



WATER SAFETY

Many children enjoy water. Children on the autism spectrum sometimes seem particularly drawn to all kinds of water: water dripping from a spigot in a sink, a filled bathtub, a wading pool, a body of water such as a pond, lake, or swimming pool, and of course the ocean! Water can be soothing and calming as well as fun. Children on the autism spectrum may even leave the house looking for water simply because they like it, and, during times of stress, children on the spectrum may seek out water sources to calm themselves.

On more than one occasion, an autistic child has been found at a neighborhood stream, leaning over the bank's edge to allow the water to flow through the child's fingers. Other stories are told about children found playing in a small amount of water left undrained in a wading pool or children running from home to the neighborhood pool.

Sometimes these stories do not have such happy endings. Drowning is a leading cause of death among children on the autism spectrum. As parents and caretakers, the responsibility for keeping our children safe lies with us.

What can you do?

Here are a few suggestions:

- Teach water safety at an early age. Water safety includes swim lessons. Lessons for children with special needs can be found at many recreation centers and YMCAs. Be aware: although children may learn to swim, it does not mean they will use this skill if they are frightened or upset.
- If you have a pool or live near one, be sure there are adequate gates, alarms, locks, and pool covers in good working condition.
- Drain all water from all containers as soon as they are finished being used. This includes buckets, wading pools, etc.

- Take advantage of the fact that children on the autism spectrum usually abide by rules – almost to a fault. Have very strict rules around water play, swim instruction, etc., or whenever the child may be near a body of water. Use Social Stories™ to reinforce the rules and try to anticipate situations. For example, set a rule — *Do not go into the water* — for when the child is around water and a parent is not there. Give the child a replacement behavior — *Wait for a familiar adult to take you in*.
- If your child is drawn to water, complete safety forms with local safety offices and indicate where all possible water sources are located near your home. These can include places where large puddles form after storms.
- Install a buzzer alarm system in your home so you are aware if your child leaves without your notice.
- Consider putting a lock on the toilet.

Related Article:

- [Elopement](#)

Additional resources:

- [Review of Mortality in Autism Drowning](#)
- [Drowning Prevention and Autism \(Florida Resource\)](#)
- [Water Awareness in Residential Neighborhoods](#)

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