

Drownings among kids with autism spiked in '24



Jonisa Cook, moved to a suburb of Cincinnati with her two children this year. In November, her 6-year-old son, Joshua Al-Lateef Jr., drowned in a pond at the West Chester apartment complex where the family lived. SAM GREENE/CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

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WOODLAWN, Ohio – Jonisa Cook gets teary-eyed talking about her son four months after his death. She still struggles to walk past kids' clothing racks in stores or grocery aisles with his favorite foods, like Dino Nuggets and pudding cups.

Joshua Al-Lateef Jr., a 6-year-old boy diagnosed with autism, drowned in a pond at the family's West Chester, Ohio, apartment complex in November.

"He was lovable and his smile was everything. He ran to the sound of his own beat," she told The Enquirer, part of the USA TODAY Network. "We miss him a lot. The house is definitely quieter."

Joshua is one of at least 69 children with autism who drowned in 2024, a jump that's almost double the typical annual average. In previous years, the average number of wandering-related deaths by drowning was about 35 children per year, according to the National Autism Association.

The search for Joshua quickly spread on social media. His story was similar to that of other kids across the country: He drowned near his home after wandering away from his family's apartment. His body was found one day after he was reported missing. Police, friends, family and hundreds of volunteers gathered to search for him despite the snow.

“When you see a case like Joshua’s, it really stands out just because of the community involvement, how everybody came together, how quickly they mobilized,” said Lori McIlwain, co-founder of the National Autism Association. “The caring and compassion was so clearly there – you could feel it.”

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