



Missing Children on the Autism Spectrum Search Protocols

Finding and safely recovering a missing child on the autism spectrum can present unique challenges for families, law enforcement, first responders, and search teams.

No two individuals are ever alike, and children on the autism spectrum are no exception. Indeed, there is a reason the science community has included the word “spectrum” in the definition, and in the words of Dr. Stephen Shore, “If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.”¹ These children vary in their levels of functioning and communication capabilities. It is also important to note the chronological age of individuals with autism is often disconnected from their level of functioning. For example, a 15-year-old may display the cognitive function of a much younger child.

While the individuality of children on the autism spectrum cannot be overstated, there are some characteristics communities should understand with regard to searching for and helping to keep these children safe. For example, a child on the autism spectrum may:

- Wander away, run away, or bolt from a safe environment
- Exhibit a diminished sense of fear or engage in high-risk behavior, such as seeking water or active roadways
- Elude or hide from search teams
- Seek small or tightly enclosed spaces concealing themselves from search teams
- Be unable to respond to rescuers

Missing children with autism, especially those who are severely affected, tend to wander or elope from their environment and often seek bodies of water, such as streams, ponds, lakes, rivers, creeks, storm-water retention/detention basins, and

¹ Lime Connect interview with Dr. Stephen Shore (March 22, 2018): https://www.limeconnect.com/opportunities_news/detail/leading-perspectives-on-disability-a-qa-with-dr-stephen-shore.

swimming pools. This phenomenon is not entirely understood, but researchers and professionals studying this issue believe some children on the autism spectrum seek the serenity bodies of water offer to relieve their anxiety. Research indicates children with autism are 160 times as likely to drown as the general pediatric population.² According to a study by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, the annual number of documented deaths for individuals with a diagnosis of autism rose nearly 7 times from 1999 to 2014.³ An analysis of NCMEC data for the period of January 1, 2007, to December 31, 2016, indicates there were 952 children with autism reported missing to NCMEC. During this 10-year period, 43 missing children on the autism spectrum were recovered deceased. In 65% of these tragedies, drowning was listed as the official cause of death, and 31 of the deceased missing children with autism were actually recovered in a body of water.⁴

Children with autism may also exhibit other interests or fascinations posing similar dangers, such as going to active roadways/highways, trains, heavy equipment, fire trucks, roadway signs, bright lights, and traffic signals. In the event of an extended missing episode, these children are also at risk of exposure to weather and environmental hazards; dehydration; lack of adequate nutrition, food and medication; traffic-related injuries/accidents; falls, especially down steep terrain; and even potential encounters with others who would intentionally try to harm or exploit them.

Because of the tendency for children with autism to wander or elope, it is vitally important to quickly identify the unique interests of the child and create a list of their favorite places. It is imperative first responders talk to the parents, siblings, relatives, caregivers, and others who know the child well to ask for information about interests, fascinations, stimulations, or obsessions when developing search plans and determining where the child may go. This information could provide key clues leading to a speedy recovery.

² Joseph Guan, Guohua Li, "Injury Mortality in Individuals With Autism", American Journal of Public Health 107, no. 5 (May 1, 2017). <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/pdf/10.2105/AJPH.2017.303696>. Summary of findings available at "Individuals with Autism at Substantially Heightened Risk for Injury Death" <https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/public-health-now/news/individuals-autism-substantially-heightened-risk-injury-death>

³ Ibid.

⁴ See: <https://www.missingkids.org/theissues/autism>.

Wandering and Elopement

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention describes wandering as someone leaving a safe area or a responsible caregiver, and it typically includes situations where the child may be injured or harmed as a result.⁵ These dangers can include exposure to traffic; drowning; falling from a high place; harmful weather or environmental conditions, such as hypothermia, heat stroke, or dehydration; or encounters with individuals who might try to harm them. Wandering is also referred to as elopement, bolting, fleeing, and running.

