global leaders in adaptive aquatics

Adaptive Water Safety Toolkit

Extra Layers of Water Safety Practices and Tips for Autism, Sensory, Physical and Special Education Needs

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Adaptive Swim Lessons
Aquatic Therapy and
Online & In-Person Training

Some swimmers with special needs are drawn to the water.
They can be fascinated by it causing disregard for safety. With over 30 years of experience in adaptive aquatics, Ailene & Cindy created this kit offering simple yet powerful tips to transform water safety practices.
Watch our Water Safety Playlist on YouTube to see these techniques come to life!

What's included in the kit

Ritual and Routine

Use routines to your advantage. Create safer rituals for water play, swimming and transitioning in and out of the water. Implementing these tips will give you a few extra seconds needed to avoid a dangerous situation.

Monitor and Intervene

Monitoring and intervention are critical, especially for the autistic and special needs population. Given their heightened sensory seeking behaviors, caregivers must remain hyper vigilant, focusing on risky behaviors like repeated submersion, breath-holding, and excessive drinking.

Rescue and Equipment

Neurotypical and neurodivergent swimmers alike need to understand how to use lifejackets and rescue tubes. It is imperative to familiarize everyone with rescue equipment, improving the ability to hold it, touch it and identify it as a safety device.

Adaptive Swim Skills

Adapting your approach when teaching the swim skill benchmarks of submerging, roll overs and changing directions is paramount. Focus on helping swimmers experience what it feels like to be in the water with clothes on. This will provide familiarity with movement given the additional weight.

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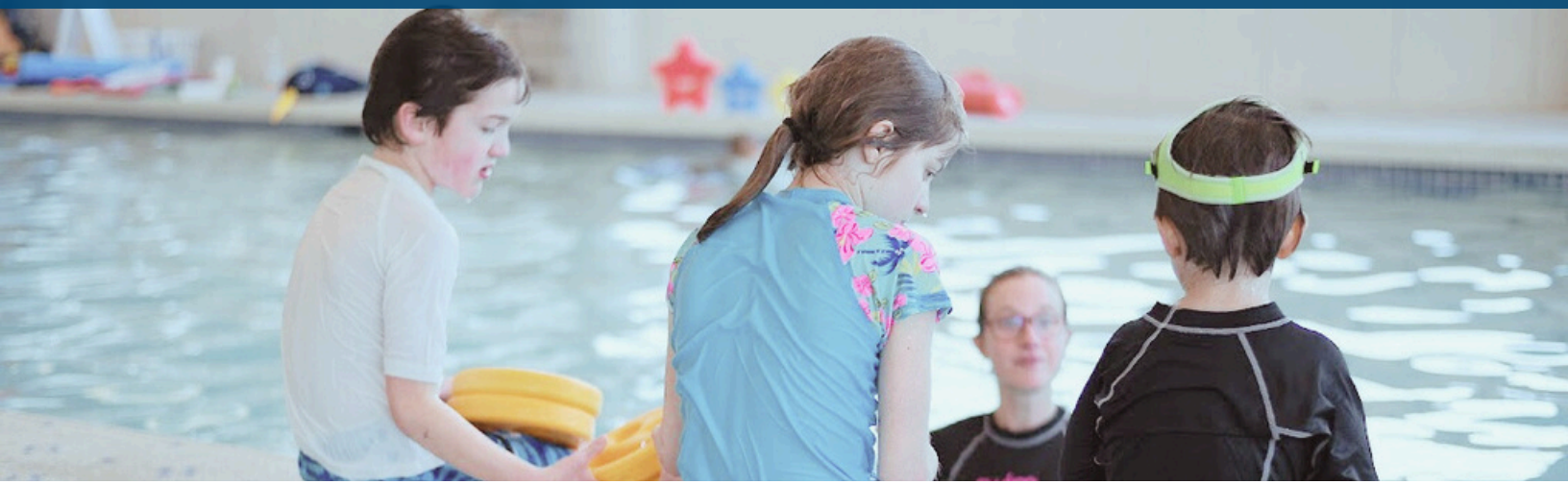
Ritual and Routine



Ask at home for the bathtub

Teach swimmers to verbally ask or nonverbally gesture/point before entering a body of water. Generalize the ritual of asking to apply to all bodies of water. This will create a sufficient delay between asking and entering the water.

Take side and provide a prompt

Have your swimmer hold the wall, while repeating the sentence "the side is safe". Have them hold for 5 and count out loud. Never take your child off the wall. You can tap their shoulder and get them to look at you, then take a hand.

