

Wandering Tips for First Responders

Time is a vitally important factor in a safe recovery

Quick Facts to Know

- Wandering is significantly more common among children with autism compared to other children.
- Drowning is a leading cause of accidental death for children with autism.
- Nearly one third of people with autism are nonverbal.
- People with autism may have difficulties communicating when stressed, confused or afraid.

A person with autism might:

- Have an impaired sense of danger and may wander to bodies of water, traffic or other dangers.
- Have delayed speech and language skills.
- Not respond to their name or verbal commands.
- Avoid eye contact.
- Engage in repetitive behavior (*ex. rocking, hand flapping, spinning*).
- Mimic phrases and behavior.
- Have sensory perception issues.
- Not understand sarcasm or figures of speech.
- Not understand personal space.
- Have epilepsy or seizure disorder.
- Fear a person in uniform (*ex. fire turnout gear*) or exhibit curiosity and reach for objects/equipment (*ex. shiny badge or handcuffs*).
- Hide in tight, small spaces.

First Responder Checklist

- Maintain sense of urgency when searching for a missing person with autism. Even if they have wandered before, the challenges related to autism can put them at great risk.
- Speak to the parent or caregiver to learn about likes and dislikes and places the person with autism may seek or avoid.
- Determine how the person communicates and if they will respond to his or her name.
- SEARCH WATER FIRST. Identify nearby bodies of water (pools, ponds, rivers, etc.).
- Warn the person when you are going to touch them before doing so and allow extra time to process questions/statements.
- Avoid interrupting repetitive behaviors unless they are a threat to safety.
- Avoid using lights and sirens when possible.
- Be calm and patient, speaking simply when giving directions.
- Give lots of praise and encouragement.

We encourage law enforcement agencies to contact Autism Speaks' partner, The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) for additional assistance and resources, including search-and-rescue experts who immediately deploy to provide recommendations and technical assistance in critically missing cases.