

Autism & Wandering

Similar to the wandering behaviors in seniors with dementia or Alzheimer's, children and adults with autism are prone to wandering away from a safe environment.

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.

Because children and teenagers with autism may have little understanding of danger, or are unable to respond to their name when called, wandering behaviors can carry unique risks for those with autism.



Additional Resources



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

Resources for Families

National Autism Association
nationalautismassociation.org

NAA's Big Red Safety Box
bigredsafetybox.com

AWAARE Collaboration
awaare.org

Vivint Smart Home
vivint.com

MedicAlert ID
medicalert.org

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

Project Lifesaver Tracking:
projectlifesaver.org

SafetyNet Tracking:
safetynettracking.com

AUTISM & WANDERING: Tips for Prevention & Response

A Resource Provided by
the National Autism Association



AUTISM & WANDERING:

Tips for Prevention & Response

49%

In the U.S., 49% of children with autism wander/elope from safe settings, such as homes or schools.

About Autism & Wandering

Wandering, also referred to as elopement, bolting, or running, is the tendency for an individual to leave the safety of a responsible person's care or safe area, which may result in potential harm or injury. This might include leaving the classroom, home or public area unnoticed. This behavior is considered common and short-lived in toddlers, but may persist or re-emerge in children and adults with autism.

TIP

Talk with your child's pediatrician about the diagnostic code for wandering, Z91.83, which can be used for safety planning in schools, and for visits with other medical professionals.



Research & Insights

Research on Autism-Related Wandering Shows:

- 49% of children with autism wander/elope
- More than one third of children with autism who wander are never or rarely able to communicate their name, address, or phone number
- 29% of cases happen from a classroom or school
- Accidental drowning accounts for approximately 70% of lethal outcomes, followed by fatal traffic injury

Helpful Insights:

- Wandering is usually a form of communication: an *I need, I want, or I don't want*
- Individuals will wander or bolt to get to something of interest, or away from something bothersome
- Wandering incidents typically spike from April through August; however, school-related cases increase through the fall and winter months
- Triggers for wandering include times of transition, commotion or stress; holiday & family gatherings; a recent move to a new home or school; visiting an unfamiliar setting; public outings



Tips for Prevention

- ✓ **Install Home Safeguards:** Install secure locks (exterior doors), home security system; door/window chimes; fence yard; secure gates; keep garage opener out of reach; use baby monitors and visual prompts like simple stop signs.
- ✓ **Secure Personal Safeguards:** Consider MedicAlert Identification for wrist or shoe; temporary tattoos are great for field trips and other outings; check with local law enforcement to see if they offer tracking devices.
- ✓ **Make Others Aware:** Alert trusted neighbors and introduce them to your child; fill out an alert form for local police that includes a current photo and unique characteristics, likes, fears, and behaviors; make school and bus drivers aware of wandering risks.
- ✓ **Remain Hyper Vigilant:** Stay on extra high alert during holidays, vacations, transition periods, a recent move to a new home or school, or in unfamiliar settings. Initiate a *Tag You're It* system during family gatherings and transitions: tag one responsible adult to closely supervise your child for an agreed-upon period of time.



Tips for Teaching Self-help

- ✓ **Identify Triggers:** Be aware of any triggers that could prompt fleeing (loud noises, bright lights, fears, etc.) and work towards teaching your child safe, alternative ways to respond.
- ✓ **Use Calming Tools:** Use tools, such as noise-canceling headphones, and teach calming techniques using favorites topics or items.
- ✓ **Enroll in Swimming Lessons:** Enroll your child into swimming lessons - final lessons should be with clothes and shoes on.
- ✓ **Demonstrate Safety:** Use social stories to teach individuals ways to stay safe, and favorite objects or tools to demonstrate when it's outside time versus inside time.



Tips for Response

- ✓ **Call 911:** Remain calm and always call 911 if an individual with autism is missing. Law enforcement should treat each case as "critical."
- ✓ **Search Water First:** Search areas that pose the highest threat first, such as nearby water, busy streets, train tracks, and parked cars.



For more resources, visit
nationalautismassociation.org