

**AUTISM**

# **WATER SAFETY**

**& DROWING PREVENTION RESOURCES**



**UCF**

**Center for Autism  
and Related Disabilities**



# CONTENT

## **INTRODUCTION**

- P. 3 CONTACT UCF CARD TODAY!
- P. 4 WHAT SHOULD PARENTS KNOW TO KEEP THEIR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM FROM DROWNING

## **GENERAL WATER SAFETY INFORMATION**

- P. 6 WATER SAFETY TIPS
- P. 7 12 THINGS PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM NEED TO KNOW ABOUT DROWNING PREVENTION (AUTISM SOCIETY FLORIDA)

## **WATER SAFETY INSTRUCTION & SWIM LESSONS**

- P. 9 THE IMPORTANCE OF WATER SAFETY INSTRUCTION AND SWIM LESSONS
- P. 11 UCF CARD'S LAYERS OF PROTECTION APPROACH TO PREVENT ELOPEMENT AND DROWING
- P. 14 KNOW THE ABCD'S OF WATER SAFETY
- P. 15 LOCAL SWIM RESOURCES
- P. 19 SWIM SCHOLARSHIPS

## **ADDITIONAL LAYERS OF PROTECTION**

- P. 20 KEEP KIDS SAFE FROM DROWNING (WATERSMART FL)
- P. 21 EVERY PARENT SHOULD KNOW CPR

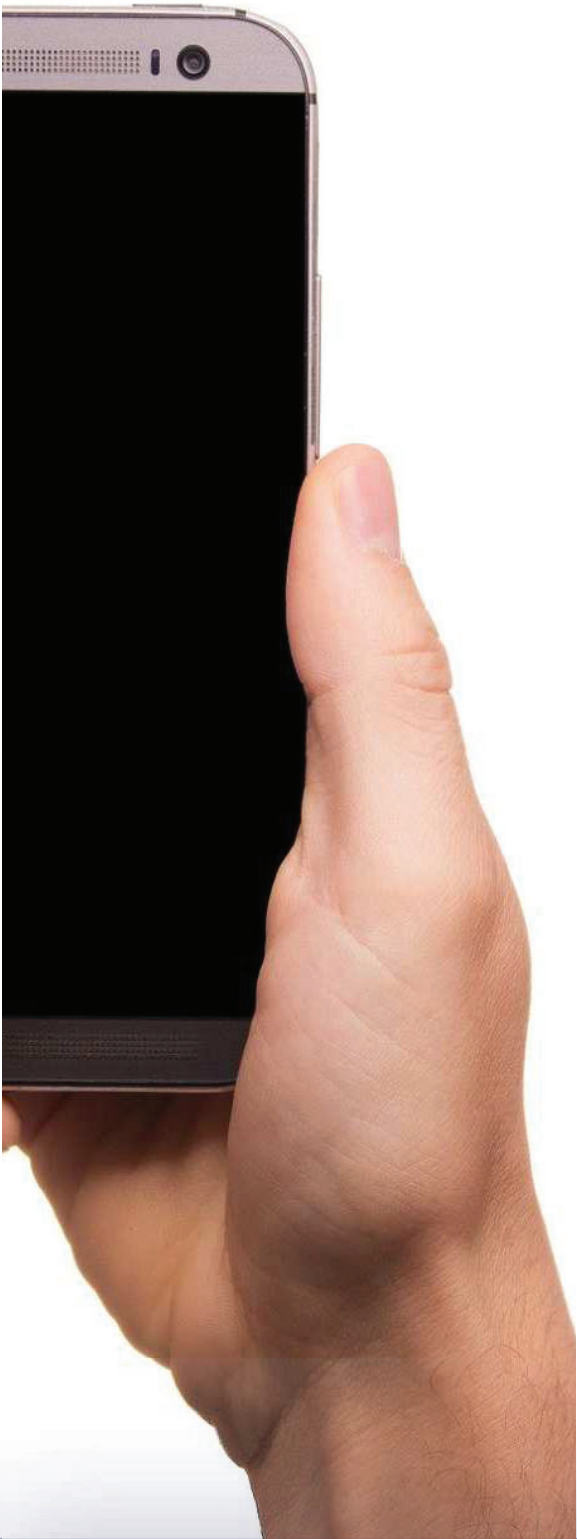
## **ELOPEMENT PREVENTION**

- P. 23 HAVE A WRITTEN EMERGENCY PLAN FOR YOUR CHILD
- P. 25 WANDERING PREVENTION & SAFETY FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

## **APPENDIX:**

- GENERAL SAFETY SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS
- ONLINE RESOURCES
- SOCIAL NARRATIVES
- COMMUNITY RESOURCES
- OTHER CARD CENTERS





# Contact UCF CARD Today!

UCF CARD is a free resource to all families of individuals with autism in the Central Florida area, including Brevard, Lake, Orange, Osceola, Seminole, Sumter and Volusia Counties. If you have a loved with autism or you suspect they may have autism, we ask that you contact UCF CARD to discuss your concerns and goals with one of our Autism Disorders Specialist.

If you are already registered with UCF CARD and have a concern related to your child's safety from wandering or drowning risks, CARD can help. Please contact your Autism Disorders Specialist to address the issue. If you are unsure who your Autism Disorders Specialist is, contact our office at 407-823-6001 and we will help you get an appointment scheduled.

**Drowning is preventable.** While wandering and elopement dramatically increase the risk of drowning in children with autism, there are steps that you can take to keep your child safe. Registering with UCF CARD and discussing your concerns with your Autism Disorders Specialist will help you to get the critical information you need to set up a safety and drowning prevention plan for your child. Please do not delay in contacting us; we are here to help!



[ucf-card.org](http://ucf-card.org)



[ucfcard@ucf.edu](mailto:ucfcard@ucf.edu)



(407) 823-6001



visit our resources page

# What Should Parents Know to Keep Their Children with Autism from Drowning

*Jack Scott, PhD, BCBA-D Executive Director FAU CARD*

Children with autism present a high risk for safety when compared to other children. Their risk for drowning may be as high as 10 times greater. We know that 50% of children with autism will wander away from home or school creating a greater risk. A child who wanders often goes to a pool or other body of water and too often drowns. This is a huge problem. CARD provides all the families we serve with good information on how to keep their child safe and how to prevent drowning. Here is a brief summary of some critical safety information that we want all of our families to know.

First, parents must know that their child is at much higher risk for safety. Awareness is the very first step. Then, they should prepare by developing an emergency plan so that if an emergency happens, such as the child wanders away, they will have a plan. This plan should include a picture of the child and ideas of where the child might wander so it can be shared with the police. It is essential, we cannot stress this enough, that if the child is missing, parents must call 911 immediately. A comprehensive search is necessary, and only law enforcement can do this. Call immediately. Then, check nearby bodies of water. Wandering and elopement are big risk factors for drowning. When a child is kept from wandering, the child is much safer from drowning.

Families that have swimming pools or spas have special obligations. Parents must see that building codes are met regarding alarms on doors and windows that open to a pool area. The property should be fenced with self-latching and self-locking child-proof gates. Professionally installed pool fencing is the safest option for keeping young children with autism out of the pool. Remove the fencing only when the pool is used and competent adult supervision is provided. Drain entrapment is also a danger, and these drains must have a cover so a child is not held down by the suction of the drain. Be sure pool drain covers are in place.





Children must be taught to only go near the pool when their parents are with them. When not using the pool, all toys and items that may entice the child should be stored out of the water. When in the pool, competent and dedicated adult supervision is required. This means an adult who is not cooking hamburgers, drinking alcohol, on their phone, or in and out of the house. A dedicated “water watcher” is required when children are in the pool. This is an adult with 100% responsibility for the safety of the children in the pool. Having a visual reminder, such as a “water watcher” lanyard helps to make it clear who is responsible for monitoring the children in the pool. Younger children and those who do not know how to swim require supervision at arm’s length, and the adult should be able to go in the water immediately. Float toys like floaties do not provide real security. US Coast Guard-approved personal flotation devices or life jackets do provide greater safety, and they should be used in and around boats and bodies of open water.



All water-watchers and caring adults should take a Red Cross Water Safety class. This class teaches parents how to keep kids safe in and around water. This class is free and can be done online. One of the key things parents learn is that drowning in real life is not what we see in the movies. For active or passive drowning victims, the child will not be able to call for help, and they quickly drown if not rescued. Persons watching children in the water need to be aware of this and closely monitor all children and to ensure that none are in distress.

