

# Autism Family SAFETY Handbook

**RWJBarnabas**  
HEALTH

Children's  
Specialized  
Hospital















Developed by the experts at





# Be Safe.

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## About this Handbook

Safety is a major concern among people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) because of the complex communication, social, sensory, and behavioral challenges related to this disorder.

Safety is an important part of everyone's lives. But many people with ASD do not recognize or understand safety issues at home, in school, at work, and in the community. As a result, they may be at increased risk for injury or death.

Individuals with ASD, families, school staff, safety personnel, and community members benefit from increased awareness and strategies to help prevent and respond to serious safety matters. This safety handbook is designed to build awareness and provide tips for many safety matters involving people with ASD. Remember that every person is different. Some information may be appropriate and some may be unrelated to your situation. It is important to be aware of activities that may violate or injure people, damage property or belongings, and involve preparing and responding to harmful situations and emergencies. Be sure to seek additional help from healthcare providers, safety personnel, and educational professionals who can help to prevent or reduce dangers.





# Common Safety Issues

It is important for family members and caregivers to understand common issues that affect the safety of people with ASD.

- Many people with ASD do not understand danger. They may not recognize risks within the home or community. Safety gestures, expectations, or commands like “STOP” or “LOOK OUT” may not be understood. People with ASD may be unresponsive to community officials and emergency warnings.
- A person with ASD may not have the communication and social skills necessary to seek or ask for help when needed.
- Many individuals with ASD have a tendency to escape and wander and may not recognize when they are in danger.
- Many people with ASD are attracted to water and may not possess water safety or swimming skills.
- A person with ASD may engage in aggressive and/or self-injurious behaviors. He or she may be attracted to objects that are dangerous.
- It may be difficult for a person with ASD to understand the intentions of others.
- A person with ASD may not recognize bullying, harassment, or abuse.
- It may be challenging for a person with ASD to handle disorderly or disruptive situations. He or she may act out or behave inappropriately when confused by a situation.
- Traveling may be difficult for people with ASD. Sitting safely in a vehicle, keeping safety belts fastened, and handling route changes are some common difficulties.
- Emergencies that may result from weather or disasters are tough for everyone. There are increased challenges related to preparation and response for those with ASD.
- It may take longer for a person with ASD to learn different skills and once learned, he or she may not be able to generalize them to different places or situations.





# Medical & Mental Health Concerns

Individuals with ASD may have additional medical and mental health conditions that increase safety risks. Work with a healthcare and/or mental health professional to assist with these and other related issues.

- Anxiety is commonly diagnosed among people with ASD and can occur for many reasons. People with ASD may vary in their ability to understand and cope with many emotions and challenges.
- Generally, people diagnosed with ASD often have fixed interests and ritualistic behaviors. Some individuals can experience fears and anxieties related to obsessions and compulsions (OCD).
- Some people diagnosed with ASD have challenges with feeding that may lead to safety concerns. They may not be able to regulate the pace or amount of food they consume. This can lead to choking and/or vomiting. In addition, they may not distinguish between food and non-edible items (pica).
- There is a percentage of people with ASD who have cognitive impairments. These impairments may make it more difficult for a person to understand safety risks and follow directions.
- Balance, coordination, fine motor, and gross motor challenges are common among people with ASD.
- Many people with ASD have difficulties going to sleep (waking up very early and/or staying asleep through the night.) Of significant concern are potential dangers which could occur during the night while family members and caregivers are sleeping.
- Seizures are a concern for many individuals with ASD and their families. Some seizures may be recognized and others may not.





## Sensory Issues

For many people with ASD, the nervous system responds more intensely to sensory stimulation. These sensations can be extreme, overwhelming, and unpredictable.

Some with ASD are hyper-sensitive to temperature, pain, sound, light, texture, and people around them. Seemingly insignificant stimuli might cause discomfort or pain. Because these sensations can be intense, individuals may attempt to avoid the stimulation, resist, act-out, or attempt to escape. There are people with ASD whose clothes are so bothersome that they feel the need to remove them. Because crowded, noisy areas can be overwhelming and frightening, they may run away – potentially to an unsafe or unknown location.

Others with ASD may be hypo-sensitive to sensory input. They may be able to tolerate significant pain and other sensations before their nervous system responds. These individuals may seek ways to engage their senses and may seem unaware of pain and extreme temperatures. Known as “sensory seekers,” these individuals may not be able to gauge rough touch from gentle touch. Some may engage in self-injurious and/or aggressive behaviors in response.

