

Water Safety

Water safety is a primary concern for many parents of children and youth with special healthcare needs (CYSHCN). This is due in part to the fact that many children with autism, developmental disabilities, and cognitive disabilities are drawn to bodies of water, combined with the sobering statistic that drowning is a leading cause of death in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Nearly two-thirds (32%) of parents reported a “close call” water incident with their children with autism, ending with near or possible drowning. Further, accidental drowning has accounted for up to 91% of total U.S. deaths reported in children with ASD under the age of 14 (National Autism Association, Lethal Outcomes in ASD Wandering, 2012).

Parents are the first line of defense to protect CYSHCN from water accidents or drowning. Many experts recommend that parents start teaching water safety to their children starting at a young age, taking care to emphasize the potential dangers of water. Another common recommendation is making sure that CYSHCN have continued access to swimming lessons.

Since many CYSHCN, specifically those with autism, are prone to elopement and/or wandering, taking precautions against elopement and wandering can help prevent water-related accidents. Nothing can replace adult supervision while in and around water; however, having safe and appropriate swim gear, including adaptive life jackets, can provide additional safety for CYSHCN. It is important for families to select the right type of life jacket for their child. The United States Coast Guard has general guidelines on [How to Choose The Right Life Jacket](#). In some cases, an adaptive life jacket might be more appropriate for some CYSHCN. Many options for adaptive life jackets are available, but the specific type will depend on each child’s individual needs.

The Safety Store at Riley Children’s Hospital offers low-cost safety products to families. Safety Store employees are trained educators, and they can provide families with safety advice, product suggestions, and educational materials. Families can contact The Safety Store online (<https://safetystore.iu.edu/>) or at 317-274-6565. Additionally, The Safety Store website has many topic-specific educational resources available to parents.

Educational Resources for Parents of CYSHCN

There are many educational tools available to help parents and caregivers learn more about water safety for CYSHCN.

- [Autism Spectrum Disorder & Water Safety Caregiver’s Guide](#) (Center for Autism and Related Disabilities)
- [The Big Red Safety Toolkit](#) (National Autism Association)
- [Drowning Prevention Information](#) (American Academy of Pediatrics)

- [General Water Safety Guidelines](#) (American Red Cross)
- [Guide to Water Safety for Special Needs Children](#) (Children's Hospital of Philadelphia)

Social stories and videos can be an invaluable way to help teach CYSHCN about water safety.

- [Pool Safety Social Story](#) (Cornerstone Autism Center)
- [Water Safety Video for Children with Special Needs](#) (Safe Kids Worldwide)

Many other social stories are available online. They are also easy to create specifically for your own child, so that it is tailored to your family's specific needs. Additionally, [Indiana Family to Family's Pinterest page](#) has a board specifically dedicated to safety resource information.

Programs and systems change often. It is important to ensure that you are using the most current information. This fact sheet was revised November 2023. Please check <https://www.inf2f.org/fact-sheets.html> for the most recent edition.

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