



## Including Swimmers with a Disability: A Guide for Coaches

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The mission of the Disability Swimming Committee is the full inclusion of swimmers with a disability in USA Swimming programs

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Swimmers with a disability participate in USA Swimming programs for the same reasons as swimmers who do not have disabilities – they want to have fun, they enjoy swimming, they want to be with friends and make new friends, they want to “get in shape” and stay healthy, they want to improve their skills and performances, and they enjoy competition. Swimmers with a disability are attracted to USA Swimming programs because of the quality of coaching and competition, and they are participating in greater numbers every year.

This brochure was written to help coaches respond to the challenge of including swimmers with a disability. The content is based upon advice from coaches who have experience working with swimmers who have a disability. Emphasis is placed upon common-sense solutions that accommodate individual differences and that rely upon typical coaching expertise.

### Why Include?

Including swimmers with a disability has obvious benefits for all members of the swimming community. Inclusion is simply the right thing to do!

### Benefits for Swimmers with a Disability

Athletes with disabilities who join USA Swimming clubs benefit from better sport-specific coaching, more rigorous training, more competition in practice, and higher expectations than they are likely to receive in other settings. Other benefits include socialization opportunities, greater independence in activities of daily living, and improved ability to cope with limitations imposed by disabilities. The opportunity to be part of a team is especially important to athletes whose educational experiences may have been routinely individualized, and the opportunity to demonstrate ability and educate others can be a very satisfying experience for persons who are frequently judged on the basis of what they cannot do.



## **Benefits for Other Swimmers**

The whole team benefits from inclusion of swimmers with disabilities. New friendships and experiences enrich the lives of every member of the team. In addition, swimmers who do not have disabilities learn to appreciate the concept of focusing on abilities rather than limitations. They observe the similarities between themselves and their teammates who have disabilities, such as common motives for swimming, shared performance goals, and similar responses to training regimens. Some coaches report that including athletes with disabilities increases motivation and decreases negative talk or complaints by other swimmers during practice.

## **Benefits for the Coach**

Coaches hone their skills with respect to communicating with athletes, teaching sports techniques, and modifying activities and equipment. Another benefit for coaches who include athletes with disabilities is the possibility of being selected to coach at camps and competitions for athletes with disabilities.

## **Benefits for the Club**

In some cases, sports programs that include athletes with a disability may realize increased publicity and support. Clubs that implement inclusion may experience benefits such as reduced rental costs and increased program time at facilities that comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (<http://www.ada.gov>). Similarly, external funding such as sponsorship support and small grants may be easier to obtain.

## **How to Include**

The USA Swimming rule book (Article 105) defines disability as “a permanent physical or cognitive impairment that substantially limits one or more life activities.” This definition encompasses swimmers who are deaf and hard of hearing; swimmers who are blind; swimmers with cognitive disabilities; and swimmers with physical disabilities such as amputations, cerebral palsy, dwarfism, spinal injury, or other mobility impairments. The advice provided in this brochure focuses on common-sense adaptations to coaching methods that will help coaches accommodate swimmers with any of these disabilities.

## **Get to Know the Swimmer**

How should a coach respond when a swimmer with a disability asks to join the club or moves up into a new practice group? First, embrace the challenge. The most important ingredients for successful inclusion are an open mind, common sense, and a willingness to try. Inclusion may require extra effort by the coach, especially during the swimmer’s first few weeks with the club, but the rewards to the coach and swimmers outweigh the extra effort.

*“All of us are capable of learning. We developed our knowledge in coaching through experience and we can develop skills in this area over time as well.”* Terry Maul, Coach, Area Tallahassee Aquatic Club

Second, get to know the athlete. Focus on the individual, not the disability. Meet with the swimmer to discuss his/her abilities and goals. Watch the athlete swim and experiment with different stroke techniques.

*“I liked the fact that he never, from the day I walked in the pool, he never looked at me as a person in a chair, he looked at me as a swimmer.”* Aimee Bruder, Paralympic swimmer

Third, seek advice from experienced coaches about ways to accommodate the athlete. Methods of coaching swimmers with a disability are usually not covered extensively in swimming textbooks or coaching clinics, so experienced coaches often are the best source of ideas. Although how-to-coach information is somewhat limited, information about disabilities and physical activity is readily available in most libraries and via the internet.