The intensity of these challenges can vary with each person, each situation, or each day. Individuals may find unique ways to help and calm themselves. Occupational therapists and other healthcare providers can help a person regulate these sensations and reduce potential safety risks.





# Challenging Behaviors



Sometimes people with ASD have behaviors that are challenging and difficult to manage. The person may be unaware or unable to control these behaviors. There are some approaches that can be helpful to address these behaviors and to support those involved in these difficult experiences.

- Some things that may aggravate behaviors include unexpected changes, transitions, unfamiliar surroundings, confusion, too many demands, and insufficient time to respond or complete an activity. Look at triggers that may be causing these behaviors. Try to adapt the environment or interactions accordingly.
- People with ASD may not understand the consequences of their actions. It is important to explain the cause and effect of these actions in an understandable way.
- Prescription or over-the-counter medications can affect mood and behavior. Speak with your healthcare provider about adjusting the medication if behavior becomes unmanageable.
- Pay attention to behaviors that may cause injury or damage. It may be necessary to place safety devices on hot faucets, gas knobs, or toilet handles. Furniture, shelving, and other household items may need to be secured, bolted, or removed for those who climb on or damage property.
- Always keep safety in mind. When possible, ignore these behaviors. When the person behaves appropriately and safely, provide immediate and consistent positive reinforcement. With time, individuals can learn alternate, appropriate behaviors.
- When these difficult behaviors happen often, affect daily functioning, or become overwhelming for caregivers, it is important to seek help from behavioral or other healthcare professionals.







## Home Safety

People with ASD may not recognize or understand things that are dangerous in the home. Common, everyday items in your own home could be dangerous for a person with ASD. There are modifications that can be made to protect all family members and reduce the risk of injuries.

- Use locks, monitors, motion sensors, and other security devices to secure doors, windows, and cabinets. There are inexpensive magnetic locks that alarm when a cabinet or door is opened. Doors can be safeguarded with deadbolt locks.
- Items such as cat litter, mouthwash, aftershave, detergents, pesticides, and other chemicals may need to be secured and kept out of reach. Label and protect hazardous and poisonous items with consistent and recognizable warning symbols. These visual aids can serve as safety reminders throughout the house.
- Secure electrical devices, heaters, and other fire dangers. Safety devices may need to be implemented to prevent repetitive behaviors with things such as gas and electrical switches and knobs.
- A person with ASD may not be able to determine or regulate the temperature of water. He or she may have reduced sensations or have communication challenges which increase the risk of injury. Thermostats and control valves can help to reduce the chances of scalding. Parental supervision around water is necessary at all times.
- Be sure to protect all areas with water in and around the home to prevent drowning. There are locks, monitors, and other devices that can secure these areas. Discuss potential water dangers with your neighbors and relatives who have pools so that they are aware of your safety concerns. Work with community recreation providers to coordinate swimming lessons and water-safety skills.
- Identify the agency that dispatches local 911 calls for your home. Schedule a meeting to speak with a person and ask that a “911 identifier” be associated with your home telephone number. Provide critical information such as additional locks or window bars in your home, where the person may run or hide, triggers for challenging behaviors, and alternate forms of communication used by the person. Emergency decals on your home windows may also help in an emergency.
- Safety skills learned in your home may not be carried over to other locations. Discuss the person’s safety challenges with your family, friends, and neighbors.
- Seek help from a reputable home safety representative and/or behaviorist to assist with unique and challenging safety concerns.





# Poison Control

Accidental poisonings can occur with any child. However, people with ASD may accidentally poison themselves without knowing that what they are swallowing could cause harm. A person with ASD may do this as a form of exploration, a need for sensory input, or for various behavioral reasons.



- Poisoning can happen anywhere and anytime. Program the number for the Poison Control Center (1-800-222-1222) into all home and cell phones.
- Be on alert of items that look alike. Medicine can look like candy; floor cleaner can look like apple juice; beer cans can look like juice cans; petroleum jelly can look like baby food; cleaning powder can look like a bag of potato chips. Label and/or secure items that could be dangerous if swallowed.
- Always keep cleaning products, medicines, pesticides, and other potentially hazardous substances secured and in their original containers. Check your garage, basement, and other places in your home for potential poisons and make sure they are secured.
- Dispose of all medication that is expired or no longer needed. Many cities and counties offer drug take-back programs. Another method of safe disposal is to mix unwanted medicines in cat litter, dirt, or used coffee grinds. Seal the mixture in a plastic bag and throw away in a closed trash container outside the house. Avoid crushing the capsules or tablets in this process.
- Some people with ASD may eat items that are not meant for human consumption. Pica is an eating disorder that can cause health problems such as lead poisoning or obstruction of the bowel. Some items swallowed may include paint, dirt, chalk, clay, glue, cosmetics, plants, detergents, soap, paper, ink, coffee grinds, cat litter, feces, buttons, and small batteries. Caregivers should be trained in first aid and CPR, and be prepared to respond in case of choking.
- If you believe there is a life threatening emergency related to poisoning or pica, call 911 immediately.