Children with autism wander or elope for a variety of reasons. They may hide from parents, caregivers, or teachers. They may seek places of special interest to them, such as water, active roadways, train tracks, a favorite place, or possibly to escape an environment because of overwhelming stimulus, such as sights, sounds, surroundings, or activities of others. First responders must quickly gather information about why the child may have wandered and places the child may go. **Interviewing parents, siblings, caregivers, and others who know the child well is vital, since these people may know about the child's activities, behaviors, and interests, both past and present.**

According to published research survey data, nearly half of families reported their children with autism wander or elope, a rate nearly four times higher than nonaffected children.⁶ Children on the autism spectrum may have a diminished or unique way of communicating.⁷ Because of the circumstances often surrounding these missing children cases, the guidance noted below is provided to assist law enforcement, first responders, and search teams in the event of a reported incident.

Missing Children on the Autism Spectrum: Response Recommendations

Because these children have an unusually high mortality rate and are especially at risk, NCMEC recommends treating missing children on the autism spectrum as critical incidents requiring elevated responses by law enforcement and first responders. Certain exceptions may apply for children on the spectrum who are considered high functioning and, therefore, should be assessed by weighing all risk factors.

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Disability and Safety: Information on Wandering (Elopement)* (September 18, 2019): <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandsafety/wandering.html#ref>

⁶ *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>

⁷ *Fact Sheet published by the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders* (May 2012): https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/Documents/health/voice/NIDCD-Communication-Problems-in-Children-with-Autism-FS_0.pdf

Preliminary Considerations

Because children with autism sometimes have an attraction to water, it is **imperative** first responders and search teams immediately check all nearby bodies of water to head-off the child. These include, but are not limited to, streams, ponds, lakes, rivers, creeks, storm-water retention/detention basins, and swimming pools.

Children with autism may have difficulty with verbal and nonverbal communication and in some cases may **not** be able to respond to their name being called. They may hide to elude searchers, sometimes concealing themselves in small or tight spaces, and may display a diminished sense of fear about dangers in their environmental surroundings.

As with all critically missing children, time is a vitally important factor in a safe recovery. Public-safety telecommunicators are encouraged to obtain the information noted below and immediately share it with all first responders. Additionally, law enforcement agencies are encouraged to contact the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678) for technical assistance and resources, including search and rescue experts who may be able to immediately deploy to help find the child.

Call-Intake Questions The following recommendations are offered to help public-safety telecommunicators when taking calls concerning children on the autism spectrum. First, obtain a full description of the child, including height, weight, and hair color along with clothing and shoes worn. Then ask:

- Is the child wearing or carrying any tracking technology device? If so, which one and how is location information accessed?
- Is the child attracted to water? If so, can the child swim, and in what bodies of water?
- Is the child attracted to active roadways/highways/traffic lights?
- Does the child have a fascination with vehicles, such as trains, heavy equipment, airplanes, or fire trucks, or anything else in the environment?
- Has the child wandered away before? If so, where was he or she found?
- Does the child have a sibling on the autism spectrum? If so, has that sibling wandered away before? If so, where was the sibling found?
- Where does the child like to go? Does the child have a favorite place?
- Is the child nonverbal? If so, how does the child prefer to communicate?
- How will the child likely react to his or her name being called?

- Will the child respond to a specific voice, such as that of his or her mother, father, other relative, caregiver, or family friend?
- Does the child have a favorite song, toy, character, or sound other than a voice? If so, what or who is it?
- Does the verbal child know his or her parents' names, home address, and phone number?
- Does the child have any specific dislikes, fears, or behavioral triggers?
- How might the child react to lights, sirens, helicopters, airplanes, search dogs, people in uniform, or those participating in a search team?
- How does the child respond to pain or injury? What is the child's response to being touched?
- How might the child respond to being approached by unfamiliar people?
- Does the child wear a medical ID tag?
- Does the child have any sensory, medical, or dietary issues and requirements?
- Does the child rely on any life-sustaining medication?
- Does the child become upset easily? If so, what methods are used to calm him or her?

The Initial Response The recommendations noted below are offered to help guide law enforcement and other first responders in the initial response and search for the child.