### **Have the Same Expectations**

Coaches should have the same general expectations for swimmers with a disability as for their teammates. All swimmers should be expected to comply with team rules and policies, demonstrate a good work ethic, and exhibit good sportsmanship. All swimmers should contribute to the team by supporting their teammates and helping with team activities. Conversely, the swimmer with a disability should enjoy the same opportunities as other swimmers, such as promotion to a more advanced practice group, participation in meets, and participation in team social events.

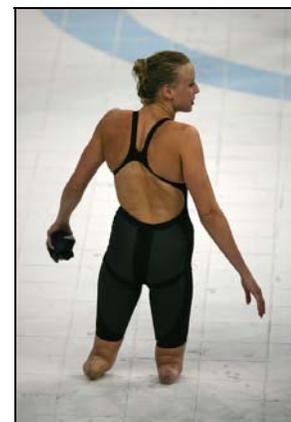
*“I felt the best way to work with the athletes was to treat them the same as the other swimmers.”* Peter Banks, Coach, Brandon Blue Wave

### **Adapt Start, Turn, and Stroke Techniques**

Most coaches already have the expertise, creativity, and common sense needed to modify start, turn, and stroke techniques for swimmers with a disability. The principles of biomechanics are universal and apply to all swimmers. Resistance training can help all swimmers to develop better muscular strength and endurance. Training equipment such as kickboards, pull buoys, and fins help all swimmers to isolate or emphasize certain movements. Disability-specific suggestions are presented in the following paragraphs.

*“The basic principles of swimming – body position, balance, rhythm, flotation, resistance, and speed – apply to everyone and everything in the water. Coaching a disabled swimmer heightens a coach’s awareness of these fundamentals, which benefits all of their swimmers.”* Marie Cook, Coach, Butte Tarpons Swim Team

- *Swimmers who are deaf.* Swimmers who are deaf have the physical ability to correctly perform strokes, turns, and starts. Coaches should use frequent demonstrations and should ask the swimmer to repeat the desired motions to insure understanding of correct techniques. Also, remember to teach the athlete to use a strobe light as a starting signal.
- *Swimmers who are blind.* Vision loss may affect swimming techniques in several ways: (a) it is often more difficult to learn a physical skill through verbal instruction than by demonstrations; (b) many blind swimmers are unable to use vision to determine proper head and body positions while swimming; (c) some blind swimmers are reluctant to move their hands and arms away from the torso; and (d) blind swimmers need ways to know when they are approaching the end of the pool. Coaches should use rich verbal descriptions during demonstrations and videotapes. Move the athlete's body through the desired movements when teaching stroke, start, or turn techniques. Teach the swimmer to use stroke counts to estimate the length of the pool. Experiment with different methods for notifying the swimmer of an impending turn or finish. A touch on the leg or foot can be used to notify the swimmer to start his/her leg of a relay swim. It is important for tappers to hone their skills at practices in order to mold a successful partnership.
- *Swimmers with cognitive disabilities.* Swimmers with cognitive disabilities generally have the physical ability to perform strokes, turns, and starts using correct technique. However, coaches will need to give extra attention to principles of motor learning, especially when introducing new skills. Use simple one-part or two-part directions, demonstrate correct movements, introduce new skills gradually, and review instructions frequently.
- *Swimmers with amputations.* Arm or leg amputations might contribute to problems with balance and body roll while swimming, and might affect the swimmer's ability to generate uninterrupted propulsion. Therefore, coaches must be creative when applying principles of biomechanics for these swimmers. Some examples of coaching solutions include teaching swimmers with single-leg amputations to center their kick behind the body rather than the same-side hip, or to use a four-beat kick in backstroke, kicking twice to the right side then twice to the left side. Swimmers with leg amputations might also require alternate positions on the starting blocks. Swimmers with arm amputations must be careful to maintain simultaneous limb movements and level shoulder positions when swimming breaststroke or butterfly. Use of equipment such as fins, hand paddles, and pull buoys can help swimmers with amputations to develop better stroke technique, as well as to keep up with other swimmers during practice sessions.



