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Media Contact: Amy Thompson

amyt@connectedpb.com | 561-328-6044

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Local Nonprofit Takes Action to Reduce the Risk of Autism-Related Drownings

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla., April 11, 2024 – Children with autism face a staggering statistic: They are 160 times more likely to drown than their neurotypical peers, according to the Autism Society of Florida. In response to this critical issue, Connections Education Center of the Palm Beaches, a nonprofit school in West Palm Beach dedicated to serving children with autism, is stepping up during Autism Awareness Month this April to reduce the risk.

The majority of Connections' students live below the poverty line and come from minority families, and they often lack access to critical services. Recognizing the unique challenges these children and others with autism face, the school includes adaptive swim lessons in the curriculum for all students.

"Water safety skills must be a priority for children with autism. It's common for children with autism to 'elope' or wander from where they're safe, and they're often drawn to water out of curiosity," explains Debra Johnson, Executive Director and Principal of Connections. "This can create a dangerous situation."

That's why students at Connections attend weekly, adaptive swim lessons with specially trained instructors. "Children with autism often learn to swim differently than other children," says Johnson. "Our adaptive swim lessons enable students to acquire swim skills in a flexible order in a sensory-friendly environment with instructors who lean heavily on visual cues rather than verbal instruction."

The school's swim program has proven highly effective and has been shared as a model at a statewide educators' conference. However, public funding falls short of covering its costs. In response, during Autism Awareness Month, Connections is launching the "Draw the Line on Drowning" campaign. This initiative aims to raise awareness and funds to sustain the school's vital swim program. To learn more or contribute, visit give.classy.org/DLDautism. All donations made by April 30 will be matched by an anonymous, generous donor up to \$50,000.

In addition to fundraising, Connections is sharing essential water safety tips for children with autism on its website at connectedpb.com/drowning-prevention-autism-awareness.

To showcase student progress, Connections' students will demonstrate their swim skills April 30-May 3, 2024, at Lake Lytal pool between 9:45 a.m. and 1:20 p.m. daily. Each class will compete in an aquatic obstacle course, fostering friendly competition while highlighting the importance of water safety. Spectators are welcome with advanced reservations made by calling the school at 561-328-6044. Classes are also competing to see which can raise the most funds during the Draw the Line on Drowning campaign.

About Connections:

Connections is a nonprofit educational center that delivers high-quality, specialized instruction to students with autism in Palm Beach County. They serve students ages 3-22 years and offer an innovative program for young adults with autism. Learn more at connectedpb.com.

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