

Autism Awareness 9-1-1

Safety First”

Five Important Safety Tips

for
Parents and Others
Who Support
Someone with an

Autism

Spectrum

Disorder

Safety Tip #1

Register the special needs of your child in the 9-1-1 data base and inform your local dispatch that you have someone with autism living in your home.

Why register?

The single most important thing that you can do to insure your child's safety in an emergency at home is to make sure that First Responders arrive already informed that there is someone living with you who has an autism spectrum disorder.

The officer may be responding to a call indicating that someone is hurt, that there is a fire, or that a child is missing. Increasingly, law enforcement, emergency medical technicians and fire fighters are receiving basic training in how to recognize and interact successfully with individuals who have an autism spectrum disorder.

If they are aware that someone in the home has ASD, they will be far less likely to misinterpret behavior by that individual as threatening, or perhaps as the cause of the emergency. In cases where the home must be evacuated – say in a fire – they can be able to follow specific instructions about your family member with ASD to approach them appropriately.

How do I register?

1. You can fill out the enclosed A.L.I. worksheet and mail it to the address on the form. This will red flag your PHONE NUMBER at the NH 9-1-1 database. The 9-1-1 database links the number of an incoming call with the physical location from which that call is placed. A "red flag" can be attached to the file for a specific address, alerting the dispatcher that there is additional information available on a second screen in the database.

2. You can register with your local police department. (see enclosed form and instructions) They will be able to place a "flag" on your ADDRESS, that notifies any first responders about a person with ASD. It will also give the officers a profile with important information specific to you ASD individual.

Cities and many towns also maintain a local dispatcher. Calls reach the local operator either by being patched through by the 911 operator or by a direct call made to your local police or fire station. It is the local dispatcher who puts out the call to appropriate personnel and maintains direct radio contact with them.

It is advisable that a family both "red flag" their home phone number in the 9-1-1 database and inform the local dispatch office that they have an individual with autism living in the home.

Safety Tip #2

Display an Autism Alert decal in the front window of any car in which your family member who has ASD routinely travels.



Why display a car decal?

In the event of a motor vehicle accident, it is crucial that First Responders know that there may be someone in the car who has ASD. A simple decal pasted on to the lower left-hand corner of the windshield, which Responders routinely scan when first assessing an accident, is fast becoming the standard way to make this fact known.

The driver and/or other caretakers may be unconscious or otherwise incapacitated and so cannot explain the situation. If uninjured, the individual with ASD may not be closely attended despite nearby traffic. If injured, the individual with ASD may respond in unusual ways and need to be addressed by EMTs in a manner that takes their disability into account. Or the individual with ASD may simply overreact to the unusual turn of events, police lights, or presence of strangers, in which case, they need to be removed from over-stimulation as quickly as possible.

How do I obtain a decal?

Decals are available from the Family Support program at the Autism Network at Easter Seals. They are always available at the Autism Awareness 9-1-1 Registrations along with instructions on how to use the decal. You may also obtain a decal through the Autism Society of America's website. Click on *Safe and Sound*.

Safety Tip #3

Review the locks in your home and consider the use of an alarm system.

Why pay special attention to locks and security devices?

Individuals with ASD have often been known to wander away from home. Unattended, he or she may be at risk due to traffic, water hazards, etc. Individuals with limited verbal skills may not be able to ask for assistance in finding their way back home.

Parents, make no assumptions. The propensity to wander may be something that your child develops over time. Although seemingly uninterested in what lies beyond the backyard gate, he or she may spot something attractive or recall a recent pleasurable experience away from home. Once motivated, mechanically inclined children with ASD may be unusually adept at disabling locks that would pose an obstacle to their age peers. In fact, many parents speak of their child as a "little Houdini," an escape artist who foils any and all conventional locks. For such children -- and for adults who wander -- an alarm system that alerts a caregiver when an exit has been opened may be an appropriate alternative.

How do I find an adequate security system?

There is no reason to turn your home into Fort Knox. In fact, caregivers are cautioned to avoid developing such elaborate locks and barriers that they hinder First Responders from entering the home in a fire or other emergency.

Thanks to an increased appreciation of the needs of elders, excellent advice and new home security products are now readily available on the Internet. Alarm systems and electronic locators designed for Alzheimer's patients are often used by caregivers worried about an individual with ASD who wanders. **See the Resource page for more specific information.**

Safety Tip #4

Teach an individual with ASD to carry an identification card and/or wear a medical alert bracelet indicating the nature of their disability.

Why carry an ID or medical alert?

Individuals with ASD often struggle with diminished speech when faced with a novel or anxiety provoking situation. Although he or she may know phone and address information by heart, someone with ASD may temporarily forget details or fail to understand the importance of sharing this information with rescue personnel.

