

Understanding 4 Common Learning Differences

A Quick Reference Guide for Swim Coaches

Every swimmer learns differently.

And sometimes, what looks like a lack of attention, difficulty following instructions, or trouble with a new skill is actually a sign that the swimmer needs a different approach.

This quick-reference guide gives you a **starting point for recognizing 4 common learning differences** and **understanding how they may show up in the pool** with **practical coaching considerations** you can put to work right away.



The free guide gives you a snapshot of **four learning differences** from our full guide.

Use it as a quick refresher when you're planning a lesson, thinking through a coaching challenge, or working with a team to develop a more consistent approach.

Want the full Quick Reference Guide?

Get it inside **All Abilities Swim: Coaches' Tips** online course, featuring **9 learning disorders** along with practical strategies to help you adapt your coaching to support swimmers who may process information, communicate or learn differently from their teammates - while keeping everyone moving forward.

UNDERSTANDING LEARNING DIFFERENCES & DISORDERS

DIAGNOSIS

DESCRIPTION

HOW THIS MAY SHOW UP

CONSIDERATIONS

ADHD (ATTENTION-DEFICIT/HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER)

Attention regulation and impulse control challenges can affect focus, organization, and self-management.

Difficulty listening during long instructions, impulsive starts, missed intervals, variable effort across sets.

Keep instructions brief and timed between sets, post clear set structures, allow movement during explanations, use consistent routines and cue words.

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)

Developmental differences affecting communication, flexibility, social interaction, and sensory processing.

Strong preference for predictable training, distress with sudden set changes, literal interpretation of instructions, difficulty with group dynamics, experience sensory sensitivities.

Maintain predictable session flow, preview changes, be explicit about expectations, reduce sensory overload, support social inclusion without forcing interaction, use visual supports as needed.

DOWN SYNDROME

A genetic condition that can affect muscle tone, coordination, strength, and sometimes learning.

Slower motor skill development, fatigue during long sets, difficulty with complex sequencing or multi-step drills.

Focus on clear demonstrations, allow extra time for skill mastery, break drills into smaller steps, monitor fatigue, emphasize positive reinforcement and confidence-building, may need to adapt using equipment for some of the drills for better technique.

SENSORY PROCESSING DISORDER (SPD) / SENSORY SENSITIVITIES

A difference in how the nervous system processes sensory input, leading to over- or under-responsiveness.

Strong reactions to noise, crowded lanes, splashing, water temperature, or physical contact during drills or starts.

Adjust lane spacing if needed to allow for more freedom of movement, allow gradual exposure to starts or contact drills, provide regulation with sensory strategies throughout the practice.