Like many autistic children, Ethan John loves the water — and that's both a good and bad thing.

If there's water around, the 7-year-old will head right to it, even if there's nobody watching him.

"Everything else is so chaotic for him, but being in a pool or the ocean relaxes him," says his mother, Koren McKenzie-John, of Tamarac. "We can't take our eyes off of him for a second."

Because of children like Ethan, water safety instruction is crucial in South Florida. And, in fact, experts say South Florida offers the most-advanced programs to teach autistic children how to swim. Instructors here must go through an extra layer of certification to work with special-needs children. And kids are matched with qualified instructors through Broward and Palm Beach county water-safety agencies.

"It's a great model, the best in the country," says Jack Scott, executive director of the Florida Atlantic University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities. "Florida is trying to teach them water safety rather than have instructors who just throw up their hands and say, 'They can't do it.'"

Scott said swimming, when handled carefully, is an important source of recreation and leisure for them.

"But on the flip side, kids with autism have a special interest with water," he said.

A National Autism Association poll reported that 92 percent of autistic children wander away, a trait experts call "elopement." They're drawn to dangerous spots such as water, train tracks and highway exit signs, association chairwoman Lori McIlwain says.

Last year, six autistic children drowned in the United States, McIlwain says. In South Florida in the past five years, at least three autistic children younger than 8 have drowned.

"They have a disorder and they're unaware of certain dangers," McIlwain says.

They like the water because it helps them maintain balance. McIlwain is among those who
theorize that water compresses the skin, calming them down "like a big hug." They also love the feeling of weightlessness, she said.

"The water stabilizes him," says Cate Crehan, of Sunrise, whose 4-year-old, Indiana, is non-verbal. Crehan signed him up last summer for the Baby Otter Swim School in Plantation.

"He's like a motorboat, he figured out that he could move," Crehan says.

She also got his first word from him while in the water. It was "Yay."

**Improved instruction**

In 1997, Florida began requiring any water-safety instructor to be certified, either through the American Red Cross, the YMCA or another nationally recognized program. In 2006, the Florida Legislature approved requiring instructors of kids with special needs to obtain a second certification.

This extra certification is available only through an online curriculum developed by the Miami Children's Hospital Dan Marino Center in Weston and Broward County's Swim Central agency.

About 240 swim instructors in Florida have the two certifications; three-fourths of those teachers are in Broward, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties, Swim Central director Matthew Berman says.

"There is more to teaching children with special needs than just knowing how to be patient," Berman says.

For example, the online course provides instructors with "trigger points," or ways to connect with special-needs children, Berman says. Among them is what autism therapists call "picture-exchange communication," where they give kids pictures of the tasks.

"The feedback has been unbelievable for the children to have the opportunity to learn in an environment that has the expertise and the structure," says Al Rego, regional director of ambulatory service at Miami Children's Hospital. "And to understand the communication that's needed for a child with autism can make the difference between learning a basic survival skill or not."

In addition to the online course, instructors can take optional in-water courses through the American Red Cross Palm Beaches-Treasure Coast Region.

"You want everyone to have a quality experience in the water, and maximize their learning," says Linda Olson, director of Health & Safety Services for the American Red Cross Palm Beaches-Treasure Coast Region.

**Children more responsive**
At the Dan Marino Center, aquatic coordinator Nicole Dino takes Ethan by the hand and they walk into the 92-degree pool, surrounded by kickboards, floaties, balls, oversized letters, cones, even a submerged mini-trampoline.

"You find out what techniques work for them and use anything that sparks their interest," she says.

Since the curriculum started in 2008, the Marino Center has taught 524 children with special needs, Dino says. (Former Dolphins quarterback Dan Marino, through his foundation, formed a partnership with Miami Children's Hospital to open the center in 1998. Marino has a child with a mild form of autism.)

To calm Ethan down, she holds him close and massages his back.

"Imagine having your senses — touch, feeling, auditory — bombarded," she says. "They want to feel safe and it's important that they relax their muscles."

"Do what I do," Dino tells him, and Ethan, who is nonverbal, kicks alongside.

Dino points to cartoonish photos, which have directions:

Reach and pull...

Place the rings on the cones...

Float on your back...

Dino pulls out a surfboard for Ethan to lay on, to develop core strength. He's more likely to imitate his teachers — an important way for autistic children to learn — when he's in the water, his mom says. The balancing and movement he's learned in the water have helped Ethan negotiate stairs better, too, McKenzie-John says.

For McKenzie-John, the water-safety lesson has a bonus: just seeing her son act more like any other child, she says. Interacting.

"This gives parents hope," she says. "You can see progress. He gets in the pool and you see there might be a light bulb inside of him after all."

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