

This resource is meant to provide information and prevention tips for keeping autistic individuals safe around water.

Drowning can happen in any body of water. Everything from a pool, river, pond, or even a bathtub poses a drowning risk. Although drowning is a leading cause of death in children, for autistic individuals, the risk of drowning is greater than for those who are neurotypical. According to a 2017 Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health study, the drowning risk for autistic children is 160 times that of the general pediatric population, and drowning accounts for more than 70% of wandering-related deaths, according to a 2017 National Autism Association study.

Reasons for Increased Risk

The heightened risk of drowning in autistic individuals is due to a variety of factors, which include the following:

- **Communication Barriers** – Individuals who are non-verbal or have limited communication skills lack the ability to ask for help when they are in distress.
- **Lack of Danger Awareness** – Autistic individuals may not have the skills to understand a dangerous situation or assess the risk of the environment around water.
- **Sensory Appeal** – Water may appeal to autistic people's senses, and often, they will be drawn to it regardless of type or temperature. The sight, smell, feel, and sound of water could be attractive to an autistic individual who may not be able to understand the possible danger involved with interacting with it.
- **Wandering/Elopement** – Because autistic individuals often seek out sensory-rich environments, they may wander into unsafe situations, including interaction with bodies of water.



Prevention Strategies and Safety Steps



- **Alarms** – Installing loud alarms to windows, gates, doors, etc., may provide not only an auditory warning but also a harsh deterrent for autistic individuals.
- **Communication** – Informing neighbors, community members, and first responders of a child's elopement risk could prevent a water emergency.
- **Education** – Educating autistic individuals on the risks of water by using modeling, social stories, and continued discussion reinforces water safety.
- **Emergency Response/First Aid** – Understanding drowning signs and symptoms, having the ability to provide CPR/first aid, and knowing when to call 911 is critical when a water emergency occurs. Being able to give a quick and effective response could mean the difference between life and death.
- **Physical Boundaries** – Establishing and reinforcing water boundaries, such as fencing with self-closing, self-latching gates, may provide support for an autistic individual who wanders. Also, ensure pools and hot tubs are covered when not in use.
- **Protective Gear** – Wearing a life jacket when around water may protect autistic individuals and may provide a layer of safety.

Prevention Strategies and Safety Steps (continued):

- **Specialized Swimming Lessons** – Enrolling in autism-friendly swimming lessons for autistic individuals may build swimming techniques and water confidence. Make sure the final lesson is completed with the student wearing clothing and shoes.
- **Safety Plans** – Creating an individualized safety plan for each autistic person ensures all givers are aware of how to provide supervision, identify hazards, and prevent elopement.
- **Supervision** – Providing close, constant, capable supervision by a responsible adult when in and around water may help prevent elopement and may ensure quick emergency intervention.
- **Visual Safeguards** – Removing toys from in and around water may provide a visual cue to not be around the water. Other visual aids, such as stop signs on doors, windows, and gates, could prevent autistic individuals from wandering toward water.

Resources

Individuals with Autism at Substantially Heightened Risk for Injury Death

This 2017 study from Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health discusses drowning, the leading cause of death for autistic children, and recommends swimming lessons following diagnosis.

[View Resource](#)

Water Safety & Drowning Prevention

This National Autism Association webpage is inclusive for all families and provides information that is applicable to neurotypical and autistic children.

[View Resource](#)

Autism and Wandering

This resource offers suggestions for keeping someone with autism who wanders safe. Topics include definitions, how to secure your home, suggestions to prevent wandering, and how to alert people who can help.

[View Resource](#)

Drowning

This Justice for Autism resource provides essential training and resources to help prevent drowning and ensure the safety of individuals with autism.

[View Resource](#)

Autism Awareness and Drowning Prevention Strategies

This National Drowning Prevention Alliance resource provides parent and caregiver drowning prevention tips and strategies for autistic individuals.

[View Resource](#)

Learn the 5 Layers of Protection

Water safety is a lifelong endeavor. This National Drowning Prevention Alliance video series teaches the five layers of protection that help save lives.

[View Resource](#)