

Barbara A. Taylor
M.S. CCC-SLP & Associates
Speech-Language Pathologist
(410) 442-9791



Barbara.Taylor@helpmespeak.com
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YOUR SPECIAL CHILD

By Amy Landsman

Kids with Disabilities Build Confidence and Skills in the Water

It's been a fun summer for 16-year-old Callie Loschiavo, of Ellicott City. That's because, for the first time, she's sliding down the big slide at her family's swim club.

For years, Callie, who is on the autism spectrum, simply wouldn't take the plunge. Not so this summer, says her mom, Carol Loschiavo. "We walked up and I'm thinking, 'She's just going to come back down,'" recalls Loschiavo about first approaching the big slide this summer.

But Callie didn't climb down. "She really liked it," adds Loschiavo. "She lost her



COURTESY PHOTO

Kids learn to feel good about being in the water at MarTar Swimming in Columbia.

fear, I guess. I was so happy."

For about the past year and a half, Callie has been taking swim lessons at MarTar Swimming in Columbia, and her mom says it's made a difference.

"When she started with this, she had been in the water, but she didn't have many skills at all," says Loschiavo. "She's really improved her movements. They work very nicely with her."

While MarTar welcomes students of all ages and abilities, it specializes in swim lessons for children with disabilities. Co-owners Marty and Tara Girch estimate that 85 to 90 percent of their students have either autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disabilities, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, visual or auditory impairments, or multiple disabilities. The remaining students often are the siblings of the kids with special needs.

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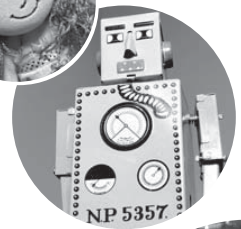
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Into the Pool

MarTar Swimming leases pool space at the Life Time Fitness health club in Columbia for its classes. Stop by during lessons and you'll see students in the pool learning to blow bubbles and practicing their kicks. The instructors stay close, supervising and praising the students' efforts.

Among other requirements, the seven MarTar instructors have completed 40 hours of training and an online certification course in adaptive aquatics, and are certified in first aid and CPR. Most are certified lifeguards as well.

Watching the action in the pool, Tara Girch points out how far some students have come. "This is Kyle," she says, gesturing toward one boy in the pool. "He's been with us on and off for two years. We've got him to the point that he's using the kickboard. He was never swimming before."

Also watching the day's lessons is Tana Cormier. Cormier is nanny to 6-year-old twins John and Nora.

Cormier notes that John, who has autism, used to scream during the lessons. That's all behind him now. These days, he loves the water, she says.

Class Time

Swimming is approached as a life skill at MarTar. Marty says that once a child learns to swim, the family has more freedom to take beach vacations or go to pool parties. And just as drowning is a serious concern for typical children, it is a serious concern for children with special needs as well. Marty believes that confidence in the water will enhance the children's safety.

Classes are "very structured; they're very routine-based," explains Tara. "Every single lesson has the same beginning, middle, and ending. We use visual aids, social stories, and sign language."

"The [end-of-class] incentives are individually based," she adds. "Some kids like to have hugs, some kids like to dive for rings, some kids like to go down to the bottom of this big slide, and some kids just want to have extra playtime."

But there's not a lot of playing during class, says Marty Girch. In his words, the goal is to make the students "competent in the water."

Students use floating barbells and kickboards. They also have to wear goggles.

Tara notes that kids with autism don't always like the goggles, but when they get used to them and learn to go underwater, the impact is huge.

"For the kids with autism who go underwater, it's a whole new world for them under there," she says. "It's peaceful and calming."

Also, again unlike many swim programs, MarTar does not require parents or guardians to go into the water. The adults can relax in deck chairs.

"I love not having to get into the pool!" laughs Kristen DeLuca, of Elkridge, who brings her kids, Max and Arabella, to MarTar.

Outside of running their swim school, the Girches both work full-time jobs. They say their love of swimming and their dedication to kids with special needs led them to start MarTar Swimming in 1999.

