

# TIPS FOR CAREGIVERS SUPPORTING CHILDREN ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM



Research suggests nearly half of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) will go missing.<sup>1</sup> More than one-third of children on the autism spectrum who go missing may not speak<sup>2</sup> and for some children leaving their environment is a nonverbal form of communication.<sup>3</sup> 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.



As part of a proactive approach for supporting children on the autism spectrum, here are some tips that Home Safe partner 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, bright lights, traffic signals, buses, teachers, or friends. Utilize tools such as a [Letter to Neighbors](#).

If any child with ASD goes missing, **immediately call 911** and begin searching the surrounding area and especially bodies of water. Time is of the essence when children are missing but especially for children with ASD because they are at an elevated risk for drowning.<sup>4</sup> Once 911 is called, contact the **National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678)** so NCMEC can assist with their free resources to help find missing children, including deployment of Team Adam and all the other coordinated resources available through NCMEC's case management team such as poster distribution, victim and family support, and analytical services.

- 1 Connie Anderson, et al., "Occurrence and Family Impact of Elopement in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder," *Pediatrics* 130, no. 5 (2012): 870-877, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23045563/>.
- 2 Connie Anderson, et al., "Occurrence and Family Impact of Elopement in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder," *Pediatrics* 130, no. 5 (2012): 870-877, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23045563/>.
- 3 Lori McIlwain, "Autism & Wandering: A Guide for Clinicians," last modified January 9, 2015, <https://nationalautismassociation.org/autism-wandering-a-guide-for-clinicians/>.
- 4 Joseph Guan and Guoha Li, "Injury Mortality in Individuals with Autism," *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 5 (2017): 791-793, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28323463/>.



- 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.
- 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, might be non-responsive to their name being called, or might be 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 children on the autism spectrum can be resilient and tenacious, traveling 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 adults who are known to frequently go missing. These programs are designed to assist law enforcement agencies when they encounter someone with a 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. While locative technology can be helpful, it should not be the only approach to safety for children with autism as 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 provide additional tips and guidance on how to keep children safe.





*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.”<sup>5</sup>*

For more information on protecting children on the autism spectrum, contact:

**Local Police**

**Local Supportive Services**

5 Connie Anderson, et al., “Occurrence and Family Impact of Elopement in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder,” Pediatrics 130, no. 5 (2012): 870-877, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23045563/>.



**The Kevin and Avonte Program: Reducing Injury and Death of Missing Individuals with Dementia and Developmental Disabilities**

Through the *Kevin and Avonte Program: Reducing Injury and Death of Missing Individuals with Dementia and Developmental Disabilities*, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), in partnership with [NCMEC](#), [The Arc](#), and the [Bureau of Justice Assistance](#), Office of Justice Programs at the U.S. Department of Justice, supports local jurisdictions’ efforts to reduce the number of deaths and injuries of individuals with forms of dementia such as Alzheimer’s disease or developmental disabilities such as autism who, due to their condition, wander from safe environments.

**CONTACT US: [homesafe@theiacp.org](mailto:homesafe@theiacp.org)**

Visit us:  
[theiacp.org/projects/home-safe](http://theiacp.org/projects/home-safe)

Visit The Arc’s webpage:  
[thearc.org/our-initiatives/criminal-justice/pathway-justice/](http://thearc.org/our-initiatives/criminal-justice/pathway-justice/)

Visit NCMEC’s autism webpage:  
[missingkids.org/theissues/autism](http://missingkids.org/theissues/autism)



This project is supported by Cooperative Agreement No. 2019-NT-BX-K002 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions contained herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. References to specific agencies, companies, products, or services should not be considered an endorsement by the author(s) or the U.S. Department of Justice. Rather, the references are illustrations to supplement discussion of the issues.