



Get Involved: Coaches

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

Coaches – use your expertise to promote inclusion

Coaches are the most important ingredient for the successful inclusion of swimmers with a disability. You are the face of USA Swimming with respect to welcoming and accepting the swimmer to the sport, and you encourage the swimmer to achieve a healthy lifestyle and competitive success through your efforts on the pool deck. We encourage you to:

- Read “Including Swimmers with a Disability: A Guide for Coaches” in the USA Swimming Resources section of this web page, as well as the technical swimming information presented in the articles section.
- Understand the officiating guidelines for swimmers with a disability as published in Article 105 of the USA Swimming rule book, and as discussed in the Article 105 interpretations in the USA Swimming Resources section of this web page
- Contact Randy Julian (rjulian@usaswimming.org) with your ideas and concerns related to inclusion in USA Swimming programs. We want to benefit from your expertise!

Enough about inclusion ... many swimmers with a disability choose to participate in both inclusive (USA Swimming) and disability-specific (e.g., Paralympics, Deaflympics, Special Olympics) programs. Refer to the “links” under the “get involved” section on this web page to learn more about disability-specific competitions. The US Paralympics swimming page also includes information for coaches, such as eligibility criteria for trip lists to coach at international swimming meets.



Including Swimmers with a Disability: A Guide for Coaches

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

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.



"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 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.

- *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

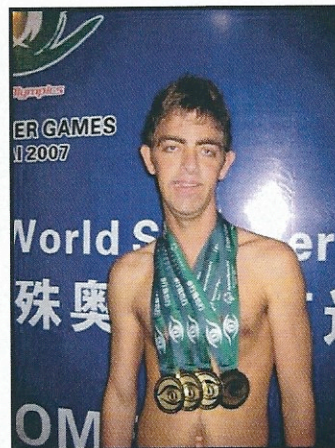
as well as to prove qualifying time standards for major disability-specific competitions.

- 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.

- *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

Tips for Effectively Coaching an athlete with APD and/or ADD

To most effectively coach athletes with an underlying disorder, a coach must be aware of possible disorders. Having knowledge of a disorder will help a coach better understand an athlete who is having problems listening and following directions in the pool. A coach must use outside resources in order to come to the best conclusion as to how to most effectively communicate with these athletes.

Two of the main disorders:

- ◆ **Auditory Processing Disorder (APD)**- a neurological dysfunction that affects how a person processes auditory input. Processing of auditory information involves attention, detection, identification, comprehension, and memory of a signal. A child with APD has adequate hearing acuity. They can hear sounds. However, they have difficulty in understanding or making sense of what they hear.

- ◆ **Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)**- a neurobehavioral disorder of childhood. There are three basic types of ADD.
 - I. Inattentive Type: difficulty organizing or finishing a task
 - II. Hyperactive-Impulsive Type: impulsive, fidgety and talkative
 - III. Combined Type: symptoms of above two types are predominant in the child

Common Attributes:

- 3 step directions are difficult
- HABIT and ROUTINE are IMPORTANT
- Having them repeat something doesn't mean they will remember it

This handout is composed of excerpts from a longer article by Jan Curley, M.A., CCC-SLP. The full article is available at:

www.usaswimming.org/TipsforADD

Tips to effectively coach:

- Communicate with parents
- Be clear & concise
- 1 step at a time; break it down
- Speak slowly
- Monitor athlete— do they look lost or confused?
- Visual aids are good
- Good catch phrases: “Look at the board”, “Eyes & ears”. Repeat until attention is there
- Get your athlete a swim buddy— they can follow someone else's lead
- Use all of their awareness (auditory, visual, and tactile)
- Try different strategies for different kids
- Give frequent & immediate consequences for a child's inappropriate behavior
- Find out if they are taking any medication or if they should
- Be compassionate towards these athletes; go the extra mile

Youngsters with APD or ADD have many positive qualities and talents (high energy, outgoing charm, creativity, and figuring out new ways of doing things) - **channel their high energy productively.**



USA Swimming Progression Outline: Swimmers with Disabilities



USA SWIMMING COACH SAFETY REQUIREMENTS WAIVER FOR COACHES WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

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USA Swimming requires anyone applying for coach membership to provide proof of current certification in First Aid, CPR and Safety Training for Swim Coaches (STSC). These courses include skill demonstrations that people with certain disabilities may be unable to participate in. In this event, the coach candidate should follow these procedures:

1. Obtain current certifications in any of the three courses where his/her disability is not a factor. Certifications must be from the list of USA Swimming approved courses.
2. Take the remaining course(s) and complete the written exam at the end of the course.
3. Get a letter from the organization that administered the course(s), stating that the candidate passed the written exam(s) but was unable to participate in the skills demonstration portion of the exam(s) due to a physical disability. Letters should be submitted to the LSC Membership Chair.
4. Submit a letter to the LSC Membership Chair from the club's head coach or board president, stating that a lifeguard or another USA Swimming coach will also be on deck at all times.

Candidates with disabilities will be eligible for coach membership provided that all the following conditions are met:

- ✓ Candidate has current USA Swimming-approved certifications where a waiver is not necessary (First Aid, CPR, and/or STSC);
- ✓ Candidate can provide proof of having passed the written exam(s) for those courses where a waiver is necessary, in the form of a letter from the course instructor verifying that the candidate has a disability that prohibits him/her from completing the required skills demonstration;
- ✓ A letter from the USA Swimming club verifying that a lifeguard or another USA Swimming coach member will be on deck at all times

The coach candidate must prove to the LSC Membership Chair that all the above conditions have been met. At that time, coach membership can be granted by the LSC.