Children who do not know how to swim should take swimming lessons. Swimming should be the first sport all children with autism learn. Water safety lessons and adaptive swim instruction are available. This may be the most important thing you can do for your child’s safety from drowning. Remember, even children who know how to swim need to be carefully supervised by competent adults.

Finally, parents need to be sure that each time their child is near a pool or water, all safety precautions are in place.



# Water Safety Tips

It is critical that all children learn how to swim. Evidence shows that swim lessons reduce the risk of drowning among children over the age of 1 and while limited evidence exists, some swim programs do teach survival lessons to children as young as 6 months! On page 15 you will see a list of resources providing swim lessons in your area.

Pool safety is stress-free fun for all. Making sure that pool fencing and guards are properly installed is key. The best protection is a four-sided isolation fence separating the pool area from the house and yard) reduces a child's risk of drowning 83% compared to three-sided property-line fencing.

Adult supervision makes all the difference. Siblings and other children should never provide supervision. Even for children who know how to swim, supervision must always be provided by an adult." Adults should have a safety plan in place in the event that a child in their supervision needs assistance. Questions to consider are: Are there life guards available, if in a public area? Is there water safety equipment available and does someone know how to use it? Call 911 for immediate assistance.

Life jackets save lives. Always have your children wear a life jacket approved by the U.S. Coast Guard while on boats, around open bodies of water or when participating in water sports. Make sure the life jacket fits correctly. Have kids make a "touchdown" signal by raising both arms straight up; if the life jacket hits a child's chin or ears, it may be too big or the straps may be too loose. Swimming aids such as water wings or noodles are fun toys for kids, but they should never be used in place of a U.S. Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device (PFD), and no flotation devices should ever be used in place of attentive adult supervision.

Most experts in the field of drowning prevention agree that it is not safe to use flotation devices such as floaties, puddle jumpers, or even life jackets while swimming in the pool. This is because it creates a false sense of security in believing that floating in the water is natural and also because these devices keep children in a vertical position, which is also known as the "drowning position." We do not want to build our children's muscle memory to be vertical within water and we do not want them to overestimate their ability to float. The safest way to enjoy water with your children is to keep nonproficient swimmers within an arm's length and to provide vigilant supervision anytime your child is in the pool, no matter how strong of a swimmer they are.

Learn CPR, it makes a difference. CPR can save lives and improve outcomes in drowning victims.



# 12

## *Things Parents of Children with Autism Need to Know About Drowning Prevention*

**1.** Kids with autism are DRAWN to water. They love the way it shimmers, bubbles, and feels on the skin. That, paired with a lack of danger awareness, can easily lead to a lethal combination.

**2.** The drowning rate in those with ASD is 160 times greater than those who are typically developing. 48% wander from parents and safe adults. 74% of drowning is a result of wandering.

**3.** Never leave a child unattended, no matter how much you think they won't jump into the water on their own or seek out a neighbor's pool.

**4.** Be sure that your child gets swimming lessons. This is of utmost importance. Don't assume that they cannot learn to swim. Many kids with autism are incredible swimmers, after they are taught.



**5.** When using flotation devices use CAUTION. If children get accustomed to having one on, they may always think they will float.

**6.** People with autism often have poor generalization skills. They may exhibit swimming skills in one pool, but not in another. Have your child spend time in different swimming environments to be certain that they have enough skills to stay alive in the water.



**Autism Society**  
Florida



autismfl.org  
info@autismfl.org  
407.207.3388



**7.** Knowing that 76% of all children who drown are age 3 and under, we must be diligent in keeping doors locked, pools gated and locked, alarms on doors and NEVER assume that a child cannot get out of the house.

**8.** When beginning the swimming lesson process, prepare students for the loud sound of the lifeguards' whistles. Demonstrate them and explain why they are used, and allow them to blow the whistle.



**9.** Allow your child time to familiarize themselves with the pool, the instructor, and objects they will be using, like their kickboards', goggles, or fins. This helps to minimize social difficulties and discomfort that a child with autism might experience.



[www.autismfl.org](http://www.autismfl.org)



**10.** Ask your swim school if they can offer a 'quiet room' or space. It doesn't need to be an actual room, but this would be an area away from the noise and activities where your child can go if they need a quiet break.

**11.** If your child has a hard time with crowds, ask the school if they can adjust the student-teacher ratio at "off" times. Many students with ASD perform better in smaller classes. Also, ask for flexibility with standard requirements, such as wearing swimming caps, which lots of kids with ASD can't handle.

**12.** Prepare laminated visuals of swimming lesson expectations, pool rules and rewards. Develop social stories about what kids can expect when they begin swimming lessons. Using individual pictures of your child and his/her teacher would be great and more meaningful.



# The Importance of Swim Lessons & Water Safety for Your Child with Autism

*Jacqueline Wood, Ph.D., FAU CARD Clinical Manager*

Sadly, drowning is the leading cause of death for children with autism. Common behaviors such as a fascination with water, a propensity to wander, and not understanding environmental risks makes children with autism more susceptible to drowning. Because of this, **swimming should be the first sport for all children with autism to learn**. It could end up saving their life. Pediatricians agree that enrolling your child in swim lessons should be prioritized as high as other therapies such as behavioral, speech, and occupational therapy.

While some children with autism may learn to swim from traditional swim lessons, others may require lessons that take a more tailored approach to meet their developmental, physical, cognitive, or sensory needs. This is where **adaptive swim lessons** come in!

**What are Adaptive Swim Lessons?** Adaptive swim lessons are designed specifically for individuals with special needs and take an individualized approach to learning how to swim and building water safety awareness. Adaptive swim instructors have received specialized training to modify the aquatic environment, lessons, and programming to each swimmer's unique needs and preferences.

Adaptive swim lessons may be provided by an additional instructor within a group setting to provide individual or small group supports and prompts to help the child follow the larger group. Alternatively, they may include private swim instruction in a 1:1 setting to teach adapted lessons. Some adaptive programs may incorporate many of the same practices that your child uses at home or school such as a visual activity schedule, peg boards, picture boards, and visual timers.



## **Tips for Parents:**

### **Finding Adaptive Swim Lessons:**

Some local swim instructors and aquatic centers offer adaptive swim lessons. The instructor or aquatics director will be able to tell you more about their adaptive swim options. Some people with autism will need one on one or very small group lessons or may need adapted techniques. It is important to ask what options each provider offers when making a decision about what would be the best fit for your child. You can see a list of providers on page 12.

### **Questions to Ask:**

Currently, there is no industry standard for swim instructor training to be qualified to teach adaptive swim lessons. You will want to ask some specific questions to ensure the program is a good fit. You may want to ask about:

- o The instructor's experience/comfortability working with students with autism.
- o What adaptive swim training the instructor has received.
- o How the program will address your child's unique needs such as anxiety, water-seeking behaviors, difficulty following directions, communication needs, etc.

### **Water Safety Awareness:**

In addition to learning how to swim, water competency includes teaching your child about the dangers of water and rules for staying safe. It is important to communicate water safety rules with your child, read picture books together that teach about water safety, incorporate social narratives, use video models, use visual supports and specifically list and frequently review the rules for water safety.

### **Other Benefits of Aquatic Environments**

Beyond drowning prevention, teaching your child to swim has additional benefits as well! Having access to swimming provides opportunities for physical activity and exercise throughout your child's life. Aquatic environments may improve motor and coordination skills, strengthen muscles, and enable those with physical limitations to move more freely. Furthermore, swimming is a nontraditional team sport. Individuals with autism can participate in individual or team competitions while gaining opportunities to build social skills and friendships.

While swim lessons have shown to reduce the risk of drowning for children with autism, please remember that swim lessons alone will not drown-proof any child of any age. Drowning prevention requires a multilayered protection approach including: close, constant, attentive supervision; environmental barriers and alarms; life jacket use; safety awareness and competency building; and CPR training.



# UCF CARD's Layers of Protection Approach to Prevent Wandering and Drownings

*Jennifer Cicia, M.Ed., BCBA Autism Disorders Specialist*

The layers of protection are designed to ensure that there are multiple barriers preventing your child's ability to wander and access water unsupervised. By taking this approach there would have to be multiple failures in order to have a catastrophic event. Each layer lessens your chance of tragedy by putting another barrier in place to keep your child safe.

