



## Including Swimmers with a Disability: A Guide for Swimmers and Parents

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

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*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, train in a team environment, 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.

### Join 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.

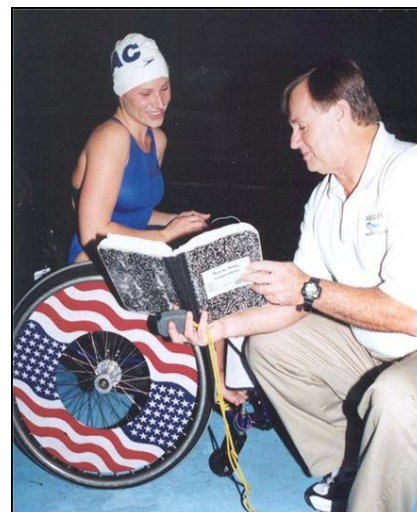
*“Swimmers need access to education and coaching about stroke technique, training methods, mental training, goal setting, access to competition, emotional support, and much more. All of these things can be found in the context of a USA Swimming club program.”*

Look for a club with a philosophy that meets your needs, 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 philosophies 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.usaswimming.org](http://www.usaswimming.org)). 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. Contact your Disability Swimming Chair Local Swim Committee (LSC) for assistance if needed.

## Benefit from Organized 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 Paralympic Games or the Deaflympics. Expect to receive the same quality of coaching and the same level of attention as other swimmers. 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 start the set and turn 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. Work with your coach and other club members to provide the disability accommodations that you need. Recognize the club's limitations with respect to financial and personnel resources, and acknowledge their efforts in regards to inclusion.

*Collaborate with your team and coach with respect to disability accommodations.* You are the expert at what works best for you! Consider common-sense, low-cost alternatives whenever possible, and provide your own accommodations when feasible – be part of the solution! If you have questions regarding your specific rights and obligations regarding the applicability of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), please consult the ADA home page (<http://www.ada.gov>).

## **Meets and Competition**

You are welcome and encouraged to compete at USA Swimming meets. Your coach can provide advice about the most appropriate meets to enter. You and your coach should also discuss any disability accommodations that you may need, giving consideration to ways in which your disability does or does not affect your ability to comply with swimming rules, the need to be fair to other swimmers, and the time constraints associated with swim meets. If you conclude that accommodations are necessary, follow these guidelines from Article 105 of the USA Swimming rule book when making your requests to the meet director or meet referee.

- The coach or swimmer should contact the meet management to request disability accommodations that are needed at the swimming meet facility. Examples could include preferred parking, wheelchair seating, use of a service animal, additional strobe light, etc. It is courteous to make this request at the time entries are submitted, giving plenty of notice to the meet management to accommodate your request.
- In addition, the coach or swimmer should speak with the meet referee before the competition to provide a concise description of the athlete's disability and to request appropriate rule modifications or disability accommodations related to the actual competition. Possibilities include, but are not limited to, special seeding, extra time getting set at the start of a race, hand signals at the start, or personal assistants who help with tasks such as entry and exit from the pool, tapping (for the swimmers with vision loss), personal care, or interpreting. Personal assistants: (a) are not required to be members of USA Swimming; (b) do not have the benefit of USA Swimming general liability or excess accident insurance unless they are members of USA Swimming; (c) may not coach unless registered as coach members; and (d) must not interfere with meet operations.

Develop a personal strategy for determining your success at meets. You will be swimming against same-aged swimmers who do not have a disability at USA Swimming meets. Please don't expect special events for swimmers with a disability or 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 "bend the rules" 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 disability specific meets. Recognize that some officials are inexperienced when judging swimmers with a disability. If you and/or your coach feel that an inappropriate disqualification was made given your disability, then your coach should discuss this with the meet referee. Remember that we are all learning together.

### National and International Competition

Many swimmers with a disability compete in both "regular" and specific disability meets. They enjoy swimming in local USA Swimming meets because they can test themselves against skilled swimmers who do not have disabilities and they can participate with their friends and teammates.

