



Autism
Society
Iowa



variety™
the children's charity

SWIMMING & WATER SAFETY TOOLKIT

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Water can be both fun and therapeutic, but for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), it can also pose serious risks. Research shows that **drowning is the leading cause of accidental death for children and young adults with autism**, making proactive water safety education and training critical for families and caregivers.

The Autism Society of Iowa has developed this toolkit to provide practical guidance, resources, and support for families looking to improve water safety for their loved ones with autism. Whether your family is just beginning to explore water activities or is seeking advanced skills and strategies, this toolkit is designed to help you navigate the options available. Inside, you will find:

- A listing of providers offering adaptive swim lessons and private, one-on-one instruction tailored to individuals with autism.
- Social stories and visual supports that help teach water safety concepts and prepare children for safe experiences around water.
- Information about the Autism Society of Iowa Water Safety Scholarship Program, which helps families access adaptive swimming lessons and other water safety instruction.

Our goal is to empower families, reduce risks, and build confidence in and around water. Every swimmer deserves the opportunity to enjoy water safely — and every family deserves the resources and support to make that possible.

Let this toolkit be your guide to safer, more confident, and enjoyable water experiences for your loved one.



AUTISM SOCIETY OF IOWA WATER SAFETY SCHOLARSHIP

Thanks to a generous grant from *Variety- the Children's Charity*, we are thrilled to offer scholarships for adaptive as well as private 1-on-1 swim lessons for children with autism. Recipients will be required to provide receipts of lesson payments to ASI per grant requirements.

ASI will reimburse up to \$300/per family, per year.

Scholarship window closes June 30, 2026.

For more information, visit:

<https://autismia.com/water-safety-scholarship/>



Private and Adaptive Swimming Lessons

Northern Iowa

Mason City YMCA – Mason City, IA

- One-on-one swimming instructions tailored to your needs. Private swimming lessons are only offered to YMCA members.

More information: Contact Matt Anderegg, 641-422-5995 or <https://masoncityymca.org/>

Northeast Iowa

Panther Academy for Water Safety (PAWS) – Cedar Falls, IA

- High quality and socially equitable opportunities for all children, with and without developmental disabilities, within learn-to-swim and water safety skills programming.

More information: <https://www.facebook.com/PAWSSwim/>

Eastern Iowa

Iowa City Parks and Rec – Swimability – Iowa City, IA

- Lessons are 1:1 ratio and designed with the participant goals and needs in mind. Each lesson lasts for 30-minutes and participants must be 5 years of age at the start of the session.

Note: Iowa City Parks & Recreation Inclusive/Adaptive Programs can include customized swimming lessons for individuals with disabilities (seasonal and by request) - contact the recreation office for details and registration.

More information: <https://www.icgov.org/government/departments-and-divisions/parks-and-recreation/recreation/activity-registration>

Linn-Mar Aquatic Center – Marion/Cedar Rapids Area

- Adaptive swim initiative at the Linn-Mar Aquatic Center provides lessons designed for students with sensory challenges, autism, anxiety, and other special needs- using specially trained instructors and individualized instruction strategies.

More information: <https://www.linnmar.k12.ia.us/schools/aquatic-center/>

Camp Courageous Aquatics Center – Monticello, IA

- Aquatic center that can be supportive of adaptive swim lessons; families often contact staff about customized instruction and therapy-oriented sessions.

More information: <https://campcourageous.org/swim-lessons/>

Diventures – North Liberty, IA

- Private swimming instructor offering tailored one-on-one lessons; can be customized for swimmers needing individualized attention & adaptive teaching styles.

More information: <https://www.diventures.com/swim/private-swim-lessons/>

North Liberty Aquatic Center – North Liberty, IA

- Community pool with lessons; inquire about inclusive or individual adaptive lessons through Parks & Rec or private instructors.

More information: <https://northliberty.recdesk.com/Community/Program?category=4>

Central Iowa

Ames Parks & Recreation – Adaptive Swim Lessons – Ames, IA

- Offered through the City of Ames at Furman Aquatic Center, this program provides small-group adaptive swim lessons in a low-stimulation environment with adaptive equipment and extra instructor attention. Intended for children with special needs, these lessons emphasize comfort, water safety, and skill development.