- 1. Safety Proof Your Home:** The goal is to keep your child in their safe place: your home. But we must first consider dangers that may exist within our own spaces. Make sure that your child does not have unsupervised access to areas that could be a drowning, suffocation, or other hazards within your 4 walls. Consider blocking access to bathrooms (toilets, bathtubs, sinks), air/water tight appliances (such as washers, dryers, dishwashers), and other safety hazards such as hanging cords, unblocked outlets, and furniture tipping risks. Additionally you should never leave buckets of water out that children can gain access to. Children can drown in just a couple of inches of water.
- 2. Locks for All Entry/Exit Points in Your House:** Next, you will want to make sure that you have safety locks for all entry and exit points in your home, including all exterior doors and windows. These will need to be locks that your child is not able to open, which may be beyond what comes standard. There are many options available commercially. If you are unsure where to start, please contact your Autism Disorders Specialist with UCF CARD and they can help discuss what options may work best for you.
- 3. Alarms for All Entry/Exit Points in Your House:** In addition to locks for all entry and exit points, you will also want to utilize alarms so that if your child is able to figure out how to breach the lock you will be alerted. This can be done through a household alarm system or just by adding individual alarms to your doors and windows. You will want to make sure that any alarms that you add will be loud enough that you would hear them across the house and it is best to have alarms that will continue to sound as long as the door or window is open (not just make a single chirp that can easily not be heard). There are many sources that offer these types of alarms at low or no cost. Contact your ASD Specialist with UCF CARD to discuss what, if any, options are currently available in your area.

**4. Fences:** If your child is able to get out of your home, it is best if they can be kept in a safe place on your property. If you live in a home that can be fenced, it is highly recommended that you do so. All fences should have a self-closing gate which should also have its own lock and alarm. If you have a pool or other body of water on your property, it is 100% necessary that they be blocked with a 4-sided fence.

**5. Communication with Local Law Enforcement:** If your child is missing, seconds count. It is imperative that you immediately contact law enforcement so that local patrols can begin an immediate search and additional resources can be deployed. Most law enforcement agencies have a registry for people with special needs that allows you to store current information about appearance, likes, and dislikes so that that information is immediately accessible to first responders and can be shared out within seconds. You can contact your local jurisdiction to inquire about this option. It may also be possible to have local patrols meet with your child so that if an emergency ever does happen, they have familiarity with each other. Finally, it is recommended that you fill out a child information packet like the one included in the [The National Autism Association's Big Red Safety Box](#) and take a picture of your child daily in the clothes that are wearing so that you don't have to recall these details while you are already in panic mode.

**6. Tracking Devices:** Tracking devices are not designed to be a replacement for attentive adult supervision, but can be lifesaving technology if your child does end up going missing. There are a variety of options, and some may have funding sources in your area. Contact your ASD Specialist with UCF CARD to discuss this option and what may be the best fit for your family.

**7. Swim Lessons:** High quality swim lessons are essential for all children. Many parents of children with autism worry that they will not be able to find an instructor that can help their child, but there are many options in Central Florida for instructors that are trained in adaptive swim. If lessons are not affordable for you, there may be options for grants and scholarships in your area. Contact your ASD Specialist with UCF CARD to inquire about providers and if there are any financial assistance programs available in your area.

Remember – ALL DROWNINGS ARE PREVENTABLE! Following these steps and utilizing the ABCDs of drowning prevention will greatly reduce your child's risk.

Contact UCF CARD for more information:

<https://ucf-card.org/>

[ucfcard@ucf.edu](mailto:ucfcard@ucf.edu)

(407) 823-6001



# Layers of Protection



## Safety Proof Your Home

No unsupervised access to laundry rooms, bathrooms, or kitchens. Never leave out buckets of water or chemicals.



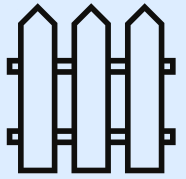
## Locks on All Exit Points

Put childproof locks on all doors and windows.



## Alarms on All Exit Points

Choose alarms that will sound until the door/window has been resealed.



## Fences

Fence off all bodies of water on your property. Put a fence around your property if possible.



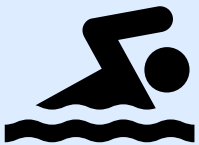
## Contact with Law Enforcement

Register your child with local law enforcement. Set up a meeting with routine patrols. Call 911 IMMEDIATELY if your child goes missing.



## Tracking Devices

All children that wander/elope must have a tracking device so that you can locate them quickly.



## Swimming Lessons

Enroll your child in high quality swimming lessons TODAY.

**Contact your Autism Disorders Specialist with UCF CARD today to learn about programs and options in your area and develop your child's personalized safety plan!**



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# ABCDS

## of Water Safety



# A

## ACTIVE ADULT SUPERVISION

Keep infants and toddlers within arm's reach. No one should ever swim alone, including adults. Drowning is silent, so have a "water watcher" who has their eyes on the pool at all times.

# B

## BARRIERS & BATHTUBS

Install fences with self-closing, self-latching gates to isolate swimming areas. Have childproof safety locks and alarms on doors. Always supervise your child in the bathtub.

# C

## CLASSES

Learn to swim by taking lessons. Learn first aid and CPR. A phone should always be close by in case of emergency, but should not be used by the water watcher unless they need to call for help. Teach that running, jumping, and pushing on pool decks is dangerous and can cause injuries.

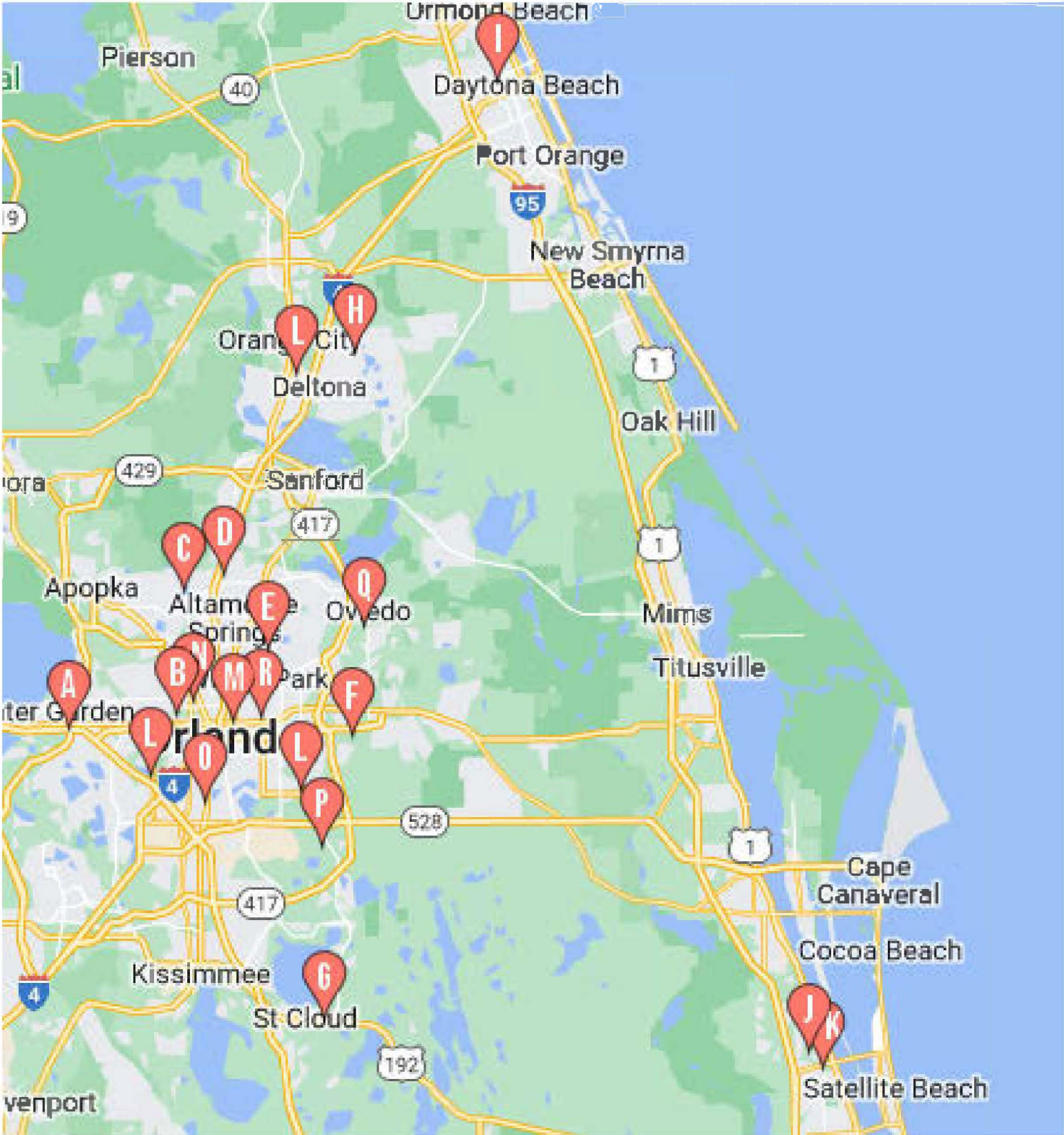
# D

## DRAINS

Keep children away from pool drains. Tie hair up and remove dangling items. Know where the pool pump shut off is.