## Fire Safety

People with ASD may not recognize fire dangers or comprehend the damage a fire can cause. They may not understand fire drills and alarms. It is important to prepare for and prevent fire dangers, and to teach fire safety skills.

- When stressed, a person with ASD may go to a “safe place” where he or she feels comfortable, even if that place is unsafe. Communicate this location with first responders before an emergency so they are prepared to look there first.
- Place a decal on windows of your home and car to alert emergency responders that there is a person with ASD at that location.
- Be cautious of “stimming” behaviors that involve electrical switches, lighters, gas pilots, and other fire hazards. Safety devices may need to be implemented. Keep matches, lighters, and other flammable items out of sight and reach. Behavioral intervention may be needed to stop these behaviors.
- Seek professional help for behaviors or interests that are focused on fire or lighting fires. A person with ASD may not realize the potential and serious dangers of firesetting.
- Prepare a home escape plan and practice often. Don't assume what is taught at school will be carried over at home, as people with ASD may not be able to apply these skills in different locations.
- Visual tools such as picture cards, social stories, and video modeling can help a person learn fire safety skills in your home. Role playing can also help people practice ways to act safely. In school, ask the child’s educational team to include some safety goals as part of his or her Individualized Education Plan (IEP). These skills should be practiced at home with different members of the family to increase understanding and to reinforce the skills in multiple environments.
- For some with ASD, alarms and sirens may trigger unpredictable and potentially dangerous behaviors. Talk to a local firefighter about alternate types of smoke detectors that can be used in your home.
- Be sure to check your smoke detectors and fire extinguishers regularly.





## Water Safety

Many people with ASD are attracted to water and may not know how to swim. They may not understand the danger of drowning. It is important to teach water safety skills and secure water dangers in and around the home.



- Begin teaching water safety and swim lessons at a young age. It is never too early or too late to start. Work with community recreation and other service providers to participate in swim safety and adaptive swim lessons. Water survival techniques are critical lessons for people with ASD.
- Monitor and drain bathtubs, sinks, buckets, and other containers when not in use. You may need to place safety devices or alarms on hot tubs, toilet seats, and other water sources in and around your home.
- If you have a pool, secure it appropriately with fences, locks, and/or alarms. Speak with neighbors and your local municipal representatives to ensure areas with water are protected.
- Find the appropriate life jacket to meet the person's age, size, and needs. Teach the person to use it whenever he or she is near any body of water.
- Discuss potential water dangers with your neighbors and relatives who have pools so they are aware of your safety concerns. Always be within arm's reach of the person whenever he or she is in or around any open water.
- Learning CPR can make a big difference for a person who has stopped breathing after being submerged in water. Contact the American Heart Association or the Red Cross to identify CPR classes in your area.





## In the Neighborhood



Many people with ASD unable to recognize or understand danger. This can place them in potentially harmful situations in the community. They may have sensory issues where bright lights, vivid colors, and various noises or smells cause them to become upset, run away, or act unpredictably. They may also have a tendency to wander and not know they are lost or how to get help.

- Safety skills learned in your home may not transfer to other locations. Discuss safety challenges with family, friends, and neighbors so they understand information related to the safety concerns and needs of your family.
- Playgrounds and parks can be difficult as many children with ASD may run away suddenly. Try to visit playgrounds that are enclosed with fences to help prevent wandering and escape. While at the playground, supervise children with ASD closely.
- Parking lots can be dangerous for some people with ASD. Speak with your healthcare provider and local motor vehicle agency if your family member has safety issues involving escaping, running, and unawareness of the danger of moving vehicles. You may be eligible to receive a handicapped parking permit.
- Help the person with ASD get to know his or her local police officers, firefighters, and rescue workers. This will help first responders understand some of his or her challenges. Help the person to recognize their uniforms, interact with first responders and know that they are “safe people” to go to for help and to listen to during an emergency.
- Use different types of community-based lessons to teach people with ASD how to protect themselves from being coerced or manipulated by strangers. Videos can help depict different situations.
- Use social stories and other aids to teach pedestrian rules and street safety tips. Include visual aids to help teach street signs and signals.
- Traffic Control Devices are street signs that serve to inform and guide drivers, pedestrians, and bicyclists. These signs can be used to alert those on the road about a person with ASD who has safety concerns in the area.





