

# Pointers from the Pool

## Building Towards Independence



**Autism** ONTARIO  
*see the potential voir le potentiel*

Micole Ongman, Program and Aquatic Supervisor, Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville, September 2013

Swimming instructors and lifeguards are taught many principles that may be appropriate and transferred easily to those working with children with autism. It is most important for instructors and lifeguards to understand whom they are working with, that each child is different, that children want to trust their teacher, to have fun and to enjoy their experience. Here are 25 pointers that have applications well beyond the pool.

- Safety is always first and foremost
- Establish rules right from the start and associate them with a picture/visual if possible. Pick the important ones and keep it simple
- At each class, go over the rules again. Don't expect them to be remembered. Point or the visual if the rule is broken so that they understand why the rules exist
- Be aware and be prepared for medical concerns
- The water may be very intimidating, take progressions slowly
- Don't miss out on successes. What you think they should be doing for success may not be what they are actually able to accomplish and many of their successes go unseen. For example, the instructor may be frustrated that the child may be focusing on the water, getting to know the texture and feel. For them that is a huge success
- Praise successes based on personal bests and skill building. Don't compare them to the other kids or to the criteria on the worksheets. There is always an accomplishment. Sometimes you need to look really hard and understand the child to recognize it.
- If you think they aren't listening, you are probably wrong.
- Learn from parents who their favourite characters are, then relate learning activities to that character. They may not be able to do something because they are shy or overwhelmed but they might be able to do it as Dora the Explorer, etc.
- Follow their lead and try to get what you want done inserted into what

their focus is.

- Work with their focus rather than expecting them to keep up with you.
- Lead transitions smoothly. If you are at one end of the pool blowing bubbles and need to go to another area, do walking bubbles or something that links the activities.
- If they are focused on an activity and doing well at it, ask yourself if you really need to move on to the next thing right now or can you go with the moment and allow them to do this longer
- Establish routines that do not change. Always meet at the same place for the beginning of the class. Start with the same activity to get them comfortable. End the class with the same activity to end with a success and to allow them to be aware that the next step is going out of the pool and class is over Be consistent
- What works for one child may be a disaster for another. Don't try to do canned lessons. Read in the child what works and what doesn't and adjust lessons as necessary
- Use one command/direction at a time. Keep it simple. If they don't do it, it probably means that they need it explained again in another way
- Everyone must respect the others' personal space. Before you touch them to assist with a float or skill, let them know what you are going to do and that you need to touch them. Demonstrate on someone else if possible
- Skills that are usually broken down into two or three steps may need to be broken down to 10 or 20 steps
- Assist children from the change room
- Use their names whenever possible. Make sure you introduce yourself in any situation. Children are usually much more comfortable once they know your name
- If there is a problem between two children, there is usually a reason and it is often in response to something once child did. Find out what the trigger was. It may be helpful to ask caregivers what types of triggers there may be and avoid those situations if possible
- Rules and consistency are very important. They need to be clear, to the point, visual if possible and explained
- If necessary, have a dry run of a visit to the pool. Bring the child in with their parents, siblings, etc. And let them practice or role play how to obey pool rules
- Have a plan in place on how to deal with issues. If a rule is broken or they

are not listening, have a meeting place that they are asked to go to so that things can be discussed, they can calm down, etc.

- It is too distracting to yell out directions or questions when they are in the pool. Devise a hand signal to alert them of the need to come to the side. Practice that with them over the course of the swim.

Be creative and have fun. Don't let their personal achievements slip by your notice. There is always something to praise.

***About the Author:***

*Micole is very active in Autism Ontario York Region chapter and has a young son with ASD. She brings personal experiences to her professional work. Micole also sits on the Council for the Lifesaving Society, Ontario Branch.*

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