Equipment use should NOT become a routine

Use equipment when needed (like a lifejacket) but be sure to have structured swim time without floats and goggles. Use equipment as a tool, not a permanent solution. Be mindful of flippers and floats that give a false sense of security. If your swimmer is independent only with flippers, what happens if one falls off?

Routine to allow time or delay entry

Create an extended routine that will delay entry into the water. An easy movement activity such as "clap your hands, touch your toes" and then ask again before entering the water. For super seekers, create a lengthy routine such as 'head, shoulders, knees and toes' or a favorite song to sing before they get in. This allows time to intervene in the unlikely event they wander towards water ahead of you.

Swim Whisperers® Roadblocks:
Safety; Engagement & Interaction

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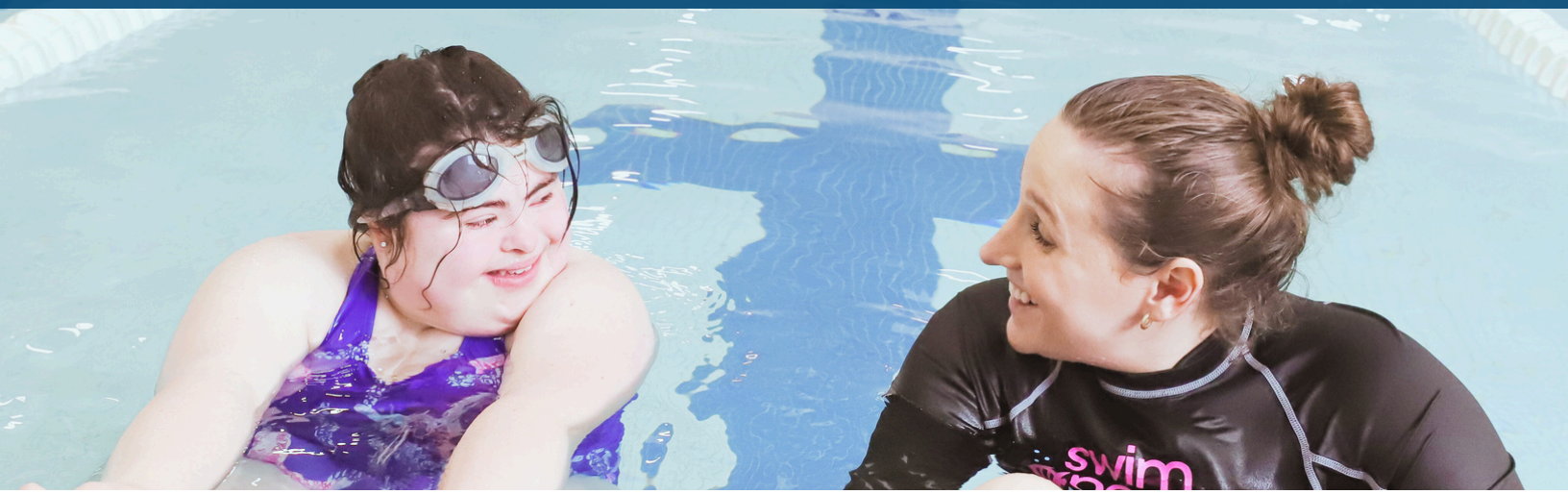
Monitor and Intervene



Reduce underwater breath holding

Some swimmers love being underwater due to the hydrostatic pressure (which increases with depth). The deeper you go the more pressure there is. Some swimmers repeatedly submerge with disregard for breathing. Visually monitor and physically intervene to ensure appropriate breaks for above-the-surface water play.

Lifeguard education

Lifeguards are trained professionals who prioritize aquatic safety, but understanding your child's unique needs is crucial. Inform the lifeguard about your child's specific challenges. Our FREE 'Adaptive Techniques For Lifeguards' mini-course will provide them with the tools and confidence to approach and assist swimmers who require adapted strategies.

Observe excessive drinking

Some swimmers love to drink, suck and spit the water. Watch the amount or number of times water is swallowed. If it is ongoing, try having them swim on their back, bite on a chew toy, or move to a preferred game on top of the water.

Brightly colored swimwear

Pools get busy and lakes get dark. One tip is to wear brighter colored swimwear. This will make it easier when you are the 'Water Watcher' for your swimmer that might be trying to swim off. Consider a swim cap and shirt that is a brighter color for ease of identifying where they are located in the water.

