How to Choose an Autism-Informed Swim Program



A Family Guide to Finding the Right Fit

Pinellas County, Florida

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JWB
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This educational resource was developed in collaboration with Dr. Kaycee Reese, neuropsychologist and autism specialist, and the Center for Autism & Related Disabilities at the University of South Florida (CARD-USF).

CARD
Center for Autism & Related Disabilities
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

IBCCES
CAC
CERTIFIED AUTISM CENTER

Juvenile Welfare Board of Pinellas County is a Certified Autism Center

Why Swim Lessons Matter

Many autistic children enjoy being around water because it provides a calming, enjoyable sensory experience. However, water can also present unique safety challenges. In Florida, most fatal autism related drownings, over 94%, occur during non-swim time so a layered approach to drowning prevention is key.

Swimming lessons are one of the most effective ways to reduce the risk of drowning. An autism-informed swim program teaches more than swimming—it helps children build water confidence, develop lifesaving skills, and learn safe behaviors in and around water while supporting their individual communication, learning, and sensory needs.

Learning to swim is one part of a complete water safety plan. Active adult supervision, wandering prevention strategies, barriers such as four-sided pool fencing, and water competency all work together to help keep children safe. Choosing a program that understands autism can make learning safer, more enjoyable, and more successful for both children and their families.

Did You Know?

Drowning is the leading cause of accidental death among autistic children, making water safety skills especially important.

Safety Resources for Parents

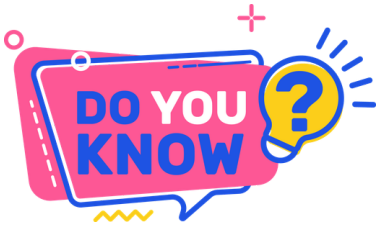
card-usf.fmhi.usf.edu/safety.html

autismsociety.org/water-and-wandering

What to Look For in a Quality Program

Not all swim programs are created equal. Here's what to look for in a quality autism-informed program:

- ☑️ 1:1 or 1:2 instructor-to-student ratio or small groups
- ☑️ Individualized instruction plans
- ☑️ Visual supports (schedules, social stories)
- ☑️ Sensory-friendly environment
- ☑️ Trained in autism & communication differences
- ☑️ Gradual water introduction protocols
- ☑️ Parent communication & progress updates
- ☑️ Family training — caregivers learn to reinforce skills at home
- ☑️ Flexible pacing (no rigid timelines)
- ☑️ Calm, low-stimulation pool setting
- ☑️ Safety-first skill progression and Safety Around Water/Near Water Including learning to wait



- Drowning is the leading cause of death for autistic children ages 1–14 years, accounting for approximately 90% of all autism-related accidental deaths in that age group (National Autism Association).
- Autistic children are 160× more likely to drown than neurotypical peers (Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, 2017).
- In 2024, Florida a record 35 autistic children drowned — the most in any single year. 61% of all Florida drowning deaths in children age 5+ involve an autistic child. Swimming lessons are a powerful intervention available to reduce this risk.

Questions to Ask Before You Enroll

Question	What to Listen For
1. Are your instructors trained to work with autistic children?	What training specifically? How recent? Look for specific autism or adaptive training certification.
2. What is the instructor-to-student ratio?	The answer should be 1:1 or 1:2. More than 3 children increases waiting and unsupervised time.
3. Do you use visual supports during lessons?	Quality programs have laminated picture schedules, first-then boards, and step-by-step skill cards ready to go — standard tools, not add-ons.
4. How do you handle sensory sensitivities?	Offering earplugs, gradually introducing splashing, warm pool water, early-morning quiet lanes, allowing familiar clothing into the water, never forcing face submersion before readiness.
5. What if my child is afraid of the water?	Use of a graduated desensitization approach: starting outside the pool, sitting on the edge, dangling feet, then entering shallow steps — across multiple sessions at whatever pace the child sets.
6. Can parents be involved in lessons?	A parent in the water during early sessions may reduce anxiety. Ask if you can join the first few lessons and what happens if your child will only enter with you present.
7. How do you track and communicate progress?	Look for written progress notes, regular parent check-ins, and skill checklists shared after each session.
8. What is your safety protocol?	Clear emergency procedures, lifeguard on duty, instructor certifications current, and a plan for elopement or meltdown in the water.
9. Do you teach water safety skills and non-swim time safety skills like waiting and supervised water contact only?	Teaching water safety and non-swim safety skills helps children stay safer around water, even when they aren't swimming, and builds habits around boundaries and waiting.