- *Swimmers with dwarfism.* The most common form of dwarfism is characterized by short arms and legs in relationship to the head and torso. Short arm and leg length affect the swimmer's ability to generate propulsion, and overall short stature and body shape contribute to greater drag when swimming. In addition, some dwarf swimmers have limitations to range of motion, especially in the elbows, hips, and knees. Body roll, distance per stroke, and pulling under the center of gravity are especially important elements of stroke technique for dwarf swimmers. A high stroke rate in comparison to their longer-limbed peers usually is necessary.
- *Swimmers with neurological conditions.* Swimmers with disabilities such as cerebral palsy, stroke, and head injury have difficulty coordinating and controlling their movements. The more severe the disability, the more likely that these swimmers will also experience limitations in functional range of motion. The coach's goal should be to help the swimmer achieve greater motor control and greater flexibility. Visualization is an effective practice method for many swimmers with neurological disabilities, especially when used in combination with demonstrations or videotapes. Instruction is often more effective when the swimmer's body is moved through the correct motions. Coaches should use resistance training such as bands, stretch cords, or hand paddles to help the swimmer develop a better feel for the desired movements. Repetition (more than required for other swimmers), either through dry land work or swimming drills, will help the swimmer to learn practice good technique. When leg function is severely limited, the coach and swimmer should experiment to determine whether it is better to swim without kicking, and when one side of the swimmer's body is severely affected, it might be preferable to swim with only the right or left side. Remember that officials are instructed to judge body parts that are used while swimming.
- *Swimmers with spinal injuries and other mobility impairments.* Typical stroke technique problems for swimmers with little or no ability to kick include difficulty with horizontal and lateral body positions, inadequate shoulder roll, a truncated arm pull characterized by a short deep catch and a short weak finish, a wide straight pulling pattern often with dropped elbows, a wide arm recovery, and early breathing. Compromised arm and trunk strength and mobility for swimmers with higher-level spinal injuries may exacerbate these stroke technique problems. Regardless of the severity of disability, these problems can be minimized with good coaching. Pull-buoys or other leg floats help swimmers to complete longer more intense practice sets. Practice sets that require swimmers to use their legs, when possible, help to maintain residual leg function and may eventually improve stroke technique. If the kick will be used in competition, it must be legal. Try to include low or non-functioning limbs in swim or dry land movements. Even though the swimmer may not develop sufficient movement to perform a legal stroke, such exercise may lead to increased use of those limbs for activities of daily living. Although a variety of in-water, on-deck, and on-the-block starting positions are allowable, many swimmers with spinal injuries and leg dysfunction can learn to perform effective sitting or standing dives.

## Modify Swimming Practices

Coaches shoulder considerable responsibility for making inclusion work. When they develop positive relationships with swimmers who have a disability, they serve as models for teammates and other members of the swimming community. Coaches are also responsible for resolving many of the logistical challenges related to inclusion, such as finding lane space and providing disability accommodations. More importantly, coaches make a major contribution to the athlete's development and success in the sport by adapting practice sets as needed and including the swimmer in ancillary activities such as weight training and mental training.

All swimmers need personal attention and instruction from the coach to develop their talents as athletes. Some coaches (and parents) are concerned that inclusion of swimmers with a disability may take time and attention away from other swimmers; however, this is not usually true. If the swimmer with a disability is placed in an appropriate training group, there is no need for a substantial shift in the coach's attention to that one swimmer. And all swimmers in the practice group are likely to benefit when the coach provides disability accommodations such as frequent demonstrations or more comprehensive verbal instructions.

*"Giving time and attention is what we are supposed to be doing with all children. Some require more than others. It's our job to find a way to meet the need."* Terry Maul, Coach, Area Tallahassee Aquatic Club

Finding lane space to accommodate a swimmer with a disability may be a challenge, especially for coaches of clubs with a large membership roster. Consider different practice group placements for the swimmer with a disability – with same-aged swimmers, same-speed swimmers, same-ability swimmers, or a combination of placements. Your goal should be to identify the most enabling environment for the swimmer. Instruct swimmers in workout etiquette. Swimmers with a disability who are slower than their teammates can become "speed bumps" in practice if they don't learn how to circle swim, pass and be passed, and clear the path at turns and finishes.

*"Find a way. We make lane space for the swimmer with an earache or broken arm who needs to kick for 6 weeks, we can certainly find space for a swimmer with a permanent disability."* P.J. Keller, Coach, Parkway Swim Club

Some swimmers with a disability have the ability and speed to participate in practices without accommodations, and some will be leaders in practice. However, in other cases coaches will need to modify practice sets to help the swimmer achieve his/her goals and to maximize use of lane space.

- *Use the same principles of conditioning that you would use for any swimmer.* Consider the race duration rather than the distance when designing practice sets. For example, if the time for swimmer's best event is four minutes (regardless of the distance), train the swimmer as you would a middle distance swimmer.