## Escaping and Wandering

Many people with ASD have a tendency to run or escape suddenly from an area, unlock or open a protected location, or wander away from a caregiver. They may want to get to or escape from a person, place, sensation, situation, demand, or activity. The person may simply enjoy running or exploring. These individuals may find themselves in an unsafe place or situation, involved in unfamiliar social situations, or lost without the ability to seek or ask for help.

- Maintain a current identification (I.D.) kit containing the person’s name, nickname, date of birth, gender, hair color, eye color, weight, height, glasses, braces, and identifying marks such as birthmarks, moles, and scars. The kit should also include fingerprints, a current photo and a few pieces of hair. Seal the I.D. kit in a zippered plastic bag and store in a safe place that you will remember and can access easily.
- Signs and other visual aids may alert a person with ASD of areas where they shouldn’t go. Signs that say “STOP” can serve as a reminder not to leave the area. Bright colored duct tape can also be used to designate barriers.
- Deadbolt locks on doors, window bars and locks, alarms, and motion detectors can help to prevent or delay a person with ASD from escaping from the home. Some people with ASD may be skilled at removing these barriers. Professional assistance may be needed to assist securing the home and yard. Remember to communicate with childcare providers and guests and to secure all locks and devices after visitors arrive and packages are delivered.
- Family gatherings and other events may raise the chance of escape (elopement) and wandering as there may be more opportunities for the person with ASD to be overlooked and people may get distracted more easily. It is important to designate someone to be responsible for the person’s safety at these types of get-togethers.
- It is important for people with ASD to carry a form of identification with them at all times.
- Consider using a personal tracking device for those who have a tendency to wander.





# Personal Tracking Devices

Many regions throughout the country have electronic tracking systems available which help locate people who wander. There are several types of personal tracking technology. It is important to research which systems are available and will function best for the person in need.



- Some technologies use satellite signal, some use cellular towers, and others use radio frequencies. Depending on the device, the person wears a bracelet, anklet, or necklace which transmits a signal. Each system has a different geographical range.
- Some devices send the signal to the home and others signal Search & Rescue teams.
- With certain systems, someone notifies an emergency team after a person goes missing. At that time, the Search & Rescue team will use the tracking signal to identify the location of the person. These devices can significantly improve the efficiency and effectiveness of search and rescue operations.
- Some tracking devices can be purchased and others can be rented with monthly fees.
- Always take precautions to avoid elopement and wandering. This technology is reliable, but not guaranteed.
- When using personal tracking technology, it is important to ensure the device is water resistant and can't be removed by the person.
- It is important to check the batteries regularly.





## Identification Options

Difficulties with communication and social skills make it important for people with ASD to carry some form of identification. In emergency situations and for those who wander far from home, it is critical that the person has identification and contact information.



- Ensure the person with ASD has some form of identification that lists emergency contact information. There are many options available based on sensitivities, circumstances, challenges, and method of fastening. Some options include:
  - ✓ cellular phones and tablets
  - ✓ clothing
  - ✓ identification cards
  - ✓ iron-on labels
  - ✓ key chains
  - ✓ medical alert jewelry
  - ✓ shoe laces and other footwear accessories
  - ✓ stickers or decals
  - ✓ tags for backpacks, bags, and wallets
  - ✓ temporary tattoos
  - ✓ USB drives
  - ✓ voice IDs and other electronic devices
  
- Try to keep identification in visible, easily accessible areas. Because a person's reaching into clothing can be misinterpreted, you can fasten the I.D. card to a retractable keychain and attach it to the outside of clothing so that it remains visible to all.
  
- Identify personal items with labels so they can be returned if misplaced.







## Personal Transportation

The National Highway Traffic Safety Association (NHTSA) advises caregivers seek advice from medical professionals in the selection of vehicle safety restraints for individuals with special needs. People with ASD may require adaptive car seats or safety restraints for their protection and the safety of others.

