

# Deaf-friendly swimming toolkit

A guide for  
professionals





**Our vision is a world  
without barriers for  
every deaf child.**

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**i** We use the term 'deaf' to refer to all types of hearing loss from mild to profound. This includes deafness in one ear or temporary hearing loss such as glue ear.

We use the term 'parent' to refer to all parents and carers of children.

# 1 Introduction

This resource contains information and advice on how to make swimming activities inclusive for deaf swimmers at all levels, and links to resources and organisations for further support.

The toolkit was created as part of the Deaf-friendly Swimming Project, a five-year programme funded by Sport England and the National Lottery Community Fund, Scotland.

# 2 Making the swimming pool deaf-friendly

Due to high noise reverberation, swimming pools have poor acoustics that can make verbal communication difficult, especially for deaf people. Many deaf young people rely on hearing aids or cochlear implants which are not waterproof and this makes communicating during swimming activities even more challenging. But there are lots of ways to adapt the swimming pool environment to make communication easier, here are some tips.

- › Have a board with teacher's names, faces and pool rules.
- › Download and display a poster with deaf-awareness tips.
- › Create visual signs for toilets, showers and changing rooms.
- › Make teachers, assistants, lifeguards and receptionists aware that a deaf child is attending.
- › Test your hearing loop regularly and ensure it is working.
- › Ensure the pool is well lit.

- › Turn off noisy water features such as jacuzzis and fountains.
- › Limit distractions by using quiet areas of the pool.
- › Explain things poolside when children can wear hearing technology.
- › Light should shine on your face, not from behind you.
- › Everyone should know what to do in an emergency, agree a visual signal.

Ensuring staff around your centre are practising good deaf-awareness and even using basic sign language can have a huge impact on deaf children and their families. Find out more about making swimming deaf-friendly with our helpful resources on page 19.

 You can download our communication flyer at [www.ndcs.org.uk/communicationflyer](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/communicationflyer). Find out more about testing loop systems and explaining things poolside at [www.ndcs.org.uk/how-tech-works](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/how-tech-works) and [www.ndcs.org.uk/childhooddeafness](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/childhooddeafness).



# 3 Tips and advice for deaf-friendly swimming

Because a deaf child may not hear what you are saying and miss out on important information, they can misunderstand and make mistakes. This can lead to a lack of confidence, frustration and feelings of isolation.

But small and simple changes can help to ensure deaf young people can enjoy swimming just as much as their hearing peers.

## Do:

- › ask the child their preferred communication method in the pool
- › get attention before speaking – try waving your hand, a flag or float
- › use visual aids like directional lane boards, photos, pictures, videos or wipe-off boards
- › stay in one place and keep eye contact (kneel or sit on the poolside if needed)
- › use gestures, demonstrate strokes and techniques
- › repeat other swimmers' contributions to the session
- › allow time to put hearing technology on mid-session, or talk before it is taken off
- › ensure the child feels comfortable to ask you to repeat yourself
- › practise races with a touch start or strobe light before competitions.

## Don't:

- › speak too slowly or shout – this distorts lip patterns
- › move around the pool when you are talking
- › cover your mouth or talk with your whistle in your mouth
- › talk and demonstrate at the same time
- › give up – try explaining differently, write it down, use pictures or demonstrations.

We have lots more deaf-friendly do's and don'ts for every situation on our website.

There are lots of simple things you can do to make swimming more deaf-friendly. Find more useful resources on page 19.



Find more information on the different ways of communicating with deaf children at [www.ndcs.org.uk/communicationtips](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/communicationtips).



## 4 Working with a communicator

You may find you are working with a British Sign Language (BSL)/English communicator in your swimming activities. Here are some tips for good practice.

- › Remember that swimmers need to see you and the communicator.
- › Keep eye contact with the swimmer, even if the 'voice' is coming from the communicator.
- › Swimmers can only look at one place so can't watch a stroke demonstration and the communicator simultaneously. One, and then the other.
- › Allow time for the communicator to finish and the swimmer to reply.
- › Use your own communication skills to build rapport with the swimmer.
- › Share the session plan in advance and explain swimming jargon.



## 5 Is it safe to swim with glue ear?

Children are normally advised by their doctors to continue to participate in swimming and water based activities if they have glue ear, grommets or both with some or all of the following precautions.

- › Two weeks out of the water post-op.
- › Wearing earmoulds.
- › Wearing a headband over the ears.
- › Avoiding swimming underwater in deep water.
- › Avoiding jumping into deep water.

All children are different and not all of the above precautions will be necessary for every individual. It is best to speak to the parent or carer directly.

 We have lots more information to help you understand glue ear and how it affects children at [www.ndcs.org.uk/glueear](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/glueear).



