

## ***It Is Not Just Swimming, It Is an Adventure!***

***By Dr. John Harrington***

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The title could describe the first few times our son, Sean, a swimmer with autism, started on a swim team at the YMCA in 2008. He was 13 years old and seemed to be a natural swimmer, but the noise and chaos of a swim meet was quite overwhelming. Normally developing children have difficulty maintaining their concentration, but for Sean we needed to sit with him and keep him focused. I remember his 100 backstroke event most clearly. He was actually in second place at the turn and when he saw us shouting encouragement from the pool side, he completely stopped swimming, looking at us for instructions as the other children swam by. We have since learned not to stand too close to the pool and have watched his ability to understand the whole process of a USA swim meet take hold. Sean is now 18 years old and has senior cuts for multiple events: 200 IM, 100 Fly, 200 Fly, 100 Back, 50 Free, 100 Free, and 200 Free.

Because he has had success, he has also had disappointment. Unfortunately, his emotional age does not match his chronological age. These disappointments have led to openly weeping on the deck and becoming angry and loud to my wife and our coaches. The difficult part about autism, a neurodevelopmental disorder, is that your child appears 100% normal on the outside to strangers who are unaware of the diagnosis. We have worked hard to give Sean strategies to cope with losing or gaining time in his events, and for the most part they have worked. Overall, Sean loves to swim and seems at home in the pool, where he can communicate with physicality. Although Sean remains with a limited ability to make and continue a conversation, he still attempts to learn everyone's name and is probably one of the friendliest swimmers you will ever meet. So, if you get a chance to say: "Hi," I am sure that Sean would appreciate your gesture.