World Autism Awareness month
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Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition which impacts how someone views the world. People with ASD can experience difficulties with communication, social interaction and restricted/repetitive interests and behaviours. These challenges are often accompanied by sensory issues such as an over-sensitivity or under-sensitivity to sounds, smells or touch.

While water safety education and learning to swim is a key childhood activity for many, it is often reported that individuals with ASD/other abilities are less likely to receive appropriate water safety education and learn to swim instruction than their peers. Understanding and accommodating your swimmers’ unique challenges, and working to build on their strengths is imperative in making aquatic environments safer and more enjoyable for your swimmers with ASD/other abilities.

This Autism Awareness Month we want to share with you a toolbox of teaching methodologies, specialised education and support to help you to change the hugely underreported statistics and remove all barriers to inclusion in all aquatic environments.

What is Autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition which impacts how someone views the world.

People with ASD can experience difficulties with communication, social interaction and restricted/repetitive interests and behaviours. These challenges are often accompanied by sensory issues such as an over-sensitivity or under-sensitivity to sounds, smells or touch.
Individuals with ASD may exhibit some or all of these characteristics:

- A **better retention of visual information over auditory information**.
- **Resistance to change** (e.g. change in routine, change in swimming teacher).
- **Decreased or increased sensitivity to pain or temperature**.
- **Increased avoidance or seeking of sensory stimuli such as sound, touch, smell and taste**.
- **Very strong attachments to objects and/or interests**.
- **Difficulty interacting with and tolerating others**.
- **Difficulty understanding and responding to instructions**.

The term “spectrum” is used to emphasise that autism presents differently in every single person. Each person with ASD has their own set of strengths and challenges. Many individuals with ASD have high abilities in specific topic areas, or specific skills such as memorization, calendar calculation, music, or maths.

It is important to identify the individual needs of each person in your swimming classes. This way, you can ensure you are providing optimal learning environments for all of your swimmers.

When preparing classes for swimmers with autism and other abilities, just remember: If in doubt, ask! Each person and their family/carers will know their own needs best, and will be glad to help make the aquatic environment safer and more accessible.
Everyone deserves the opportunity to be safe in and around the water, and to enjoy aquatic environments. However, for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and other abilities, there are many barriers to accessing the water safely. It is startling to note that:

- **Children with ASD are 160 times more at risk of drowning than their typically developing peers; and**
- **Accidental drowning accounted for approximately 90% of total deaths reported in children with ASD ages 14 and younger subsequent to wandering/elopement between 2009 and 2011.**

So WHY is this the case?

There are a number of key reasons why incidents of drowning in children with ASD are higher than the general population. These include:

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**Wandering**

Wandering is the tendency for an individual to try to leave the safety of a responsible person’s care or a safe area, which has the potential to result in potential harm or injury. Almost half (48%) of children with ASD attempt to elope from a safe environment, a rate nearly four times higher than their unaffected siblings.
Wandering is usually step one in the process leading to accidental drowning for individuals with ASD. Key reasons an individual may wander include:

- To get away from something they may find aversive (such as sensory discomfort).
- To reach something of interest/head to a favourite or preferred place.
- To escape demands or anxieties.
- Curiosity.
- They are lost or confused.

As there are multiple reasons as to why someone with ASD may wander, seeking support from a Behaviour Specialist is pivotal in understating the function/s and developing subsequent wandering-prevention strategies.

Autism Swim’s Wandering and Drowning Prevention Toolkit is a world-first in mitigating the associated risks.
**Difficulties with perceiving danger**

Many individuals with ASD have difficulties with anticipating danger and judging risk, which is exacerbated if they also have an intellectual disability. Difficulties perceiving danger may result in unsafe water behaviours such as:

- **Impulsive water entry.** For example, a swimmer may enter the water without permission; or jump into shallow water without identifying any risk.

- **Distracted by sensory properties of water.** For example, submersion underwater may allow the swimmer to escape an overwhelming amount of auditory or visual input. In this case, a swimmer may stay underwater for unsafe periods of time.

With explicit teaching strategies, individuals can learn water safety behaviours.

**Difficulties with generalisation**

Although many individuals with ASD may have had swimming lessons and developed swimming skills, they may experience difficulties in using these skills across different environments (lakes for instance).

Generalisation of skills needs to be taught from the very first lesson when developing a new skill.

It is also recommended that swimmers be exposed to a number of different aquatic environments to improve familiarity and generalisation of skills.
Seizure activity

Individuals with ASD often have comorbidities such as epilepsy. If an individual is identified as having seizure activity, it is important to have a seizure management plan and appropriate staff training in place.

When seizures happen in water, this can be life-threatening.

