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## Autism and Safety in the Community

### A person with autism may...

- misinterpret words, gestures, and symbols
- have difficulty relating appropriately with people of authority
- have trouble understanding disorderly or disruptive situations
- not understand safety-related issues



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### Potential Dangers

People with autism who lack fear of danger may find themselves in potentially harmful environments.

For example, a person may not understand that an oncoming vehicle can injure or that fire can burn. The person may be attracted to movement, bright lights, or heat. These factors or commotion may cause a person to scream, run away or act unpredictably.

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### Understanding Safety Issues

A person with autism may...

- be unaware or unresponsive to people and warnings
- be unable to express distress or warn of danger
- have a tendency to wander and may not know where he/she is or that he/she is lost
- not understand the context of the word or hand gesture for safety commands like "STOP!" or "LOOK OUT!"
- be attracted to certain unsafe objects that spin, move quickly, or have repetitive movement
- seem unaware of pain, heat, or cold
- try to hide in places that are insecure or unsafe
- act or behave inappropriately when confused by a situation

## Water Dangers...

Many people with autism are attracted to water

- swimming pools and spas (home, neighbor, public, hotel/resort, etc.)
- rivers, ponds, lakes, beaches, reservoirs
- sewer treatment facilities

- Pool operators need to ensure sufficient number of lifeguards for the size of the pool and types of programs
- Event organizers need to assess abilities and challenges of all participants in and around areas with water
- Pool areas must be equipped with protective fences (as mandated by law) and locked at all times
- Special attention should be given during social gatherings near water

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## Challenges with First Responders

- Communication
- Individuals may struggle when approached
- Problems with rescue
  - forced entry due to locks
  - barred or nailed windows
  - fences with locked gates
  - “personal safe place” may be in danger
  - risk of running away



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## Runaways

Some people with autism walk away, run away, or try to escape from a closed, locked building. The reasons vary and may be impossible to predict. When a person with autism disappears, caregivers rightly spring into action...

Not everyone knows their neighbors -- and not every neighbor can identify a runaway... Provide neighbors with a photo of a potential runaway, along with a friendly request that they get in touch immediately if they see this person wandering on his own.

## Traffic control devices may be placed on the roadway to heighten driver awareness



Even under a parent or caretaker's protective guard, a person with autism may inadvertently or unexpectedly place himself in a harmful situation or dangerous location.

## Helping a Lost, Missing or Vulnerable Person

Many people with autism carry or wear identification to provide helpful information



- autism alert cards / decals
- medical ID bracelets or necklaces
- voice IDs
- iron-on garment labels
- *...and other methods*

- Do not touch or attempt to restrain the person
- Ask basic information questions  
(e.g. "What's your name?", "Where do you live?", "What help do you need?", "Where are you hurt?")
- "Yes/No" questions may not provide the information you need to help  
(Avoid questions such as "Are you lost?", "Do you need help?", "Are you hurt?")
- Call the police department to notify them of a lost, missing, disoriented, or hurt person

[www.childrens-specialized.org/KohlsAutismAwareness](http://www.childrens-specialized.org/KohlsAutismAwareness)

For more information about this program contact: [KohlsAutismAwareness@childrens-specialized.org](mailto:KohlsAutismAwareness@childrens-specialized.org)



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