More information: <https://www.cityofames.org/My-Government/Departments/Parks-and-Recreation/Facilities/Furman-Aquatic-Center/Swim-Lesson-Information>

Foss Swim School – Ankeny, IA

- Offers swimming lessons where parents can request tailored instruction; adaptive options can often be coordinated with instructors.

More information: <https://www.fossswimschool.com/swimming-lesson-locations/ankeny-ia/>

Iowa Swim Academy – Ankeny, IA

- Private instructor-based swim lessons. You can discuss autism-friendly approaches and adaptive pacing directly with the instructor, which many families prefer for individualized needs.

More information: <https://www.facebook.com/IowaSwimAcademy/>

Trail Point Aquatics and Wellness – Ankeny, IA

- One-on-one instruction for swimmers of any age or level.

More information: <https://mytrailpoint.com/swim-academy.html>

Central Iowa Swim – Granger, IA

- Offers private and semi-private swimming instruction that can be tailored to your child's pace and learning style — families of children with autism often choose private lessons to support confidence and safety.

More information: <https://centraliowaswim.com/>

Natavi Swim School – Grimes, IA

- Natavi offers a specialized S.W.I.M. (Swim and Water Instruction Modifications) program designed specifically for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), focusing on water safety, confidence building, and individualized instruction one-on-one with an instructor. Lessons meet consistently once per week and are customized for each student.

More information: <https://www.nataviswim.com/>

Newton YMCA – Family Water Safety Clinic – Newton, IA

- Free family swimming lesson. 3rd Saturday of each month; 10:00 A.M.

More information: <https://www.newtonymca.org/>

Newton YMCA – YMCA Adaptive Aquatics – Newton, IA

- The Newton YMCA offers an Adaptive Aquatics program designed for individuals with intellectual or physical challenges. Activities include basic swimming skills, adaptive movement, water games, and low-pressure aquatic exercises. Contact the Aquatics Director for scheduling and participation details.

More information: <https://www.newtonymca.org/>

Goldfish Swim School – Urbandale, IA

- Offers private/semi-private lessons; open discussions about adaptive pacing and strategies are encouraged.

More information: <https://goldfishswimschool.com/urbandale/>

SafeSplash + SwimLabs – Adaptive Aquatics – Waukee, IA

- Adaptive Aquatics swimming lessons are tailored to children with physical, sensory, or developmental challenges. Instructors work one-on-one with swimmers to build water safety skills, confidence, and strength. Lesson plans are customized to each child's needs and goals.

More information: <https://www.safesplashswimlabs.com/locations/waukee-ia>

Aqua-Tots Swim School Des Moines – West Des Moines, IA

- Structured swimming school with private/semi-private lessons; many families request *adaptive/sensory-friendly instruction*.

More information: <https://www.aqua-tots.com/swim-levels/additional-swim-services/>

Central Iowa Aquatics – West Des Moines, IA

- Swim school with individualized lessons where instructors can adapt instruction based on needs.

More information: <https://www.gomotionapp.com/team/isicia/page/swim-lessons>

Southwest Iowa

Edgar May Health & Recreation Center – Council Bluffs, IA

- This program teaches water safety and swimming skills to youth and adults with physical or intellectual disabilities using instructors certified in the *Swim Whisperers Program*®. Includes free adaptive swimming sessions plus structured lessons with assessments and individualized support.

More information: <https://edgarmay.org/adaptive-swim>

Swimtastic Swim School – Omaha, NE

- Adaptive Aquatics program in Omaha designed to meet the unique needs of swimmers with physical, sensory, or developmental challenges. Through individualized lesson plans and compassionate instruction, Swimtastic helps children build water safety skills, confidence, and strength in a safe and supportive environment.

