



Cultural Differences and Body Autonomy

Issues and Cultural Gaps in SafeSport



- ★ **Influences on "Normal":** A swimmer's perception of "normal" is shaped by more than just the sport, including family culture, school expectations, religion, national norms, and team traditions.
- ★ **Cultural & Environmental Factors:** These factors influence how swimmers view privacy, body exposure, physical touch, and authority.
- ★ **Authoritative & Immigrant Household Norms:** In certain cultures, including many Asian and immigrant households, modesty and respect for elders can make crowded locker rooms, comments on body shape, or unsolicited physical contact from a coach seem typical, even when causing discomfort.
- ★ **U.S. Swimming Contradictions:** While many U.S. programs emphasize bodily autonomy and speaking up, team culture often rewards obedience, silence, and pushing through discomfort, creating confusion for athletes.
- ★ **The Importance of Context:** Acceptability varies by setting; what is normal in one environment may feel invasive in another.
- ★ **Key Areas of Subjectivity:** Experiences with changing, showering, hands-on corrections, suit adjustments, and body comments differ based on cultural background, age, gender, authority, and consent.



Important Gaps

- Current safety education often explains rules, but does **not fully teach how culture shapes what swimmers interpret as normal.**
- Many programs do not help students compare messages from **home, religion, school, and sport**, even though those messages may directly conflict.
- Formal systems usually focus on whether a rule was broken, not on how a swimmer may have been socialized to ignore discomfort in the first place.