Tips for Getting Started

Visit the Pool First

Let your child explore the space without pressure. Walk the perimeter, sit at the edge, listen to the sounds, and watch other swimmers. Simple familiarity can reduce first-lesson anxiety by 50% or more. Ask if a free preview visit is possible.

Bring Comfort Items & Reinforcers

Bring visual supports, comfort items, or reinforcers to every early session — a preferred toy as a finish reward, a first-then board, noise-cancelling headphones, or a familiar towel. Share your child's full reinforcement menu with the instructor in writing before Lesson 1.

Start with Short Sessions

Begin with 15–20 minutes and gradually increase as comfort grows. A child who ends each lesson on a success will build enthusiasm. Pushing to 45-minute sessions too early often causes shutdown. Let your child's energy guide the pacing.

Communicate in Writing Before Lesson 1

Provide your child's sensory triggers, communication style, reinforcers, and behavioral strategies in writing. Include Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) use, meltdown triggers, sensory preferences, what 'I need a break' looks like, emergency contacts, and medical info. A one-page profile is ideal.

Don't Give Up After One Hard Session

Water comfort typically takes 3–5 consistent exposures. Research shows 62% of autistic children improved by at least one swim skill level after just 5 days of adapted instruction. Week 1 is often the desensitization phase. Stick with it for 6–8 sessions before evaluating fit.

FREE Swim Lesson Vouchers — INQUIRE BEFORE YOU PAY!

ELIGIBILITY RESTRICTIONS APPLY

The Florida Swim Lesson Voucher Program through the Florida Department of Health, with WaterSmartFL, prioritizes children with ASD and accepts applications annually. Available at: https://www.floridahealth.gov/individual-family-health/child-infant-youth/drowning-prevention/

Eligibility requirements:

- Child age: 1–7 years old
- Income-based: gross family income no more than 200% of federal poverty guidelines
- Proof of Florida residency

Pinellas County Public Pools

Facility	Address	Website
Long Center, Clearwater	1501 N. Belcher Rd.	myclearwaterparks.com
Morningside Rec Complex, Clearwater	2400 Harn Blvd.	myclearwaterparks.com
North Greenwood Rec & Aquatic Center, Clearwater	900 N M.L.K. Jr Ave.	myclearwaterparks.com
Ross Norton Rec & Aquatic Complex, Clearwater	1426 S M.L.K. Jr Ave.	myclearwaterparks.com
Highlander Pool, Dunedin	1937 Ed Eckert Dr.	dunedingov.com
Highland Family Aquatic Center, Largo	400 Highland Ave.	playlargo.com
Southwest Pool, Largo	13120 Vonn Rd.	playlargo.com
Skyview Pool, Pinellas Park	9040 54th Way N.	pinellas-park.com
Seminole Family Aquatic Center, Seminole	9100 113th St. N.	myseminole.com
North Shore Aquatic Complex, St. Pete	901 N. Shore Dr. NE	stpeteparksrec.org
Childs Park Pool, St. Pete	1227 43rd Ave. S.	stpeteparksrec.org
E.H. McLin Pool, St. Pete	6102 14th St. S.	stpeteparksrec.org
Fossil Park Pool, St. Pete	6739 Dr. MLK Jr. St. N.	stpeteparksrec.org
Jennie Hall Pool, St. Pete	1025 26th St. S.	stpeteparksrec.org
Lake Vista Pool, St. Pete	1450 60th Ave. S.	stpeteparksrec.org
Northwest Pool, St. Pete	2331 60th St. N.	stpeteparksrec.org
Shore Acres Pool, St. Pete	4142 Shore Acres Blvd. NE.	stpeteparksrec.org
Walter Fuller Pool, St. Pete	7883 26th Ave. N.	stpeteparksrec.org
Greater Palm Harbor Branch, YMCA	1600 16th St.	suncoastymca.org
Greater Ridgecrest Branch, YMCA	1801 119th St. N.	suncoastymca.org
Jim & Heather Gills YMCA	3200 1st Ave. S.	stpeteymca.org
John Geigle YMCA	4550 Village Center Dr.	suncoastymca.org

