

Including Swimmers With a Disability:

A Guide for Swimmers and Parents

Welcome to the USA Swimming family! One of our goals is the inclusion of swimmers with a disability. We welcome you to join a club, compete in meets, and participate in educational activities such as camps and clinics.

As people with a disability know, inclusion is not always easy. You may be the only swimmer with a disability on your club. You may encounter coaches and officials who know relatively little about disability and inclusion. There might be times when you and your parents need to advocate for your rights.

USA Swimming is working to educate all members of the swimming community about inclusion, but in the meantime, you will be a pioneer in our program. You will shape the attitudes that affect your competitive swimming experience and the experiences of other swimmers with a disability in the future. The more that you help members of the swimming community to understand disability concerns and the more that you are a partner in resolving challenges related to inclusion, the more positive your experience will be.

Joining a Club

You are more likely to have a positive experience in competitive swimming if you join a club. Advantages of club membership usually include quality coaching, access to facilities, and information about upcoming meets. More importantly, you will enjoy support and friendship from your teammates.

“Swimmers need access to education and coaching about stroke technique, training methods, mental training, goal setting, access to competition, emotional support, and much more. All of these things can be found in the context of a USA Swimming club program.”

Look for a club with a philosophy that satisfies you, that uses accommodating practice and meet facilities, and that offers the level of coaching that you need. Ask for a short try-out period to determine whether the club is a good match for you. Keep in mind that costs, practice schedules, and style of coaching vary from club to club.

Contact USA Swimming if you need help locating clubs in your area. Use the “club search” function on the USA Swimming web site (www.usa-swimming.org) or call the Member Services Division at (719) 578-4578. Although most swimmers register with USA Swimming as a member of a club, you may choose to register as “unattached” while searching for a club to join.

Benefiting from Swimming Practices

Communicate with your coach about your abilities and limitations. There are no textbook answers about coaching swimmers with a disability, so you and your coach will need to be creative in determining the best stroke techniques, conditioning methods, race strategies, or mental training techniques for you. Be sure that the coach knows about your goals in competitive swimming, especially if those goals involve qualifying for disability-specific competitions such as the USA Swimming Disability Championships, Paralympic Games, or Deaf World Games.

Expect to receive the same quality of coaching and the same level of attention as other swimmers. But recognize that all swimmers must earn the coach’s respect by demonstrating a good work ethic in practice, competing in meets, supporting their teammates, and helping out when needed.

“I swim and earn people’s respect by trying hard. After a while, people see me for who I am, and fitting in doesn’t seem to be a problem at all. When you are in the water, your disability seems to disappear.”

Become a valued member of the team. Make friends and earn respect by showing interest in your teammates, supporting and cheering for other swimmers, working hard in practice, helping other swimmers, following team policies, swimming your best in meets, and contributing to team activities.

“I feel I am valued because value isn’t measured in the awards you win or how fast you are. Value is determined by your work ethic, attitude, and the interest you show in others and they show in you. Every person’s individual personalities and characteristics go into forming the team, and you can either add or detract from the group. I feel I add.”

Learn workout etiquette. Some swimmers are slower than their teammates. They 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. If you have limited ability to push-off the walls, ask your coach to adjust send-off intervals so that you have enough time to execute starts and turns without colliding with other swimmers in your lane.

Some swimmers with a disability require accommodations such as gym mats to facilitate transfers, physical assistance getting in and out of the pool, tappers who warn the swimmer of an impending turn or finish, or alternate methods of communicating instructions. Collaborate with your coach and other club members to provide disability accommodations. Recognize the club’s limitations with respect to financial and personnel resources, and be appreciative when they work to include you. Consider common-sense, low-cost alternatives whenever possible, and provide your own accommodations when feasible – be part of the solution.

Competing in Meets

Notify the meet director if you need disability accommodations or if you will be bringing a personal assistant with you to the meet. Accommodations might include special seeding provisions, extra time getting set at the start of a race, hand signals at the start, or wheelchair seating on the pool deck. Personal assistants (usually provided by the swimmer) are people who help with tasks such as entry and exit from the pool, tapping, personal care, or interpreting. The best time to contact the meet director is prior to the meet, preferably at the time your entry is submitted. Also, speak with the meet referee prior to each session of the meet so that s/he is aware of your disability and can make the appropriate accommodations. Help the meet director and officials to help you.

Develop a personal strategy for determining your success at meets. You will be swimming against same-aged “able-bodied” swimmers at most local meets – don’t expect special events for swimmers with a disability and don’t expect consideration of disability classifications. Celebrate personal best times. Share your goals with your coach and teammates so that they can encourage and celebrate with you.

