Swimming and water therapy are increasingly emerging areas of benefit for people living with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Studies are suggesting that the benefits of swimming are no longer being looked upon as simply retaining physical fitness or swim technique, but rather how movement in water can be used as a form of therapeutic benefit for someone living with ASD. A study was conducted by Chien- Yu Pan (2010), which suggested that students developed an improvement in social and communication skills over the 10-week period of once-weekly, 45-minute swimming lessons.

Children diagnosed with ASD enter life with serious challenges. Learning can be difficult. Communication can be difficult. Showing and receiving affection can be difficult. Performing daily living tasks such as eating can be difficult. Even playtime for a child with autism is fraught with sensory interference and disruptive anxieties.

Water may make a difference during these difficulties. Anxiety and concentration are often major barrier for a student in the classroom. Chien-Yu Pan found that concentration, mental alertness and responsiveness were higher in students post swimming lesson, in comparison to beforehand.

The water environment appears to meet several needs of a child with autism that enables the child to respond well to therapy and grow. There are other properties of water which may also contribute to the development of a child with autism and sensory difficulties. Water makes the body lighter by 90%, reducing stress on the body during therapeutic exercises. The warm temperature of water calms the muscles, an important feature for
children who deal with spasticity and tension in the muscles due to anxiety. Because of these benefits of an aquatic environment, children with autism enjoy their time learning and developing their abilities. The energy required to move against the force of water tends to **decrease a child’s excess energy and enhance their attentiveness for daily tasks such as sleeping and eating**.

Individuals living with ASD will often find additional barriers in learning a new skill, which can then lead to decreased confidence and self-esteem. When given additional time and tailored education to learn a new skill, a person can be provided with a sense of identity and increased well-being. Results of available research have indicated that water therapy can lead to an increased compliance with various other water-based tasks such as showering and completing the dishes.

Decreasing the chance of drowning for someone living with ASD will always be the priority of swim education. However, emerging research is outlining the strength that water therapy has on a person’s capacity to perform daily living tasks in the home, and in the community. Just like anybody, someone living with ASD is unique, and the results will therefore be unique, and should never be generalised. Aquatic therapy is being used as an effective recreational treatment and we are excited to see further studies, determining the long-term results.

**Jarrod Gist.**
Occupational Therapist.

**References:**