# Local Swim Resources



# Local Swim Resources

## **A. The Gift of Swimming/Southwest Aquatics/Joy McGinty**

littleaquatics@gmail.com  
407-905-0999  
205 Windermere Road, Winter Garden, FL 34787 <http://www.giftofswimming.org/https://southwestaquatics.com/>

## **B. Precision Aquatics/Karen Faust**

k.faust@infantswim.com  
407-729-6251  
910 Fairvilla Rd, Orlando  
[https://www.facebook.com/PrecisionAquaticsSWOrlando/https://www.webaccomplice.app/scheduler\\_app/lesson\\_types/precisionaquatics\\_group/0//0](https://www.facebook.com/PrecisionAquaticsSWOrlando/https://www.webaccomplice.app/scheduler_app/lesson_types/precisionaquatics_group/0//0)

## **C. Patriot Aquatics**

admin@patriotaquatics.com 407-862-2207  
991 Sand Lake Road, Altamonte Springs, Florida 32714  
<https://www.teamunify.com/team/flpa/page/summer-programs1/swim-lessons1>

## **D. Pool Safety Resource/Geoff Dawson**

geoffdawson@thepoolsafetyresource.com  
407-834-9182  
107 Meadow Creek Cove Longwood, FL 32750  
<http://thepoolsafetyresource.com/>

## **E. Goldfish Swim School - Winter Park**

407-410-4660  
5445 Lake Howell Road Winter Park, FL 32792  
[https://goldfishswimschool.com/winter-park/?y\\_source=1\\_MTYwNjg0NjYtNDgzLWxvY2F0aW9uLndlYnNp dGU%3D](https://goldfishswimschool.com/winter-park/?y_source=1_MTYwNjg0NjYtNDgzLWxvY2F0aW9uLndlYnNp dGU%3D)

## **F. Stone Crab/Ann Stone**

stonecrabs@gmail.com  
407-282-4970  
1085 Crane Crest Way, Orlando, FL 32825  
<http://www.stonecrabsswimteam.com/>

## **G. Safety First Pediaquatics**

407-492-9952  
1104 Quotation Ct, St Cloud, FL 34769  
<https://safetyfirstpediaquatics.com/>

## **H. Swim With Becky**

info@swimwithbecky.com  
386-490-2190  
Deltona, Various Locations  
<https://www.swimwithbecky.com/Scholarship Available>

## **I. Easterseals: Float4Life Water Safety Program/Chelsey Robinson**

crobinson@esnecfl.org  
386-271-2133 (ext. 358)  
1219 Dunn Avenue, Daytona Beach, FL 32114 <https://www.easterseals.com/necfl/>

## **J. Swim Sprouts, LLC**

swimsproutllc@gmail.com  
940-277-7688  
865 Oakwood Dr, Melbourne, FL 32940  
<https://www.swimsprout.com/>

## **K. Health First**

321-434-9122  
8705 N. Wickham Road, Melbourne 32940  
<https://hf.org/healthcare-home/departments-services/physical-occupational-therapy/physical-therapy/who-we-are#our-locations>



# Local Swim Resources

## **L. Fintastic Swim Academy**

info@aquafinswimschool.com

904-775-9400

820 Commed Blvd, Orange City, FL 3276

5915 S Goldenrod Rd, Orlando, FL 32822

4792 S Kirkman Rd, Orlando, FL 32811

<https://aquafinswimschool.com/>

## **M. Downtown Orlando YMCA**

407-896-6901

433 North Mills Ave Orlando, FL 32803

<https://ymcacf.org/locations/downtown>

## **N. Leonard and Marjorie Williams Family YMCA**

407-723-5699

2178 Packing District Way Orlando, FL

32804

<https://ymcacf.org/locations/packingdistrict/>

## **O. South Orlando YMCA**

407-855-2430

814 W Oak Ridge Rd Orlando, FL 32809

<https://ymcacf.org/locations/southorlando/>

## **P. Lake Nona YMCA**

407-852-3520

9055 Northlake Pkwy Orlando, FL 32827

<https://ymcacf.org/locations/lakenona/>

## **Q. Oviedo YMCA**

407-359-3606

7900 Red Bug Lake Rd Oviedo, FL 32765

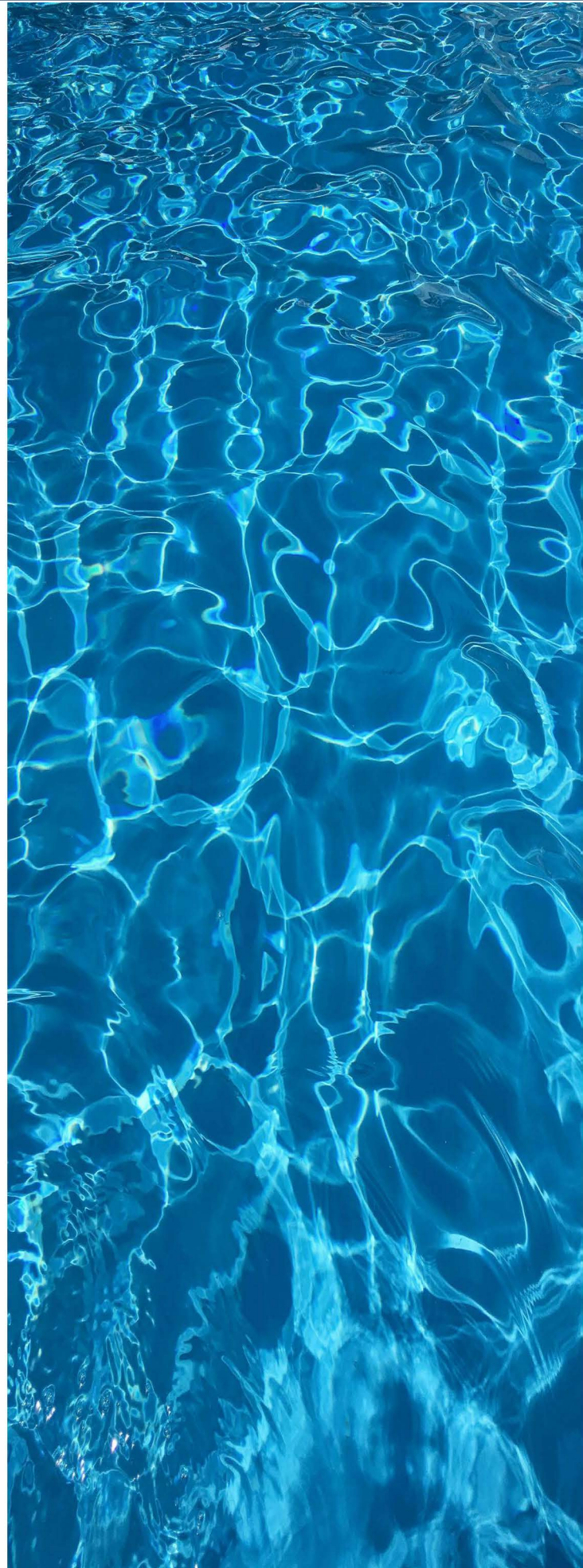
<https://ymcacf.org/locations/oviedo/>

## **R. Vinny Vurro**

407-898-5060

4401 East Colonial Drive Suite 107,  
Orlando, Florida 32803 Located on the  
Orlando Health South Lake Hospital  
Campus