Swim Whisperers® Roadblocks:
Body & Breath Control; Excessive Drinking

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Rescue and Equipment

Life jackets

There are different types and styles of lifejackets, make sure you select the right one for your child's unique needs.

- Get your child comfortable in the bathtub wearing the lifejacket.
- Practice wearing the lifejackets at the pool to ensure it is effective.
- If the lifejacket is too buoyant and they can't control their body. Try improving body awareness by adding cotton pajamas.

Inform local aquatic facility

Communicate your child's needs with aquatic professionals:

- Provide a photo of your child and some ideas for keeping them safer.
- Introduce the aquatic director to your swimmer and explain how to best interact with your swimmer.
- If your child has a physical limitation and needs a lift, schedule a time to use the lift and improve poolside entry safety.

Rescue tube

Familiarize swimmers with the rescue tube/ equipment. Let them hold it, touch it, and identify it as a safety device. Rescue tubes have a slippery surface which can be uncomfortable to touch or hold onto, so practice is a must. Another tip is to use this during land-based playtime.

Take and hold floating objects

When you go swimming, practice "take and hold" with any floating object such as a kickboard, barbell or noodle. Try to improve a ritual of taking and propelling to the side. Then, once they are safely at the side, they can hold on and make a train along the wall to the shallow end or steps.

Swim Whisperers® Roadblocks:
Interpreting Touch; Ways of Processing

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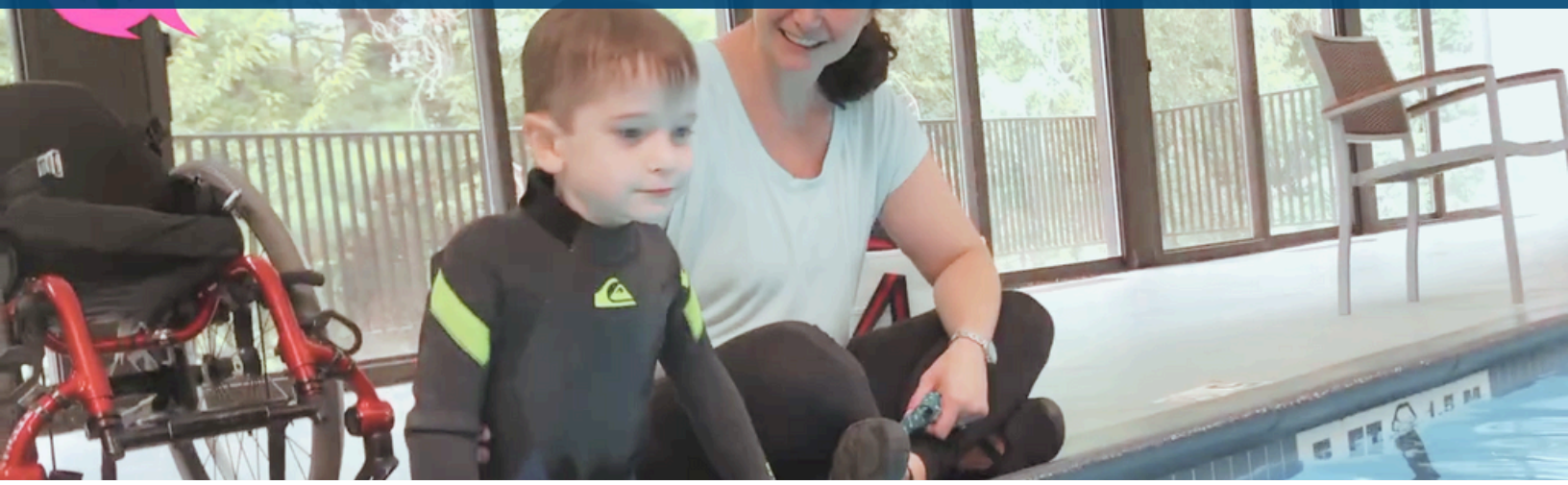
Adaptive Swim Skills



Learn to submerge

Successful submerging will improve a safe rescue as the swimmer will be more comfortable holding their breath.

- Identify body parts “mouth, nose, eyes, hair." Practice immersing these body parts in order one at a time and say the word “under”.
- Firm wiping of the face, with the chin down as they come out of the water, will help desensitize the face.