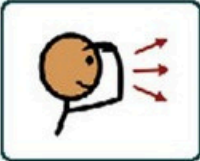


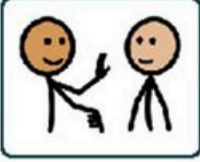
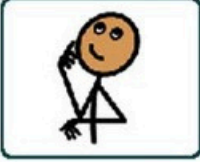
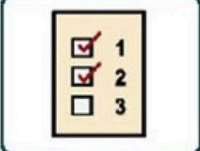
More information: <https://www.swimtastic.com/locations/omaha-northwest-ne>

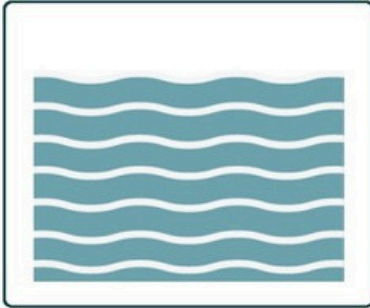
Special Needs-Focused Swim Instruction – Big Blue Swim School (selected locations)

Big Blue offers adaptive lessons for children of all abilities using instructors trained in the Swim Whisperers® method, designed to support sensory, motor, and processing needs.

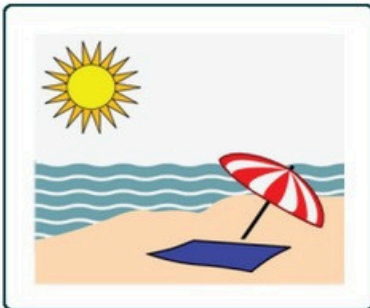
Tips for Accessing Adaptive Swim Lessons

- Contact instructors/programs before signing up: Many adaptive lessons aren't listed as "special needs" classes online; staff often tailor teaching once you explain needs.
- Ask about one-on-one or low-stimulus sessions: Individuals with autism or sensory needs often do best with individualized or low-noise environments.
- Inclusive Pools & Parks: Municipal community pools frequently offer ADA-friendly access and will accommodate adaptive formats — just inquire with the Aquatics Supervisor.

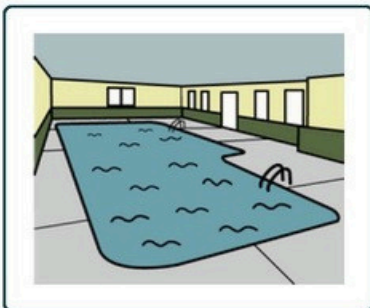
- | | | | |
|---|---|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1 |  | <p>Designate a responsible person to supervise the water without distraction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use something visual or tangible to identify the water supervisor like a hat or lanyard. • Schedule water supervisors in intervals to ensure optimum attention to the water. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 |  | <p>Stay within an arm's length of children that are in or near water.</p> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 |  | <p>Be mindful of toys in or around the water that would entice someone to bolt or enter the water.</p> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 |  | <p>Model safe behaviors, narrate safe behaviors, and practice safe behaviors in all water environments to promote generalization.</p> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 |  | <p>Be mindful of your child's interests and typical behaviors so that you can be best prepared.</p> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 |  | <p>Have a safety plan when in or near water.</p> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



There is water everywhere.



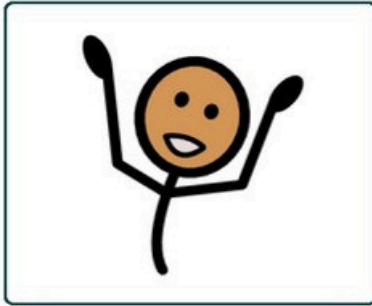
**There is water at the beach,
in a lake, or in the ocean.**



**There is water in a puddle,
on a dock, or in the pool.**



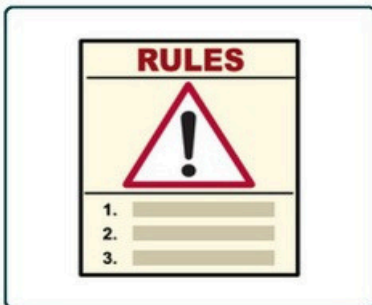
**There is water in the bathtub,
in a fish tank, or a big aquarium.**



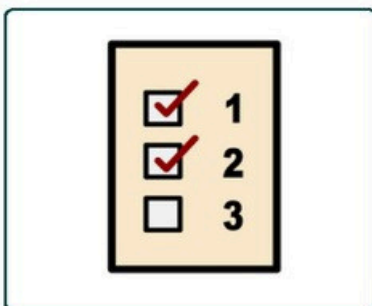
Being in the water can be fun.