- Identify hazards in the area where the child was last seen and dispatch personnel to those locations to search for the child, paying special attention to any bodies of water and specific locations of interest to the child, such as his or her favorite places. It is recommended search personnel stay at the bodies of water regardless of whether the child is there as the child may make his or her way there eventually.
- Secure identified hazardous areas near where the child was last seen to prevent the child from entering those areas.
- Determine if the child was wearing/carrying a tracking device and, if so, immediately initiate tracking measures to locate the child.
- Determine if the child is frightened by aircraft, dogs, ATVs, or any other resources used to assist in searches. Remember, using search dogs at the onset of the initial response will better ensure successful tracking.
- Determine if the child is sensitive to or frightened by noise and how he or she will typically react to that type of noise or lights and groups of people.

- ❑ Establish containment measures of the child's known routes to prevent him or her from wandering further away from the place last seen, using all appropriate means, such as road, bike, and air patrol.
- ❑ Contact the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children without delay to request assistance from their search and rescue and search management resources.
- ❑ Ensure the lead agency has considered using a reverse 911 system, such as A Child Is Missing Alert at www.achildismissing.org. This service helps alert the local community via a rapid-response, neighborhood-alert program using high-tech phone systems.
- ❑ Determine if an Endangered Missing Child Alert has been issued.
- ❑ Use of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's [Missing Children With Special Needs Lost-Person Questionnaire](#) is also highly recommended.

Investigative Measures The recommendations noted below are offered to help guide law enforcement's search and investigative efforts.

- ❑ Contact the child's parent/guardian to further assess the child's behavior and cognitive functioning.
- ❑ Determine if the child has any history of wandering or eloping and, if so, where and what physical features associated with those episodes may have attracted the child.
- ❑ Identify additional physical features the child may be attracted to such as roadways/highways, trains, heavy equipment, fire trucks, park swings, traffic lights, or road signs.
- ❑ Determine if the child has any favorite places.
- ❑ Determine if the child has a favorite song, toy, character, or sound other than a voice? Determine if the child has any dislikes, fears, or behavioral triggers and, if so, how he or she will typically react to negative stimuli.
- ❑ Determine how the child reacts to lights, sirens, dogs, vehicles used in searches, and people of authority/in uniform. Children with autism will sometimes avoid search teams or attempt to hide in small places.
- ❑ Determine the communication abilities of the child regarding verbal versus nonverbal skills.
- ❑ Determine if the child will respond to his or her name when being called.
- ❑ Determine if the child knows his or her parents' names, home address, and phone numbers.

- Determine if the child has any other mental, physical, cognitive, or behavioral conditions.
- Determine if the child has any dietary issues or requirements.
- Determine if the child is taking any medications, and, if so, the type of medications, risks involved with delayed or missed doses, and potential side effects if the medication is not taken as prescribed.
- Determine if the child wears a medical identification bracelet or tag.
- Determine how the child responds to pain or injury.
- Determine how the child might respond to being approached by unfamiliar people.
- Determine the child's response to being touched.
- Determine what methods are used to calm the child.

Search and Rescue Measures The deployment of personnel trained in search and rescue protocols is highly recommended to assist in the investigation to safely locate the missing child. Law enforcement should **immediately** provide information to search and rescue personnel about the child's specific behavioral and cognitive functioning, and any information about the interests or other characteristics that may assist in searching for the child.

Law enforcement should consider immediately establishing an Incident Command System (ICS) to help ensure all aspects of the investigative and search functions are properly managed and resources are used to their fullest potential. Additionally, a critical component of an ICS is the establishment of a search and rescue manager for all aspects of the search and rescue operation. The search measures noted below may help in safely locating a missing child on the autism spectrum.

- Preserve the place the child was last seen.
- Use search and rescue personnel accustomed to the existing geography whether urban, suburban, or rural.
- Provide a detailed briefing to search and rescue personnel arriving on scene about the behaviors of the missing child.
- Reference the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's [Missing Children With Special Needs Lost-Person Questionnaire](#).
- Initiate search and rescue efforts with an emphasis on bodies of water, high-hazard areas, travel corridors, routes to favorite places, previous locations visited, and any other areas of interest suggested by those who know the child.

