

PFA Tips

Make Swimming Fun and Safe

Pools can create different visions for us. Some of us look at a pool and imagine our child will one day be the next Michael Phelps. Others automatically see a hot summer afternoon with happy kids splashing the day away. And for some, pools evoke fear. What if my child falls in? What if my child can't swim and panics? What if my child doesn't understand the dangers associated with water? How do I even get my child interested in getting near a pool? If you have more than one child, you might experience all three of these scenarios. With my daughter, I was delighted she was doing flips off the side. With my son, my goal was simply that he didn't drown. So how do we ensure that our kids will feel comfortable and be safe around the water?

Autism and the drowning risk

Let's begin by pointing out that teaching water safety is critical because **71% of the deaths that occur due to wandering and elopement are due to drowning.** Make sure your child can swim, doggy paddle, float... anything to sustain life if they fall into water.

Starting out

We don't want that first experience to be overwhelming, because we know when that happens, "first" can also mean "last". Consider having the first trip to the pool be during a quieter time of day, to allow for "easing" into the experience. For the first few visits, consider explaining the pool and the layout of the pool facility:

- Take a walking tour
- Discuss where it is deep and where it is shallow
- Point out the lifeguards
- Explain that they should know where the lifeguards are at all times
- Explain that if they need assistance, they can ask a lifeguard

Tip toe through the poolips

Think about who takes your child to the pool or beach and whether they are comfortable around the water. If that person feels uneasy, so will your child. You want to model calm. I know - you don't think "calm" is in your vocabulary. Picture that peaceful, beautiful ocean - even if you're at the public neighborhood pool surrounded by screaming, splashing kids.

Safety First

We want swimming to be a fun experience,

but safety must be the #1 priority. Always know where your child is **AT ALL TIMES**. A child can go under in the blink of any eye. And what most people don't realize is that children sink - they don't splash around and yell for help. They just quietly sink to the bottom. Do not assume the lifeguard is watching your child. In the time it takes for the lifeguard to be distracted by another swimmer, your child may have already made it to the bottom of the pool. Know when your child is getting tired and suggest moving on to new activities. And consider enrolling in a learn-to-swim program. Even if your child never perfects a single stroke, just focus on skills to keep from drowning.

"Look mom - I'm a dolphin!"

Give plenty of time for free swim and water exploration. Allow your child to experiment, but be there for support. You want your child to enjoy the water, and not associate pools as just one more place for instructional lessons. Don't tell them this - but all that fun splashing around is also good practice.

Water water everywhere and not a drop to drink

Stay hydrated! The sun gets hot, and although you are IN water, you may not be getting enough water IN YOU!

Slip, slop, slap

Slip on a shirt, slop on sunscreen, and slap on a hat. Ok, I stole this from an Australian health campaign. But it's good advice in any country. Wear sunscreen. Preferably a high SPF that is also waterproof.



We would like to thank the Michael Phelps Swim School for their contributions to this article.

Additional Resources

PFA Tips: Finding the Right Swim Lesson <https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/recreation/parent-tips-finding-the-right-swim-lesson/>

Tips for Teaching Swimming to Students with Autism <http://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/recreation/tips-for-teaching-swimming-to-students-with-autism/>

Video: "Swim School" by Real Look Autism <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqjYfG55ic&feature=youtu.be>

SOSecure Containment Swim Brief <http://www.sosecureproducts.com/>

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