

**Presentation Transcript**

Topic: Developing an Inclusive Aquatic Programme suitable for all abilities

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People with disability consistently rate swimming as one of their preferred forms of physical activity. And it's not hard to understand why, considering the physical, social, emotional, and sensory benefits of the water.

What if I told you that 91% of parents in the Autism Swim community had left mainstream services due to them, not understanding or accommodating their child's needs.

My name is Jessica Thackeray, I am the clinical lead and an occupational therapist at Autism Swim. I have over seven years of experience in the aquatics industry, in which I worked as a swimming instructor developing inclusive programmes and worked as a Special Olympics coach.

Today I'm here to talk a little bit about Autism Swim, why we provide specialist supports in the water overcoming challenges we've encountered and how we have overcome them and encourage you to join the Autism Swim community.

So, let's start with a video.

Accidental drowning accounts for approximately 90% of deaths reported in children aged 14 or under and that's subsequent to wandering.

Wandering is the tendency for an individual to want to leave the safe environment or person. Wandering is also the first step in the process of drowning.

Autism Swim have identified that there are seven key contributing factors to the increased risks of drowning for individuals on the autism spectrum. These include increased seizure activity, we all know how risky it is to be in the water. If you have active seizure activity and are surrounded by people who don't know how to respond, so we believe it to call it part of training that all aquatic professionals are aware and know how to respond to seizure in the water.

Other contributing factors might be difficulty generalising skills, so we know that a person who has difficulty generalising skills might have attended swimming lessons and shown a lot of competence in them. However, if placed in an unfamiliar or a stressful environment, they might not be able to recall the skills required and still be at risk. We believe there's a lack of

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specialised services of those who can accommodate and understand the individual needs of person including their sensory communication, behaviour and physical needs. So, part of how Autism Swim came to be is that Erica, our founder was unable to find appropriate services. She knew the statistics and that her clients were at risk, but she couldn't find an appropriate provider to teach water safety and swimming skills. We also know that there's an increased difficulty in perceiving danger at autism swim, we focus more on teaching safe behaviours around the water as opposed to teaching the ability to perceive or understand danger, so we might teach that we enter the pool at one certain place rather than trying to show danger or induce fear. The final part is a lack of awareness and that's across the wider community, we consider a core part of our role is promoting community awareness and accommodations even wider than the aquatic communities.

We know that current drowning prevention strategies have neglected to address specific needs of individuals on the autism spectrum, and those with other abilities and we know this because of the higher statistics. We also know that there is no mention of how to approach or support a person on the autism spectrum, who might be in crisis, let alone how to appropriately teach a diverse swim on.

So, Why the water? For many people on the autism spectrum, the properties of the water helped to moderate levels of excitement and anxiety, which can help making it easier to concentrate and maintain attention. So, we know that in the water, we can get better outcomes, we can teach things in a more regulated and ready to learn way. We also know that in the water, our participants are more motivated to engage and they are often associated improvements in social behaviours, communication and interactions. So, on this slide, I've placed some pictures of children in different aquatic environments, we can see a boy swimming towards his teacher in the pool, and a girl standing up on a paddleboard in the ocean. So, in the water, we also know there are sensory benefits, we know that the hydrostatic pressure of the water provides physical and emotional relief.

It can also provide a lot of relief from overwhelming sensory experiences in the wider community or the wider parts of a person's day. Teaching in the water gives us great opportunities to teach water safety, as well as the improved coordination, mobility, balance and cognitive benefits.

So, what are some common challenges? We have identified and things that we have heard are common concerns for providers or credit professionals, for an individual on the autism spectrum, or those with other abilities, to stay focused and complete a task, to manage their emotions, to be laid on their back. To understand and follow through with instructions, to comprehend and learn water safety, or at least water safety behaviours, getting in and out of

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the water when it's finished time, being touched which can be a real challenge for instructors who really like to take a hands-on approach to teaching. Having other swimmers or group lessons can be a really big challenge and coping with sensory experiences in the pool environment.

When we're thinking about our individual participants, we all have different sensory processing preferences. We have a visual system, of vestibular system and auditory system, tactile and proprioceptive systems. We also have gustatory and olfactory senses. Some of those will be really familiar to you, those are things like our sight, our hearing, our smell, our taste, others might be a little less familiar, those are things like our proprioception, which is how our body awareness, where we are in space, and our stimulus system, which helps us to establish our centre of gravity and balance. When all of this information is processed well and is talking to each other, we know exactly where our body is in relation to everything else in our environment. This helps us to feel safe, and to feel confident. So, if we think about the sensory systems, and if we just take any one of them, and increase sensitivity to them, so let's say increase sensitivity to sound, all of a sudden that is going to be a core aspect of how we experience at environment, sounds that might not be intrusive to us or things that we might be able to automatically filter out, become at a total focus and of risk to an individual with increased sensitivity to sound in an aquatic environment. Similarly, if somebody has a reduced ability to perceive proprioceptive senses and where their body is in space, they might be less likely to feel comfortable doing things like getting their legs up, out of the bottom of the pool, or even entering into downstairs or things like that to get into the pool. So, really important things to be aware of and to accommodate in your lessons.