Disability-specific meets provide an opportunity to compete against other swimmers who have similar abilities and disability classifications. Equitable and fair competition is the goal at these events. Other advantages of these meets include greater opportunities for awards and recognition, as well as the chance to qualify for international teams. Major disability-specific competitions include the following:



- The *U.S. Paralympics CAN-AM Championships*. U.S. Paralympics is a division of the U.S. Olympic Committee that offers elite level competition for athletes with physical disability or vision impairment. U.S. Paralympics Swimming and Swimming Canada's Paralympic program collaborate to host two championship meets each year that alternate between U.S. and Canadian locations. These meets are contested in a 50 meter facility. Participation requires International Paralympic Committee (IPC) classification and achievement of established time standards that vary according to classification. These standards must be achieved at legitimate competitions. More information can be found at <http://usparalympics.org>.

- *Paralympic Games.* The “Para”lympic Games is the “parallel” sporting event to the “O”lympic Games for athletes with a disability. It is the ultimate competition goal for swimmers with physical disability or vision impairment. The Paralympic Games are held once every four years immediately following Olympic Games, utilizing the same facilities and competition venues. Swimmers qualify for Team USA through their performances at the U.S. Paralympics Trials Meet (see above for U.S. Paralympics info). Consult the International Paralympic Committee web site ([www.paralympic.org](http://www.paralympic.org)) for more information about the Paralympic Games.
- *Deaflympics.* The *Deaflympics* is the highest level of competition for swimmers who are deaf and hard of hearing. They are held once every four years in the year following the Olympic Games (odd numbered years). Swimmers qualify for the USA team through their performances at designated competitions. Participation requires membership in USA Deaf Sports Federation and U.S. Deaf Swimming. Swimmers are required to compete at the Deaf Trials event and submit best times for consideration for selection to the National Team. Consult the Deaflympics web site ([www.deaflympics.com](http://www.deaflympics.com)) and the USA Deaf Sports Federation ([www.usdeafsports.org](http://www.usdeafsports.org)) for more information.
- *Special Olympics World Games.* The Special Olympics World Summer Games are conducted every four years in the years prior to Olympic Games. The Games celebrate and recognize the achievements of athletes with cognitive disabilities from throughout the world. Participating swimmers are nominated by their national Special Olympics organizations using criteria such as swimming performances, ability to manage a lengthy trip under the supervision of coaches rather than parents, and history of participation in the Special Olympics program. Consult the Special Olympics International web site ([www.specialolympics.org](http://www.specialolympics.org)) for more information about the World Summer Games, and consult your area or state Special Olympics office to learn more about selection criteria.
- *Down Syndrome World Swimming Championships.* The Down Syndrome International Swimming Organization ([www.dsiso.org](http://www.dsiso.org)) conducts world championship swimming meets every two years. Eligibility consists of qualifying time standards, as well as medical proof that the swimmer does indeed have Down syndrome.

## 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.* Remember, you are the expert regarding your child’s disability, day-to-day functional abilities and the need for accommodations. Discuss your child’s needs for disability accommodations at practices and meets, possible ways of increasing independence as the athlete gets older or becomes more skilled, and ways in which you are willing to assist this process.

*“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. Work with your swimmer’s coach to help educate others in the swimming community who might not be aware of these rules and policies. Everyone benefits from education!

*“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 the same benefits as their able-bodied peers. These include better overall health, improved stroke technique, better training and conditioning, faster times, more friendships, opportunities to travel and compete, recognition for accomplishments, improved self esteem, and confidence that they can be the best swimmers they could possibly be. We welcome you to share in these benefits and to help make inclusion a reality in all aspects of USA Swimming.

*“I’ve tried many things ... I haven’t found the thing that’s stole my heart like swimming has.”*

## Resources

Article 105 of the *USA Swimming Rulebook*.

*Article 105 Case Studies: Inclusion of Swimmers with Disabilities at USA Swimming Competitions*. Document posted on the Disability Swimming page of the USA Swimming website.

Block, M.E. (1995, January). Americans with Disabilities Act: Its impact on youth sports. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 66(1), 28-32.

*Safety/Risk Management and the Inclusion of Swimmers with Disabilities*. Document posted on the Disability Swimming page of the USA Swimming website.

U.S. Department of Justice. (2009). *Americans with Disabilities: ADA home page*. Retrieved February 20, 2009, from <http://www.ada.gov/>