## 6 Preparation checklist for deaf-friendly swimming lessons

Some deaf children struggle to make progress in mainstream swimming lessons because of the reliance on verbal information, the noisy environment and the need to remove hearing aids and cochlear implants.

Make sure you are prepared to accommodate a deaf swimmer by using this handy checklist below as a guide.

### Things to ask the parent or swimmer before you start

- › What level of deafness do you have?
- › How do you like to communicate?
- › If you are not looking at me, what is the best way to get your attention?
- › Do you use any equipment to help you hear?
- › Do you use any equipment at school like a radio aid?

### Things to bring with you

- › Dry box for hearing aids and cochlear implants
- › Dry wipe board, pens and eraser
- › BSL for Swimming flip cards
- › Coloured flags
- › Strobe light to practice race starts
- › Video equipment for stroke analysis
- › Visual resources for games, for example pictures or objects.

### Other considerations

- › Does the pool have an auditory or visual emergency signal, or both?
- › Does everyone know what the alarm means and what to do?
- › Do you need another emergency signal such as an agreed visual gesture?
- › Are lifeguards and receptionists aware that deaf children are attending?
- › Is your hearing loop in good working order?



You can find more information on hearing aids and hearing implants at [www.ndcs.org.uk/childhooddeafness](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/childhooddeafness). If you would like to know more about radio aids and what they can do for children you can find plenty of information at [www.ndcs.org.uk/how-tech-works](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/how-tech-works)

# 7 Deaf-friendly pool games

Try out these deaf-friendly swimming games. Not all games will be suitable for all ages and abilities, but with some creative thinking, most games can be adapted to suit the swimmers in your group. Think about games you regularly play in the pool and how these could be adapted to be more deaf-friendly.

## Simon Says

1. The teacher gives instructions such as 'jump up and down'.
2. The swimmers only follow the instructions if the teacher uses the phrase 'Simon Says' before giving the instruction.

Use a visual signal for the phrase 'Simon Says' such as holding a float up or waving a flag. The visual signal can be anything as long as everyone recognises it and understands what it means.

## Underwater signing

Swimmers take turns to go underwater and sign, the rest of the group has to watch to see what they say.

The signing could be an animal, a colour, a hobby or any word at all.

Make it harder for older groups by using fingerspelling.

## Singing and dancing

There are loads of visual songs that work really well in the pool, for example *The Hokey Cokey*, *If You're Happy and you Know It* and *Dingle Dangle Scarecrow*.

Use BSL or create your own appropriate gestures to go with the words.

Each week the swimmers will get more familiar with the words and actions, and so will the teacher!

## Relays and races

Make sure you have a visual signal for 'Go' such as waving a flag, or an action like lowering an arm, and ensure all of the children can see you.

At the end of the race raise your hands and wiggle your fingers to applaud in BSL!

## The Bean Game

Swimmers move in different directions around the pool and you call out the name of a different type of bean.

When you call out a bean, the children do the appropriate action.

Each bean has an action, such as a 'runner bean' running, 'jumping beans' jumping or 'broad beans' stretching.

Have a visual representation of the action – this could be a demonstration by the teacher jumping or running on the spot, or a picture on a whiteboard that is held up for the group to see.



## Treasure Hunt

Children collect and return equipment to a specified point.

The teacher decides how the swimmers move, jumping for example.

Use a whiteboard to write down or draw pictures of what the swimmers should collect, such as something green or something that sinks, and how the swimmers should do this, walking and blowing bubbles, for example.

## Sharks and Dolphins

Swimmers split into two groups and face each other.

The teacher calls out instructions, for example, 'Sharks two steps forward' or 'Dolphins three jumps back'.

The teacher can call out 'Sharks/Dolphins attack!'

The attacking side tag the others, who run back to their side of the pool.

The 'tagged' swimmers join the other side.

Use gesture for 'shark' or 'dolphin' or show pictures or toys.

Hold up fingers to show numbers and visually demonstrate the way the swimmers should move, for example, 'fairy step', 'giant leap', 'hop', or use a whiteboard to write instructions.



# 8 Competitive deaf swimming

The competitive pathway for deaf swimmers may be different from hearing swimmers and can include opportunities to compete in mainstream, disability and deaf-specific competitions.

Some deaf children may prefer to participate in disability competitions, while others may prefer to participate in mainstream competitions with their hearing peers. Many swimmers will take part in a mixture of mainstream, disability and deaf-specific events.

Take a look at GB Deaf Swimming to learn more about competitive deaf swimming.