<https://usantc.com/facilities/swim-training/>





# Private Swim Lessons

## **Little Aquatics**

littleaquatics@gmail.com

(407) 913-7946

<http://www.littleaquatics.com/>

Serves Greater Orlando, Sanford, Lake Mary, Winter Park, Winter Garden, Ocoee, Winter Springs, Casselberry, Maitland, Oviedo, and Kissimmee

## **Summit Therapy Private Swim Lessons**

summittherapies@gmail.com

407-732-2487

<https://www.summittherapiesorlando.com/summit-swim-lessons>

Serves Winter Springs, Oviedo, Casselberry, Longwood, Maitland, Winter Park, Sanford, and Orlando

## **Sunsational Swim School**

office@sunsationalswimschool.com

1-888-788-2140

<https://www.sunsationalswimschool.com>

Serves all of Central Florida

## **Aquatics and Education/Brooke Bothum**

aquaticsandeducation@gmail.com

561-676-5007

<https://aquaticsandeducation.com/>

Serves Brevard and Palm Beach County

Scholarship AVAILABLE





# Swim Scholarships

## **Live Like Jake**

<https://livelikejake.com/>

## **Because of Logan**

<https://becauseoflogan.com/>

## **Love Can Build a Briggs**

<https://www.lovecanbuildabriggs.com/scholarship>

## **Levi's Legacy**

[levislegacy.com](https://levislegacy.com)

## **Judah Brown Project**

<https://judahbrownproject.org/what-is-survival-swim/>





# Keep Kids Safe from Drowning

**Drowning happens when you least expect it.**

In Florida, drowning is one of the leading causes of preventable death in children 1–4 years of age. To reduce the risk of drowning, use multiple **layers of protection** and restrict unsupervised access to water sources such as pools, hot tubs, canals, ponds, ditches, bathtubs, toilets and more.



## Layers of Protection

### Supervise

**Proper supervision is the most effective drowning prevention.**

- Know your surroundings and possible drowning risks to your child at home and when traveling.
- Ensure young children are always supervised by a trusted caregiver.
- Assign a Water Watcher and use touch-supervision.
- Never leave a child alone near water, even for a second.

### Swim Safety

- Seconds count! CPR training saves lives.
- Water survival skills training and swim lessons can help reduce drowning risk for children between the ages 1–4.
- By their 4th birthday, most children are ready for swim lessons.
- Swim lessons are not a replacement for supervision.
- Make a family drowning prevention plan and ensure all family members know how to swim.

### Barriers & Alarms

**Use barriers to water access.**

- Install and maintain 4-foot pool fencing and self-closing, self-latching gates and doors.
- Secure and lock all doors, windows and pet doors.
- Install door chimes or alarms.
- Routinely check for needed repairs to fencing, gates and barriers.

### Did You Know?

- While most child drowning incidents occur in a pool, nearly 70% of those children were not expected to be in the pool at that time.
- Distracted caregivers are a primary factor in child drowning incidents.
- Most drowning happens without a sound.
- Drowning incidents are preventable.

To learn more, visit:

**WaterSmartFL.com**

**WaterSmartFL**  
WATER SAFETY IS EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY

**Florida  
HEALTH**





# Every Parent Should Know CPR!

*Jacqueline Wood, Ph.D., FAU CARD Clinical Manager*

No parent wants to think about any harm being done to their child; however, given the increased safety risks often faced by children with autism, it is imperative that you are prepared in the event of an emergency. Many children with autism are fascinated by water, may have a propensity to wander from a safe place, and possibly have a diminished sense of danger or environmental awareness. These risks make them especially vulnerable to entering a body of water without knowing how to swim and without adult supervision. Prompt cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or CPR, has the greatest impact on survival and prognosis in the event of a drowning incident. As a parent or caregiver, being trained in CPR could be a crucial lifesaving skill for your loved one.

The benefits of parents and caregivers being trained in CPR include:

**Identifying potential hazards and risks:** Knowing CPR can help you to proactively identify potential dangers in different settings. Being able to recognize these can help you make environmental modifications as necessary to avoid future injuries and accidents.

**Preventing long-term injury or death:** Drowning is a hypoxic event, meaning that the brain does not receive enough oxygen, limiting its ability to function and affecting all organs of the body. In the event of a nonfatal drowning, emergency treatment is critical. If oxygen is not delivered quickly enough, the individual could suffer irreversible brain damage or even die. Caregivers who have received training in CPR can administer help immediately.

**Able to take action:** Emergencies can happen at any time and in any place. If a child stops breathing, every second counts, but sometimes medical aid may not arrive for several minutes. You must be able to assess the situation and react quickly. Without CPR training, you may be left feeling helpless and not knowing what to do to save your child's life.

**CPR is easily accessible to anyone:** You do not need to have a medical background to safely administer CPR. Anyone can take a CPR training course and learn this necessary lifesaving skill. CPR training can be completed in just a few hours and at a relatively low cost. Certification courses can be completed in-person or in a blended format. Online courses are available; however, hands-on skills training is necessary to become certified from an organization such as the American Red Cross.

**Being prepared:** An emergency situation can quickly become chaotic and thinking often becomes blurred. Being trained in CPR can increase your knowledge and ability to think clearly, so that you can take the necessary steps in an emergency. You can feel more confident with your child knowing there is a way to help.

Children with autism are especially vulnerable to accidents and injuries. Be proactive and prepare yourself beforehand. CPR training is an integral part of your emergency planning and is an additional layer of safety for protecting your loved one. There are many options for CPR classes available in your community. There may be free or low cost options. If you need help finding CPR classes in your area, contact your Autism Disorders Specialist with UCF CARD.

UCF CARD is a free resource to all families of individuals with autism in the central Florida area, including Brevard, Lake, Orange, Osceola Seminole, Sumter and Volusia Counties. If you have a loved with autism or you suspect they may have autism, we ask that you contact UCF CARD to discuss your concerns and goals with one of our Autism Disorder specialists. Together, you will create an individualized plan for you and your family.

Contact UCF CARD:

<https://ucf-card.org/>

[ucfcard@ucf.edu](mailto:ucfcard@ucf.edu)

(407) 823-6001





# Have a Written Emergency Plan for Your Child with Autism

*Jack Scott, PhD, BCBA-D Executive Director FAU CARD*

When a child with autism elopes or wanders away, most parents go into panic mode. This is understandable as they know the children can't care for themselves and that risks are dramatically increased. A drowning can happen in such a short time that finding the child immediately is essential, but parent's thinking ability will not be good in panic mode. Preparation for such an emergency is required, and this happens well before an emergency. The benefits of parents and caregivers being trained in CPR include:

## **Steps for Creating an Emergency Plan:**

- 1. Develop your plan:** Preparing for an autism emergency means developing a clear plan for how parents and caregivers will react if the child elopes. We recommend doing this as a family with all adult caregivers present. It is best to use a template for this purpose as it will address the key areas needed. There are multiple free templates available online. The original and perhaps the best autism emergency plan is offered by Dennis Debbaudt with Autism Risk Management. This free plan is available here in English, Spanish, and French:  
<https://autismriskmanagement.com/downloadable-resources/>
- 2. Complete your plan:** You may decide to complete the plan on a computer, and this makes it easy to share multiple copies with other caregivers (grandparents or babysitters), and with your child's teacher and school. It should include a current and clear photo of your child.
- 3. Print copies of your plan:** Post them in your home on the refrigerator or other prominent locations. Have multiple copies ready to be handed to law enforcement officers if an elopement occurs. If you have others providing care in the home, be sure to go over the plan with them and be confident they know how to respond as you would.
- 4. Upload a copy of the emergency plan to your cell phone:** Ensure this copy can be quickly shared with local law enforcement agencies in an emergency. This will allow them to have essential information and immediately share it with all officers involved in the search through their dispatch system. The seconds matter, so take the time to practice sharing this electronic document if you are not familiar with this process.

**5. Distribute your plan:** Be sure to provide a plan to your child's teacher, aftercare, the special education coordinator, and any other who will be responsible for supervising your child. Be sure the school resource officer for your child's school has been informed about the elopement risk for your child. You are confirming that they are fully informed partners in maintaining your child's safety. Your plan is an important piece of paper, but it is more than this. It is a clear message from the parent to others who have responsibility for your child that your child is at elevated risk for elopement and all the dangers that come with elopement. It enlists others in your mission of keeping your child safe.

**6. Update your plan:** As your child grows, it is likely that their behaviors and preferences will change as well. At least once a year, update the form with a new picture, information on your child's likely places to go, and other preferences. Coordinate this update with another significant yearly event to help you remember. For example, put a reminder in your cell phone or calendar to update the plan each year on your child's birthday.

