

Dyspraxia: A guide for swimming instructors



Dyspraxia, also known as Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) affects movement and coordination in children and adults. It is surprisingly common, affecting around 5% of school-aged children with difficulties continuing into adulthood in most cases. Whilst Dyspraxia doesn't affect intelligence it can affect speech and non-motor skills such as organisation, planning, memory and attention. Together these difficulties make it hard for dyspraxic people to carry out everyday activities that others manage easily.

The health and wellbeing benefits of physical activity are well known, but negative experiences of PE, games and sports can have a long-lasting impact on dyspraxic people's confidence to take part. This is worrying as inactivity is linked to problems with fitness, weight, physical health and well-being. It is important to find ways to encourage and support dyspraxic people to take part in and enjoy physical activities throughout their lives.

Swimming is good for dyspraxic people as it is made up of repetitive movement sequences and the environment remains fairly predictable (unlike when playing team sports and ball games). It is worth encouraging dyspraxic people to persevere when learning to swim as they will often become quite proficient, even if their swimming style is rather individual!

Swimming helps with the development of core stability, strength, flexibility, endurance and coordination – skills that are challenging for dyspraxic people. It can also boost confidence and self-esteem. It is important to avoid drawing attention to a dyspraxic person's movement difficulties however, and to offer encouragement and individual attention to prevent them from becoming disillusioned and disengaged.

You may observe the following:

- Movements appear effortful, awkward and uncoordinated
- Takes longer to learn movement sequences compared to peers
- Difficulty moving limbs separately from their body, so the torso lifts out of the water when doing front crawl. May turn right over at times.
- Has difficulty climbing down steps the pool
- Some dyspraxic people swim well under the water but struggle to float on top
- Difficulty following instructions due to slow processing speed or difficulty attending in a noisy environment
- Some dyspraxic children have no fear of the water, while others are afraid of lifting their feet from the bottom
- May be slow to get changed and have difficulty organising their clothes and equipment

How you can help

- Find out if the individual has any specific limitations or needs, for example very flexible joints (see advice for people with Joint Hypermobility Syndrome if they have this diagnosis too). Discuss and identify necessary adjustments to ensure success
- Use clear, concise language and give instructions in small chunks. Repeat, if necessary using the same words (this is especially important for people who struggle to process language)
- Over-learning is essential for people who have problems with their short-term memory. That is, they need to continue practicing newly acquired skills to ensure they are maintained and eventually, become automatic.
- Provide positive, precise and constructive feedback. Explain what should be done, rather than saying what was done incorrectly
- Ensure each movement or movement sequence is mastered before adding another. Dyspraxic people often progress at a slower pace and need more practice than their peers
- Many dyspraxic people make more progress with daily lessons (eg during the school holidays) compared to weekly lessons
- Breaststroke may be easier than front crawl because both sides of the body move at the same time.
- Use pictures to illustrate the required stroke if someone has difficulty following verbal instructions
- Position the dyspraxic person next to the wall so they can follow the pool edge when swimming widths or lengths
- If someone has difficulty using the steps to get into the pool, place your hands on their feet so they can feel the steps. Alternatively, teach them to sit on the pool edge, turn to one side and lower themselves into the water feet first.
- Children who struggle to get themselves changed, and people who find noisy changing rooms overwhelming can do their last width or length first, so they get back to the changing room before the others.

Useful links:

[Swim England | Welcome to the home of Swim England \(swimming.org\)](http://swimming.org)

Further information available from:
Dyspraxia Foundation, 8 West Alley, Hitchin, Herts SG5 1EG
Helpline Tel: 01462 454986
Admin Tel: 01462 455016
Fax: 01462 455052
Web: www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk
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