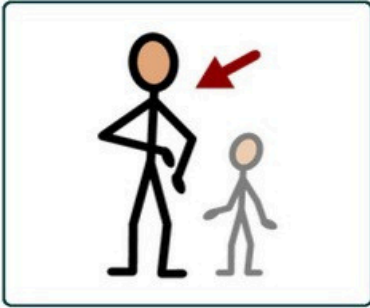
But being near water can be dangerous if I don't follow the water safety rules.



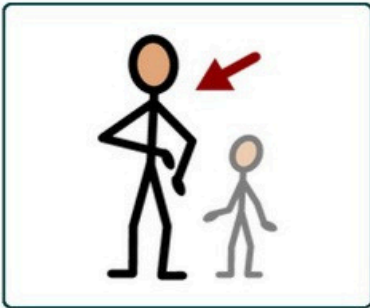
To stay safe and have fun in the water, I will learn the water safety rules.



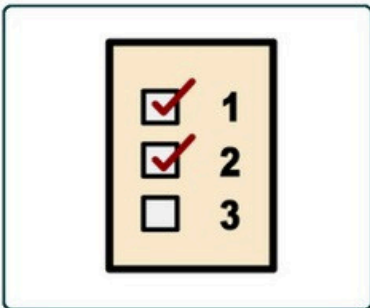
When I am in or near the water, these are the safety rules I will follow.



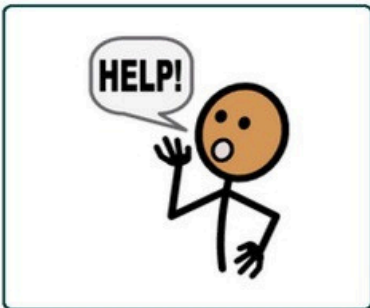
I will stay close to a helper when I am in or near the water.



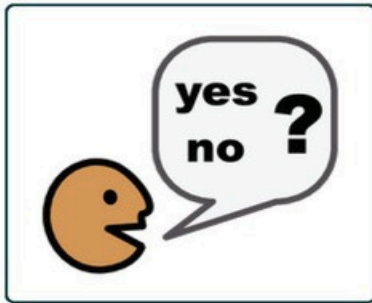
A helper can be an adult like a parent, a teacher, or a caregiver.



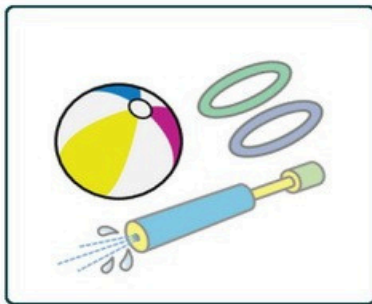
I will follow directions.



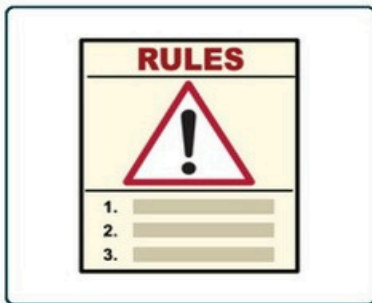
I will ask for help.



I will ask my helper before I go into the water.



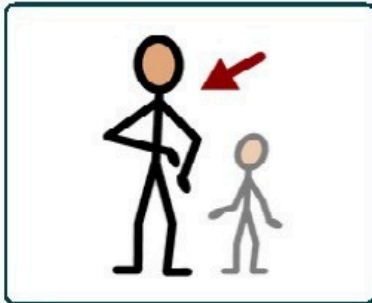
I will ask for help if I want to get something that is in the water.



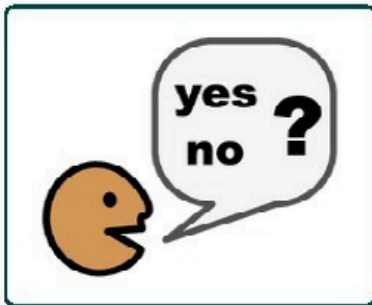
When I follow the safety rules, I can stay safe in and around the water.