**\*\*If you have an electronic tracking device\*\*** If you have an electronic tracking device for your child, be aware of any information that you may need to share with law enforcement to assist in a search (such as the unique code for the device). Different tracking options use different mechanisms, so it is important to know how yours works in order to make sure it is properly utilized in case of an emergency. Any pertinent information should be included in your child's emergency plan. If you are unsure what information needs to be included for your particular device, contact your Autism Disorders Specialist with UCF CARD for guidance.

No parent likes to think about anything wrong happening to their child, but if you have a child with autism, the risk that your child will elope is high. Preparation can do two critical things: It can serve as a reminder of the safety status of your child for the family and all who provide care for the child. Second, in the event of an elopement, it can serve as the action plan for finding your child and helping the police move quickly to get your child back to you safely.

Finally, if you are registered with UCF CARD, contact your Autism Disorder Specialist, and they will be happy to assist you in writing your Autism Emergency Plan. If you are not already signed up with UCF CARD, and you have a child with autism or think your child may have autism, please contact us today.

Contact UCF CARD:

<https://ucf-card.org/>

[ucfcard@ucf.edu](mailto:ucfcard@ucf.edu)

(407) 823-6001



# WANDERING PREVENTION & SAFETY FOR CHILDREN WITH ASD

Wandering is a big source of worry for many parents and caregivers of individuals with autism. This fact sheet provides basic facts on wandering, ways to reduce risks, and some resources where you can get additional information and support. Kiely and Associates (2019) established that receiving guidance on this topic helps parents use a greater number of wandering prevention strategies. Please inform your UCF CARD, autism disorders specialist, if wandering is an area of concern for your child.

Wandering or elopement refers to leaving the expected area without permission, supervision, or caregiver knowledge. This can include suddenly running or bolting away to escape or get to a specific place, item, or interest. It can also include simply wandering without a purpose. It can occur in all settings, including a school, residential facility, in the community, a friend/neighbor's house, or an individual's own residence. It often happens "in the blink of an eye", and can lead to serious consequences both for the individual and their family. Drowning remains the leading cause of death related to wandering (National Autism Association, 2017).

According to a 2012 study of more than twelve hundred children with ASD:

- Nearly half (49%) of children with ASD engaged in wandering behavior.
- 29% of wandering happened from a classroom or school.
- In more than 1/3 of cases, police were involved in the search.
- Increased risks for wandering were associated with ASD severity.
- More than 1/3 of children with ASD who wandered were not able to communicate their name, address, or phone number.
- Due to fear of wandering, more than 40% of parents experienced sleep deprivation and more than 60% of families avoided activities outside the house at some point.

(Anderson et al., 2012)

## Risks

There are several major risks associated with wandering. These risks can include, but are not limited to:

- Drowning
- Traffic injuries
- Encounters with strangers
- Dehydration
- Falls exposure to elements

## Reasons for Wandering

- Physical attention (e.g. to be chased), verbal attention (being reprimanded or praised)
- Access to something desired (toys, food), or visual investigations (trains, water)
- Escape from something unpleasant or overstimulating
- Sensory enjoyment: walking, running, 'sightseeing' or being outside.

Some people with ASD may wander due to one of these reasons, a combination of these, or for some other reason not mentioned. Identifying the individual's purpose for wandering is critical for resolving the issue.

## Prevention

Prevention is the key to intervention. You will need to develop a plan for keeping your child safe and employ several layers of support in order to prevent wandering or elopement (National Autism Association, 2012). The details of the plan will change over time as your child grows, and as their environments change. Please contact your UCF CARD Autism Disorder Specialist to obtain training and tools to support your loved one with autism.

- Inform all of your child's caregivers about wandering risks and triggers. Many happen when caregivers look away for just a second. Close supervision is essential and always needed. Safety skills and wandering prevention measures can be written into your child's IEP (Autism Speaks, n.d.).
- Enroll your child in swimming lessons. Seek a swim instructor who is familiar with the unique needs of children with autism.
- Make environmental modifications:
  - Door locks and latches, doorknob covers, window locks, gate locks, pool fences, etc.
  - Door alarms, window alarms, proximity alarms, immersion alarms, etc.



- Educate the community:
  - Inform local authorities including police, fire rescue, paramedics, and other local agencies about your child with special needs. They may have local initiatives and additional resources on wandering prevention.
  - Talk to your neighbors and other pertinent individuals about your child. Provide them with your contact information and your child's recent picture, or make an in-person introduction to your child (do a predator search before this step).
  
- Add identification information:
  - Medical alert bracelet
  - Identification card
  - Tags on shoes and clothing with your phone number

CALL 911 IF A CHILD IS MISSING OR IF THERE IS ANY OTHER EMERGENCY.

## **Skill Development**

Skill development can go a long way in reducing undesirable behaviors. Involve all teachers and specialists in developing goals to promote your child's safety, and practice essential skills often:

- Communication- Expressive language skills to request items or activities. This can include sign language or picture systems, with phrases such as "I want to go outside".
- Communication- Expressive language skills to request attention, such as "Play with me", or "Chase me".
- Communication-Expressive language skills to request a break from work, routines, or environments, such as, "I need a break", "All done", or "I want to get out of here".
- Communication-Receptive language skills, such as responding to "Stop", "Come here" or "Walk with me".
- Waiting skills, such as "I will count to ten while I wait".
- Emotional self-regulation skills to cope with stressful situations.
- Crossing the street safely, with adult or caregiver supervision.
- Abduction prevention/stranger danger.
- Skills for recognizing community helpers (police, firefighters, paramedics) and interacting with them safely

Remember to use consistent reinforcement for safe behaviors (e.g. praise, stickers, preferred items) and consistent consequences for unsafe behaviors (e.g. loss of access to preferred items).

## References

- Andersen, A. M., Law, J. K., Marvin, A. R., & Lipkin, P. H. (2019). Elopement patterns and caregiver strategies. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 50*(6), 2053–2063. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-03961-x>
- Anderson, C., Law, J. K., Daniels, A., Rice, C., Mandell, D. S., Hagopian, L., & Law, P. A. (2012). Occurrence and family impact of elopement in children with autism spectrum disorders. *Pediatrics, 130*(5), 870–877. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-0762>
- McIlwain, L., & Fournier, W. (n.d.). *Mortality & Risk in ASD wandering/elopement 2011-2016*. National Autism Association. <https://nationalautismassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/NAAMortalityRiskASDElopement.pdf>





# Online Autism Drowning Prevention & Water Safety Resources

## **CARD Water Safety Booklet**

[http://card-usf.fmhi.usf.edu/docs/CARD\\_WaterSafety\\_booklet\\_061114.pdf](http://card-usf.fmhi.usf.edu/docs/CARD_WaterSafety_booklet_061114.pdf)

## **Water Smart Palm Beach County "Be Water Smart" booklet**

<https://discover.pbcgov.org/drowningprevention/PDF/Be-Water-Smart-Booklet.pdf>





## Autism Society’s Water Safety Initiative: HollyRod Foundation Collaboration

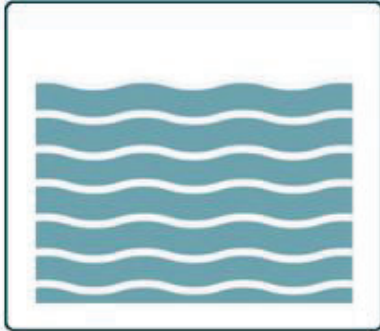
The Autism Society of America teamed up with HollyRod Foundation to develop a companion to *Charlie Makes a Splash*, a children’s book describing the solace and empowerment aquatic environments bring to many individuals with Autism. Included in this pack are water safety checklists for caregivers and individuals with Autism. In addition, there are social narratives that include key water safety rules that correspond to the water environments described in *Charlie Makes a Splash*. The Autism Society of America is committed to supporting water safety and wandering prevention.

### Autism and Water Safety

49% of individuals with Autism wander from a safe environment and 24% of those individuals experienced a close call with drowning. Additionally, a person with Autism is 160x more likely to drown than their neurotypical peer. The rattling statistics reinforce the undeniable need for water safety skills, preventative wandering strategies, and optimum safety around the aquatic environment.