- *Adapt sets as you would for swimmers who are injured.* For example, if the swimmer with a disability completes 50s in the time it takes teammates to complete 100s, the swimmer could complete half of the prescribed distances unless otherwise instructed.
- *Do not underestimate the swimmer with a disability.* All swimmers need challenging workouts to help develop skill, speed, and conditioning. Self-esteem is enhanced when the swimmer masters a difficult challenge.

*“Having to adapt the workout, set, or technique to suit the swimmer gives you a new set of challenges, but their ability to master the challenge is the reward.”* Peter Banks, Coach, Brandon Blue Wave

Include the swimmer in ancillary activities such as resistance training and mental training. Alterations to resistance training exercises may include different equipment choices, using elastic bandages to help the swimmer grip the apparatus, or helping the swimmer to maintain a stable position on the apparatus. Use common-sense adaptations to mental training. For example, allow deaf swimmers to keep their eyes open during relaxation training, and position yourself so that they can read your lips or signed instructions. Focus on all of the senses – vision, hearing, proprioception, etc. – when conducting visualization sessions. Treat the swimmer with a disability as you would any other swimmer.

### **Include in Meets**

Most swimmers with a disability enjoy competing in local USA Swimming meets because they can test themselves against fast, skilled swimmers, and they can participate with their friends and teammates. Their coaches typically insist upon participation in meets to help gauge the effectiveness of practices in improving skill, speed, and conditioning and because of the contributions the swimmer can make to the team effort. Here are some ways that the coach can help to make meets a successful and fun experience for swimmers with a disability.

- Help the swimmer to set reasonable but challenging performance goals. Advise the swimmer that s/he will be competing against swimmers who do not have disabilities, and that there are no special events or classifications for swimmers with a disability in USA Swimming meets. Encourage the swimmer to focus on personal-best performances, especially if s/he is likely to be slower than other swimmers in the meet.
- Expect the swimmer to demonstrate as much personal independence as possible. Some swimmers need help from personal assistants (usually friends or family members) who provide disability-specific help to the swimmer such as interpreting for swimmers who are deaf, “tapping” for swimmers who are blind, and helping with transfers for wheelchair users. Because independence contributes to the swimmer’s self-esteem and because the use of personal assistants is restricted at major disability-specific national and international

meets, coaches should encourage swimmers to gradually reduce reliance on personal assistants as they become older and more skilled. Personal assistants: (a) are not required to be members of USA Swimming; (b) are protected by USA Swimming general liability insurance, but do not have the benefit of excess accident insurance unless they are members of USA Swimming; (c) may not coach unless registered as coach members; and (d) must not interfere with meet operations.

- Request facility accommodations such as preferred parking, wheelchair seating, use of a service animal, or an additional strobe light from the meet director at the time entries are submitted. The meet host will be more prepared to address the swimmer's needs if given advance notice.
- Request rule modifications or accommodations to the actual competition from the referee. Per Article 105, the coach (or swimmer) is responsible for describing the swimmer's disability and requesting specific accommodations or rule modifications. Examples include but are not limited to personal assistants, special seeding, unique starting positions, use of tappers, and rule modifications. Special seeding may include swimming out-of-event (e.g., completing a 100 while other swimmers in the event complete a 200); swimming out-of-age group (e.g., a 13-year-old swimmer competing in an 11-12 event); and special lane assignments (e.g., placing a deaf swimmer in a position to see the starter's movements and strobe light). Coaches should consider issues such as fairness to the swimmer with a disability, fairness to other swimmers, and the meet timeline when making requests.
- Know the LSC policy on inclusion of swimmers with a disability. For example, are time standards waived for regular season meets? May the swimmer request to participate in time trials? What is the LSC policy about inclusion in championship meets? Notify the meet director and/or meet referee if such modifications to administrative procedures (see Article 202.2.13 of the rule book) are essential to the swimmer's success.
- Remind the referee prior to each session if the swimmer needs accommodations that affect officiating such as special placement of a strobe light, use of tappers, or an in-water or sitting start. This will help officials to provide appropriate accommodations without focusing undue attention on the swimmer. The referee will notify other officials as needed.
- Expect your swimmer to comply with USA Swimming rules and expect officials to apply those rules. Officials follow the principle that if a swimmer uses a body part for propulsion, it is judged according to the technical rules. Article 105 of the USA Swimming rule book provides additional guidelines about officiating swimmers with a disability.
- Obtain proof-of-time to support applications for American/World Records for submission to organizations such as U.S. Paralympics and U.S. Deaf Swimming,

as well as to prove qualifying time standards for major disability-specific competitions.

