

# PFA Tips

## Teaching Swimming to Students with Autism

Instructing anyone who is new to the pool requires a different set of teaching tools than those needed to teach techniques to someone on a swim team. Likewise, there may be some adjustments that you make in your lessons for students who have Autism. Although this is not meant to take the place of a training class, these are some tips that may help you better understand the unique characteristics of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and think about how you approach teaching swimming lessons to those students.

### Individuals with Autism MAY Demonstrate Difficulty with:

**I Communication:** both verbal and nonverbal

**I Sensory processing:** may have sensitivity to sound, light and touch

**I Social interactions:** may not make eye contact, pick up on social cues, body language or understand personal space

**I Behavior:** may have obsessive tendencies, exhibit outbursts, or wander

### What Does Autism Look Like?

A person with autism MAY:

**I** Have trouble understanding social cues, body language and conversational language styles

**I** Have an inflexible adherence to routine or ritual

**I** Exhibit repetition of movements or words and phrases

**I** Have difficulties with fine-motor skills and sensory integration

**I** Have a persistent preoccupation with objects or narrowly focused topics of interest

### Understanding what's behind "bad behaviors"

National speaker and author William Stillman points out that ALL "behaviors" should be seen as communication. People may engage in "acting out" or "aggressive behavior" because of the inability to communicate ideas, pain or mental health

experience in ways that are effective, reliable and universally understandable. (William Stillman, "Presuming Intellect")

### How Can You Assist Your Students With an ASD?

**I** Presume intellect. People with ASD do not necessarily have decreased intellectual abilities.

**I** Simplify language. Avoid metaphors and sarcasm.

**I** Do not rely on facial expressions to convey meaning.

**I** Allow the student to utilize coping strategies (self soothing/stimming activities). Examples may include hand flapping, counting, or covering the face when overstimulated. Ask the student or caregiver what his or her coping strategies are.

**I** Give one instruction at a time.

Accommodations to Consider

**I** Adjust the student-teacher ratio. Many students with ASD perform better in small or private classes.

**I** Hold classes during times with limited distractions.

**I** Consider potential fear of water among older children and adult students. Often we mistakenly associate this fear with younger children.

**I** Relax apparel policies on goggles, caps, etc if applicable. Some of these items may be too uncomfortable, even painful for students with heightened sensitivities.



**I** Offer an introduction to the pool environment for new swimmers. This would include giving students exposure to the noises, smells, water temperature, other activities in pool, and lifeguards.

**I** Prepare students for the loud sound of the lifeguards' whistles. Demonstrate the whistles, explain why they are used, and possibly allow the student to blow the whistle.

**I** Provide written or picture schedule (depending on the student's communication style) as many people with ASD tend to be visual processors. A wipe board with an agenda may work. Be sure to include the expectations of the student for that particular lesson.

**I** A parent or aid MAY request to be in the pool with the student.

**I** Offer a 'quiet room'. It doesn't need to be an actual room, but this would be an area away from the noise and activities where the student could go if he needs a quiet break.

*Written by Shelly McLaughlin, Pathfinders for Autism. We would like to thank Kathryn Ewell, MS Ed, OTR/L for her contributions.*