

Supporting Children on the Autism Spectrum: **Tips for Caregivers**

Nearly half of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) will go missing at some point in their life. More than one-third of children on the autism spectrum who go missing may not speak – and for some children leaving their environment is a nonverbal form of communication. Some leave because they are fleeing overwhelming stimuli, such as sights, sounds, surroundings, or the disruptive activities of others. Others leave home or school and seek out things they are attracted to such as water, trains, traffic, or the woods.



If any child with ASD goes missing, **immediately call 911** and begin searching the surrounding area and especially bodies of water because time is of the essence.

Once 911 is called, contact the **National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678)** so we can assist with our free resources.

This project was supported by Grant No. 15PJDP-21-GK-02819-MECP and 15PJDP-21-GK-00998-MECP awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this program are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

As part of a proactive approach for supporting children on the autism spectrum, here are some tips that NCMEC recommends for caregivers:

- Identify the risks for your child and let those who are close to them, such as neighbors, relatives, teachers, law enforcement, and other trusted community members, know where your child may go. Make this part of your plan when you move to a new neighborhood.
- **Alert those close to the child,** law enforcement, and trusted community members about interests, attractions, or favorite people or places your child may have, including bodies of water, roadways/signs, highways, trains, fire trucks, traffic signals, buses, teachers, or friends.
- Make a plan with your child's school in the event they leave the classroom. Wandering can be addressed in your child's Individualized Education Program. Find out your school's standard procedure for wandering prevention.
- Be familiar with local bodies of water, proximity to highways, and other landmarks near your child's residence and school. Encourage your child's school to keep relevant maps in the main office so they are readily accessible in case of emergency.
- Remember, a child's perception of natural water sources may be different than a dislike or fear of baths or pools. Knowledge about water safety is essential for children on the autism spectrum to help prevent drowning.
- Contact your local pool or **YMCA** to find out if they provide swimming lessons for individuals with developmental disabilities. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends additional swimming lessons in wet clothes and shoes.
- Help others understand that children on the autism spectrum may not speak, be non-responsive to their name being called, or fearful of any close contact with people they do not know. They may shrink away from touch, or bolt if you approach them, so maintain a safe distance, keeping the child in sight without restraining the child unless they are in imminent danger.
- Know these children can be resilient and tenacious, going farther and longer than many searching people would expect.
- Introduce your child to your local law enforcement agency so they know them and are familiar with any relevant support needs.
- Have a current photo and **Child ID** for your child available for law enforcement.
- Contact local law enforcement or non-profit organizations to determine if they administer any programs to help support and locate your child in the event of a missing incident.
    - Some local law enforcement agencies administer safe and secure community programs to support children and individuals who are known to frequently go missing. These programs are designed to assist law enforcement agencies when they encounter someone with an intellectual or developmental disability who may need help returning home.
    - The goal is to promote communication and to give officers access to needed information about your child to better assist them in providing safe interactions and swift recoveries.
    - Some may provide wearable locative technology. This should only be considered one tool in your safety toolkit, because technology can fail or be removed.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics has a **guide** and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has a **fact sheet,** both of which provides additional tips and guidance on how to keep children safe.

See: Occurrence and Family Impact of Elopement in Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders, Connie Anderson, J. Kiely Law, Amy Daniels, Catherine Rice, David S. Mandell, Louis Hagopian and Paul A. Law, Pediatrics (November 2012): **https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/130/5/870**

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