

**Meet the Police:
A Guide to Introducing Children &
Adults with ASD to Local Law
Enforcement**





MEET *the* POLICE

*A National Autism Association
Safety Initiative*

Meet the Police: A Guide to Introducing Children & Adults with ASD to Local Law Enforcement

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Table of Contents

<i>Purpose</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Schedule a Visit</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Information to Provide</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>'Meet Sheet' Sample</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Safety Steps</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>'Meet Sheet' Template</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Information for Police</i>	<i>7</i>

The purpose of this guide

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that an average of 1 in 68 children in the U.S. have an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges. These challenges often present unique safety risks, which may increase the chance of encounters with police and other first responders. The purpose of this guide is to help caregivers enhance the quality of search-and-rescue response and interactions between their loved one with ASD and members of law enforcement.

"Sometimes the uniform scares people. But immediately when I went to the park, she recognized me and she came to me."

Deputy Amanda Vollmer, who helped locate a nonverbal 7-year-old girl who went missing in Nebraska - KETV.com, August 2016

Topics Covered

In this guide, you will learn about:

1. How to schedule a visit
2. What information to provide to police about your loved one or client
3. How to use a 'meet sheet,' along with other resources & tools provided in this guide
4. Steps you can take to ensure the safety of your loved one or client



Unique Risks

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

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

ASD 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.

1. How to Schedule a Visit

Start by getting the numbers of both your local police department and sheriff's office. You can locate their non-emergency numbers on their websites.

Once you've identified the non-emergency number, call and say:

"I'm reaching out because my loved one has autism and I'm afraid he/she may be misunderstood should he/she ever have an encounter with law enforcement. May I schedule a time to introduce my loved one to members of your department and dispatch?"

Note: If you are a caretaker in a residential facility with multiple clients, or if your loved one is unable to do an on-site visit, ask if key members could visit the facility or your home. Remember that they handle many calls and inquiries each day, so please be patient and respectful.

"My good friend Gary Klugiewicz once told me — and I've never forgotten it — that 'persons with brain-based disorders are more likely to have run-ins with the police than others, but they are far less likely to commit a crime. When they get arrested or when an encounter becomes violent between an officer and a subject with autism or other brain-based disorder, it's often because neither party knew how to communicate with the other.'"

*From the article, Police and autism: New stats may forecast more contact with ASD subjects
Doug Wyllie, PoliceOne.com, April 2012*



Some individuals with ASD may have difficulty visiting a new place or new people. In the event that your loved one or client is unable to visit with members of law enforcement, drop off a 'meet sheet' instead. This will allow you to provide a personal introduction of your loved one or client in written form. A meet sheet template and sample can be found within this guide.

2. Information to Provide

Even if your loved one or client has never wandered/eloped from a safe setting or had encounters with police, it's always important to provide law enforcement with critical information.

- Provide information on your loved one's physical traits, behaviorial characteristics, medical needs, calming methods, and other vital information.
- Provide the "What is Autism" sheet located within this guide.
- Be sure to ask the dispatcher to note in their database that someone with autism lives in your home.
- Use the provided 'meet sheet' to give a personal introduction of your loved one in written form.

'We've noticed a rise in search and rescues with missing [persons with] autism,' said Lieutenant Jim Byers of the El Dorado County Sheriff's Office. He says those incidents spiked in the early 2000's. And in 2005, the Sheriff's Office launched an autism registry to help.'

From the article, El Dorado County Registry Helps Find Missing People With Autism - sacramento.cbslocal.com, March 2017



Be sure to keep a copy of the 'meet sheet' in your vehicle. Though it's difficult to think about, this will allow first responders to have important information about your loved one in the event of an emergency.

4. Safety Steps You Can Take

Many individuals with ASD have an impaired sense of safety and cannot effectively communicate when they need or want to go somewhere, or are feeling overwhelmed and need to get away from a certain environment. There are several key steps you can take to help prevent a wandering or bolting incident.