- Seek assistance from school staff, therapists, or transportation safety specialists for issues such as
  - ✓ sensitivity or aversion to safety straps and buckles
  - ✓ behavioral issues during transport
  - ✓ unbuckling and removing safety belts
  - ✓ unlocking doors
  - ✓ distracting or harming the driver
  - ✓ injuring others in the vehicle
  - ✓ exiting the vehicle at unsafe times
  - ✓ damaging the vehicle
  - ✓ other unsafe practices
- People with autism may need safety restraints such as vests that buckle into the car and cannot be removed. Contact a local Child Passenger Safety Technician (CPST) for assistance. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration maintains a directory of many inspection stations. More information is available at <http://cert.safekids.org>.
- There are also hospitals and organizations that conduct car seat safety programs for people with special needs.
- Window decals can be helpful to alert first responders of any challenges related to passengers with ASD in the vehicle. A copy of the person's emergency form can be placed in a seat pocket, glove compartment, or other location in the vehicle. An emergency form provides information to first responders when others in the vehicle are injured and cannot communicate on behalf of the person with ASD.
- All children should ride in the back seat of the vehicle with an appropriate restraint on every trip and in every vehicle.





# School Transportation



There are a variety of communication, behavioral, and social concerns that may be a challenge for a person with ASD while traveling in a school vehicle. There are many situations that can happen en route. Some students with ASD are entitled to supports as a related service under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA.)

- The following are some considerations that can be reviewed to support appropriate and safe transportation of students as part of the IEP.
  - ✓ safety seats, harnesses, vests, etc.
  - ✓ personal attendants/aids
  - ✓ behavioral interventions
  - ✓ bus schedule adaptations
  - ✓ bus service to/from child care and after-school programming
  - ✓ communication methods, social issues
  - ✓ transportation supports for field trips
  - ✓ length of bus ride
  - ✓ medical concerns (seizures, allergies, asthma, etc.)
  - ✓ seat assignments
  - ✓ vehicle type and environment
  - ✓ school/district schedule discrepancies
  - ✓ physical challenges
  - ✓ evacuation strategies
  
- Use social stories and visual schedules to show the standard bus route and schedule. Describe procedures and rules for behavior. Include the possibility for road closures and changes in bus staff.
  
- Provide appropriate activities that can occupy time for the person during the trip.





# Public Transportation

There are many adolescents and adults with ASD capable of using public transportation. These individuals may need education and guided assistance to learn the necessary skills needed to safely and independently travel.



- Ensure that the person carries an identification card as well as a list of the locations he or she is traveling to and from, in case he or she gets lost.
- Use social stories and other visual aids to teach transportation safety such as staying in the vehicle, wearing safety belts, respecting passengers and drivers, etc.
- Practice with the person to familiarize him or her with riding on a bus, train, or taxi. Initially it may involve being safe at the bus stop or taxi stand and getting used to crowds, noises, and smells. Begin by traveling to preferred places. Then, expand to different routes, modes of transportation, and various independence skills. Help the person to recognize and identify landmarks, learn various routes, safely cross streets, and other important safety skills.
- Research types of public transportation that offer assisted transportation services in your community. It may be helpful to use transportation providers that specialize in working with travelers having special needs.
- When traveling by airplane, contact the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) at 1-855-787-2227 to ask for a passenger support specialist to assist with the travel. Passenger Support Specialists help to resolve traveler-related screening concerns. They receive specialized disability training which includes how to communicate with passengers by listening and explaining, disability etiquette and disability civil rights.





## Safety While Traveling



Vacations and traveling can be difficult for people with ASD and their families. Traveling to places which are unfamiliar or out of the ordinary routine can be difficult for people with ASD. Keep in mind the length of the trip, seasonal weather, crowds, and available activities to reduce many challenges and provide for more availability of family members or staff to help at the location.

- Before the trip, review pictures, videos, and maps together. This can help to make the destination familiar and provide alternatives if something goes wrong. This will also help to identify places the person may be attracted to, entrances and exits, and areas that may need to be avoided for safety reasons.
- Role play different situations to practice things like waiting in lines, going through security areas, remaining in the vehicle, and wearing safety belts. Videos, social stories, and other visual aids help review appropriate behaviors, reduce anxiety, and prepare for the trip.
- Video games and other electronic devices with headphones can help distract from increased sensory challenges and help ease boredom during lengthy trips.
- It is important to have the person carry identification when traveling. The identification should also include the person's method of communication and any challenges that are important to know in case he or she gets separated from parents or caregivers.
- People with ASD are often attracted to water and may not know how to swim. Be aware of areas near water.





# Bullying

People with autism spectrum disorder are potentially “perfect victims” for bullying because their social and communicative deficits often make them less likely to realize when they are being victimized. Their desire for friendship and reduced social judgment may result in inappropriate behavior. Youth with disabilities are particularly vulnerable and represent a high-risk group for becoming both potential victims and/or perpetrators of bullying.