**** Many locations offer scholarships or reduced fees***

Additional Programs

Where to Find Programs — Hillsborough, Pinellas & Pasco Counties

Visit USF CARD Resources at card-usf.fmhi.usf.edu/ost/index.html
On the left menu select Swim Lessons & Summer Camps and filter by county to locate programs in your area.

Private Providers Serving the Region

Sunsational Swim School
Private in-home lessons serving Pinellas, Hillsborough, and Pasco.

Mermaid Swim School
Private lessons serving Pinellas, Hillsborough, Pasco, Manatee, Charlotte, and Sarasota.

Water Smart Tots
Drowning prevention lessons serving Pinellas, Hillsborough, Pasco, Manatee, and Sarasota.

Tampa Bay Turners Swim School
Private swim school serving Pinellas County with structured progressions.

Aquatic Summer Camps

Camp COAST (Children on the Autism Spectrum Together)
Through the YMCA of the Suncoast. A summer day camp specifically for children with autism and developmental disabilities in a safe, fun, and nurturing environment. Designed for ages 5-10 (Camp COAST JR) and 11-16 (Camp COAST Middle).

Freedom Sailing Camp of Florida, Inc.
Adaptive sailing and water skills camp in Pinellas County.

PAIR Camp — Pasco County Parks & Recreation
Pasco's adaptive/inclusive recreation camp. Contact Pasco Parks for aquatic programming availability.

Camp Idlewild of Florida
Summer camp in Pasco County serving children with special needs.

The Gold Standard Skills

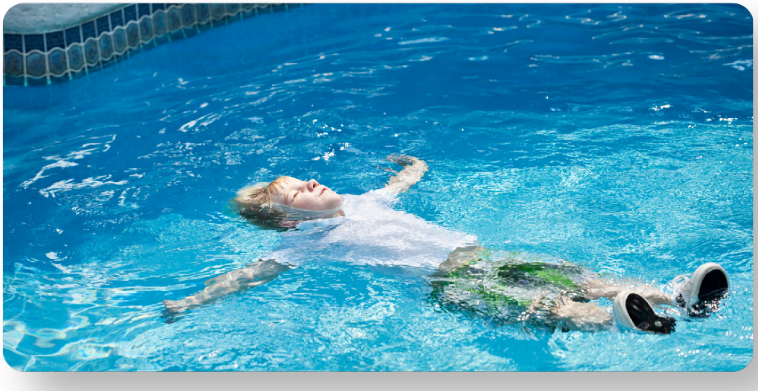
According to the Autism Society of Florida, every autistic child should learn:

1. Roll to Back and Float
If a child falls in, they should be able to roll onto their back and float to breathe and rest until help arrives. This is the single most important water survivial skill. Practice this skill with child fully clothed.

2. Swim to the Wall
Reaching a fixed surface allows the child to hold on, rest, and call for help or wait for rescue. Drowning occurs when a child cannot maintain a position above water; the wall eliminates that risk.

3. Exit the Pool Safely
Once at the wall, the child should be able to pull themselves out of the water independently without assistance from an adult or step ladder. Practice this skill from mulitple points around the pool edge, not just the steps.

These three skills can be lifesaving even if a child is fully clothed. Most accidental drownings happen when children are not dressed for swimming. Practicing in regular clothing at least once per month builds true real-world safety competency.



