

Autism & Safety

As a first responder, chances are you may encounter one or more individuals who have an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a developmental disability that can affect a person's behavior, communication, and understanding of danger or consequences. The purpose of this guide is to help first responders enhance the quality of search-and-rescue response and interactions with individuals with autism.

According to 2012 data published in *Pediatrics*, 49% of children with autism attempt to elope from a safe environment, a rate nearly four times higher than their unaffected siblings.

It's also estimated that individuals with autism will have seven times more contacts with law enforcement during their lifetimes than the general population (Curry, Posluszny, & Kraska, 1993).

Behaviors like eye-contact avoidance, not responding to commands, or reacting differently to sounds, lights and commotion, may be mistaken for defiance, non-compliance or drug/alcohol use and lead to unsafe interactions with members of law enforcement and other first responders.

Additional Resources



For additional information about autism or safety resources, please visit nationalautismassociation.org.

Training & Resources

National Autism Association
nationalautismassociation.org

National Center For Missing & Exploited Children:
missingkids.com; 1-800-THE-LOST

Project Lifesaver Tracking:
projectlifesaver.org

SafetyNet Tracking:
safetynettracking.com

Reverse 911:
achildissing.org

Autism Risk Management:
autismriskmanagement.com

Take Me Home Registry:
Officer Jimmy Donohoe
Jdonohoe@ci.pensacola.fl.us

EMA Emergency Alert Guidelines:
ncjrs.gov

ABOUT AUTISM: Tips for First Responders

A Resource Provided by
the National Autism Association



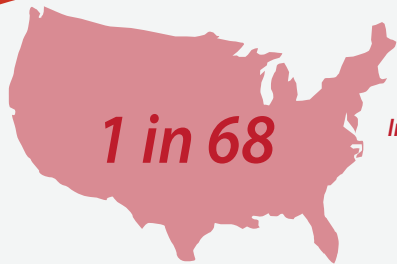
ABOUT AUTISM:

Tips for First Responders

About Autism

Autism is characterized by social-interaction difficulties, cognitive impairments, communication difficulties, and repetitive behaviors. Because autism is a spectrum disorder, no two people with autism are alike. It's estimated that half of children with autism wander from safe settings, and individuals with autism have seven times more contacts with law enforcement than the general population.

Because of eye-contact avoidance, not responding to commands, or reacting differently to sounds, lights and commotion, behaviors in those with autism may be mistaken for defiance, non-compliance or drug/alcohol use and lead to unsafe interactions with members of law enforcement and other first responders.



*In the United States,
1 in 68 individuals
has a diagnosis
of autism.*



Recognizing the Signs

A Person with Autism May:

- Not speak; appear deaf
- Avoid eye contact
- Not respond to their name or verbal commands
- Rock, pace, spin or hand-flap (stimming)
- Repeat phrases (echolalia)
- Hold hands over ears due to sound sensitivity
- Avoid or resist physical contact
- Have unusual fears or obsessions
- Need time to process questions or demands
- Try to run away or hide
- Appear to be under the influence
- Not be properly dressed for the elements
- Avoid grooming or showers due to tactile sensitivity
- Have the mental capacity of someone younger
- Enter water/traffic with no understanding of danger

Their Caregivers May:

- Have unusual security patterns in the home
- Not have toys in the home
- Have walls with holes, dents, fecal matter
- Have unusual foods in fridge/cupboards
- Have home and/or car windows covered
- Have unusual sleeping arrangements
- Allow child/adult to wear odd clothing or no clothing



Tips for Search & Rescue

If a Person with Autism is Missing:

- ✓ **Act Quickly:** People with autism may head straight to water, traffic, or abandoned cars/areas, so treat each case as *critical* regardless of age
- ✓ **Search Water First:** Even if the child or adult is said to dislike water, search any type of nearby water, including waste water
- ✓ **Ask Questions:** Ask the caregiver if the individual will respond to his/her name, and about likes/dislikes (Will they be drawn to certain music, favorite characters, fire trucks, mom's voice? Or afraid of certain noises, sirens, search dogs?)
- ✓ **Use Tools:** Issue an Endangered Missing Alert or Silver Alert; Implement Reverse 911 (achild dismissing.org)

Get Involved



To help enhance safety among children and adults with autism, consider hosting meet and greets or other safety events at your station, a local school, library, park, etc. You can also start a voluntary registry for members with autism in your community and/or tracking programs, such as Project Lifesaver or SafetyNet Tracking.



Tips for Interaction

- ✓ **Don't Assume:** Do not assume the individual will respond to 'stop' or other commands or questions
- ✓ **Allow Space:** If there is no imminent danger, give the individual time and space, and avoid the use of restraint
- ✓ **Stay Calm:** Maintain a calm and relaxed demeanor, speak with normal tone; if sitting, get down on their level
- ✓ **Offer Water/Snack:** If you have a water bottle or snack, hold it out to the individual
- ✓ **Check for ID:** Look for a medical ID and contact the caregiver
- ✓ **Avoid Figurative Language:** Use simple, literal phrases
- ✓ **Reassure:** Even if the person is nonverbal, speak and reassure in a normal tone
- ✓ **Offer Tools:** If nonverbal, offer a phone or iPad to communicate via typing – these items may also calm the individual



NATIONAL
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For more resources, visit
nationalautismassociation.org