Some key tips:

- Safeguard your home by installing door/window chimes, a home security system, fencing
- Use visual prompts like stop signs on windows and doors
- Put identification on your loved one, especially for those who are non-verbal or minimally verbal



Safety Resources

Free personalized ID's are available through MedicAlert. Visit medicalert.org/autism.

Visit awaare.org and nationalautismassociation.org for information and free wandering-prevention tools and resources.



Important Numbers to Customize & Keep

Non-emergency Police Numbers

State Protection & Advocacy Agency: ndrn.org or 202-408-9514

Autism Information & Referral Center: 1-855-828-8476

Doctors/Pharmacy

If a child with autism is missing, Dial 911, then call the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children at 1-800-THE LOST (1-800-843-5678)

Local Resources: yellowpagesforkids.com

Other

Poison Control: 1-800-222-1222



Everything beyond this page can be printed and provided to law enforcement and other first responders.

Today's date:

Meet _____

_____ is diagnosed with autism and could be misunderstood if there is ever an encounter with law enforcement or other first responders.

Because _____ has difficulty visiting new places or people, I'm writing you today to introduce this amazing person who may not know what to do in a stressful situation.

In addition to some of the characteristics I've marked on the right side of this page, other behaviors include:

Should this person ever become lost, please search nearby water, busy streets and these places:

This person has certain likes/dislikes that may affect interactions with police or other first responders. To limit risk, please:

If this person is ever lost, I can be reached at:

_____ or _____.

I may be attaching other helpful information. Should you have any questions, please call me at the number listed above. Thank you for all the work you do to protect the lives of people with autism.

Sincerely,



Name: _____ Age: _____

Address: _____

Meds or Allergies: _____

Emergency Contact: _____



This 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), or repeat phrases (echolalia)
- Hold hands over ears due to sound sensitivity
- Avoid or resist physical contact
- Have unusual fears or obsessions with things like flashing lights, sirens, K-9s
- Not answer questions
- 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
- Have the mental capacity of someone much younger



How Do I Approach Someone with Autism?

- If there is no imminent danger, give the individual time and space
- Maintain a calm and relaxed demeanor
- Look for a medical ID, contact caregiver immediately
- Speak in a normal tone of voice using simple phrases
- Use first/then approach to ease anxiety: "First, we are going to sit in the car, then we'll see your Mom."

What is Autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) 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. ASD can range from mild to severe and occurs in all ethnic, socioeconomic and age groups. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that an average of 1 in 68 children in the U.S. have a diagnosis of ASD that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges. These challenges often present unique safety risks.

Unique Safety Risks

According to 2012 data published in *Pediatrics*, 49% of children with an ASD attempt to elope from a safe environment, a rate nearly four times higher than their unaffected siblings. It's also estimated that individuals with ASD will have seven times more contacts with law enforcement during their lifetimes than the general population (Curry, Posluszny, & Kraska, 1993). ASD 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. Also be aware that older people with autism may have the mental capacity of someone much younger.

Things You Can Do

To help enhance safety among children and adults with ASD, consider hosting meet and greets or other safety events at your station, a local school, library, park, etc. It would be helpful to collaborate with your local special education director or superintendent to schedule school visits. This will allow individuals with ASD to become familiar with your officers, uniforms, vehicles, and K-9s. You can also start a voluntary registry for members with ASD in your community.



How to Recognize Signs of ASD

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), or repeat phrases (echolalia)
- Hold hands over ears due to sound sensitivity
- Avoid or resist physical contact
- Have unusual fears or obsessions with things like flashing lights, sirens, K-9s
- Not answer questions
- Need time to process questions or demands
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If a person with autism is ever missing, search nearby water and busy roads first.

Autism & Wandering

Similar to wandering behaviors in seniors with dementia or Alzheimer’s, children and adults with ASD are prone to wandering away from safe environments.

People with ASD may wander or bolt from safe settings to get to something of interest, or to get away from something stressful, such as loud noises, commotion, or demands. They often seek low-sensory environments, or favorite topics or places.

