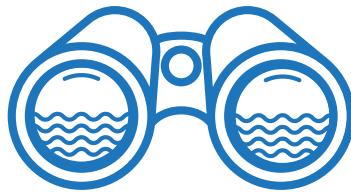
This Family Emergency Response Plan is available at autismsafetycouncil.org, or write to info@autismsafetycouncil.org

- **Google your home address** and any other places your child/dependent regularly visits, such as school, relatives' homes, or vacation rentals.
- **Identify nearby water sources**, such as ponds, canals, lakes, or retention basins near each address. **Pools may not appear on the map**, so document any nearby locations that have a pool, such as a neighbor's house. You can also lean on city planners to help provide this information.
- **Include this information in your emergency plan**, and share it with helpers and emergency responders.
- **Search the closest water location first** (whether it's a pond or pool), if your autistic child or dependent is ever missing.



Tool: *Water Watcher Tag*

Cut, laminate or cover in plastic, and use a hole punch for the opening. This is a larger size that can be worn around the neck.



I'm the
**WATER
WATCHER**

- I'm the designated **Water Watcher** of someone with autism.
- My only job is **active supervision**.
- I will keep the child/dependent **within sight and reach** at all times.
- I will **stay alert**.
- I will **avoid distractions** (phones, conversations, tasks).
- If I need to stop watching, I will clearly **pass the tag to another adult**.
- If the child or dependent with autism is missing, I will call 911 and **search nearby water first**.



Tool: *Water Watcher Tag*

Cut, laminate or cover in plastic, and use a hole punch for the opening. These sizes are designed for wrist wear.

