

Wandering Tips for First Responders

Time is a vitally important factor in a safe recovery!



Quick Facts to Know

- Nearly 50% of people with autism of all ages are at risk of wandering from safety.
- Drowning accounts for 91% of deaths in children with autism subsequent to wandering – during search and rescue, **SEARCH WATER FIRST!**
- Nearly one third of people with autism are non-verbal.
- People with autism may have difficulties communicating when stressed, confused, or afraid.

A person with autism might:

- Have an impaired sense of danger and may wander to bodies of water, traffic or other dangers
- Have delayed speech and language skills
- Not respond to his/her name or verbal commands
- Avoid eye contact
- Engage in repetitive behavior (ex. rocking, hand flapping, spinning)
- Mimic phrases and behaviors
- Have sensory perception issues
- Not understand sarcasm or figures of speech
- Not understand personal space
- Have epilepsy or seizure disorder
- Fear a person in uniform (ex. fire turnout gear) or exhibit curiosity and reach for objects/equipment (ex. shiny badge or handcuffs)
- Hide in tight, small spaces

First Responder Checklist

- Maintain sense of urgency when searching for a missing person with autism! Even if he or she has wandered before, the challenges related to autism can put them at great risk.
- Speak to the parent or caregiver to learn about likes and dislikes and places the person with autism may seek or avoid.
- Determine how the person communicates and if he or she will respond to his or her name.
- **SEARCH WATER FIRST!** Identify nearby bodies of water (pools, ponds, rivers, etc.).
- Warn the person when you are going to touch him or her before doing so and allow extra time to process questions/statements.
- Avoid interrupting repetitive behaviors unless they are a threat to safety.
- Avoid using lights and sirens when possible.
- Be calm and patient, speaking simply when giving directions.
- Give lots of praise and encouragement!

We encourage law enforcement agencies to contact Autism Speaks' partner, **The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)** at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) for additional assistance and resources, including search-and-rescue experts who immediately deploy to provide recommendations and technical assistance in critically missing cases.

