

Taking learners who have autism to the pool can be fun, but sometimes it doesn't always as expected. So here are some tips for both practitioners and parents.

### 1. THINK SAFETY

Epilepsy is more common in autism, maybe up to 40 - 50 % and this will mostly remain undiagnosed in the majority of children with the condition.

The two biggest 'sensory risks' are sound and smell. Sound can be overcome with swimming ear plugs (if the learner can cope with them). Many pools don't use chlorine these days so smell issues may not arise.



### 2. PRIVATE SESSION

This may not be possible, but make sure the learner is happy with the people supporting them. The supporter should know him or her and his or her autism really well.

### 3. GETTING TO THE POOL

Who - Where - What - Choice?

Who is with me? Where am I going? What happens when I get there? Do I have a choice?

If a learner understands signs or symbols use them and make sure the supporter can sign to them & make the learner feel comfortable about communicating. Why not video the pool and its environment on a phone or tablet and show the learner the sights and sounds of the pool BEFORE they go? Scoop up some pool water (if permitted) and bring it to the learner outside the pool environment, so the learner can experience at a sensory level what the water feels like and smells like. Social stories or comic strip conversations are also good for this.

### 4. FAMILIAR PEOPLE

Make sure the learner knows who is supporting them at all times. The supporter needs to understand the learners communication signals well - especially to indicate dislike/fear or stop. This could be a brilliant environment to develop communication, relationships and trust.

### 5. TAKE YOUR TIME

Let the learner play/experiment with the water if they want to. Pool toys are good for this - does the learner have a favourite toy that could be taken into the pool? Consistency of approach is important here. When necessary, give the learner time to understand what is happening and self-regulate.

Be aware that for some learners time in the pool might seem endless - take a sand timer and reassure them exactly where they are in the time frame of the session. Put it on the pool side. Check it together.

### 6. DON'T PUSH TOO FAR

A learner with autism should never ever be forced to put their face in the water before they are ready. If the learner wants to do something different... let them! It's also a possibility that they may pee or poo in the pool. Neurotypical folk do this too sometimes!

### 7. LET THEM DO THEIR OWN THING...SOMETIMES

It's not unheard of for kids with autism to drink the pool water. A few sips won't hurt, but litres will. As in the classroom, learners may need to flap and move. They may need time out or they may need you to give them space - the pool environment is the same as the classroom!

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