

Making Swimming More Autism-Accessible - Feedback for Swimming Providers

In 2025, Autistic Children and Carers Together worked on a small project looking at swimming accessibility for autistic people in Sheffield, exploring the barriers that might prevent autistic people from being able to take part in swimming and outlining resources or other initiatives that might help to overcome those barriers.



Our thanks for the Swimming Teachers Association CommUNITY STARters programme for providing a grant of £1,000 towards this work and to Mighty Splash Swim School and Dr. Susy Ridout for their support in developing and delivering this project.

Through this project, we received a lot of feedback and suggestions from autistic people and parents of autistic children about the barriers that make going swimming inaccessible to them. We present this summary of the issues identified along with our other project reports as a guide to the key areas that leisure centres and swimming providers could focus on in order to make their swimming sessions and lessons more accessible to autistic and neurodivergent people.

The Sessions Offered

Overwhelmingly, the most common piece of feedback was: **please can we have more autism-friendly, SEND-friendly, inclusive sessions**. Sessions with reduced numbers in the pool, reduced noise and unnecessary lighting, warmer pool temperature and staff who have undertaken autism awareness training. There is real demand for sessions like this.

Just as for toddler sessions, pools could warm the water slightly for sensory friendly sessions. If pools could also limit numbers and have quiet sessions that would be great.

Many of the inaccessibility factors are alleviated by being able to access a quieter swimming session. **A simple change leisure centres could make is to say on your website which times of day are likely to be quieter.**

At the moment, it's possible with some providers to try to figure this out based on the 'spaces remaining' info you can see when you book, but it would be nice to have some information on this without going through that level of rigmarole every time.

I think if it wasn't all of the difficulties at once they could manage some of them. But as it's noise, busy, echoes, cold, worries of being in the way or getting unexpectedly splashed. Plus the stress of getting changed amongst people they don't know, it's too much to cope with.

Publishing Accessibility Information on Your Website

I am very anxious when going to new places as I don't know what 'to do' in certain situations and so I avoid them.

The type of anxiety shared here is very common amongst autistic and neurodivergent people; it reflects the neurological differences that mean social cues and norms which are often obvious to non-autistic (neurotypical) people are unclear to autistic people, which brings with it all the social anxiety related to 'getting it wrong'.

Leisure centres could help overcome these barriers enormously by adding information to venue websites. In particular, the **publication of photo or video walkthroughs of your venue** allow people to prepare for a possible visit, to give them a better idea of what to do, to identify any possible sensory triggers or other issues that might impact them.

Video tours are super important ..we end up searching youtube for families that have visited different pools

Alongside this, a voiceover or text description to point out anything that might be unclear can really reassure people that you are a venue that welcomes autistic people. For example, "when you come to reception, you will be asked if you've already booked and the time of your session. You can show the ticket on your phone or give your name. We will give you a wristband, and can show you where the changing rooms are if you haven't visited us before"

You could also consider offering **trial visits** so people at risk of sensory overload can have a look around.

If unclear, it would also be incredibly helpful to include information about things like:

- The changing facilities, and any accessible cubicles, mixed gender family changing or similar things you offer
- Lockers - how do they work, what do people need to bring with them to operate a locker (pound coins? Their own lock? Something else?)
- Parking and public transport information
- Water temperature. Many parents mentioned the water being too cold as a significant barrier that stopped their autistic children from enjoying swimming. Information about this published in advance could really help families make informed decisions.
- The pool rules - more on this below.

The amount of people in the pool is a huge factor. Especially if there are lane swimmers where my children feel in the way, or other people splashing. They worry a lot about how they impact other swimmers and it makes them feel very anxious.

The Changing Area

We know that leisure centres cannot easily change their building fabric or renovate the changing rooms. But we hope it is worthwhile to point out some of the ways in which changing areas can be inaccessible to autistic people and encourage leisure centres to think about ways that these issues could be addressed, or their negative impacts minimised.

Some quieter calmer space in the changing rooms would make such a difference

As mentioned above, for autistic people at risk of sensory overload, the changing area can be a huge barrier to accessible swimming. Wet floors, noisy hand dryers, humidity, clanging lockers, the feeling of wet swimming costume on your skin, the smells, can all cause people to become dysregulated.

Being able to access separate cubicles can sometimes literally be the difference that means an autistic person can go swimming. Sharing information on your website about the facilities you have available helps. Having more of this type of more private/enclosed changing area would help even more.

Having a high up second lock inside family changing cubicles that parents can use to ensure children don't run off whilst the parent is undressed would be so helpful!

In the Pool

Does your pool have rules for swimmers to follow? How are those rules communicated to swimmers?

As we've already discussed, social anxiety and fear of breaking the rules are a major accessibility barrier for autistic people. It would be very helpful for pool rules and guidance to be published on leisure centre websites so people can help prepare themselves. Similarly, clear signage in and around the pool would help reinforce these messages.

At Ponds Forge there are unwritten rules about where to use the floats that you only find out about when the rule is broken - I don't like that.

As noted, noise and other sensory factors can cause significant problems for autistic people. Reducing unnecessary noise really helps. For example, sirens that announce wave machines, background music, high pitched lifeguard whistles.

Wrist bands are really hard for my child to tolerate. We have had to leave sessions due to this.

For parents with demand avoidant children, getting them out of the pool at the end of the session can be a huge issue. Things that would help here include 5 minute warnings of the session end, a countdown, and lifeguards having autism awareness to act with compassion where they encounter parents struggling to get their child(ren) to exit the pool.

As noted above, pool temperature can be a real issue. Having the pool temperature publicised on your website helps, as does keeping the temperature as consistent as possible.

Staff training and experience

Some leisure centres now offer their staff training in autism awareness or basic knowledge about people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). This is really important.

What would take it to the next level is for that training to clearly come out in practice. It would also be reassuring to see signage in the leisure centre and information on the website to indicate that the leisure centre is aware of the needs of autistic people and that you want your venue to be welcoming to autistic people.

Could you offer a way for people to contact you to discuss their needs and how you could accommodate them?

Would be brilliant if more staff were aware of neurodiversity and that some people need more instructions and patience

Lessons / Swimming Instruction

Both of my children eventually had to stop group swimming sessions. My son stopped progressing, because the teacher was unable to communicate the instructions using different phrasing so that he could understand what needed improving in his technique. My daughter had to stop due to the exhaustion from focusing on instructions in a noisy echoey space with multiple classes on at once.

Many autistic people and parents of autistic children discussed the lack of SEND-friendly swimming lessons and the length of waiting lists to access the small amount on offer. There is a real need for more SEND swimming lesson provision.

We really need actual SEND swim teachers, not just providers saying it's SEND friendly but not making any actual changes or accommodations for SEND people.

Relatedly, swimming instructors with knowledge and experience of the needs of autistic people and the ability to adapt their lessons to meet those needs could make all the difference.

It would help if teachers could be more open to children not always following every instruction to the letter, especially when dysregulated. Adapting lessons to meet needs, i.e. some kids need time to build confidence and rushing sets them back. Also some kids need to master one thing before doing another so they don't get confused

It would help to be able to give information about individual needs and perhaps discuss with an instructor in advance of booking.

There also seems to be a need for more resources that parents could use themselves to teach their autistic children to swim.

I would really like to have some guidance from SEND friendly swimming groups or instructors that I could try with my son when we are able to get to a pool.