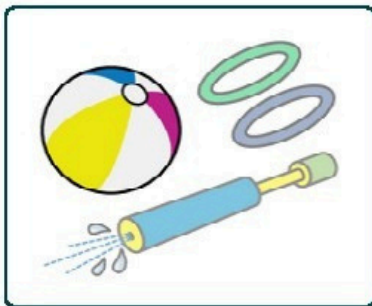
When I follow the safety rules, water can be fun and safe!



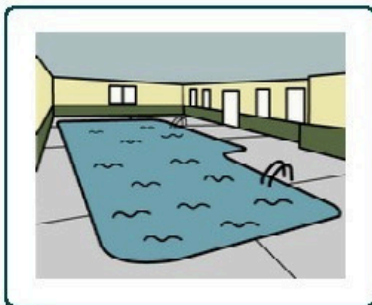
When I am at the pool I will stay close to my helper.



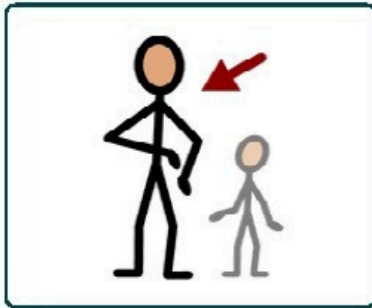
When I am at the pool I will ask my helper before I go in the water.



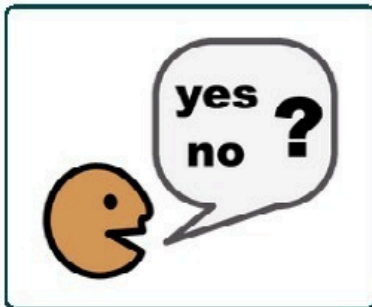
When I see a toy in the pool that I want, I will ask for help to get it.



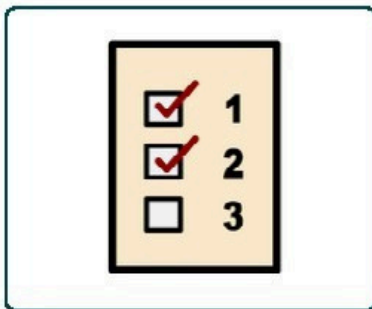
When I am at the pool I will follow the safety rules so that I can stay safe.



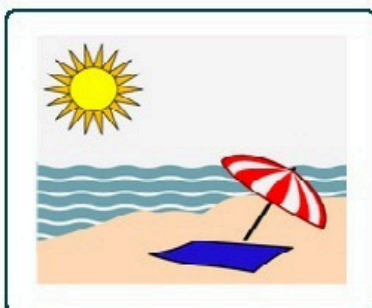
When I am at the beach I will stay close to my helper.



When I am at the beach I will ask my helper before I go into the water.

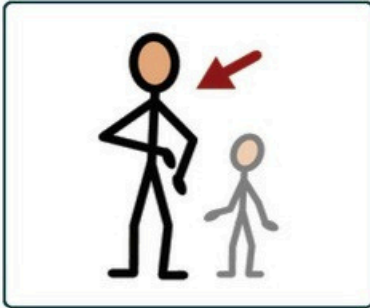


When I am at the beach I will follow directions so that I can stay safe.

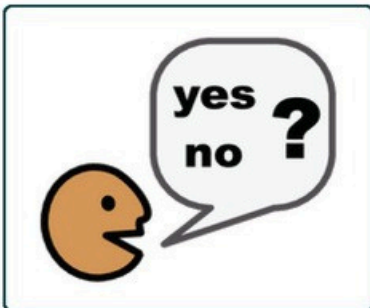


I am safe when I follow the safety rules at the beach.