Where Swim Cultures and Family Cultures Overlap

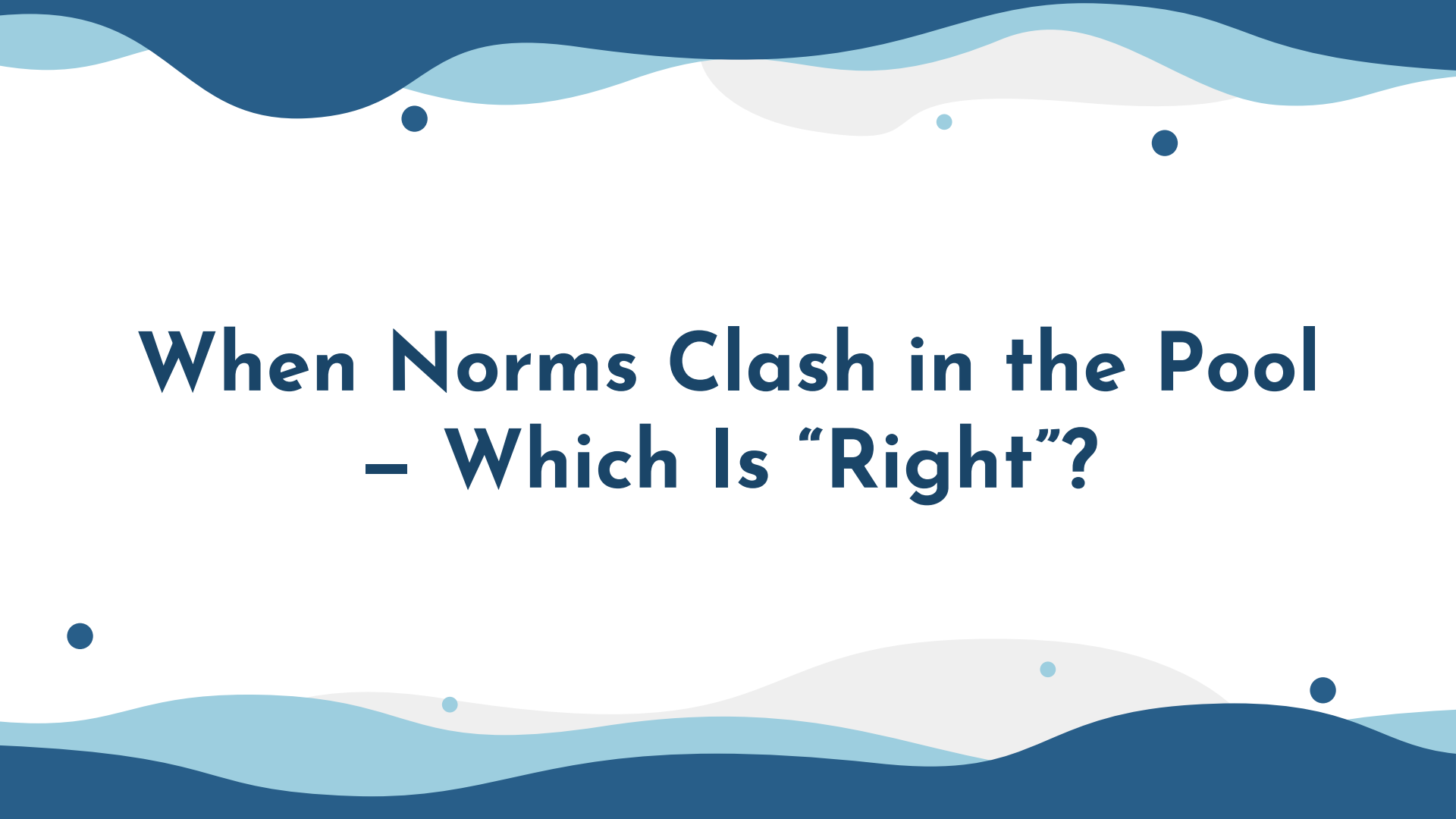


- ★ In swimming, body-autonomy education can be presented as a tool that protects both health and performance while still honoring family and cultural values.
- ★ **Shared Goals:** Caregivers and coaches across all cultures generally seek the same outcomes: protection, discipline, growth, success, and pride.
- ★ **Methodological Differences:** While goals are similar, the methods used to achieve them vary—ranging from strict obedience and endurance to shared decision-making and open communication.
- ★ **Benefits of Cultural Responsiveness:** Programs that are culturally responsive help athletes feel seen, understood, and supported.
- ★ **Improved Trust and Engagement:** Acknowledging an athlete's language, identity, and lived experience—rather than assuming universal norms—strengthens trust and participation.



Important Gaps

- Many current training frame safety as a legal issue only, instead of showing families and coaches that **autonomy also improves trust, motivation, and long-term athlete retention.**
- Programs often fail to explain that safety and consent are **not anti-discipline**; they are part of healthy athlete development.
- Cultural responsiveness is often missing from team education, even though it affects whether athletes feel included and supported.



When Norms Clash in the Pool – Which Is “Right”?



- Expectations to endure discomfort, obey adults, and protect family or group reputation can discourage speaking up when a swimmer feels unsafe. That can affect responses to locker rooms, revealing uniforms, body comments, or touch by coaches.

- Rights-based approaches to sport emphasize that swimmer safety, consent to touch, and privacy in changing areas come before tradition, hierarchy, or a coach's or parent's authority. A swimmer should be able to decline a particular hands-on correction, request a different changing arrangement, or question rooming and travel expectations without being labeled disrespectful.

- Many athletes are taught to ask whether something is "normal," but not whether it is safe, wanted, and respectful.

- Programs often do not directly address gray areas like suit adjustment, changing-space discomfort, or touch framed as "just coaching."

- Formal reporting systems may become involved only after harm is serious, leaving a gap in early prevention and everyday decision-making.



Cultural Barriers and Body Autonomy

Getting Help

Internalized expectations regarding high achievement, emotional self-control

Silence

Asking for help is perceived as weakness or disrespect

Hierarchies

Strong hierarchies and "toughening" mindsets

Identifying Abuse

Struggle to recognize or challenge boundary-crossing

Body Image Pressures

Pressures significantly shape an athlete's mental health and self-image



Important Gaps

- Current swimmer safety education rarely connects swim-specific situations to broader research on **help-seeking, stereotype pressure, and authority-based silence.**
- Students may be told to “report if needed,” but not taught why some groups face **higher emotional and cultural barriers to reporting.**
- Teams often address physical safety and performance science more directly than **body autonomy, shame, or sociocultural body pressure.**



Model Minority Stereotype and Swim Bodies



- **Assumption of Resilience:** Coaches and adults may falsely assume Asian-heritage swimmers are inherently disciplined, high-achieving, and "problem-free," leading them to overlook emotional or physical distress.
- **Neglected Support:** Because they are viewed as self-sufficient, Asian swimmers may receive less proactive support and check-ins from staff and peers.
- **Pressure to Appear Perfect:** Internalizing the "model" label often creates immense psychological pressure to maintain a perfect image, making athletes hesitant to show vulnerability or admit struggle.
- **Reduced Help-Seeking:** The stereotype fosters a fear of failing to meet high expectations, resulting in a lower willingness to seek help for mental health issues or injuries.
- **Normalization of Pain/Abuse:** Athletes may train through pain, accept dehumanizing comments regarding their body or performance, or tolerate abusive coaching behaviors to avoid being seen as "difficult" or ungrateful.
- **Underreported Misconduct:** Asian-heritage swimmers may fail to report misconduct, bullying, or safety concerns due to a fear of breaking the "compliant" stereotype, leaving them vulnerable to ongoing maltreatment.
- **Undermined Body Autonomy:** The "compliant" stereotype can lead to coaches ignoring a swimmer's request to stop training, disregarding a swimmer's autonomy over their own body.