- Advocate for the swimmer. Encourage meet directors, officials, and the LSC to implement the LSC inclusion policy. Per Article 105, the coach is responsible for notifying the meet referee about the swimmer's disability and requested accommodations. It is courteous to notify meet management with advance notice about participation of a swimmer with a disability. Remember that attitudes are easier to change when you set a positive example and when you educate rather than confront.

### Consider Disability-Specific Competitions

In addition to “regular” USA Swimming meets, swimmers with a disability have opportunities to compete in disability-specific meets. At these meets, swimmers are typically classified according to ability/disability prior to the meet, with separate events conducted for swimmers in the various classifications. Swimmers with physical disabilities are placed into one of ten classifications based upon functional swimming abilities. Swimmers who are blind fall into one of three classifications according to the extent of vision loss. There is one classification designated for swimmers with cognitive disabilities and one classification for swimmers who are deaf.

At first, encouraging a swimmer to compete in disability-specific competitions may seem contradictory to the philosophy of inclusion. However, success in disability-specific meets often motivates swimmers with a disability to persist in the sport and helps them to gain the confidence needed to compete against swimmers who do not have disabilities in “regular” meets. Other advantages include additional opportunities for awards and recognition, as well as the opportunity for travel and to qualify for international teams.



Major disability-specific meets include the quadrennial Paralympic Games, Deaflympics, and Special Olympics World Games, as well as the U.S. Paralympics CAN-AM Championships which are held twice each year.

- The *U.S. Paralympics CAN-AM Championships*. U.S. Paralympics is a division of the U.S. Olympic Committee that offers elite level competition for athletes with physical disability or vision impairment. U.S. Paralympics Swimming and the Swimming Canada Paralympic program collaborate to host two championship meets each year that alternate between U.S. and Canadian locations. These meets are contested in a 50 meter facility. Participation requires International Paralympic Committee (IPC) classification and achievement of established time standards that vary according to classification. These standards must be achieved at legitimate competitions. More information can be found at [www.usparalympics.org](http://www.usparalympics.org).
- *Paralympic Games*. The “Para”lympic Games is the “parallel” sporting event to the “O”lympic Games for athletes with a disability. It is the ultimate competition goal for swimmers with physical disability or vision impairment. The Paralympic Games are held once every four years immediately following Olympic Games, utilizing the same facilities and competition venues. Swimmers qualify for Team USA through their performances at the U.S. Paralympics Trials Meet (see above for U.S. Paralympics info). Consult the International Paralympic Committee web site ([www.paralympic.org](http://www.paralympic.org)) for more information about the Paralympic Games.
- *Deaflympics*. The *Deaflympics* is the highest level of competition for swimmers who are deaf and hard of hearing. They are held once every four years in the year following the Olympic Games (odd numbered years). Swimmers qualify for the USA team through their performances at designated competitions. Participation requires membership in USA Deaf Sports Federation and U.S. Deaf Swimming. Swimmers are required to compete at the Deaf Trials event and submit best times for consideration for selection to the National Team. Consult the Deaflympics web site [www.deaflympics.com](http://www.deaflympics.com) and the USA Deaf Sports Federation ([www.usdeafsports.org](http://www.usdeafsports.org)) for more information
- *Special Olympics World Games*. The Special Olympics World Summer Games are conducted every four years in the years prior to Olympic Games. The Games celebrate and recognize the achievements of athletes with cognitive disabilities from throughout the world. Participating swimmers are nominated by their national Special Olympics organizations using criteria such as swimming performances, ability to manage a lengthy trip under the supervision of coaches rather than parents, and history of participation in the Special Olympics program. Consult the Special Olympics International web site ([www.specialolympics.org](http://www.specialolympics.org)) for more information about the World Summer Games, and consult your area or state Special Olympics office to learn more about selection criteria.
- *Down Syndrome World Swimming Championships*. The Down Syndrome International Swimming Organization ([www.dsiso.org](http://www.dsiso.org)) conducts world championship swimming meets every two years. Eligibility consists of qualifying time standards, as well as medical proof that the swimmer does indeed have Down syndrome.

