

Swimming for the Severely Challenged Child

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All children are capable of learning to swim despite their disability.

When preparing to teach children with special needs, it is important to evaluate them completely, to include their physical, cognitive and sensory needs.

Working with standardized swim skills progressions from organizations like the American Red Cross, YMCA or Learn-to-Swim programs may prove challenging. These skill progressions may need to be “*adapted*” in order to meet the needs of the swimmers you are working with.

Understand that when teaching children with special needs, the skill or desired outcome may not come as easily or as quick as with students in a regular swim program. So patience is essential.

The first skill I work on is “*water acclimatization*” or being comfortable in and around the water. Surprisingly enough this process begins even before they step foot into the pool area.

- a. Getting the student to understand that showering prior to swimming is a part of the process as well. This may be a new experience to some as most children are used to baths. Talk them through it and assure them they are okay. Make it a game.
- b. The process of coming out to the pool from the shower room can be someone traumatic for some as they anticipate the unknown but also as they experience temperature changes along the way. Cover them with towels while in transition and have dry ones available for afterwards as well. Comfort them and keep them warm.
- c. Once in the pool area, seeing a space that is large and full of water can be overwhelming. Take time to sit with them in a chair or on the pools edge and let them see the water and touch them water before becoming fully immersed in it. Take your time.

Based upon the student’s ability to sustain themselves in the water, the use of a floatation device or something to support them may be needed. Whether using a floatation device or not, physically providing support reassures the student that they are safe while they get used to the water.

Once the student has become comfortable in the water and also comfortable with you, you can begin working on your next skill using the swim progression you have developed for them. Remember to go at their pace and understand that you may have to do this each time they come till it becomes natural for them.

There are many students with physical, cognitive and behavioral disabilities that have other factors which may impede their ability to learn to swim. Some of these factors are:

- a. Lack of focus/distractibility
- b. Sensory Input
- c. Communication
- d. Tactile/Tactile Defensive

Just to name a few.

When working with students who have **Down's syndrome**, they may exhibit oral behaviors using their tongue. Being aware of this, you may want to work on getting students to close their mouths so they aren't swallowing a lot of water. Some activities include:

- a. Blowing ping-pong balls across the water
- b. Mirroring "*mouth closed*" behavior
- c. Using repetitive verbal commands to get them to close their mouth (e.g. "*close your mouth*" (show them), "*put your tongue in your mouth*")

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder have a tendency to spend a lot of time underwater. The water is very stimulating to them. So you may want to concentrate on skills that work on keeping the head above the water or at water level. Some activities include:

- a. Relaxation exercises and/or floating on your back
- b. Bring them up each time they take their head under
- c. Verbally tell them to "keep your head up"
- d. Teaching them swim strokes

Students with severe behavior issues are more likely to have issues from the time they come down to go swimming, throughout the lesson and during the transition out of the pool at the end. So it is important that you have spoken with the teacher or care provider to establish a plan of action should the behaviors get to a point of needing intervention.

- a. Identify the behaviors that are most destructive during the swim session.
- b. Meet with the teacher or care provider to develop a behavior plan
- c. Be consistent when using the plan and enforcing the consequences.
- d. Make their swim session successful, to minimize outbursts.
- e. Follow up with the teacher or care provider if you have to utilize any form of intervention

Working with a special needs student in the water tends to be a “hands-on” experience, literally. Even with students who exhibit defensiveness to being touch or handled, it is going to be important that you ease your way in to touching and/or holding them while in the water.

- a. Let them know that you are going to “touch” or “hold” them. (e.g. *“I am going to hold you in the water to keep you safe...okay?”*)
- b. Let them know where you are going to touch them. (e.g. *“I am going to touch your feet so we can work on kicking.”*)
- c. Use a hand-over-hand approach when working on arms skills. Have them put their hand on yours or vice versa. Whichever feels comfortable to them.
- d. When working on their back, offer to let them lie on you. It offers support and comfort and they tend to relax knowing you are under them. (This requires the student and teacher to wear a floatation belt; a more advanced skill for some.)

These techniques have worked to calm and settle the most physically aggressive and behaviorally challenge student.

*Don’t hesitate to “adapt” your swim program to meet the needs of the students you are working with.

***NO** child is unreachable.

***NO** behavior is too challenging. See it as communication and figure out how to work through it.

*The **SAFETY** of the student, yourself and those around you is always the first priority.

***EVERY** student deserves the opportunity to learn to swim in a safe and supportive environment.