The Autism Society of America is leading a national effort to prevent water and wandering related deaths through proactive programming, public awareness, and public policy. Together, with community agencies, law enforcement, and members of the Autistic community, the Autism Society of America is identifying and developing best practices to improve the safety and lives of those living with Autism.

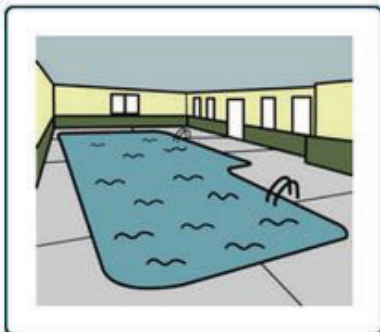




**There is water everywhere.**



**There is water at the beach,  
in a lake, or in the ocean.**



**There is water in a puddle,  
on a dock, or in the pool.**



**There is water in the bathtub,  
in a fish tank, or a big aquarium.**



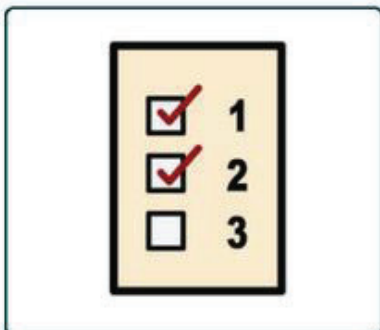
Being in the water can be fun.



But being near water can be dangerous if I don't follow the water safety rules.

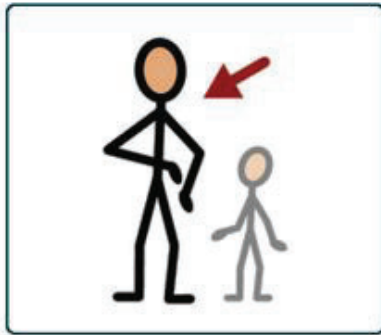


To stay safe and have fun in the water, I will learn the water safety rules.

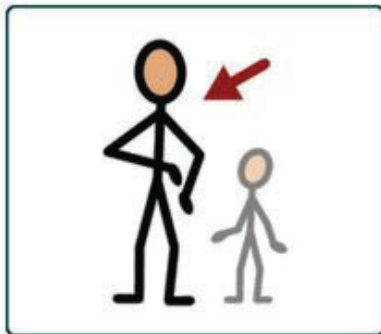


When I am in or near the water, these are the safety rules I will follow.

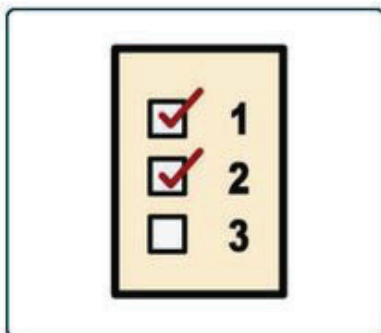




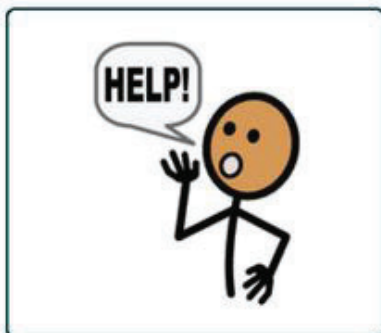
**I will stay close to a helper when I am in or near the water.**



**A helper can be an adult like a parent, a teacher, or a caregiver.**



**I will follow directions.**

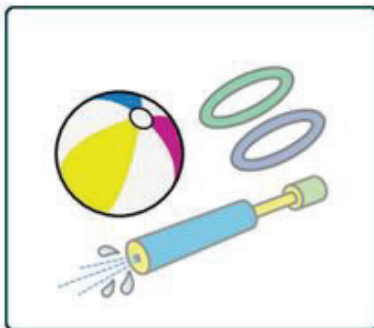


**I will ask for help.**

# Staying Safe: Near Water



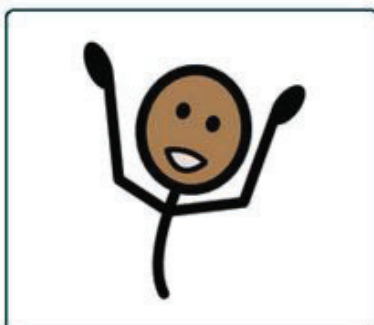
I will ask my helper before I go into the water.



I will ask for help if I want to get something that is in the water.



When I follow the safety rules, I can stay safe in and around the water.

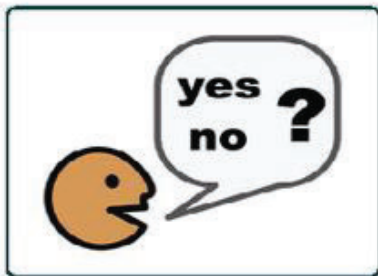


When I follow the safety rules, water can be fun and safe!

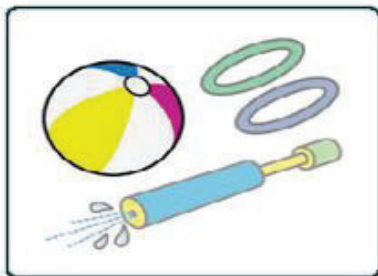




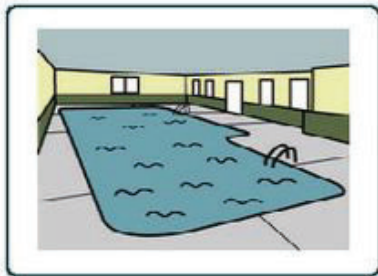
When I am at the pool I will stay close to my helper.



When I am at the pool I will ask my helper before I go in the water.



When I see a toy in the pool that I want, I will ask for help to get it.



When I am at the pool I will follow the safety rules so that I can stay safe.



**When I am at the beach I will stay close to my helper.**



**When I am at the beach I will ask my helper before I go into the water.**



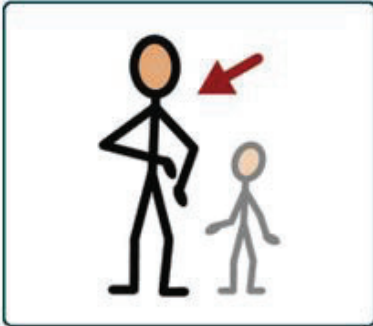
**When I am at the beach I will follow directions so that I can stay safe.**



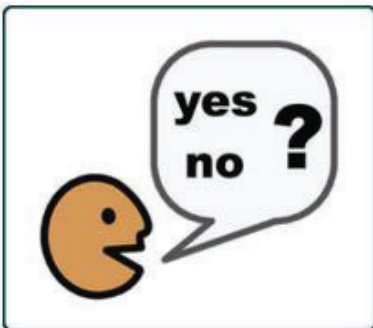
**I am safe when I follow the safety rules at the beach.**



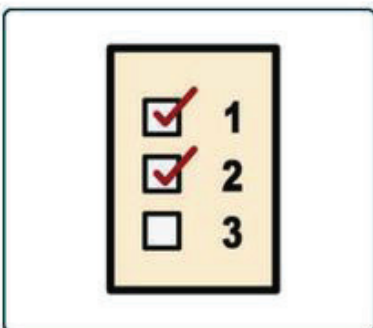
# Staying Safe: At the Lake



When I am at the lake I will stay close to my helper.



When I am at the lake I will ask my helper before I go into the water.

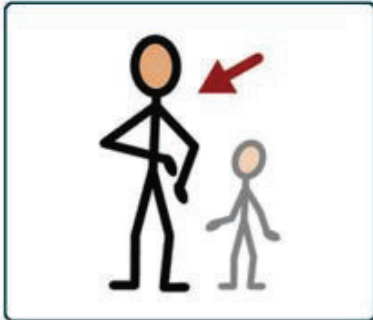


When I am at the lake I will follow directions so that I can stay safe.

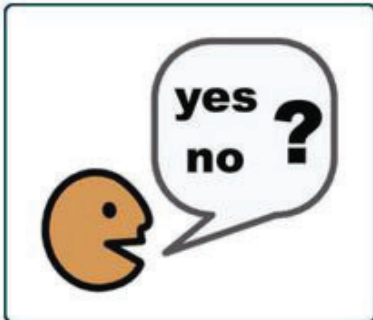


I am safe when I follow the safety rules at the lake.