- Take the time to prepare for social situations before they occur. Use pictures, television shows, and videos to illustrate various scenarios, expressions, and social cues. Watch the shows together to discuss the character’s actions, choices, and reactions of others.
- Role play different situations that involve bullying, providing tools and tips on how to respond and what to do.
- Social stories are excellent ways to familiarize a person with ASD with rules and expectations.
- During social interactions you can cue and reinforce appropriate social skills. Afterward, discuss the interactions with the person and develop strategies to improve challenges that may have occurred. You can take videos of the communication and provide feedback and reinforcement.
- Encourage the person with ASD to draw pictures, write, or talk about worrisome situations. Review and keep these recollections of the incidents to help problem solve.
- Ask that anti-bullying techniques and precautions be included within the child’s IEP. Include a method of communication with the school, such as a school communication log or email correspondence, in order to monitor the progress on a routine basis.
- It is important to maintain calm, honest, and respectful conversations with the child’s teachers and school administrators about bullying issues in the school. Ask for and offer recommendations and tools to work through the issues together.
- Take the time to monitor internet history and social media. People with ASD can be vulnerable to cyber-bullying and victimization.
- Bullying can occur in the workplace by managers and co-workers. Company employees may be educated about the characteristics of autism, acceptance, and ways to interact.





# Abuse and Neglect

Children and adults with ASD can be especially vulnerable to abuse and neglect at home, school, and within the community. People with ASD may have difficulty interpreting thoughts, feelings, or intentions of others and their behaviors may be challenging and stressful for caregivers.

- Abuse can occur at home, at school, on a bus, at camp, in a group home, and throughout the community. Everyone must work together to detect and prevent all forms of abuse and neglect. Some red flags for abuse include:
  - ✓ increased anxiety, fears, sadness, irritability
  - ✓ changes in behaviors
  - ✓ cuts and bruises
  - ✓ re-enactment of the abuse
  - ✓ increased self-injury
  - ✓ increased sleep problems
- If you suspect abuse or neglect, it is important to report it immediately. If someone has been injured as a result of abuse, call 911 or contact your local child protection agency. The National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 (1-800-799-SAFE) is available to discuss issues related to physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological abuse or violence.
- Caregivers and family members can become overwhelmed by understanding the diagnosis, medication management, complex scheduling, family issues, behavior management, financial challenges, social concerns, educational difficulties, lack of respite and support, and employment issues. Counseling and respite is essential to manage these challenges and to reduce stress.
- There are often many people involved in the care and treatment of a person with ASD. The individual may not understand or not recognize the appropriate limits of those involved. It is important to identify trusted adults who he or she can go to for help.
- When a child with ASD isn't responding to typical discipline methods, seek assistance for alternate methods to correct behaviors.
- People with ASD can be unaware of the dangers when interacting with someone online. Teach internet safety skills and monitor online conversations when necessary.
- Teach the person with ASD to let people know if he or she feels they are unsafe or being hurt by someone. If in public, teach the person to go into a safe, open place and/or find a police officer or security guard. A person with ASD may not have the ability or skills to recognize or communicate abuse or may not be believed. Work with therapists and healthcare professionals to provide alternative methods of communication.
- Sex education classes offered by schools can be adapted using more concrete approaches, multimedia tools, repetition and role play.





## Law Enforcement

People with ASD are often taught to be compliant to instructions, but they may have difficulty distinguishing when the person who is giving the instruction is trying to hurt them or is being manipulative. In addition, people with ASD may not differentiate behaviors that should be private from those that are acceptable or expected in public places



- Ensure the person with ASD carries an identification card with contact information and information related to his or her diagnosis.
- From a young age, teach the person with ASD to inform a police officer that he or she has autism when he or she feels scared or in danger.
- Behavior that may be acceptable as a child may not be as an adolescent or adult. It is important to teach and reinforce appropriate behaviors early and practice on an ongoing basis.
- Social skill challenges and uncommon behaviors among people with ASD can seem odd or threatening to others. Social stories, video modeling, role playing, and social skills training can help to teach appropriate behavior in various situations. Behavioral intervention may be needed to reduce problematic behaviors.
- Law enforcement officials may not have adequate knowledge of the characteristics of autism spectrum disorder. Lack of eye contact, inappropriate social responses, resisting physical contact, unpredictable actions, and lack of response are some behaviors that can be misinterpreted by police officers. It is important to advocate for law enforcement, child protective services, and judicial personnel to receive training to assist in prevention, assessment, interaction, and response techniques involving individuals with ASD.
- In the criminal justice system, a person with ASD can be a victim, witness, or offender. Education and communication is important at all levels of law enforcement.
- Adolescents and adults with ASD should use advocates who understand the disorder and related behaviors in order to help them navigate the criminal justice system.





