

# INVESTIGATIVE CHECKLIST FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT WHEN RESPONDING TO MISSING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS



This Checklist is meant to enhance the response measures taken by law enforcement to safely recover missing children with special needs and is to be used in conjunction with the *Missing Children With Special Needs* addendum and *Missing Children With Special Needs Lost-Person Questionnaire*.

## Call-Intake Questions

Public-safety telecommunicators are encouraged to **immediately** obtain the information listed below and provide it to all first responders. Additionally they are encouraged to **immediately** contact the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678) to ensure resources, including search-and-rescue experts, are immediately deployed at the onset of the incident.

- 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?
- Is the child attracted to active roadways/highways?
- Does the child have a fascination with vehicles such as trains, heavy equipment, airplanes, or fire trucks?
- Has the child wandered away before? If so, where was he or she found?
- Does the child have a sibling with special needs? 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? How will the child likely react to his or her name being called?
- Will the child respond to a particular voice such as that of his or her mother, father, other relative, caregiver, or family friend?
- Does the child have a favorite song, toy, or character? 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 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?
- 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

- 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.
- 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.
- 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 experts.
- Ensure the lead agency is using the services of a reverse 911 system, such as A Child Is Missing Alert at [www.achildismissing.org](http://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.

## Investigative Measures

- Contact the child's parent/guardian to further assess the child's special-needs condition.
- 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, and road signs.
- Determine if the child has any favorite places.
- Determine if the child has a favorite song, toy, or character.

- [ ] 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 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 or physical 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 the child's response to being touched.
- [ ] Determine what methods are used to calm the child.

### Search and Rescue Measures

- [ ] 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.
- [ ] Consider using 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 with special needs may have a protective effect allowing the child to survive longer than what is considered to be a normal survival rate for a child.
- [ ] Evaluate the overall effectiveness of the search operations, in the event of a prolonged search, and adjust as necessary for the next operational phase to include immediate and long-range resources and logistical requirements for deployment of those resources.
- [ ] Determine if there are any gaps in the original search area and make arrangements to search those areas again.
- [ ] Consider using trained search-and-rescue personnel with volunteer searchers to enhance the search capabilities.

### Recovery and Reunification Measures

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 and avoid 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.
- 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 humor and 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.
- Contact the National Autism Association for further reunification assistance at 1-877-622-2884.