Perhaps more importantly, a First Responder may not recognize that someone has ASD. Many common traits associated with ASD can lead to further misunderstanding. A lack of eye contact, for example, could be interpreted as a sign of guilt. Ecolalia or other unusual speech patterns could be seen as taunting and disrespectful. A police officer might attribute an individual's motor mannerisms to drug or alcohol use.

If your child is younger and you will be at an outdoor event such as an amusement park, consider pinning a laminated ID with your cell phone number onto the back of the child's clothing. For instance "I have autism and sometimes I get separated from my parents...please call 555-0921 to get ahold of my mom."

What if my child won't wear a bracelet? Wouldn't an ID compromise his or her privacy?

Individuals with ASD may be resistant to wearing a medical alert bracelet for any number of reasons – the tag can be irritating or single them out as "different." Some teens object simply on fashion grounds.

Fortunately, there are many creative options available today. Lifetag has recently introduced a medical alert icon specifically for autism. Other vendors market this icon paired with bracelets in fashionable designs and colors, or offer fabric, leather or plastic bands, which may be less irritating to the wearer. For those with tactile sensitivity, a medical alert can even be woven into a shoe lace or attached to a favorite backpack.

Caution should be exercised, however, when deciding what information to display on an ID card and where to carry it. In an emergency situation a First Responder needs to know an individual's name and the contact information for someone responsible for that individual. Just like a drivers license, it is best to carry an ID out of sight in a pocket or wallet. Remember, individuals with ASD are often the victims of crime. **See the Resource page for more information.**

Safety Tip #5

From an early age, teach children with ASD how to recognize police, fire and other rescue personnel and how to behave in the presence of these officials.

Why are these lessons so important?

Without specific information about the role of police and safety personnel, a person with ASD may run away when stopped by an officer, attempt to touch an officer's badge or weapon, or fail to recognize First Responders as a likely source of help when in trouble.



It is important to remember that individuals with ASD do not learn in the same way that typical peers do. Even though he or she may have seen police on television, your child will not necessarily generalize these examples to real life. He or she may not infer that a uniform of a certain style or a car with flashing lights are important markers of a group of people who can help them in an emergency. Or he or she may over extend the idea that police "fight criminals" and fear that if an officer questions them, it indicates that they have broken a law.

Again, there are many well established techniques for teaching individuals with ASD. In general, these approaches favor the use of visual supports – such as photographs – over purely written or oral instruction. More repetition and multiple examples may be necessary before a lesson is generalized, and safety information should be revisited with increasing sophistication as your child grows older.

Above all, remember to be concrete and specific. Do not assume that your child "just knows" something that seems obvious to most of us. Social stories, which provide a detailed and personalized narrative, are particularly helpful in this regard. For example, one illustrated page might read: *"These are three of the police in [your child's name]'s town. Some of the tools that they use in their work are a radio, a night stick, and a gun. They wear these tools on their belt. It is important that [your child's name] never touch these tools."*

Perhaps most important of all, do not hesitate to ask for help from local police and other emergency personnel. They are always willing to take time to talk with children about the work that they do to insure community safety. Moreover, in talking together, your child is teaching too. There is no better way for First Responders to learn about ASD than getting to know someone like your son or daughter.

I have autism.

If I give you this card, I am having a difficult time communicating.

Please do the following:

- take me to a quiet area
- speak with me in a calm voice
- have patience with my responses

contact _____

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Guidelines For Calling 9-1-1

Ask yourself the following:

1. Is the situation beyond your control?
2. Is someone in the household in danger of physical harm?
3. Is there a danger to the general public?
(Example - child has taken the family vehicle and left)
4. Is someone hurt or injured?
5. Is there a potential for the situation to escalate beyond your control?

If you can answer "YES" to any of the questions above, call 9-1-1.

What to expect when you call 9-1-1:

1. The call-taker will not be a police officer.
2. The call-taker will ask you the nature of your emergency.
3. The call-taker will transfer you to your local police department, fire department, or EMT service.

While speaking with the call-taker, remember to:

1. Remain calm.
2. Inform the person of your child's condition (ASD and /or other diagnosis').
3. State only the current facts of the emergency.
4. Inform them of any important information that will aid them in responding appropriately to your home.
(ie "Do not use siren...")
5. Remain on the line and follow the directions of the person to whom you are speaking.
6. If the child has run away, be prepared to give an accurate description of what they were wearing, and the direction of travel.

When the officer(s) arrive:

1. Restate any conditions (ASD, mental illness, seizures, etc...)
2. Calmly explain the situation.
3. Restate any important information the officer should be aware of in approaching your child.
4. Understand that the officer's job is to resolve the problem situation as quickly and safely as possible.
(They may need to physically restrain the disruptive individual if necessary.)

The officers can do any of the following:

1. De-escalate the situation and leave.
2. Call an ambulance if there is a physical injury.
3. Arrest the individual* - If they deem appropriate. (There would then be a further evaluation at the station)

*If arrested, the officers will contact Mental Health on call personnel to involve them in an evaluation.