## Using 9 1 1



Some individuals with ASD may understand emergency situations, and others may not. Analyze and use best judgment about teaching the use of 911.

- Teach the person with ASD ways to identify real emergencies such as an injury, fire, car accident and choking. Use television shows, videos, and pictures to help provide examples of emergencies and non-emergencies.
- When teaching the person to call 911, help him or her with skills needed to provide accurate information and to answer questions during the call. In addition, the person needs to learn to follow directions given by an emergency dispatcher as well as first responders.
- If calling 911, the person with ASD may not be able to understand and listen to instructions given by an emergency dispatcher. Typically, first responders will be dispatched to the location to assess the situation.
- People with ASD can use the Kohl's Autism Awareness 911 Means EMERGENCY guide to help them understand emergencies and the use of 911. This resource is available at [www.childrens-specialized.org/911meansEmergency](http://www.childrens-specialized.org/911meansEmergency).







# Emergency Preparedness



Families and caregivers should always make preparations for unexpected emergencies. The needs of each person with ASD are unique. It is important for individuals and families to prepare for these needs and communicate with local public safety officials in order to protect and reduce the risk of injury for all members of the community.

- Many states, counties, and towns have established special needs registries which inform emergency responders about the location and needs of people with disabilities in the area. These registries provide vital information for emergency service agencies so they can prepare necessary resources and respond appropriately. Register your child by providing details about his or her particular challenges and needs before a disaster happens.
- Speak with representatives at your child's school about specific concerns related to lockdowns, evacuations, and relocations at school. Work with the school to ensure that your child understands what to do and has the appropriate supports needed.
- Contact your local first aid squad to arrange a tour of their facility and ambulance. It may be helpful for a person with ASD to be familiar with the vehicle, responders, mechanisms, and procedures.
- Many people with ASD are affected by disorder, noises, smells, commotion, and other sensory input. Alarms, sirens, smoke, or crowds may cause the person to respond unexpectedly or undesirably. Work with emergency responders to find a safe location with minimal sensory challenges. Communicate ways that can help to calm the person when they are agitated.
- Contact local safety officials and other municipal representatives to advocate for increased education about autism for first responders in your community.
- It will be extremely helpful to prepare an emergency kit and have it easily accessible. If possible, have the person with ASD assist with putting the kit together so he or she is familiar and comfortable with its contents. After packing medications and other necessities, include items which will support his or her sensory needs, entertainment preferences, and non-perishable foods that are specific to his or her partiality, sensitivities, or allergies.
- Fully charge electronic devices before a storm occurs. Make plans to recharge them.





## Protecting Caregivers



Safety is important for everyone. Caregivers may need to address their own safety concerns and prepare themselves if a situation may become dangerous.

- It is important to address aggressive behavior of a person with ASD, as it poses a safety risk for family members, caregivers, and others in the person's life. Aggressive behavior also places the person with ASD at risk due to others' potential response to that behavior. Caregivers should seek professional assistance in learning behavior management techniques to help prevent dangerous behaviors.
- Discuss possible interventions with the person's healthcare provider, including whether medication or alternative approaches may be helpful.
- Obtain contact information for local crisis responders who can assist if needed. Crisis intervention and family support programs may assist caregivers to problem solve and prevent dangerous situations.
- Child and adult protective services agencies may be able to provide support services in the home, assist with respite care, and otherwise help ensure a safe environment. Agencies focused on those with developmental disabilities and/or caregivers may also be able to assist with respite care. To find local agencies, visit [www.211.org](http://www.211.org) or call 211.
- If aggressive behaviors becomes severe, avoid trying to reason or negotiate. Keep a safe distance and try to remain calm without taking the behavior personally. Clear the area of others to ensure their safety. Ask someone to call 911 or do so as soon as you are able. Try to remove objects that could be hazardous.
- Restraining the person may further aggravate this type of behavior. If you are being hurt, try to escape the area. If possible use a pillow or other object to protect yourself.
- Many families may be afraid to seek help as they may fear what might happen to the person as a result. Safety is always the first priority and dangerous situations are unlikely to improve without seeking help.





## Important Tips to Remember



Here are some practical safety tips to keep in mind:

- If your child has communication challenges, teach him or her ways to answer simple questions like “What is your name?” or “Where do you live?” You can also teach your child to present an identification card when asked these questions. Because a person’s reaching into clothing can be misinterpreted, you can fasten the I.D. card to a retractable keychain and attach it to the outside of clothing so it remains visible to all.

A medical identification bracelet with the person’s name and contact information can also be worn.