"Most of our clients have become our friends," says Marty. "It's a very big family atmosphere."

Teaching swimming to children with special needs is "a slower process, but it's more rewarding in the long run," says Tara. "We celebrate every tiny little victory."

In fact, she adds, when one little girl recently jumped into the pool for the first time, both the instructor and the girl's mom shouted for joy and then burst into tears. **BC**

More Information

For more information about MarTar Swimming, call 410-461-6415 or visit the website www.martarswimming.com.

For additional swim programs geared toward kids with special needs, go to the Recreation and Fun section of *A Special Edition: Focus on Autism 2009*, which is available on the *Baltimore's Child* website, www.BaltimoresChild.com.

**Need copies of
A Special Edition:
Focus On Autism 2009
for your group or organization?
Contact Charlotte,
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WHAT'S ON THE MENU

By S.C. Torrington

BBQ for Me and You!

We all know how messy barbecue sandwiches can be. But, with some patience and plenty of napkins, kids and their parents can enjoy these summer BBQ specialties.

Andy Nelson's Barbecue

11007 York Rd.,
Cockeysville, 410-
527-1226, www.andynelsonsbbq.com.

The meat is smoked for hours and hours over hickory logs until it falls off the bone and then simmered in Andy's own heirloom sauce. Kids "Q" Meals include sandwich, chips, a small drink, and a special prize for less than \$5.

Organizations or schools can choose any Tuesday, 5-8 p.m., for a special fundraising night by dining in, picking up, or driving through.

Join the Swine Social Club for coupons, chances to win free stuff, and mailings tailored to your family's special days.

Baker's Restaurant

1075 St. Augustine Hwy. (Rt. 213),
Elkton, 410-398-2435,
www.bakersrestaurant.net.

A "Local Legend Since 1958," this third-generation, family-owned landmark offers a wide selection of children's meals with a souvenir cup for less than \$5.50. Also, for just under \$7, let the kids move up to a Pulled BBQ Pork sandwich with Mom's homemade BBQ sauce and French fries.

Don't forget to ask about Baker's new heat-and-serve Family Meals-To-Go for four to six people.

Boog's BBQ

Oriole Park at Camden Yards, 333 West Camden St., 410-332-4633,
www.aramark.com (click on Ballparks).

The next time you take the family to an Orioles' home game, be sure to meet

Boog Powell, legendary Orioles' first baseman and All-Star, at his BBQ stand. And, while you're there, savor some delicious pit beef or pork or turkey BBQ. For about \$10, you get a sandwich, baked beans, and coleslaw.

The Corner Stable

9942 York Rd., Cockeysville, 410-666-8722, www.cornerstable.com.

A local favorite since 1972, The Corner Stable uses only the finest baby back ribs imported from Denmark. The House Specialty Barbeque Pork sandwich and Stable fries is less than \$8. Six kids' meals, such as Fried Macaroni & Cheese Wedges, come with Stable fries and

choice of soda, juice, or milk for under \$6.

Take home genuine Corner Stable ribs that you can heat up in just 10 minutes or have some shipped to rib-lovin' friends anywhere in the U.S.

Famous Dave's

Seven locations in Central Maryland, including Annapolis 410-224-2207, Columbia 410-290-0091, and Owings Mills 410-998-9577, www.famousdaves.com.

For kids 10 and younger, Lil' Wilbur Meals feature kid-sized portions of all the BBQ favorites—hickory-smoked ribs, country-roasted chicken, and Georgia-chopped pork, plus a choice of any one side or carrots and celery with Oreos cookies. The All-American BBQ Feast includes sides and cornbread muffins served family-style for four to six people—and sells for less than \$60. **BC**

For our complete Family Dining Guide—listings of local family-friendly restaurants arranged by counties—visit our website, www.BaltimoresChild.com. Click on Resources/Links and scroll down to Restaurants.

Got a favorite restaurant you'd like to see added to the Guide? Write to Susan Davis, Susan2@BaltimoresChild.com.

