



Wandering Off (Elopement)

What is wandering off (elopement)?

This is the tendency for an individual to try to leave the safety of a responsible person's care or a safe area, which can result in potential harm or injury. This might include running off from adults at school or in the community, leaving the classroom without permission, or leaving the house when the family is not looking. This behavior is considered common and short-lived in toddlers, but it may persist in children and adults with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). Children with ASDs have challenges with social and communication skills and safety awareness. This makes wandering a potentially dangerous behavior.

How common is wandering off in children with ASDs?

According to a recent survey of parents, nearly half of children with ASDs between the ages of 4 and 10 have tried to elope. This behavior may continue to occur in some older children and even teenagers and adults with ASDs. This is concerning because many individuals with ASDs may not be able to communicate their names, addresses, or phone numbers if they become lost.

What happens to children with ASDs who attempt to wander off?

Of the children with ASDs who tried to wander, nearly half succeeded and were missing long enough to concern their parents. One-third of the parents surveyed called the police. Two out of 3 parents reported their wandering children had "close calls" with traffic injury, and almost one-third reported near-drowning episodes. Older children and adults with ASDs who wander may also have negative encounters with law enforcement officers, particularly if they do not respond to officers in an expected way or if they are unable to communicate at all. Untrained officers may mistake ASDs for intoxication or drug use.

Why do children with ASDs wander off?

Parents of children with ASDs report the following top 5 reasons for wandering:

- Simple enjoyment of running or exploring
- Desire to reach a place he enjoys (such as the park)
- Trying to escape an anxious situation (like demands at school)
- Pursuit of a special interest (as when a child fascinated by trains heads for train tracks)
- Trying to escape uncomfortable sensory stimuli (like loud noise)

What can be done to decrease wandering?

- *Be aware that wandering can occur anywhere and anytime.* Caregivers should be free of distractions when supervising a child with an ASD. Family gatherings or other events may give a false impression of "all eyes on" a child, but visiting relatives create changes of routine, which can increase risk for elopement. Also remember that children with ASDs who are outside playing may need extra supervision to prevent wandering.
- *Secure your home.* This might include installing dead bolts, a home security alarm system, battery-operated alarms on doors and windows, and fencing around your yard.
- *Teach alternative behaviors.* If a child is wandering to obtain something preferred or to escape a situation, teach alternative ways to request and access these situations.
- *Alert your neighbors.* Knowing your neighbors can help reduce the risk associated with elopement. Consider giving your neighbors information about your child that you think might help in preventing wandering.

What else can be done to decrease risk?

- *Create a family wandering emergency plan.* Make sure your family has a plan in case of a wandering emergency. Involve other caregivers such as grandparents or personnel at school in developing the safety plan. The Autism Wandering Awareness Alerts Response and Education (AWAARE) Collaboration has a sample plan that can be downloaded (see Resources).
- *Maintain an emergency form.* Keep up-to-date information cards about your child, including a picture and physical description of your child. These can be distributed to neighbors and safety personnel in the event your child wanders.
- *Consider a tracking device.* These devices are worn on the wrist or ankle and locate the child through radio frequency or with GPS tracking. Check with your local law enforcement agency for more information (also see Resources).
- *Consider an ID bracelet or other ID device.* Medical ID bracelets and devices will include name, telephone number, and other important information. If your child will not wear a bracelet, there are alternative ways (for example, temporary tattoos) (see Resources). When vacationing away from home, it is especially important that your child has some form of identification that can be easily recognized in case of elopement.
- *Teach safety skills.* Work with your intervention team to evaluate your child's safety skills and proactively teach skills to help your child identify herself and stay safe (for example, state name, respond to "stop," wear and show an ID bracelet).

- *Teach your child to swim.* Ask your pediatrician if there are organizations that offer swimming lessons for children with special needs in your area. If you own a pool, completely fence it in and have gates that self-close and self-latch higher than your child's reach.
- *Alert first responders.* Your community may have programs that allow you to provide first responders with key information about your child before an incident occurs. This information might include emergency contact information, a photo, and any other information about your child that might help should she become lost.

Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics HealthyChildren.org:
www.HealthyChildren.org

Autism Society Safe & Sound Initiative: www.autism-society.org/living-with-autism/how-we-can-help/safe-and-sound

Autism Speaks Family Services Autism Safety Project:
www.autismsafetyproject.org

Autism Wandering Awareness Alerts Response and Education (AWAARE) Collaboration: www.awaare.org

Interactive Autism Network (IAN) Elopement and Wandering Questionnaire: www.iancommunity.org/cs/ian_research/elopement_and_wandering_questionnaire

Adapted from AWAARE *Autism & Wandering*, available at <http://awaare.org/docs/wanderingbrochure.pdf>, and IAN Research Report: Elopement and Wandering, reprinted with permission of Kennedy Krieger Institute, Baltimore, Maryland. This information appeared originally at: www.iancommunity.org/cs/ian_research_reports/ian_research_report_elopement.

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