- Using visual tools such as picture cards, social stories, visual schedules and video modeling can help teach and practice safety skills. Role playing can also help people to practice ways to act safely and interact with people in various situations. Ask your child’s educational team to include some safety goals as part of your child’s IEP. These skills should be practiced at school, at home, and in the community to increase understanding and to reinforce the skills in multiple environments.
- Create a safety plan
  - ✓ Complete and make copies of an emergency information form
  - ✓ Complete a child identification kit (fingerprints, photos, etc.) Repeat this process each year to keep it current.
  - ✓ Include safety goals as part of the IEP and practice safety skills in multiple environments
  - ✓ Establish methods to prevent and respond to elopement and wandering
  - ✓ Identify and safeguard potential dangers in your home and neighborhood
  - ✓ Create a form of identification and method of use
  - ✓ Communicate safety challenges and needs with family members, neighbors, and first responders
  - ✓ Contact your local dispatch center to establish a “911 identifier”
- For those prone to seizures, consider medical identification which specifies epilepsy, and communicate with those who work with the person for increased awareness and knowledge of appropriate and safe response.
- Discuss important safety issues with family members, caregivers, and friends.





# Safety Skills

Safety issues are challenging and unique to each person with ASD. Families and caregivers must continue to assess dangers at home, in school, online, and in their communities.

Because many people with ASD have difficulty generalizing skills, teach safety lessons often, in different ways and places, and with various people. The earlier you start, the better.

Request that safety goals be incorporated within the child's IEP. Some practical safety lessons include:

- ✓ responding to his or her name
- ✓ asking for permission to leave area
- ✓ asking to go to preferred locations/places
- ✓ holding hands
- ✓ crossing streets
- ✓ walking and/or staying with an adult
- ✓ recognizing dangerous items, situations, and emergencies
- ✓ waiting appropriately
- ✓ wearing medical identification or a tracking device
- ✓ exchanging an identification card
- ✓ answering a cell phone and making an emergency call
- ✓ safe touching lessons
- ✓ following directions
- ✓ answering questions
- ✓ declining inappropriate commands
- ✓ proper use of a fire alarm
- ✓ responding to fire drills
- ✓ speaking to a first responder
- ✓ working with a trained professional to increase skills and appropriate behaviors and decrease behaviors that are unsafe





# Advocating for Safety

It is important for people with ASD to be familiar with others in the community. Families and caregivers should share information about their safety needs with members of the community. Help others understand the significance of autism education to protect as well as to prevent and respond to emergencies effectively.



- Coordinate meetings between the person with ASD and local emergency responders in the community to increase recognition and comfort levels. You can make an appointment to meet with police officers, EMTs, and firefighters to discuss the person’s unique safety matters.
- Family members can attend local community and safety fairs with the person with ASD. Increased interactions with other residents helps to build acceptance and understanding of safety needs.
- Encourage a family member with ASD to participate in local safety workshops and emergency simulation activities in order to increase understanding and skills.
- Help to coordinate education among local first responders about ASD. There are many skilled trainers and resources available.
- Connect with your local media representatives. Send a letter to the editor informing him or her of the common safety issues that are important for the community to know.
- Contact your local school district and extra-curricular program coordinators to educate students about ASD and ways they can help to support the safety of their peers.
- Reach out to your legislators and ask for increased access to safety resources and devices for those with ASD.





# Resources

You can find additional information, tools, and resources to help increase safety of people living with ASD and those around them by visiting:

**Form:** Includes fields for Nickname, Legal Guardian, Primary Emergency Contact (Name, Relationship, Home Telephone, Work, Cell, Address), Date of Birth, Child's Residence, Physical Description (Hair color, Eye color, Race, Identifying marks on body, Weight), Child Identification and/or Tracking Mechanism, Primary Method of Communication, Other Medical Issues (including allergies), Dietary Concerns, Primary Care Physician, Fears, and Interests.

**Post-disaster Information for Families Living with Autism Spectrum Disorder:** Provided by the experts at Children's Specialized Hospital. It discusses the importance of staying safe and provides contact information for medical supplies and transportation needs.

**911 means EMERGENCY:** A guide for people with autism spectrum disorder. It states: "Dial 911 on the telephone ONLY when there is an emergency." and lists various emergency situations such as fire, burglary, injury, and medical emergencies.

**Signs:** A large red 'NO' sign with a hand icon, a red octagonal 'STOP' sign, and a red prohibition sign.





# Be safe.



Through a partnership with Kohl's Cares, Children's Specialized Hospital is improving access to care for children with special healthcare needs.

[RWJBH.org/CSH](http://RWJBH.org/CSH)

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