

## Missing Children With Special Needs

Finding and safely recovering a missing child with special needs often presents a unique and difficult challenge for families, law enforcement, first responders, and search teams. The behaviors and actions of a missing child with special needs are often much different than those of a missing nonaffected child. While the behaviors will differ from child-to-child, missing children with certain special needs may

- Wander away, run away, or bolt from a safe environment
- Exhibit a diminished sense of fear causing them to 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

A special-needs condition may be characterized by debilitating physical impairments, social impairments, cognitive impairments, or communication challenges.

### Heightened Risk Factors Associated with Autism Spectrum Disorders

One such cause for these types of impairments and challenges is autism. Generally speaking, no two children with autism are alike — each child is unique. The symptoms vary from the most severely affected child who may be nonverbal and low functioning, to those with milder forms, such as Asperger’s Syndrome or Pervasive Developmental Disorder–Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), who may be higher-functioning. This does not suggest all missing children diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome or PDD-NOS are not at risk — the risk factors must be weighed for each individual child regardless of the diagnosis. It is also important to note the chronological age of individuals with autism is often irrelevant to their level of functioning. For example a 15-year-old may have the cognitive function of a much younger child.

For reasons not entirely clear, missing children with autism, especially those who are severely affected, have a tendency to wander or elope from a safe environment and will often seek bodies of water such as streams, ponds, lakes, rivers, creeks, storm-water retention/detention basins, and backyard and public swimming pools. According to the National Autism Association, in the United States between 2009 and 2011, accidental drowning accounted for 91% of the total deaths reported in children with autism ages 14 and younger subsequent to wandering or elopement.<sup>1</sup> 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 the children are also at risk of exposure to weather and environmental hazards; dehydration; lack of adequate nutrition such as food and medication; traffic-related injuries/accidents; falls, especially down steep terrain; and even

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<sup>1</sup>*Autism & Safety Facts*. Attleboro Falls, Massachusetts: National Autism Association, accessed on July 24, 2012, at [nationalautismassociation.org/resources/autism-safety-facts](http://nationalautismassociation.org/resources/autism-safety-facts).

potential encounters with child molesters or others who would intentionally try to take advantage of or harm 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.

### **Wandering and Elopement**

The National Autism Association describes wandering and elopement as a situation when a person who requires some level of supervision to be safe leaves a supervised, safe space and/or the care of a responsible person and is exposed to potential dangers. These dangers can include traffic; drowning in open water; falling from a high place; harmful weather or environmental conditions such as hypothermia, heat stroke, or dehydration; or unintended encounters with individuals who could try to intentionally harm them. Wandering is also referred to as elopement, bolting, fleeing, and running.<sup>2</sup>

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.**

It is estimated nearly half of children with autism will wander or elope, a rate nearly four times higher than nonaffected children.<sup>3</sup> More than one-third of children with autism who wander or elope are considered nonverbal and are unable or rarely able to communicate their name, address, or phone number.<sup>4</sup>

Because of the unique circumstances often associated in cases of missing children with special needs, the guidance noted below is provided to assist law enforcement, first responders, and search teams in the event of a reported incident.

### **Missing Children With Special Needs: Response Recommendations**

While cases of missing children with special needs should be treated as critical incidents requiring elevated responses by law enforcement and first responders, children with autism have an unusually high mortality rate and are especially at risk. Certain exceptions may apply

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about this topic visit [www.nationalautismassociation.org](http://www.nationalautismassociation.org), [www.autismsafety.org](http://www.autismsafety.org), and [www.awaare.org](http://www.awaare.org).

<sup>3</sup> *Autism & Safety Facts*. Attleboro Falls, Massachusetts: National Autism Association, accessed on July 24, 2012, at [nationalautismassociation.org/resources/autism-safety-facts](http://nationalautismassociation.org/resources/autism-safety-facts).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

for those special-needs children who are considered high functioning and therefore should be assessed accordingly weighing all risk factors.

**Preliminary Considerations** Because children with autism often have an extremely high attraction to water, it is **strongly** recommended first responders and search teams immediately check all nearby bodies of water in an effort to head-off the child. These include but are not limited to streams, ponds, lakes, rivers, creeks, storm-water retention/detention basins, and backyard and public swimming pools.

Children with autism typically have difficulty with verbal and nonverbal communication and in many cases may **not** be able to respond to their name being called. They will often 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 additional assistance and resources, including search-and-rescue experts who may be able to immediately deploy to help find the child.

**Call-Intake Questions** The recommendations noted below are offered to help public-safety telecommunicators when taking calls concerning children with special needs. First obtain a full description of the child including height, weight, hair color, and clothing 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?
- [ ] 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** 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.
- 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.

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 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** 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 special-needs condition and any information about the specific behaviors or interests 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 that 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 with special needs.

- [ ] 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.

**Considerations in the Event of a Prolonged Search** In the event immediate search efforts have not resulted in the safe recovery of the missing child, begin to plan for the prolonged use of resources in order 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, taking into account 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 make arrangements to search those areas again.
- [ ] Consider using trained search-and-rescue personnel with volunteer searchers to enhance the search capabilities.

### **Additional Considerations Unique to Children With Special Needs**

The unique behaviors of a child with special needs must be considered by law enforcement and first responders when planning and conducting searches. Past episodes have revealed children with special needs have a natural self-survival instinct and are often resilient, allowing them to survive long periods of time — sometimes longer than a nonaffected child. Additionally the children may have a diminished sense of fear of their surroundings and are highly mobile and thus may cover great distances, necessitating an expanded search parameter. The children may seek shelter or conceal themselves in confined spaces making it more difficult for searchers to locate them. In urban and suburban environments, it is highly recommended searchers focus their efforts on small confining spaces. Missing children with special needs may also have a fascination with or fixation on particular sounds; objects, especially moving or spinning objects; or certain foods. Consider use of attraction tactics, based on the unique behaviors and interests of the child, as a means to draw the missing child to the search party. Take special care, however, to help ensure the missing child is not drawn into a hazardous environment such as water, a cliff or bluff, or an active roadway. Additionally discuss with family members and caregivers techniques that would best work to help bring the child out versus what measures could be detrimental to the search.

## Recovery and Reunification Measures

With the understanding children with autism exhibit social and cognitive impairments, communication difficulties, and repetitive behaviors, keep in mind the interaction between law enforcement/search-and-rescue personnel and a child with autism at the time of recovery and subsequent reunification can be 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 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. For more information about children with autism and resources for families, such as the Big Red Safety Box, visit [www.nationalautismassociation.org](http://www.nationalautismassociation.org).
- Visit the National Autism Association's websites at [www.autismsafety.org](http://www.autismsafety.org) and [www.nationalautismassociation.org](http://www.nationalautismassociation.org) and the AWAARE Collaboration at [www.awaare.org](http://www.awaare.org) for additional information about children with autism.
- 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 No. 2012-MC-FX-K001 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. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. Copyright © 2012 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.