

## RESOLUTION

Subject: Water Safety in Children with Autism  
 Submitted by: Maggie Stull (Medical Student Section)  
 Referred to: Reference Committee

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WHEREAS, autism or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech, and nonverbal communication<sup>1</sup>; and

WHEREAS, autism/ASD affects an estimated 1 in 36 children in the United States (US) as of 2020<sup>1</sup>; and

WHEREAS, drowning is the #1 cause of death in children with autism/ASD<sup>2</sup>; and

WHEREAS, in the US more children ages 1-4 die from fatal drowning than any other cause of death<sup>4</sup>; and

WHEREAS, for children ages 5-14. Drowning is the second leading cause of unintentional injury death<sup>4</sup>; and

WHEREAS, African American children between the ages of 5-19 are six times more likely to drown in a pool compared to their White counterparts<sup>3</sup>; and

WHEREAS, children with autism/ASD are 160 times more likely to experience fatal and nonfatal drowning than their neurotypical peers<sup>2</sup>; and

WHEREAS, children with autism/ASD are at an increased risk of drowning because they are more susceptible to wandering/elopement behaviors, may enjoy the sensations of water more than their neurotypical peers, may lack the awareness of being in a dangerous situation, and experience a higher rate of epilepsy and seizures than the general population<sup>2</sup>; and

WHEREAS, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) identifies Kentucky as having a higher-than-average rate of drownings compared to the national average<sup>5</sup>; and

WHEREAS, between 2018-2021, Kentucky's rate of drowning stood at 1.54 deaths per 100,000 people whereas the national average is 1.31 deaths per 100,000 people<sup>5</sup>; and

WHEREAS, children with autism/ASD have the capabilities to improve their water safety skills, which are important for prevention of drowning, after short bouts of aquatic training<sup>6</sup>; and

WHEREAS, legislation compliant pool fencing substantially reduces the risk of drowning and active supervision by a parent or caregiver is an effective drowning prevention strategy<sup>7</sup>; and

WHEREAS, the American Medical Association, or AMA, strongly supports barrier fencing and pool covers for residential pools, early water safety, and water awareness programs and

encourages swimming pool manufacturers and pool chemical suppliers to distribute educational materials that promote swimming and water safety<sup>8</sup>; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, that KMA encourages heightened awareness of the drowning risk for children and adolescents with Autism/ASD, with special emphasis on African American children; and be it further

RESOLVED, that KMA encourages expanding water safety techniques, including but not limited to child(ren) engagement in swimming lessons, promotion of the use of fences around pools, and direct supervision of children around water by a responsible individual.

## References:

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- 1 “What Is Autism?” Autism Speaks, 2023, [www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism](http://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism).
- 2 “Children with Autism at Increased Risk of Drowning.” Mosaic Early Intervention, 27 Feb. 2023, [mosaicearlyintervention.com.au/why-are-children-with-autism-at-increased-risk-of-drowning/](http://mosaicearlyintervention.com.au/why-are-children-with-autism-at-increased-risk-of-drowning/).
- 3 “Drowning Prevention: Autism Society of Florida: United States.” Autism Society FL, [www.autismfl.org/drowning-prevention](http://www.autismfl.org/drowning-prevention). Accessed 23 June 2023.
- 4 “Drowning Facts.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 7 Oct. 2022, [www.cdc.gov/drowning/facts/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/drowning/facts/index.html).
- 5 “Drowning Data.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 June 2023, [www.cdc.gov/drowning/data/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/drowning/data/index.html).
- 6 Alaniz, Michele L., et al. “The Effectiveness of Aquatic Group Therapy for Improving Water Safety and Social Interactions in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Pilot Program.” *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, vol. 47, no. 12, 2017, pp. 4006–4017, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3264-4>.
- 7 Gaida, Fellon J, and James E Gaida. “Infant and Toddler Drowning in Australia: Patterns, Risk Factors and Prevention Recommendations.” *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, vol. 52, no. 10, 2016, pp. 923–927, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpc.13325>.
- 8 “Swimming Safety H-10.983.” AMA, 2021, [policysearch.ama-assn.org/policyfinder/detail/water?uri=%2FAMADoc%2FHOD.xml-0-22.xml](http://policysearch.ama-assn.org/policyfinder/detail/water?uri=%2FAMADoc%2FHOD.xml-0-22.xml).