Dangers associated with wandering include drowning, traffic injury, falling from a high place, exposure, and assault.

Because people with ASD are often challenged in areas of language and cognitive function, it can be difficult to teach them about dangers and ways to stay safe.

From 2011 to 2016, National Autism Association (NAA) collected data on over 800 U.S. missing person cases involving individuals with an ASD. Certain results from that data (right & below) could help your department understand where to search for a missing person with ASD, and what components played a role in successful recoveries. There are also a wide variety of training programs for first responders, plus tools and technology that can help.

For information on how to access these resources, please write to naa@nationalautism.org.

"I was able to lay down on the deck and he reached out to me and I pulled him up. I just grabbed him, bear hugged him wrapped him in my jacket and took off running."

Patrolman Joshua Leveronne, who rescued a nonverbal 4-year-old boy from a wastewater treatment pool - WDRB.com, March 2015

Key Rescue Component

- First Responder/Rescue crews
- Good Samaritan
- Alert System or Reverse 911
- Tracking Unit or ID
- Neighbor

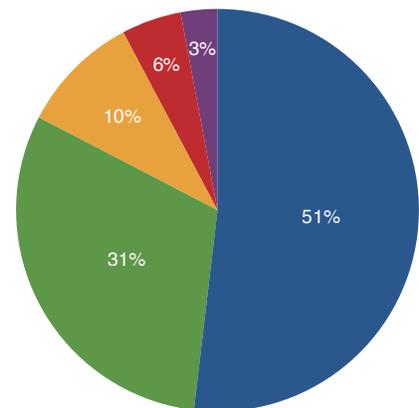


Figure 1: Non-lethal outcomes by key rescue component, Mortality & Risk in ASD Wandering/Elopement, NAA, March 2017

Top Places They Were Found

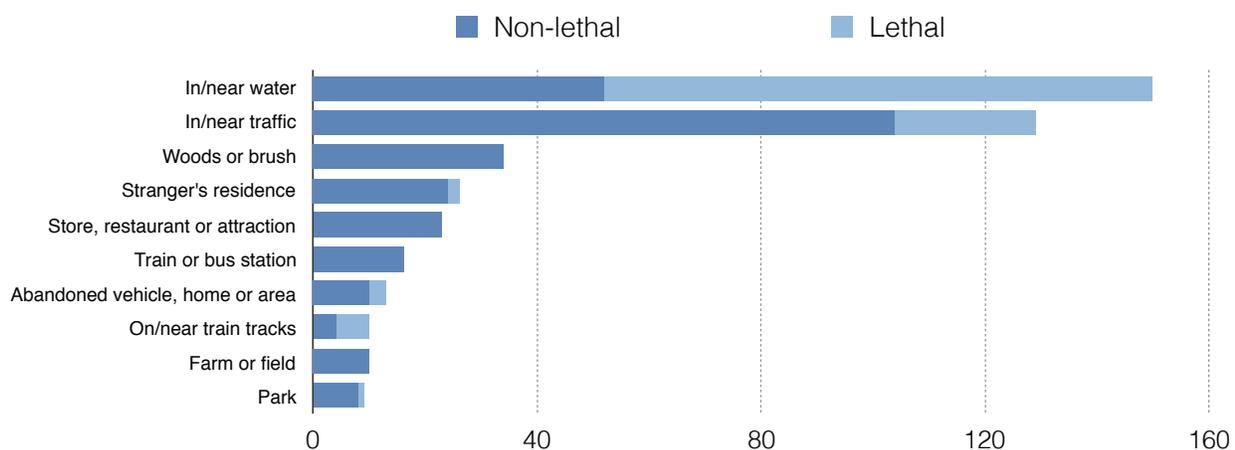


Figure 2: Non-lethal and lethal outcomes by top places they were located, Mortality & Risk in ASD Wandering/Elopement, NAA, March 2017