

Els for Autism Foundation® expands efforts to combat drowning, the leading cause of death for autistic children

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Drowning is the leading cause of death for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), with Florida reporting the highest number of deaths among these children. A recent study conducted by the Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County has found that Palm Beach County leads the state in drownings involving children with autism.

*Water safety and drowning prevention for individuals with autism are central to the efforts of the Els for Autism® team. The staff has been actively working on expanding The Els Center of Excellence® campus and its program offerings to address these alarming statistics. "The time is now for us as a community to come together and prevent another tragedy," said **Els for Autism Executive Director Marlene Sotelo, EdD, BCBA-D, MT-BC**. "Time is of the essence to provide accessible life-saving programs to keep our children safe."*

In 2023, Els for Autism announced the official launch of their capital campaign to build a specialized autism-friendly recreation complex, which will include a gymnasium, an aquatic centre, and a splash pad. Thanks to the support of Florida legislators, Els for Autism has been awarded two \$1 million state appropriations for the construction of the complex. Additionally, Stanley Black & Decker has pledged \$5 million to support the capital campaign. We are halfway to our fundraising goal and continue connecting with individual donors, sponsors, and grantors to get us to the finish line.

While Els for Autism is actively fundraising for the recreation complex, set to break ground in 2025, the program team is currently expanding the Ernie Els #GameON Autism® Sports program to include aquatics. The aquatic program will serve as the curriculum for teaching specialized swim lessons and water safety at the recreation complex's aquatic centre pool.

Once completed, the Ernie Els #GameON Autism® Aquatics program will be available globally, allowing individuals, organizations, or businesses to become Official Program Providers and offer this lifesaving program in their community.

About Els for Autism Foundation®

Established in 2009 by World Golf Hall of Famer and four-time Major Champion Ernie Els, his wife, Liezl, and honorary chair Marvin R Shanken, the Els for Autism Foundation® is dedicated to transforming the lives of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their caregivers through comprehensive lifespan services and collaborative partnerships. The Els' son, Ben, is impacted by ASD, which affects 1 in 36 children in the US. Els for Autism has provided services to autistic individuals, families, and professionals in 31 countries around the globe. In addition to its US location, Els for Autism has foundations in Canada, South Africa, and the United Kingdom.

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