

From Sensory Defensiveness to Water Confidence: What Swim Instructors Need to Know

Introduction

Sensory defensiveness — an overreaction to sensory input like touch, sound, light, or movement — is common in children with autism. For swim instructors, understanding this isn't just about comfort, it's about safety. A child who feels overwhelmed by the pool environment may resist participation, panic, or even be at higher risk in the water. By approaching lessons with sensitivity, patience, and adaptive strategies, instructors can turn potential barriers into breakthroughs.

What is Sensory Defensiveness?

- Children may perceive ordinary sensations (like splashes, echoes, chlorine smell, or cold water) as threatening or painful.
- Instead of “non-compliance,” their reaction is a protective response — their nervous system is saying “*danger*.”
- Common triggers in swim lessons:
 - Cold or texture of water
 - feel or texture of their swimming suit, the noodle or an instructional floatation device
 - Pool chemicals and smell
 - Noise (whistles, echo, other children)
 - Touch (goggles, swim caps, hand-over-hand instruction)
 - Sudden submersion

Why It Matters in Swimming Lessons

- Safety First: If a child panics, their risk in the water increases.
- Trust Building: Forcing submersion or contact can damage the instructor-child bond.
- Skill Development: Children learn best when they feel safe; reducing defensiveness allows progress.
- Equity & Access: Many families of autistic children avoid lessons altogether because of past negative experiences.

Practical Strategies for Instructors

1. Environment Adjustments

- Lower noise levels — avoid whistles, use visual cues. Ask parents to get ear plugs or head bands.
- Warm water if possible, to reduce shock.
- Offer quiet lesson times with fewer distractions.

2. Lesson Approach

- Start with gradual exposure: hands in water → cheeks → shoulders → full entry.
- Give choices (“Do you want to pour water on your hand or foot first?”).
- Use firm, predictable touch instead of light, unexpected touch.

3. Communication Tools

- Visual supports: picture cards, social stories, visual schedules. (Nicole Fairfield/Navigating Neva has swim cards for ARC learn to swim levels 1 and 2)
- Clear, calm voice; avoid shouting across the pool.
- Allow extra processing time after instructions.

4. Emotional Support

- Praise small successes (touching the water = big win).
- Validate feelings: “I see that splash was loud. Let’s try again together.”
- Encourage self-advocacy: teaching kids to signal “stop” or “ready.”

Pool Study Prompts for Swim Instructors

- **Case Study Reflection:** Imagine a child screams when water splashes on their face. Is this refusal or sensory defensiveness? How would you adjust your lesson?
- **Group Discussion:** What sensory triggers exist at *our* pool (sound, light, smell, temperature)? What changes could we make?
- **Roleplay:** One instructor plays a “sensory-sensitive swimmer,” another adapts their teaching approach in real time.
- **Cause & Effect Analysis:** What happens if sensory needs are ignored? How might this impact long-term trust and learning?
- **Personal Reflection:** Think of a time *you* were uncomfortable in a new environment. How can that empathy inform your teaching?

Conclusion

Teaching swimming is not just about strokes and breathing — it’s about building a safe, inclusive environment where every child can thrive. Understanding sensory defensiveness equips instructors to meet children where they are, reduce anxiety, and foster genuine water confidence. When we adapt our methods, we don’t just teach skills; we save lives.