Reduce anxiety

- Buoyancy can be anxiety provoking because it feels unstable. A solution to counteract this, is to wear a long sleeve cotton shirt, pajamas, or cotton socks to provide increased body awareness.
- Show social stories and videos of successful and happy swimmers in the water.
- Teach the mantra that in the shallow we ‘stand’ and in the deep ‘we just keep swimming’.

Specific adaptive aquatics training

Have you tried traditional swim lessons and not seeing results? Is your swimmer having issues meeting the swim skill benchmarks? Investigate and don't give up.
Find an Adaptive Swim Whisperers®, certified instructor. They have specific training to assess, identify and implement strategies to overcome the underlying problem to help your swimmer reach swim skill benchmarks.

Rollovers and breath control

Being able to rollover and take a breath is a vital safety skill. Use these tips to practice at home and then head to the pool.

- Log rolling on the floor or on your bed.
- Get comfortable tilting your head back in the bathtub.
- Use your bathtub 50% full to practice.
- Watch videos of 'swim-float-swim'.
- Blow mouth and nose bubbles at home.

Swim Whisperers® Roadblocks:
Managing Submerging; Inability to go on Back

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Parents Resource

Adaptive Safety Tips and Education

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P - Properties of the Water

- Surface Tension
  - Breaking the 'elastic band' at the surface of the water gives a lot of sensory input.
- Buoyancy
  - Can help physically impaired swimmers to float & move.
- Hydrostatic Pressure
  - Pressure acts like a big calming hug, the deeper you go the more pressure there is.

A- Awareness

- Get comfortable with a rescue tube by showing videos and photos and practicing with one.
- Identify (shallow/ deep) and say “I stand in the shallow, I swim in the deep.”

R- Routines

- Create a routine of asking to enter the water and plan a transition for safe entry/exit.

E- Equipment

- Use equipment as a tool, not a permanent solution. Stay at arm's length.
- Structure swim time without floats.

N- Never Give Up

- Assess what the obstacle might be: time of day, temperature, noise, depth, instructor, too much equipment, or facility. Investigate!

T- Training

- As a parent, ask your local aquatic center about their adaptive training. Specifically, ask “How long is the training?”, “Can I see an outline of the training?”, “Is there a specific method that is taught?” and “Does it address all abilities?”

S- Swim Ideas

- Successful submerging can improve a successful save.
- Explore the Swim Angelfish FREE adaptive resources for more ideas.

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Lifeguard Resource

Adaptive Safety Tips and Education

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L- Look and Listen

- Notice subtle signs of special needs such as alert (tracking) bracelets/headphones/excessive splashing/sounds/atypical movements.

I- Identify

- Observe impulsive or sensory seeking behaviors and provide intervention.
- Notice signs of physical impairments (wheelchair etc.) and offer help when appropriate.

F- Fun or Frenzy

- If you see a swimmer's fun begin to escalate into overstimulation, investigate.
- Notice signs of sensory discomfort, like covering their ears. If this happens, try a different approach to resolve the problem.

E- Expected vs. Unexpected

- Let them know you are going to touch them or blow the whistle if possible. Expected touch is often more tolerable than unexpected. Approach from the side if necessary, to decrease fear.

G- Give Time and Space

- Be patient and use varying methods to communicate your message (gestures).
- If a swimmer runs away as you approach, try to bend down and ask them to come to you versus running after them. Some swimmers avoid eye contact but are still listening.

U- Understanding

- Speak with few words and pause to allow time for them to process and respond.
- Use language such as saying "First (this), then (that)" might work.

A- Ask

- Ask the parents “How can I help you?” & “ What can I do for you?"

R- Risk Management

- Extended underwater breath holding can be a risk for seekers who like the pressure. Watch and educate the parent and swimmer to set a time limit or alternate activities.
- Know how to use wheelchair lifts and other poolside adaptive equipment.

D- Diversity and Inclusion

- Educate yourself! Check out Swim Angelfish's YouTube playlist: Swim Whisperer Stories.
- Be the agent of change by sharing these FREE RESOURCES.

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Extra layers of water safety practices for all abilities

Adaptive Swim Lessons
Aquatic Therapy and
Online & In-Person Training

Swim Angelfish equips aquatic professionals with the specialized skills needed to transform client experiences through our world-class training programs and free adaptive resources.

FREE Adaptive Mini-Courses

SCAN QR CODE

Sign Up. Get Inspired. Get Educated.

Join thousands of parents, caregivers and aquatic professionals growing their adaptive aquatics knowledge. Be the first to receive **game-changing advice and expert tips** from Founders Ailene & Cindy!

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