Lack of specialised/inclusive services

91% of parents in the Autism Swim community have left other aquatic services due to them not understanding or accommodating their child's needs. Hence, the demand for swimming instructors/teachers with specialised training specific to ASD and swimming is rapidly increasing.

In particular, there is a need for teachers to understand the ways in which individuals with ASD process information and acquire new skill sets, so the classes can be individualised and tailored to the strengths of the individual.

Specialist supports may include:

- **Use of visual information to support instructions and transitions between activities.**
- **Use of water therapy principles to promote swimmers' readiness for learning.**
- **Positive behaviour support strategies to ensure the time spent in the lesson is focused on developing water safety and swimming skills rather than managing behaviours.**
- **Utilising a sensory toolkit to ensure swimmers' needs are met during their swimming lessons.**
Lack of community awareness

Sadly, many in our community are unaware that wandering is even an issue or that drowning is such a high-risk factor for individuals with ASD.

Only 50% of parents of children with ASD have received advice about wandering prevention from a professional. In addition to parents and carers, aquatic professionals can help to address these risks through community awareness and education.

As a community we can all work together to provide safer and more enjoyable aquatic environments for everyone.

Ready to become Autism Swim Approved? Click here!
Why is the work of Autism Swim so important

... and why aquatic programs need to be a non-negotiable for those with ASD/other abilities.

In 2019, Autism Swim released a world-first report on wandering and drowning for those with ASD/other abilities. It is an amalgamation of research and an explanation of exactly what is being done to mitigate these risks.

Read this ground-breaking report here.
Why are those with ASD at such High Risk of Drowning.

Learning to Swim without Goggles.

Some of the Many Benefits of Swimming and Aquatic Therapy for those with ASD/other abilities.

To see Autism Swim's full collection of free blogs, go here.
Autism, or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) refers to a spectrum of social, communication, behavioural and sensory processing challenges. The definition is kept broad to demonstrate that each individual with ASD has their own unique and individual strengths and challenges which influence their experiences day-to-day. It is estimated that 1 in every 59 children has ASD (CDC, 2019). As aquatic professionals, we all play an important role in providing inclusive water education to individuals with ASD and other abilities.

Below are the 10 most common issues experienced by teachers when working with those with ASD and other abilities:

1. Giving Instructions:

Swimmers may have better retention of visual information over auditory information.

When overloaded with auditory information, swimmers can find it difficult to follow instructions. Common responses include:

- Swimmer may only follow the last step of an instruction given.
- Swimmer may freeze, unsure of how to complete the task.
- Swimmer may start to do something unrelated to the instruction.
2. Transitioning between activities

Swimmers may have difficulty transitioning between activities, especially activities which they enjoy. There are many reasons a swimmer may have difficulty transitioning between activities, for example:

- Difficulty shifting attention from one activity to another.
- Stress and anxiety associated with performing new and unfamiliar tasks. Swimmer may prefer to continue doing the activity they are familiar and comfortable with.
- Not being given enough time or warning to prepare for a transition.

3. Making changes to routines:

Many swimmers with ASD seek opportunities for stability and consistency in their environments, as frequent change and unpredictability of routines can be difficult to prepare for. It is common for swimmers to prefer that all lesson components are kept the same.

Some swimmers may respond negatively to big and/or small changes to a routine, for example:

- A new or different swimming instructor.
- Wearing different swimwear for the lesson.
- Swimming in a new area of the pool.
- Following a new or different activity sequence during the lesson.
4. Measuring progress/Skill acquisition:

Often, swimmers with ASD may take longer to acquire new skills during swimming lessons and to progress through standard swimming levels. Difficulties with skill acquisition may be due to:

- Motor coordination difficulties: swimmers may find it difficult to coordinate new motor patterns required for learning swimming strokes (e.g. using arms and legs at the same time).
- Cognitive flexibility: swimmers with ASD often present with a level of cognitive inflexibility. This is important for allowing swimmers to problem solve and try new strategies when learning a skill.
- Sensory processing challenges: swimmers may have difficulty learning if their sensory needs are not being met. For example, if a swimmer is overwhelmed by auditory input, they may have trouble learning in a noisy pool (see below: self regulation and sensory processing sections).

5. Generalising skills to new environments:

It has been said that a skill is not learned until it can be performed with automaticity and in multiple environments. Swimmers with ASD often have difficulty generalising skills in new and/or challenging environments.

This means that while a swimmer may know how to swim to the edge of their local pool used for swimming lessons, they may have difficulty retrieving this skill when swimming in an unfamiliar pool or lake; or when distressed.
6. Responding to behaviours of concern:

Many individuals with ASD exhibit behaviours of concern. These may include:

- Physical aggression.
- Self injurious behaviours.
- PICA (eating non-edible objects).
- Faecal smearing.
- Non-cooperation.
- Screaming.