*“Race the clock and not the other swimmers.
Don’t become discouraged if you come in last.
Always try to improve on your personal best
times and race against yourself!”*

Expect to be judged according to the USA Swimming rules – the officials shouldn’t “coddle” you because you have a disability. The meet referee and deck officials are empowered to consider your disability when applying the rules (see Article 105 of the rule book); however, they are not prepared to give special consideration to the disability classifications used in major national and international meets. Recognize that many officials are inexperienced when judging swimmers with a disability. If you feel that a call inappropriate for your disability has been made, you or your coach should discuss this with the meet referee. Remember that we are all learning together.

Qualifying for National and International Meets

Many swimmers with a disability compete in both “regular” and disability meets. They enjoy swimming in local USA Swimming meets because they can test themselves against skilled “able-bodied” swimmers and they can participate with their friends and teammates.

Disability-specific meets provide an opportunity to compete against other swimmers who have the same ability/disability classification. Other advantages of disability-specific meets include greater opportunities for awards and recognition, as well as the chance to qualify for international teams.

Major disability-specific meets include the USA Swimming Disability Championships, the Paralympic Games, and the Deaf World Games.

- The *USA Swimming Disability Championships* are conducted annually in a 50-meter facility during the summer months. Eligibility is extended to: (a) swimmers who are deaf; (b) swimmers who are blind or visually impaired; (c) swimmers with cognitive disabilities such as mental retardation, severe learning disabilities, or autism; and (d) swimmers with physical disabilities such as amputations, cerebral palsy, dwarfism, spinal injuries, or other mobility impairments. Meet information and time standards are available from USA Swimming headquarters.
- The *Paralympic Games* are the epitome of competition for swimmers with physical, vision, or cognitive disabilities. The Paralympic Games are held once every four years in the same years as Olympic Games, usually in the same facilities. Swimmers qualify for the USA team through their performances at the USA Paralympic Trials. Consult the International Paralympic Committee web site (www.paralympic.org) for more information about the Paralympic Games.
- The *Deaf World Games* are the highest level of competition for swimmers who are deaf. The Deaf World Games are held once every four years in the year following the Olympic Games. Swimmers qualify for the USA team through their performances at designated competitions. Consult the Comité Internationale des Sports des Sourds web site (www.ciss.org) for more information about the Deaf World Games.

Hints for Parents

When asked about factors that contribute to their accomplishments, successful swimmers typically give credit to the love and support they receive from their parents. Parents, in turn, recognize the importance of providing support without compromising the swimmer's efforts to become independent, and without giving coaching-type advice. Here are some suggestions from parents of successful swimmers.

Allow your child to be an athlete. Athletes are judged on ability, not disability. They need opportunities to succeed and fail, to challenge their bodies to perform, to develop sportsmanship, and to build positive relationships with their

teammates. Athletes gain confidence and self esteem from their successes, especially when they can attribute success to their own efforts. Allow your child to take risks and to be as independent as possible.

“Don’t question your child’s ability. Be positive and your child will be positive as well. Help create a fun and challenging environment.”

Respect your swimmer’s coach. The coach should make decisions about the methods, frequency, and intensity of training, and the coach should be responsible for giving advice about stroke technique. Help your child to value the coach’s expertise.

Talk with the coach about the best way to help your child. Discuss your child’s needs for disability accommodations at practices and meets, possible ways of gradually reducing the need for personal assistance as the athlete gets older or becomes more skilled, and ways in which you are willing to help.

“Let go. Let your child be as independent as he or she can be. Let the coach be in charge.”

Contribute to your child’s team. Help out with team activities and volunteer your services at meets.

Advocate for your child when necessary. Learn about guidelines for officiating swimmers with a disability from Article 105 in the USA Swimming rule book and about Local Swimming Committee (LSC) policies related to inclusion in meets. Help to educate others in the swimming community who might not be aware of these rules and policies. It’s always best to educate rather than confront or make demands.

“Realize that it is normal for people to have questions, even if they seem dumb or repetitive. Parents can best facilitate inclusion by being patient and helping educate others. Through education we all gain acceptance and understanding.”

Conclusion

Swimmers with a disability who participate in USA Swimming programs experience many benefits, including improved

stroke technique, better training and conditioning, faster times, more friendships, opportunities to travel and compete, and recognition for accomplishments. We welcome you to share in these benefits and to help make inclusion a reality in all aspects of USA Swimming programs.

"I've tried many things ... I haven't found the thing that's stole my heart like swimming has."

Resources

Swimmers and parents who need additional information are encouraged to contact USA Swimming headquarters:

USA Swimming
One Olympic Plaza
Colorado Springs, CO 80909
(719) 578-4578
www.usa-swimming.org

Other sources of information include the USA Swimming rule book (especially Article 105) and LSC policies on inclusion.

Acknowledgements

This brochure was developed by the Adapted Swimming Committee as a service to swimmers with a disability and their parents. We wish to thank participants from the USA Swimming Disability Championships and their parents for sharing the advice that appears in this brochure.

This “Guide for Swimmers and Parents” is part of a series of five brochures on including swimmers with a disability. USA Swimming has also published guidelines for coaches, officials, meet directors and safety directors, and local swimming committees.

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