

Goldfish Swim School teaches children with special needs

April is Autism Awareness Month

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WINTER PARK, Fla. - Instructors at a local swim school are helping to protect some of the most vulnerable children from drowning.

Eight-year-old [Santiago Susi](#) darts across the parking lot to his indoor swim school, his mother trailing behind. He is one of the one in 68 children in the [United States](#) diagnosed with autism.

"When you are a parent or a caregiver of any child that has special needs you have to be always ready to be looking for what is best for them," Susi's grandmother, Marytza Sanz, said.

Sanz established a family center for autism named after her grandson, "Santiago and Friends" through the [Latino](#) Leadership Program.

Safety is a primary initiative for the center, which serves dozens of Latino families in Central Florida.

A recent study from Columbia University's [Mailman School of Public Health](#) showed children with autism face a significantly higher risk from drowning.

Sanz said her grandson loves water, which worries her.

"Because here in [Florida](#) we have so many lakes, we have so many pools," [Sanz](#) said. "For our kids, water is a magnet."

Sanz said she had trouble finding swimming lessons for her grandson.

"Immediately when I say that he has autism, maybe we are not going to be accepted," Sanz said.

But when they walked into [Goldfish Swim School](#) and met the owner, Gina Jacobs Thomas, it was a perfect fit.

"We truly believe that every child and every swimmer should have the opportunity to learn swimming. It's a very valuable and important life skill," [Jacobs Thomas](#) said.

Foam rafts and multicolored plastic balls line the walls of the indoor pool to promote play-based learning.

"We do provide additional training and instruction on how to handle special needs children, some of the unique challenges that may come with them," said Jacobs Thomas. Now the instructors at Goldfish Swim School are working with behavioral therapists from the "Santiago and Friends" center. In addition to paperwork parents fill out to describe their child's triggers and calming strategies, Jacobs Thomas is working with Sanz's center to

"We're really trying to get to the heart of how we can make the swimming the focus," said Jacobs Thomas.

Find a list of [YMCA](#) locations that offer [Special Needs Swimming Instructions here](#).

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