Difficulties with generalising skills may also include:

- **Swimmer may not follow an instruction if given in a slightly different way.** For example, if swimmer has learned to do a streamline following the instruction to do “rocket arms”, they may not know what to do when asked to do a “streamline”.

- **Swimmer may not recall and perform skills in new or changing environments (e.g. a new swimmer in the class or a loud noise).**

- **Unsafe water behaviours in unfamiliar environments.** Swimmer may not generalise pool rules to other aquatic environments such as the beach, lakes or other pools.
7. Teaching water safety behaviours:

Many individuals with ASD have difficulties with anticipating danger and judging risk, which is exacerbated if they also have an intellectual disability.

Hence, swimmers may require more explicit teaching of water safety behaviours to avoid:

- Swimmer entering pool or other aquatic environment unsupervised or without permission.
- Swimmer holding their breath for extended periods under water.
- Swimmer injuring self or others due to unsafe water behaviours.

8. Creating a sensory friendly environment:

Individuals with ASD may experience sensory input in their environments differently to other swimmers.

For example:

- Noisy or bright environments may be overwhelming and cause swimmer to shut down or be distracted during their lesson.
- Unexpected noises such as whistles may cause a negative response from a swimmer and should be avoided as much as possible.
- Swimmers may have significant challenges adjusting to wearing swimwear or togs.
9. Building self-regulation skills:

Self regulation refers to the ability to monitor and adapt one's own energy levels and attentiveness. When a swimmer has difficulty with self regulation, they may:

- Not respond to instructions in class and/or do their own thing.
- Be slow to get started in activities.
- Become upset during lessons, including yelling, crying or aggressive behaviours.
- Often become distracted during the lesson.

10. Teaching in a group class:

Some swimmers may find it challenging to swim in a group class. There are many reasons why a swimmer with ASD may perform best in an individual class. For example:

- 1:1 classes provide the swimming teacher with an opportunity to get to know how the swimmer learns best, their likes and dislikes. This means that the swimmer is more likely to be comfortable and supported in their lesson.
- Other swimmers can be unpredictable, and create additional challenges for a swimmer with ASD to participate in the lesson.
- Opportunities to work towards individual goals (which may not always match typical swimming levels).
What's included in becoming AS Approved

People with ASD are 160 times more likely to drown, subsequent to wandering, than their typically developing peers. While regular attendance at swimming lessons is known to be an important factor in improving water safety skills, 91% of parents in the Autism Swim community have left other aquatic services due to them not understanding or accommodating their child's needs.

Autism Swim approved swim centres, therapists and instructors are working together to combat these statistics, and to contribute to more inclusive water safety education programs.
YOU get to be a part of our team, to work towards reducing these statistics.

How it works:

• Instant training - gain access to comprehensive online training instantly, at your own time.

• Ongoing resources - Receive an extensive set of monthly resources such as lesson plans, program templates, visuals, “what to do when” factsheets and skill focuses to set you up for success.

• Free marketing swags - get our free marketing goodies like signage and stickers, to show the world that you are Autism Swim approved.

• Expert support - with our Premium option, you will have direct access to our expert team of occupational therapists, autism specialists and behaviour specialists, whenever you need guidance in the disability sphere.

• Promotion of your services - Expand your services by featuring on our website and social media networks as a recommended provider, following your Autism Swim approval.

• Community network - Exclusive access to our private Facebook group where you can interact and learn from other Autism Swim Approved instructors.

Ready to register? Click here to start your training and connect with our worldwide network of inclusive water safety specialists today!
Receive up to 40% off

... becoming Autism Swim Approved for the month of April.

Did you know that as an STA UK Member you already receive up to 20% off Autism Swim Certifications? The coupon code for this is found in your STA Online Account.

Even better news is that for the month of April, you receive an ADDITIONAL 20% off to celebrate World Autism Awareness Month.

Simply add the coupon code "HappyWAAM2020' into the coupon code upon check out.

That's a total of up to 40% off, for this month only.
Don't miss out!

T&C's: Valid until April 30th only.
Valid on Value and Premium memberships only.
Promotion entitles customer to 35% off total value if opting to pay monthly and 40% off total value if opting to pay upfront.
Social media posts

To celebrate World Autism Awareness Month, here are some images that you can pop on your social media. Simply follow the links below to download.

For non-Autism Swim Approved individuals, click here.
For current Autism Swim Approved instructors/centres, click here.
Learning profiles

What progress has Leon made?

Leon, what do you like about swimming?
For more information on the references in this article, contact Autism Swim: hello@autismswim.com.au

Key insights taken from:
Autism Swim, ‘Wandering and Drowning Prevention Toolkit (V2)’ 2019. Toolkit can be Purchased here.