## Tips for swimming coaches

- › Don't cover your mouth with a hand, paper, pen or whistle and don't chew gum or eat.
- › Demonstrate technique corrections, rather than relying on verbal explanations.
- › Use visual aids such as white boards.
- › Present one form of visual information at a time.
- › Write down key words, swimming jargon and new vocabulary.
- › Use video analysis for technique correction.
- › Practice touch starts and lighting starts in training.
- › Some deaf swimmers can hear the start signal – don't assume.
- › Be aware of meets such as GB Deaf Nationals or the Deaflympics.

- › Be aware that some swimmers may have balance problems.
- › Some swimmers may prefer an outside lane, near the starter signal.
- › Ensure competition organisers know that a deaf swimmer is attending.



## 9 Preparation checklist for deaf-friendly swimming galas

Every swimming coach and team manager knows that swimming galas can be hectic and confusing, especially for first time competitors. Make sure you are fully prepared by using our handy checklist for deaf-friendly swimming galas.

### Things to ask the parent or swimmer

- › What level of deafness do you have?
- › How do you like to communicate?
- › Do you use any equipment to help you hear?
- › How do you prefer to start the race ?

### Useful things to bring

- › Dry box for hearing aids and cochlear implants.
- › Dry wipe board, pens and eraser.
- › Coloured flags.
- › Strobe light for race starts.

### Other considerations

- › Is there an auditory, visual emergency signal, or both?
- › Does everyone know what the alarm means?
- › Do you need another emergency signal such as an agreed visual gesture?
- › Are lifeguards and receptionists aware that deaf competitors are attending?

- › Are any swimmers competing for the first time?
- › Are swimmers in the appropriate lane based on their preferred start method?
- › Do you need to make changes to your risk assessment?
- › If staying overnight, who is responsible for alerting deaf swimmers to an emergency during the night?



## 10 Deaf-friendly swimming resources

Here you will find publications, resources and organisations to help you support deaf swimmers and ensure they get the most out of your lessons.

### BSL for Swimming videos

Our YouTube channel is full of useful videos to help you learn some basic BSL. There are signs specific to swimming and other sports. Search 'BSL for swimming' on YouTube to find our videos.

### Deaf-Friendly Swimming iLearn

This is a free online course accredited by Swim England. It contains helpful guidance on understanding deafness, communicating and technology. The course takes 1-2 hours to complete and you can save progress at any time.

[www.swimming.org/ios/course/816](http://www.swimming.org/ios/course/816).

### Deaf-Friendly Swimming Training

Fun and interactive face-to-face workshop all about adapting swimming to be more fun and inclusive for deaf young people. We aim to inspire with simple and creative ways to adapt activities in an aquatic environment. [www.ndcs.org.uk/training](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/training).

### Deaf-Friendly Swimming flash cards

These flip cards provide a great visual aid to swimming lessons, including BSL signs for swimming vocabulary. Email [InformationTeam@ndcs.org.uk](mailto:InformationTeam@ndcs.org.uk) to request a set.

## Glue ear booklet

An information leaflet explaining the condition of glue ear and discussing possible treatment options [www.ndcs.org.uk/glueearguide](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/glueearguide).

## Swimming and Your Deaf Child

Our website has lots of tips from parents of deaf children. [www.ndcs.org.uk/swimmingtips](http://www.ndcs.org.uk/swimmingtips).



# 11 Organisation

## Signature

If you are interested in learning British Sign Language visit Signature to see courses near you and find out more about learning.

## Swim England

Swim England is the national governing body of aquatics in England. The National Deaf Children's Society has worked with Swim England to support deaf young people to participate in swimming.

## Scottish Swimming

Scottish Swimming is the national governing body of aquatics in Scotland. The National Deaf Children's Society has worked with Scottish Swimming to support deaf young people to participate in swimming.

## Swim Wales

Swim Wales is the national governing body of aquatics in Wales.

## GB Deaf Swimming

GB Deaf Swimming is a Swim England affiliated club that provides training and competitive opportunities for deaf swimmers. This includes an annual National Deaf Swimming Championships and attendance at international deaf swimming competitions, including the Deaflympics.

## UK Deaf Sport

UK Deaf Sport (UKDS) is a national charity and a federation of many deaf sports organisations. UK Deaf Sport works to encourage deaf people to participate, enjoy and excel at sport.



# About us

**We're here for every deaf child who needs us – no matter what their level or type of deafness or how they communicate.**

Visit our website [www.ndcs.org.uk](http://www.ndcs.org.uk) or contact our Freephone Helpline to find out how we can support your child at every stage of their life. Join us for free and you'll be able to:

- › download or order our free information
- › come to our events
- › be a part of our online community
- › borrow equipment through our technology loan service
- › read about other families' experiences in our quarterly magazine and email updates
- › access support.

**We are the National Deaf Children's Society,  
the leading charity for deaf children.**

**Freephone Helpline:**

0808 800 8880 (voice and text)

helpline@ndcs.org.uk

**www.ndcs.org.uk**

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