

PADLS - PERSONS w/AUTISM OR DISABILITIES LEARN TO SWIM

In late December 2014, the *Florida Helps Foundation* of Fort Myers, FL was awarded a one year “**Family Community Services**” Grant from *AUTISM SPEAKS*¹, the globally recognized and highly respected autism science and advocacy organization. This prestigious grant was to support the development and management of our new *PADLS Program - Persons w/Autism or Disabilities Learn to Swim*.

Drowning is the leading cause of death among children with autism or special needs under the age of 15! And, for every child that drowns, another 4 are hospitalized for near-drowning accidents. This issue is even more severe in Florida due to the sheer number of water sources easily available (Pools, Ponds, Canals, Rivers, Lakes & the Gulf). Kids with autism or special needs can often be less aware



of the world around them, putting them at an even greater risk of drowning. It is imperative to teach children with autism or special needs basic water safety and drowning prevention techniques as they typically have limited sense of inherent threats or danger, tend to easily wander and, perhaps more than most people, they have a true natural affinity for the water.

Children with autism or special needs can learn to swim through proper guidance, a caring atmosphere and lessons that are developmentally appropriate. Our research has revealed that there are NO dedicated water safety programs specific to kids with autism or special needs in Lee County and only a small handful of instructors that provide expensive private lessons. While many basic swimming instructions programs exist at local City, County or Community pools for the general public, they typically don’t accept kids with ASD or other behavioral disorders, as these kids usually require one-on-one specialized training².

Our *PADLS Program* provides 1-on-1 lessons using specialized and certified water safety instructors to establish basic water safety skills, allowing anyone who falls into a body of water to be comfortable going under water, safely surfacing, reorienting themselves and then easily reaching the shore.

¹ awarded 10/15/14 & funded on 12/17/14, the first major Grant ever awarded by Autism Speaks in SW Florida!

² Naples has their “Swim Central” program for autistic and special needs kids at their River Park and Golden Gate pools, held as only a 2-week swim camp in the Summer.

With our initial 2015 grant from **AUTISM SPEAKS**, we established our pilot **PADLS Program** at the Cape Coral Yacht Club community pool in Cape Coral, FL. We spent the first few months working to setup the program's management and operational structure and processes, recruit and train instructors, and identify and screen applicants. We then held 3 PADLS Training Sessions between June and November 2015. During these 3 sessions we taught 34 kids over a total of 309 instruction sessions. Now that our 1-Year grant with **AUTISM SPEAKS** has expired, we are working hard to raise funds and recruit additional Instructors to continue and expand our program.



To expand **PADLS**, we are using a “**Distributed Services**” Model in which we negotiate low / no cost agreements with area pools to host our training and we dispatch our Instructors to the pools closest to the kids wanting instruction, making it as convenient and least expensive as possible for Parents to use our program. As we succeed in additional fundraising, we plan to expand our **PADLS Program** to community pools in Fort Myers, Bonita Springs, Lehigh Acres and Port Charlotte ... then expanding to Sarasota and Tampa areas and beyond as funding permits. We thank our main Sponsor in SWFL, **Coconut Point Ford**, and all other donors that provided such great support in our first year! The ultimate success of our program means saving the lives of many autistic and special needs kids and opening to them the safe enjoyment of the many water activity choices available here in Florida!

If you're interested in more information on the development and availability of our **PADLS Program**, please send an email to us at PADLS@flhelps.org and we'll add you to our mailing list. For updates, stay tuned to our web page at www.flhelps.org/PADLS.