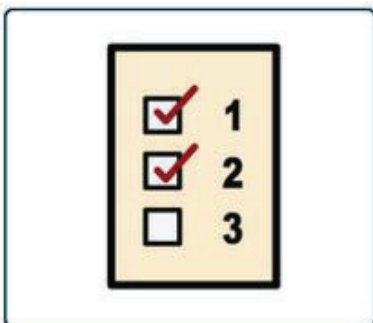
# Staying Safe: On the Dock



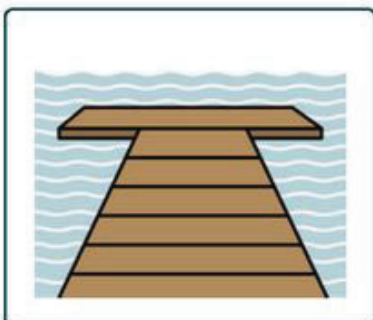
When I am on the dock I will stay close to my helper.



When I am on the dock I will ask my helper before going near or into the water.



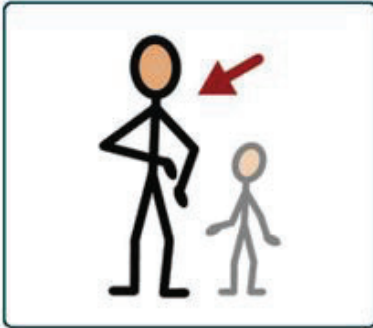
When I am on the dock I will follow directions so that I can stay safe.



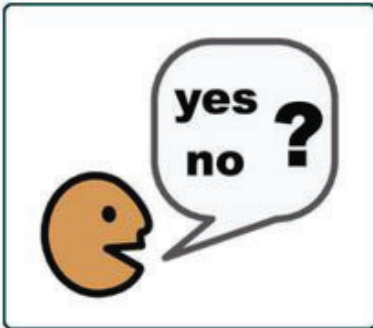
I am safe when I follow the safety rules on the dock.



# Staying Safe: On the Boat



When I am on the boat I will stay close to my helper.



When I am on the boat I will ask my helper before I go into the water.

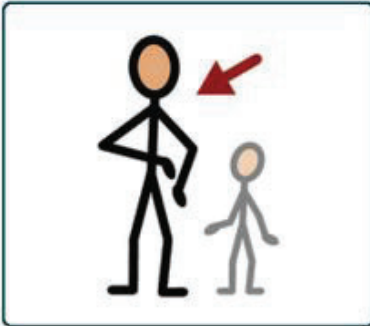


When I am on the boat I will wear a lifejacket.

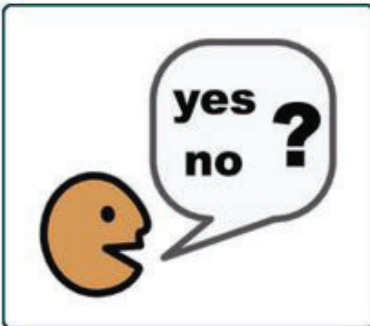


When I am on the boat I will follow the safety rules so that I can stay safe.

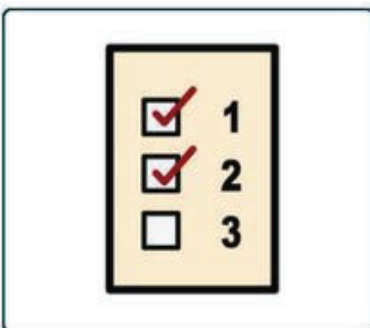
# Staying Safe: In Puddles



**When I want to jump in a puddle  
I will stay close to my helper.**



**When I want to jump in a puddle  
I will ask my helper before I do.**

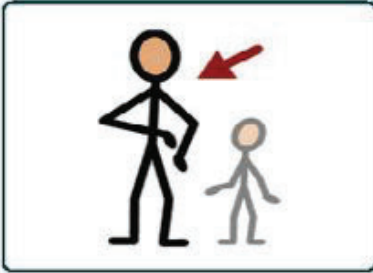


**When I want to jump in a puddle  
I will follow directions so that I  
can stay safe.**

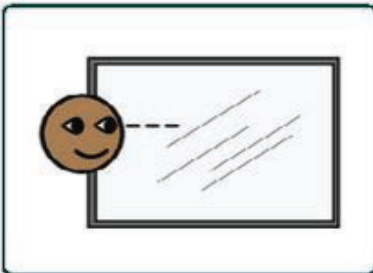


**I am safe when I follow the safety  
rules when jumping in puddles.**





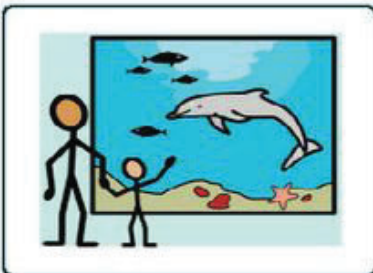
**When I am at the aquarium I will stay close to my helper.**



**When I am at the aquarium I will keep my hands off the glass. I want the animals to feel safe in their home.**



**When I am at the aquarium I will follow directions so that I can stay safe.**



**I am safe when I follow the safety rules at the aquarium.**



**When the water is on in the bathtub, shower, or the sink I will follow directions.**



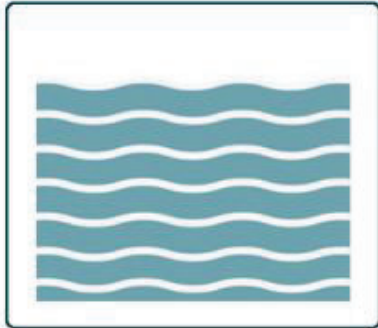
**I will ask before I turn the water on in the bathtub, shower, or sink.**



**I will ask an adult before going into the bathtub or shower each time.**



**I am safe when I follow the rules when I use the water in the bathtub, shower, or sink.**



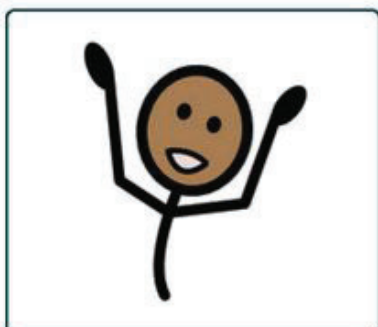
**There is water everywhere.**



**Water can look different in different places like the beach, lake, ocean, in a puddle, on a dock, pool, bathtub, fish tank, or a big aquarium.**



**Being in the water can be fun, but it can be dangerous if I don't follow the safety rules.**



**When I am in or near water I will follow the safety rules so that I can stay safe and have fun.**



# Connecting with your CARD Center

## **University of Central Florida**

[www.ucf-card.org](http://www.ucf-card.org)

(407) 823-6001

[ucfcard@ucf.edu](mailto:ucfcard@ucf.edu)

12424 Research Parkway, Suite #365, Orlando, FL 32826-2202

Supports Brevard, Lake, Orange, Osceola, Seminole, Sumter and Volusia Counties

## **Florida Atlantic University**

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# Community Resources

## Orange County

- SNAP program, Scent Kits, & Project Lifesaver
  - <https://www.ocso.com/en-us/Services/Administrative-Services/Support-Services-Division/Senior-Services-Unit>
- Occupants with Autism
  - <https://www.ocso.com/autism>
- Door Alarm Request
  - <https://www.ocfl.net/EmergencySafety/DoorAlarmRequestForm.aspx>



## Seminole County

- Free Door Alarms
  - <https://www.seminolecountyfl.gov/departments-services/fire-department/community-outreach/drowning-prevention.stml>
- Scent Kits, SCSO C.A.R.E.S., Special Needs Registration for Natural Disasters, & Elder Crimes
  - [seminolesheriff.org](http://seminolesheriff.org)

## Osceola County

- Project Lifesaver
  - <https://www.osceolasheriff.org/outreach-services-programs/project-lifesaver/>





# Community Resources

## Lake County

- Operation Aware
  - <https://www.lcso.org/oa/>

## Brevard County

- Project Lifesaver
  - <https://www.brevardsheriff.com/home/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/PLS-Project-Lifesaver-Referral-Packet-with-form-CPF-3-3.29.2022-7.pdf>

## Sumter County

- Services
  - [https://www.sumtercountysheriff.org/services/new\\_page.php](https://www.sumtercountysheriff.org/services/new_page.php)
- Child Safety Kit
  - [https://www.sumtercountysheriff.org/services/child\\_safety\\_kit.php](https://www.sumtercountysheriff.org/services/child_safety_kit.php)





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