Coaches can facilitate a swimmer's participation in disability-specific meets by learning about eligibility requirements and qualifying time standards, helping the swimmer to obtain proof-of-time to support meet entries, and requesting time trials at local meets when needed to provide opportunities to qualify for big meets, especially in events such as the 50 y/m stroke events and the 150 y/m IM that may not be offered for the swimmer's age group in USA Swimming meets.

*"Illinois Swimming recognizes swimmers with disabilities at their annual awards banquet. This support encourages swimmers to compete in local meets and showcases their abilities to the swimming community."* Pamela Redding, Coach, Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago Wave Swim Team

## Use Disability Accommodations

Most accommodations needed by swimmers with a disability are common-sense changes to coaching methods or practice facilities that involve little or no cost to the club. In some cases, the swimmer with a disability simply needs your permission to provide his/her own accommodations, such as a parent or friend to help with personal care in the locker room. The following guidelines should be useful to coaches; however, remember that accommodations should be tailored to the individual's unique needs.

- *Swimmers who are deaf.* Speak slowly and face the swimmer when giving instructions to facilitate lip-reading. Use a chalkboard or white board to communicate practice sets. Learn sign language, at least enough to communicate typical instructions, corrections, praise, and greetings. Use handouts, e-mail, or web sites to communicate information such as practice times, meet schedules, or team policies. At swimming meets, ask the referee to seat the swimmer where s/he can see the strobe light, reposition the strobe light where it can be seen more easily, and to move the strobe light or use an auxiliary strobe light for backstroke events or a start at the opposite end of the pool. Be sure that someone notifies the swimmer about important announcements.

*"Caitlin is deaf, but she can beat most of my swimmers in any practice. The only limitation she has is that I need to write the workout on a dry erase board. The flip side of that is that all of my hearing swimmers no longer need me to repeat the set 10 times; they can just read like Caitlin does!"* P.J. Keller, Coach, Parkway Swim Club

- *Swimmers who are blind.* Conduct a tour for the swimmer to orient him/her to the practice facility. Use rich verbal descriptions and "hands-on" demonstrations to communicate instructions and stroke techniques. Teach the swimmer how to use training equipment safely and effectively. Develop a reliable method of warning the swimmer of impending turns or finishes if s/he is unable to see the end of the pool – possibilities include tapping the swimmer's body with a long soft-tipped pole, a system that drips water on the swimmer as s/he passes under the backstroke flags (possibly a sprinkler hose attached to the flags), or an underwater sound source. Keep the pool deck and other traffic areas as free

from obstacles as possible. Service dogs help some blind swimmers to be more independent, and should be permitted on the pool deck. At swimming meets, inform the referee and meet director if the swimmer needs help locating and stepping onto the starting block, if the swimmer needs tapping, or if the swimmer needs a service dog.

- *Swimmers with cognitive disabilities.* Ability to understand instructions will vary considerably across swimmers. Some need simple vocabulary. Some benefit most from one-part or two-part directions. Some need demonstrations coupled with verbal instructions. Many swimmers with cognitive disabilities learn better when instructions are reviewed frequently. At meets, a buddy can help by facilitating communication and by reminding the swimmer about meet routines and procedures. Swimmers with cognitive disabilities usually benefit from following an established routine and rehearsing meet procedures.
- *Swimmers with physical disabilities.* Keep the pool deck and other traffic areas as free from obstacles as possible to accommodate swimmers who use mobility equipment such as wheelchairs, crutches, or walkers. Heavy doors should be propped open or removed. Use common-sense accommodations such as mats at pool-edge to facilitate safe wheelchair transfers, towels on starting blocks to prevent abrasions, and non-skid step stools in locker rooms for dwarf athletes (and younger age-group swimmers) to reach shower controls and other appliances. Most swimmers with physical disabilities enter and exit the water independently; however, some athletes may need help from a “lifter.” Finally, it is polite to sit or kneel when speaking to a wheelchair user or someone of short stature so that the swimmer doesn’t need to look up to see you.

## Promote Safety

Many coaches fear that safety is a bigger concern for swimmers with a disability than for other swimmers; however, this is rarely the case. With a few common-sense precautions, most safety risks can be minimized or eliminated.

