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## SwimKids program focuses on children with special needs

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SwimKids Swim School offers a variety of customized swim programs and one specifically designed for children with special needs.

The developmental swim program uses water education to develop water safety and swimming skills. It also focuses on developing self-confidence and building self-esteem.

According to the SwimKids Web site, the program is customized for each child's emotional and developmental abilities, with the goal to help each child become physically active and learn the life saving skill of swimming. The ultimate goal is to eventually offer these same children another avenue for integration into a small group of highly functional special needs children.

The special needs swim program at SwimKids is led by Dave Tonnesen, owner, and Angela Baker, special needs director.

Tonnesen, an aquatics professional with over 20 years' experience, is the former head coach of Prince William County Special Needs Swim Program and has received a commendation from Prince William Board of County Supervisors for his support of special needs programs and his commitment to working with special needs children.

Baker said she finds it difficult to stress enough the impact that swim lessons can make on the life of a special needs child.

"Water is such a great motiva-

tor for children with special needs. Kids who are limited by movement on land can often learn to move without restriction in the water. They learn the water safety and swimming skills they need to be confident in the water. They have fun exploring new boundaries. This creates a water experience that is not only exciting and educational, but also empowering, substantive and fulfilling as well," she explained.

At SwimKids, each lesson is adapted to meet the special need of the swimmer.

"Each child requires a different teaching method that is individually designed to cater to (his or her) ability and skill level of the particular student. Our program is designed to look beyond the disability. We work very hard to relate to the swimmer as an individual," Baker added.

According to the National Autism Association, drowning is the leading cause of death among children in the autism spectrum. The American Institute for Preventative Medicine states that drowning also is the leading cause of death among children in the U.S. under age 5.

Baker went on to explain she has received volumes of positive feedback from many parents of students who have progressed through the SwimKids special needs program. She has seen firsthand the positive impact that learning to swim has on the individual and the benefits the families receive.

"Learning to swim is not only a safety skill, but a source of confidence building and body conditioning. With confidence in the water,



Angela Baker, special needs director at SwimKids swim school, teaches a swim lesson to Olivia Henry.  
Courtesy photo

our boys have another social outlet. Since drowning is one of the leading causes of death of children in the spectrum, I consider the water safety skills that are taught at SwimKids an essential foundation for a lifelong, safe enjoyment of the water. Being a part of SwimKids, where there is always a caring instructor who is willing to try new methods, has made a big difference in our boys' lives," says one SwimKids mother.

Baker said that one of her student's mothers said this: "I remember asking the question as if it were yesterday," said a woman as she watched her autistic son's swim

lesson at SwimKids. "Will he really ever swim? Now, I watch every week in amazement as my son gets from one end of the pool to the other on his own." She continued, "We are so pleased with the progress he has made over the years. Our family has always wanted a pool of our own. We never thought it more than a dream because we knew that our children would have to be skilled swimmers before we gave it any real consideration. We figured that due to autism, it would in fact never be anything more than a dream. I am happy to say that we are saving our pennies for a pool. We are so thankful to SwimKids, the programs and

the coaches themselves, for this valuable life skill they have taught both our children."

The nonprofit SwimKids Foundation sponsors many things in the community not limited to water and safety programs. Plans to begin the Marilyn Kelly Fund, a scholarship program for underprivileged special needs children, are in process. Kelly retired in August after coaching the Montclair Seahawks summer league swim team in Prince William County for 35 years. The team wanted to give her a gift that keeps on giving and made a donation of \$900+ to SwimKids for its special needs program. SwimKids is matching the donation. The foundation is in its beginning stage and is not ready to fully fund scholarship programs yet. Further details will be available as they develop.

"SwimKids is proud to be a part of the foundation and looks forward to forging a strong, lasting relationship," said Cindy Tonnesen, co-owner.

SwimKids offers a wide range of lesson structures to meet a child's needs. In addition to its special needs program, SwimKids offers lessons for SwimBabies for ages six months and up, SwimTots for ages three to five years, SwimKids for ages six and up and Swim Team. The programs are offered year-round at six area swimming pools. For more information on SwimKids Swim School or to enroll your child in lessons, visit [www.swimkids.us](http://www.swimkids.us) or call 703-396-SWIM.

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