We've identified five key steps for improving access and inclusion in your aquatic programme. These include creating a safe and inviting aquatic environment, getting to know your participants and this we believe starts before they even start in your lesson. Introducing visual supports, modifying your programme to individual needs, and having a commitment to ongoing learning.

Setting up your environment, we touched on auditory processing difficulties before, but now we know 30% to 90% of individuals on the autism spectrum have sensory processing difficulties, which impact on their participation in the community. In one study, 65% of children with a diagnosis of autism reported sensitivity to noise. These have been suggested to trigger incidences of wandering or provide other behaviours of concern for those with auditory processing. So, we know that noisy environments can be a real trigger for a number of individuals with other abilities. Environmental set up considerations might include introducing quiet pool times, sensory rooms, and removing startling noises like whistles or electric hand

dryers. Another safety measure could be implementing automatic doors and putting up signs to prevent wandering.

So, what are quiet times? Quiet times are the times generally in the middle of the day where you might not be able to run a lot of group programmes because kids are at school. They might be days when people in your community do something else, like sometimes Sundays are really good times for sensory quiet time and what they do is they take out extra bodies from the pool and provide us an opportunity to, one, increase our business during quiet times, and two, create safe spaces for people who are really sensitive to noise and we can remove obtrusive noises, so that could be a case of turning off the hand dryers or replacing whistles with another form of communication for our lifeguards. For some people having to wait before the lesson can set them up for a really difficult time. Some of our providers have introduced Express Lanes to reduce wait times to get into the pool, because we know if we have a really successful lead up, we have a really good chance of having a better time in the water. You might have sensory rooms called quiet spaces in your rooms and it's really important that if you develop these, you advertise it so people know when they need it, there is somewhere for them to go. You might turn down your lighting and you might remove any music or loudspeakers from your environment.

When we talk about getting to know our swimmers, we like to use an enrollment form. This means that the parents who we identify as the experts in this child's life, they can write down their child's communication preferences, their social goals, their sensory needs, their behaviour support needs, their interests, their likes and dislikes, that goals for participating in your programme and their past experience in the water, we find the goals are really important because each person has completely different reasons for coming to the pool, it's not always learning to swim, sometimes it's the social environment and so if somebody is coming in purely for the social environment, and they place it on one on one class, there's going to need to be a discussion talking about how they're going to progress into opportunities for more social engagement.

Let's have a look at individual visual supports.

So, in this video, it is a lovely video of a person using a visual schedule. In this case, it includes pictures, but sometimes depending on preferences, it might just include words. And what it does is it helps for our participants to plan and prepare and know what's coming next. This can reduce anxiety, and it can also provide a concrete reference to look back to. It's consistent, and it builds trust between the participant and the instructor because they know what is coming next, they know how long visual supports are often combined with a timer to give a little bit

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more consistency and knowledge. Once we have visual supports, we can consider how else we can modify our aquatic programme. So, it is suitable for all abilities. In our aquatic programmes, we can set up swimming skill sets, how we can extend skills and improve generalisation so that might be in different parts of the pool, or it might be explaining things in slightly different ways to make sure that understanding is transferable. We also include water therapy as a really cool part, that's the focus on making sure our participants are regulated and ready for learning that they can use their body and know where their body is in space before starting any new learning activities. And of course, we include drowning prevention and water safety as a core part of all programmes. This might include education provided to parents, education provided to participants, and ensuring court swimming skills are being established.

Another way where we can modify our programme is through the use of water therapy principles. So, we have a number of resources that might include visuals that encourage self-monitoring and self-regulation. It might also be the use of water-based activities that provide vestibular and proprioceptive input. We typically focus on vestibular and proprioceptive sensory input first, because they are really organising aspects. Sorry, if a person's vestibular or proprioceptive input is disorganised, the other senses might go out of whack as well, so we focus on the cool ones best and then we can look up what else is going on afterwards. So, we have got lots of resources that help with understanding sensory processing, both as an instructor and ways to teach our participants as well as activity ideas to use, what are their opinion programmes.

Here's one example of water therapy being used in an aquatic programme. This is Suha, one of our providers who is encouraging his student to dunk under the water and come back up out of the water. What this does is it uses the hydrostatic pressures of the water to give every single joint and every single muscle extra pressure. It gives him a really nice organising and relieving factor, but also helps him to understand and build awareness of where his body is in space.

Another key consideration is positive behaviour supports. At autism swim, we promote understanding and accommodating behaviour support needs. This means we come from a point of understanding the purpose or the function of a behaviour and responding in a way that supports that person to meet their needs. Positive behaviour support might also look at ways to teach expected behaviours. For example, we might use a positive pool rules chart, which shows expected behaviours, such as "I walk around the pool", or "I keep my hands to myself", rather than focusing on negative behaviours that we don't want to see like "no eating", or "no diving" or "no jumping into the pool".

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And finally, we want to encourage you to become Autism Swim approved. Here's another video.

We're so proud and excited to have been presenting with you today. Thank you so much for all of your time. If you would like to know more, please feel free to visit our website at [www.autismswim.com.au](http://www.autismswim.com.au).

Alternatively, you can contact me at [clinicalteam@autismswim.com.au](mailto:clinicalteam@autismswim.com.au). I believe we'll open the floor to questions now. Thank you