*“Safety is enhanced when people are “on their toes” or aware. Having a special needs swimmer in the water heightens the coach’s awareness and everyone benefits.” Mick & Sue & Kent Nelson, Coaches, Turtles USA Swim Club*

- *Emergency action plan.* Consider the adequacy of emergency signals for swimmers who have disabilities. Visual signals are needed by persons who are deaf, and auditory signals are needed by persons who are blind. Develop an evacuation plan that specifies assistance for swimmers who are blind or those who have cognitive or physical disabilities. Remember that elevators may be inoperable in an emergency.
- *Slippery pool deck.* A slippery deck is especially hazardous for swimmers who use mobility equipment such as crutches, canes, and walkers. Many slips and falls can be prevented by keeping the pool deck as clean and dry as possible.

- *Cluttered pool deck.* A cluttered pool deck impairs mobility for swimmers who are blind and for those who use wheelchairs or other mobility equipment. Keep traffic areas clear of obstacles to prevent accidents. Personal equipment such as wheelchairs, prostheses, or other mobility equipment should be moved to a safe location during practice and returned to the swimmer when s/he exits the pool.
- *Sharp lane lines.* Sharp-edged lane lines may be an unavoidable problem for some swimmers who are blind, causing cuts, scrapes, and bruises; however, this problem can be minimized during practice by wearing gloves or taping the hands/fingers and wearing “water shoes”. Lane lines should be inspected regularly, and broken parts should be replaced.
- *Health concerns.* Some swimmers have health conditions such as seizures, lack of sensitivity to touch or pain, brittle bones, lower maximum heart rate, temperature regulation problems, or latex allergies that may affect their participation in swimming practices. A meeting should be held to discuss the demands of the sport, safety risks, and methods of minimizing the risks so that the swimmer and his/her parents can make an informed decision about joining the team and so that the coach is aware of common-sense accommodations that promote safety.
- *Foot safety.* Wearing “water shoes” can save swimmers who have little or no function or feeling in their feet from many scrapes and bruises. Note that footwear with flotation qualities (e.g., neoprene socks or stump socks) are not allowed in competition.

*“My head age group coach and I sat down with Lauren’s parents and Lauren to talk to them about any special needs Lauren might have [because of a brittle bone condition]. We were especially concerned about her colliding with others and injuries that might occur. Lauren and her family were very aware of any potential problems, but felt the benefits of being in a competitive swimming program far outweighed the negatives.” Jim Wood, Coach, Berkeley Aquatic Club*

*“Some swimmers have limbs or areas that are not sensitive to touch or pain. Make sure that exercises do not injure them. An example would be ‘up and outs’ at the end of the pool – they may not feel their toes dragging on the wall.” Donald Watkins, Coach, Peninsula Aquatic Club of San Diego*

### **Conclusion**

The most important guidelines for including swimmers with a disability are captured in the following advice from coaches who have experience with inclusion.

*“Communicate with the swimmer. Don’t be afraid to ask them what they can and cannot do.” Julie O’Neill, Coach, Rocket Aquatics*

*“It is MUCH more important that a coach understands the biomechanics of the sport than that they understand everything about a swimmer’s disability. Coaches can easily ask swimmers about their capabilities and make adaptations to the “ideal” stroke model based upon the individual swimmer’s options.”* Pamela Redding, Coach, Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago Wave Swim Team

*“Because you had one swimmer doesn’t mean the next swimmer with the same disability will react the same way to your training. As with any swimmers, you must find the methods that work the best with the individual athlete.”* Donald Watkind, Coach, Peninsula Aquatic Club of San Diego

*“Our ‘disabled’ swimmers get treated exactly the same as any other swimmer in our program. Same expectations, same workouts, same rules.”* Jim Wood, Coach, Berkeley Aquatic Club

*“Only adapt what must be adapted – our goal is inclusion.”* Mick & Sue & Kent Nelson, Coaches, Turtles USA Swim Club

### Resources

Article 105 of the *USA Swimming Rulebook*.

*Article 105 Case Studies: Inclusion of Swimmers with Disabilities at USA Swimming Competitions*. Document posted on the Disability Swimming page of the USA Swimming website.

Block, M.E. (1995, January). Americans with Disabilities Act: Its impact on youth sports. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 66(1), 28-32.

*Safety /Risk Management and the Inclusion of Swimmers with Disabilities*. Document posted on the Disability Swimming page of the USA Swimming website.

U.S. Department of Justice. (2009). *Americans with Disabilities: ADA home page*. Retrieved February 20, 2009, from <http://www.ada.gov/>