

The Arc Tank Y'S WATER WISE



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INTRODUCTION

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often feel anxiety. Wandering, especially toward water, is one way they seek relief. According to a 2011 study, roughly 50% of children with autism wander. Unfortunately, this often leads to tragedy. Drowning is a leading cause of death for children with ASD. A 2017 study revealed that children with autism are 160 times as likely to die from drowning as other children. The high risk of accidental drowning reaffirms the importance of teaching water safety to children with ASD.

To address this safety concern, the YMCA will develop "Water Wise," a water safety program for children with ASD. It will include an intake process, customized support, parent education and staff training.

The goal of Water Wise is to reduce death by drowning.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The YMCA is well-known for teaching children water safety. Children with ASD, however, can experience difficulty navigating YMCA Swim Lessons. Participation in typical swim lessons requires children to change clothes in a crowded, noisy locker room; to enter a loud, brightly lit, wet environment; and to follow the instructions of a swim instructor with a group of 6-8 other children.

Children with ASD present with a broad range of abilities and needs. While one child may navigate group instruction with little additional support needed, another child may require one-on-one instruction. One child may manage the noisy, bright environment without difficulty, while another may require sensory aware strategies.

Before beginning lessons, we'll ask parents/caregivers to complete an intake, outlining their child's needs/goals. We'll review the form together to determine the best track for each child — regular, specialized group, or one-on-one lessons. Our unique approach to the intake process will allow us to focus on and teach to students' abilities, not their disabilities, ensuring that all children with ASD feel comfortable accessing and participating.

Where possible, a child's final lesson will be with pants and shoes on, mimicking real-life situations when children fall into water wearing street clothes.

In its first year, Water Wise will serve 60 children with ASD in Northeast Massachusetts. As a leading provider of swim lessons and water safety classes, the NSY will look to partner with agencies such as Northeast Arc that lead the way in promoting solutions for the needs of children with autism and their families.