- Attempt to attract the child by using his or her favorite things, such as playing a favorite song or driving a favorite type of vehicle into the search area.
- Use night-search techniques, if appropriate, such as projected lights and patterns, especially spinning patterns, or other types of favorite visuals to attract the missing child. **Note:** Be aware night searches could be hazardous to the child if the terrain includes dangers such as cliffs, drop offs, mine shafts, or bodies of water. Attempting to draw a child into these areas could lead to tragic consequences if these are not identified by searchers and secured prior to using attraction devices.
- Extend search duration because the unique behaviors of some children on the autism spectrum may have a natural self-survival instinct allowing the child to survive longer than what is normally expected.

Considerations in the Event of a Prolonged Search In the event immediate search efforts do not result in the safe recovery of the missing child, begin to plan for the prolonged use of resources to sustain search efforts. The search and rescue manager should evaluate the overall effectiveness of the search operations and make necessary adjustments for a prolonged search operation. The recommendations noted below are provided to assist in the planning for a prolonged search and rescue effort.

- Evaluate the overall effectiveness of the search operations and adjust as necessary for the next operational phase.
- Estimate immediate and long-range resources and logistical requirements for deployment of those resources.
- Assign new or additional personnel for the prolonged search operation.
- Consider expanding the search area, assessing the distance the child could have walked during the time frame he or she has been missing and his or her resiliency. Children with autism have been known to walk several miles, often exceeding the initially-established search containment area.
- Determine if there are any gaps in the original search area and consider searching those areas again.
- Consider using trained search and rescue personnel with volunteer searchers to enhance the search capabilities.

Recovery and Reunification Measures

It is important to understand children with autism exhibit social and cognitive impairments, communication difficulties, and repetitive behaviors, which can make the interaction between law enforcement/search and rescue personnel and a child with autism at the time of recovery and subsequent reunification a traumatic experience.

The considerations noted below are recommended to deescalate and/or minimize any heightened emotions or anxieties the child may experience at the time of recovery.

- Maintain a calm and relaxed environment.
- Contain the child in a passive way to keep him or her from running or bolting while avoiding use of restraints.
- Bring a parent or guardian immediately to the recovery site, whenever possible, and tell the child that person is on the way.
- Reduce sensory input such as lights, sounds, and the number of people within line of site.
- Limit the number of people communicating and interacting with the child.
- Understand children may exhibit unusual behaviors, such as jumping, spinning, or flapping hands. Many children on the autism spectrum use these behaviors to calm themselves when excited or nervous.
- Give simple commands, one at a time. Give the child time to process commands and requests before starting again.
- Avoid touching the child, if possible. Many children have adverse reactions to physical touch. If restraint is necessary, use techniques to reduce the need for prolonged touching of the child.
- Approach the child at his or her level, kneeling if necessary, and speak in a normal tone of voice using simple phrases.
- Use a task-and-reward process to ease anxiety and enhance compliance using phrases such as, "First we are going to stay here, and then your father is going to come here."
- Avoid assuming the child understands everything being said and done at the recovery scene.
- Use communication aids, written instructions, drawings, or prompts, if possible.
- Use familiar topics when possible. For instance, if the child is wearing a shirt with a cartoon character on it, talk to the child about the character to help lessen any anxiety the child may be feeling and calm the child if upset.
- Check for any identification, such as a medical bracelet or tracking device.

- Consult Autism Speaks for additional information and support resources at <https://www.autismspeaks.org/>.
- Contact the National Autism Association for further reunification assistance at 1-877-622-2884. For more information about children with autism and resources for families, such as the Big Red Safety Box, visit <https://nationalautismassociation.org/>.
- Consult Robert Koester's *Lost Person Behavior: A search and rescue guide on where to look for land, air, and water* (2008) for additional general information.

This project was supported by Grant # 2019-MU-MU-K012 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. This document is provided for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice or professional opinion on specific facts. Information provided in this document may not remain current or accurate, so recipients should use this document only as a starting point for their own independent research and analysis. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice. Copyright © 2012-2020 National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. All rights reserved. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® and 1-800-THE-LOST® are registered trademarks of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.