



STOP! IN THE NAME OF ELOPEMENT

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Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are at increased risk for elopement behavior. Of course, we are not talking about the kind where they run off to get married in Las Vegas! Elopement, which is often referred to as “wandering,” occurs when a child leaves a specified area without permission and goes out of reach or sight of caregivers. It may sometimes look like a child is playing chase by glancing at a caregiver and then running off in hopes that the caregiver will follow. Other times there might be no signal at all as the child wanders off and darts across a busy street to look at something, or goes out the front door without letting anyone know. Regardless of the reason for eloping or how it presents, the behavior can be dangerous.

One study found that 49 percent of surveyed families reported an elopement attempt by their child after the age of four. In addition, more than half of those reports involved an incident in which the child was missing long enough to cause significant concern.¹ While children who wander can definitely be a source of worry for parents, youngsters with ASD are an even greater concern given the main features of ASD that place them at increased risk. These children have communication impairments that could prevent them from telling someone they are lost or from being able to provide their name or personal information to contact their families. Often a reduced sense of danger is inherent in the autism diagnosis. This leaves children unaware that walking into a busy street is unsafe, or that water is deadly if they cannot swim. It is clear that elopement behavior is scary, and parents are justified in worrying about what could happen when their children wander off. The good news is that there are ways to help prevent elopement from occurring, as well as intervention strategies if a child finds elopement too enticing.

Preventive Measures

When it comes to wandering, prevention is the best defense. There are a number of measures that can be taken at home or in the community to reduce the likelihood of a child eloping.



HOME

To secure the physical environment of the home, door locks and door alarm chimes are easy and inexpensive options. A simple door alarm chimes when a door or window is opened, and this immediately provides an alert that someone has exited or entered the home.



COMMUNITY

It's also important to raise community awareness about your child. Letting neighbors know about the autistic child and his or her associated features, as well as providing contact information, can be helpful in stopping an elopement in progress. You could prepare a script like the following: "This is a picture of my son, Jimmy. He is three-years-old and has autism. He often does not respond to his name and might not look at you if you talk to him. He does not have permission to be outside without me. If you see him alone, please call me immediately." Consider sharing a photograph of your child with the local police and include identifying features, as well as diagnostic and other information, to help if your child goes missing or is found but unable to communicate. Relevant diagnostic information includes communication level, sensory sensitivities and preferences. You could also share what your child finds scary or calming, and any anaphylactic allergies.



CHILD

Identification is also key to helping someone who has wandered off and is unable to communicate with unfamiliar people. The Medic Alert ID bracelet has come a long way from the heavy metal bracelets of the past. Many options are available now that contain critical information in the event of an emergency. A number of websites for runners and bikers also offer identity tags that clip on to shoes or clothing. Some tags even offer tracking abilities to locate someone who is lost or "off the path." Embroidery tags with contact and other helpful information can also be sewed or ironed to the inside or outside of shirts or shorts. These can help reunite you with your autistic loved one.

One more prevention recommendation is that you teach your child to swim or survival swim. Drowning has been cited as one of the leading causes of accidental death in autistic youth, and swimming lessons help to reduce this risk, especially if your child has eloped and is swimming alone.² Connect with your local YMCA or children's hospital for locations that teach adaptive or survival swimming. Ensure that your child learns this important life-saving skill.



Intervention Strategies

If your child engages in elopement, consider implementing preventive measures. The following ideas can be used as intervention strategies.



IDENTIFICATION

The importance of identification is well known, but getting many autistic children to wear bracelets or anklets can be challenging. One helpful approach is to pair the non-preferred item with a preferred item. For example, if your child loves to play on a tablet, require that the bracelet be worn while using the tablet. If the bracelet comes off, the tablet goes off, and vice versa. While your child might complain about this initially, it will seem a small price to pay for access to the tablet. Your child will quickly become desensitized to the bracelet and forget about it, but a new safety measure will now be securely in place.



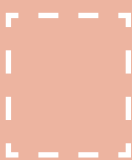
TEACH HAND-HOLDING

Another key intervention strategy is to teach hand-holding. Again, the best way to do this is to pair the activities with something your child enjoys. In a safe and secure area, practice walking and holding hands while you give your child a bite of a favorite treat or snack every so often. As your child improves in holding your hand, increase the amount of time between giving small bites of the snack. When your child routinely holds your hand in a secure environment, expand into new and exciting locations, such as an indoor playground with secured exits. Once your child successfully holds your hand for a given amount of time, allow access to the playground equipment as a reward.



RESPONDING TO THE WORD "STOP"

It is also important to teach your child to respond to the word "stop" when walking or running. To teach this behavior, start in a safe space with your child a short distance away. As your child takes one step, say "stop" in a firm tone and immediately offer a bite of a favorite snack, allow access to a favorite toy for a few seconds or blow one or two puffs of bubbles if motivating to your child, when your child complies. Slowly increase the distance until your child stops when six feet away or more. Next move to more enticing environments and restart the process at the shorter distance. Again, you can increase the distance as your child successfully stops when asked.



USE A "CHASE ZONE"

Some children love the thrill of the chase often without any regard for setting or danger. If you have a child that giggles with glee when racing out of your reach, consider implementing a "chase zone." This space, which should be safe and contained, will be the only place where you will play chase with your child. Once your child understands what and where the "chase zone" is, teach him or her to request it. Initially honor the request for chase every time it is requested so he or she learns that the chase zone is reliably accessible, rather than reverting to the old and perhaps dangerous elopement game of chase. Setting clear boundaries allows your child to know when something is okay and available, and when to engage in a favorite behavior safely.

Teaching children how to walk and stop safely and how to wear identifying information items is key to preventing elopement. It can also assure a safe return when wandering does occur.

I hope that parents and caregivers will find these strategies and suggestions helpful.

References

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2. Guan, J., & Li, G. (2017). Injury Mortality in Individuals With Autism. *American Journal of Public Health*, 107(5), 791-793.



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