



How to Protect a Wandering Child

And Other Safety Tips

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One of the biggest concerns that parents have is gauging their child's awareness of danger. Elopement, or wandering, is a major security issue for families of individuals with autism spectrum disorder. There is considerable research on the impact it has on the daily lifestyle of families affected by autism. This is not surprising as many heartbreaking incidents have made national news headlines. In 2017, the American Journal of Public Health examined national mortality data and found that individuals with autism died 35.8 years younger on average than individuals without autism. It also found that the difference in deaths caused by injury was just as striking. In addition, the National Autism Association cited wandering as a critical issue in 2017, and one of its online surveys revealed that 92 percent of responding parents believed their child was at risk. However, a 2010 survey by Agran and Krupp found that while 93 percent of parents of a child with autism considered safety skills to be a very important part of the child's educational experience, 81 percent noted that the child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) did not include safety skills as a goal. Given these facts, how can we protect children with autism from dangerous situations? The following are some suggested areas of focus to ensure your child's safety.



Communication

Essential to the safety of your child is communication with your local police and fire departments. Informing first responders that an individual with autism resides in your home allows them to respond accordingly in the event of an emergency. I also recommend giving local police and fire departments a picture of your child with your contact information on the back. This can be helpful in identifying your child if he/she is ever brought to the station. Consider registering your child with the National Child Identification Program at www.childidprogram.com and completing an Autism Elopement form found at the Autism Speaks

website at www.autismspeaks.org. Both of these can be instrumental in helping law enforcement get up to speed during an emergency.

Neighbors could also be your partners in keeping your child safe. Make neighbors you trust aware of your situation and provide them with a picture along with some helpful information about autism and about your child, such as whether your child can speak or if he/she responds to simple commands. Be sure to include your cell phone and home phone numbers, and ask them to call immediately if they ever see your child wandering away from home or walking the street unaccompanied by an adult.

Another important factor to consider is your child's level of communication. Can your child answer social questions? Concerned adults are most likely to ask your child, "What's your name?" or "Where do you live?" It is imperative that your child be understood by listeners who do not know your child. If your child will not be understood or cannot relay enough information, medical identification jewelry, such as a bracelet, can be used (www.medicalert.org).



Secure Your Home

Securing your home is key to keeping your child from wandering. Preventing access to your yard, which could be an attractive play area for your child, is essential, especially if you have a pool. First, examine the doors in your home. Standard locks are often not enough to deter a child with autism. Many children learn very quickly how to operate a standard lock on doors, windows and gates. Install locks that your child cannot open or reach in all access areas. Lock companies can help you identify appropriate locks for each specific area, especially a gate in your yard. Secondly, do you have an alarm system to help alert you or a caregiver if the child leaves the house unaccompanied? If you have an alarm system in place, be sure to keep it active. If your home does not have an alarm system, consider installing one. Video monitoring is another strategy to supervise your child around the house. Using a video monitoring system or a baby monitor with video monitoring capability gives you the security of protecting your child, especially if night-time wandering is an issue.

The pool area in your yard, or that of your neighbor, can be very attractive to a child with autism. Response time to a wandering child near a pool is critical. Ensure that a securely locked fence surrounds the pool, and that the child cannot climb over the fence to get inside. Pool alarms are also readily available.



Away From Home

The same strategies you use to secure your home can also be applied when traveling or visiting friends and family. You can create the same safe haven at a home-away-from-home setting, such as a hotel, by following these guidelines. Think about your destination and analyze the potential risks for your child with autism. When planning, carefully consider the accommodations you will need. Specifically, if your child has a history of wandering, especially towards pools or other swimming areas, you may want to request a room furthest from the pool area, one without an ocean or water view, or a room without a balcony. You may even opt to choose a destination that does not have a pool. When arriving at the location, let others know about your child's needs. Inform relatives or hotel staff that your child requires supervision at all times and to call you immediately if your child is seen unsupervised. Added security measures could include the purchase of portable door alarms, a child-locator system and/or a global positioning system (GPS). A range of devices are available online, as noted in this article.



Fire Safety

The death of autism advocate Feda Almaliti and her son Muhammed in a fire in September of 2020 was a tragic reminder for those caring for individuals with autism to take action. Assessing your child's ability to respond in the event of a fire alarm is vital. Teach your child to leave the home when the alarm sounds and to go to a predetermined meeting location. Consider conducting fire drills regularly so that the alarm triggers an appropriate response on the part of your child and your family members. Such practice can ensure a better outcome in the event of a fire emergency.



Assess and Teach Safety Skills

It is vital to proactively teach your child skills that will increase safety. Research continues to demonstrate that children with autism can be taught safety skills. Alpine Learning Group has developed a free resource to help assess your child's safety skills and identify those that need reinforcing. This assessment can help you engage with your child's school or treatment program to include the critical safety goals in your child's IEP. This assessment is available at no cost to you by contacting kcerino@alpinelearninggroup.org. To help you in writing to your child's case manager and preparing attachments for your child's IEP, sample letters are available at www.awaare.nationalautismassociation.org/.

Additional Toolkits and Resources

Big Red Safety Toolkit (<http://nationalautismassociation.org/docs/BigRedSafetyToolkit.pdf>)

Autism Speaks Safety Project (<http://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/autism-safety-project>)

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