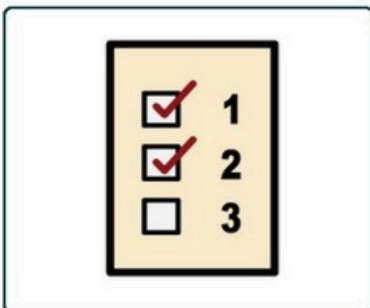
Staying Safe: At the Lake



When I am at the lake I will stay close to my helper.



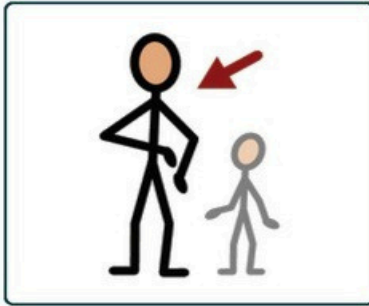
When I am at the lake I will ask my helper before I go into the water.



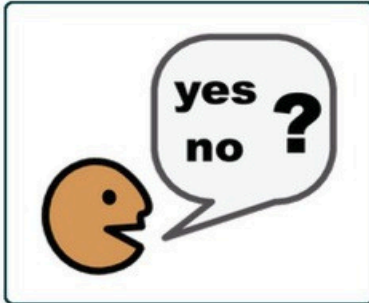
When I am at the lake I will follow directions so that I can stay safe.



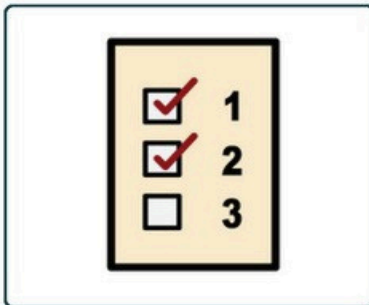
I am safe when I follow the safety rules at the lake.



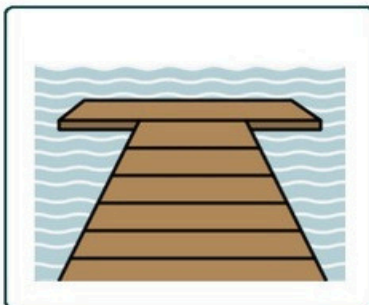
When I am on the dock I will stay close to my helper.



When I am on the dock I will ask my helper before going near or into the water.

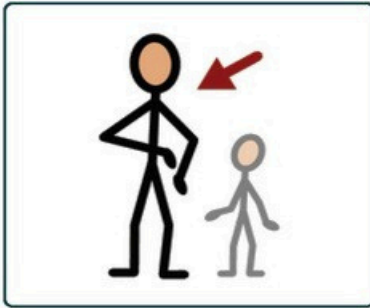


When I am on the dock I will follow directions so that I can stay safe.

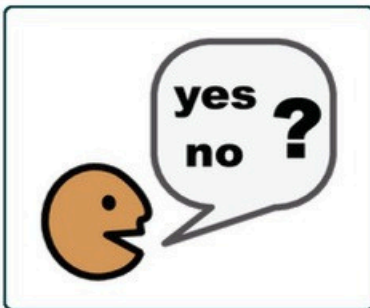


I am safe when I follow the safety rules on the dock.

Staying Safe: On the Boat



When I am on the boat I will stay close to my helper.



When I am on the boat I will ask my helper before I go into the water.

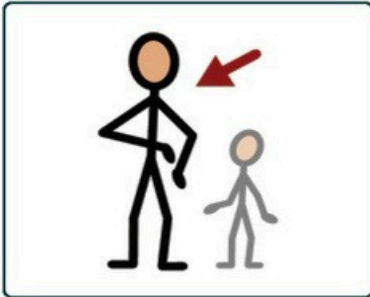


When I am on the boat I will wear a lifejacket.

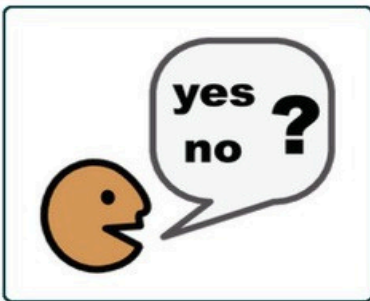


When I am on the boat I will follow the safety rules so that I can stay safe.