Additional Resources

What to Avoid	Why
Group classes larger than 3 students	In groups of 6-10, an autistic child may spend most of the lesson waiting, watching, or overstimulated rather than building skills
Instructors with no autism-specific training	Good intentions do not replace knowledge of sensory processing, task analysis, AAC use, or behavioral escalation patterns
Programs that use fear or force to get compliance	Any report of holding a child's head underwater, forcing entry, or using punishment to motivate is an immediate disqualifier and may constitute abuse
No family communication or progress tracking	If you cannot describe what your child worked on after each lesson, skill generalization to real-world water settings will not happen
Rigid, one-size-fits-all curriculum	A program that requires every child to reach 'Level 3' in the same 8-week timeline will leave behind children who need 8 weeks just to comfortably enter the pool

Certifications to Know

WSI	Water Safety Instructor (American Red Cross). Certifies ability to teach swim skills to the general public. A baseline credential — look for additional autism-specific training on top of this.
ATRIC	Aquatic Therapy & Rehab Industry Certification. Focuses on therapeutic aquatic practice for individuals with disabilities, including neurological and developmental conditions. A strong indicator of relevant expertise.
Adaptive Aquatics	Specialty endorsement (ARC or similar) for teaching swimmers with physical, cognitive, or developmental disabilities. Covers modified techniques, equipment, and individualized goal-setting.
ABA Principles	Applied Behavior Analysis training applied to swim instruction. Instructors with RBT credentials or formal ABA coursework know how to use task analysis, discrete trial teaching, reinforcement schedules, and data collection.
USF CARD / Autism Society of FL	Instructors who have completed the Autism Society of Florida's swim instructor training or USF CARD's water safety professional development have specific, Florida-focused preparation for this population.
Ernie Els #GameON Autism MARINO Adaptive Aquatics	A specialized online certification that prepares aquatics professionals to safely and effectively serve individuals with developmental disabilities. The program supports water safety initiatives in Florida while expanding access to evidence-based, individualized aquatics instruction.
YMCA Adaptive Swim Instructors	Contact your local YMCA to inquire.

Preventing Elopement Around Water

Elopement, sometimes called wandering, occurs when a child leaves a safe or supervised area without the knowledge or permission of a caregiver. For children with autism, elopement can be especially dangerous when they are drawn to pools, ponds, lakes, or other bodies of water.

Because elopement can happen quickly, water safety extends beyond swim lessons and supervision at the pool. Families should use **multiple layers of protection** to help prevent a child from reaching water unnoticed, including securing doors and pool access points, using alarms and visual cues, and considering locating devices when appropriate.

Make Your Home More Secure

✔️ Install high locks or key-operated locks on exterior doors.

✔️ Consider door and window alarms that alert you when a child leaves the home.

✔️ Install self-closing, self-latching gates around home pools.

✔️ Ensure pool gates open away from the pool and cannot be easily climbed.

✔️ Keep doors leading to pools locked whenever they are not in use.

Build a Family Safety Plan

Scan QR Code to downolad

Every family should have a plan that includes:

- Who will search nearby water first
- Emergency contacts
- Current photos of your child
- Medical information
- Communication methods
- Neighbors who know your child and can help

If your child has a history of wandering, consider notifying trusted neighbors and local first responders.

Family Water Safety Checklist

- [ ] My child is enrolled in swim lessons.
- [ ] We have identified water hazards near our home.
- [ ] Exterior doors have alarms or high locks.
- [ ] Our pool has four-sided fencing with a self-latching gate.
- [ ] Family members know our emergency plan.
- [ ] Neighbors know how to help if my child wanders.
- [ ] We have introduced our child to local fire rescue and a community police officer.
- [ ] My child is always actively supervised around water.
- [ ] Caregivers know CPR or are planning to take a CPR course.
- [ ] Work with a behavior professional to reduce elopement.
- [ ] Look into search and rescue devices that are used by your local law enforcement agency
- [ ] Enroll in Pinellas County Sheriff's Office FREE and voluntary registration program https://www.pinellassheriff.gov/TakeMeHome To enroll, please call (727) 582-6902 or email CPOPrograms@pcsonet.com
- [ ] Enroll in the Free Family Course: Wandering and Elopement for Parents | Do Better Collective