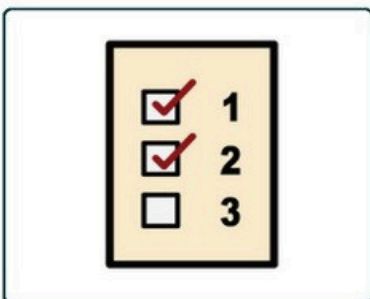
Staying Safe: In Puddles



When I want to jump in a puddle I will stay close to my helper.



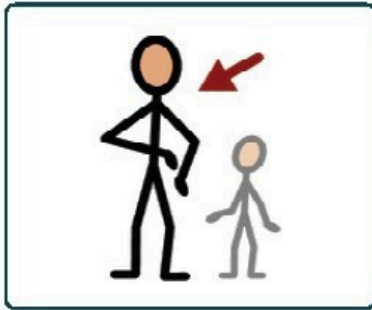
When I want to jump in a puddle I will ask my helper before I do.



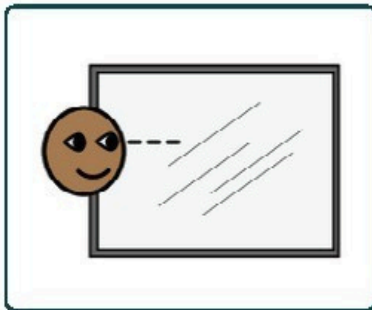
When I want to jump in a puddle I will follow directions so that I can stay safe.



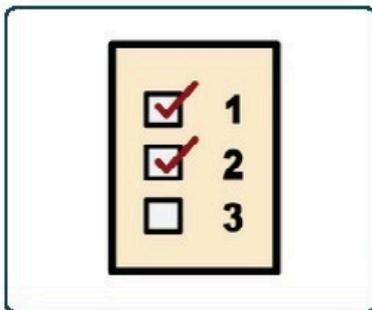
I am safe when I follow the safety rules when jumping in puddles.



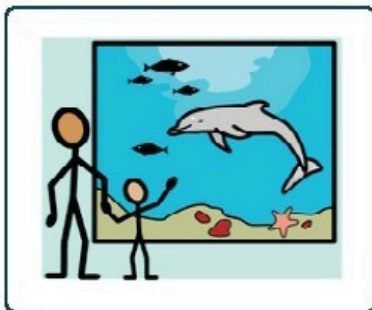
When I am at the aquarium I will stay close to my helper.



When I am at the aquarium I will keep my hands off the glass. I want the animals to feel safe in their home.



When I am at the aquarium I will follow directions so that I can stay safe.



I am safe when I follow the safety rules at the aquarium.



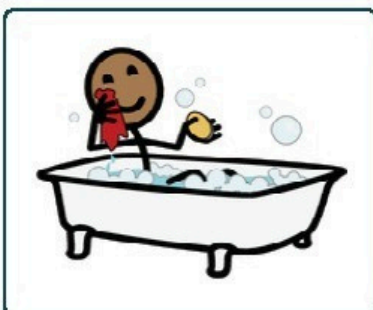
When the water is on in the bathtub, shower, or the sink I will follow directions.



I will ask before I turn the water on in the bathtub, shower, or sink.



I will ask an adult before going into the bathtub or shower each time.



I am safe when I follow the rules when I use the water in the bathtub, shower, or sink.

AUTISM SOCIETY OF IOWA POLICY

This Toolkit was developed to provide families and professionals with resources related to autism in the state of Iowa.

All information provided or published by the Autism Society of Iowa is for informational purposes only. Specific treatments, therapies, or services should be provided to an individual only under the guidance of the individual's doctor, caregiver, or other qualified professional. References to any treatment, therapy option, program, service, or provider do not constitute an endorsement by the Autism Society.

The Autism Society assumes no responsibility for how any information is used. It cannot be held liable for consequences arising from individual interactions with a professional or organization. The inclusion of any organization does not imply endorsement, and omission does not imply disapproval.

The Autism Society of Iowa may update this toolkit at any time. If you have a resource you would like included, please contact: autismsocietyiowa@gmail.com.

