

“RUNNING AWAY IS NOT OK!”

UNDERSTANDING AND REDUCING RISK OF ACCIDENTAL INJURY FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE

Steven J Parker Conference March 2026

Rachel McColl Vuolo, MD FAAP
Internal Medicine-Pediatrics
Fellow, Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics



1

I have no conflicts of interest. I will not be discussing off-label use of medications.

*Special thanks to Autism Resource Specialists for all their work in
ensuring patients' safety!*

2

Laura is a 3 ½ year old autistic child

Her father is concerned about her tendency to run away in public, She refuses to hold his hand in public places

If he calls to her to stop, she covers her ears and runs

He has noticed that she is attracted to water, and neighbor has a pool

"How do I teach her to be safe?"

CASE: LAURA

3



QUESTION:

Is an autistic child with no other medical problems *healthy*?

Yes!

4

PROGNOSIS OF AUTISM

Life expectancy for autistic individuals is 15-30 years shorter than non-autistic folks.

***Autism itself* does not limit longevity.**

5

Multifactorial causes

- ▶ increased accidental injury
- ▶ increased risk of non-accidental injury
- ▶ risk of suicide
- ▶ problematic healthcare access and utilization
- ▶ pain perception/ communication challenges

AUTISM AND PREMATURE MORTALITY

6

RISK OF ACCIDENTAL INJURY IN US

Unintentional injuries are third most common cause of death overall, after heart disease and cancer

Road traffic accidents including pedestrian accidents are the leading cause of death worldwide for ages 5-29

Drowning is third most common cause of accidental death in kids

(cdc.gov)

7

AUTISTIC CHILDREN ARE AT INCREASED RISK OF ACCIDENTAL INJURY

Autistic people are at increased risk of accidental injury and death from injury, especially <15 yo

Most common accidental causes of death for autistic children are drowning, suffocation and asphyxiation

Autistic people, especially with intellectual developmental disorder, are at higher risk of elopement

(Guan and Li, *American Journal of Public Health*, 2017; Anderson et al, *Pediatrics*, 2012; World Health Organization, 2023)

8

WHY ARE AUTISTIC PEOPLE AT HIGHER RISK OF ELOPEMENT

Why are autistic people at higher risk of elopement?

- enjoying running or exploring
- running to preferred destination
- escaping uncomfortable sensory experience
- escaping anxious situation

(Anderson et al, *Pediatrics*, 2012)

9

INCREASED RISK OF TRAFFIC INJURY

Pedestrians with Neurodevelopmental Delays are at increased risk of injury

- lower visual attention and IDD associated with trouble finding safe crossings
- decreased gaze at relevant traffic and eye contact with drivers
- executive function has impact on ability to cross streets safely
- perceptual challenges, e.g. CVI
- impulse control challenges, comorbid ADHD

(Wilmot & Purcell, *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, 2021)

10

INCREASED RISK OF DROWNING

2-160 times the risk of neuro-typical kids

Seizures

Increased risk of wandering toward water compared to neuro-typical kids

Decreased safety awareness

Decreased ability to swim compared to neuro-typical peers

11

Tendency to protect autistic students and family members from the sensory experience of fire drills

Desire to keep autistic kids regulated

Underestimating risk of fire and other emergencies

HOW SCHOOL AND CAREGIVERS' BEHAVIORS INCREASED RISK OF POOR OUTCOME IN FIRE

12



Poor safety awareness

Adaptive delays

Sensory avoidant behavior

Increased risk to family, rescuers

**INCREASED RISK FOR
BAD OUTCOMES IN FIRE**

13

**HOW CAN WE
HELP KEEP
AUTISTIC
CHILDREN SAFE?**

14

Where are nearby bodies of water, traffic

Where does child like to go

Who will help look for her

EMERGENCY PLAN: AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS, AWAARE

15

family wandering emergency plan

Make sure your family has a plan in case of a wandering emergency. Before an emergency happens, sit down together and decide how you will get in contact with each other, where you will go and what you will do in an emergency. Keep a copy of this plan in your emergency supply kit or another safe place where you can access it in the event your child is missing.

critical information

CHILD'S NAME: _____

CHILD'S TRANSITTER TRACKING NUMBER (if applicable): _____

CHILD'S OFFICIAL DIAGNOSIS: _____

CHILD'S IDENTIFYING MARKS, MEDICATIONS & MEDICAL NEEDS: _____

.....

emergency steps:

☒ **ALWAYS CALL 911 IMMEDIATELY IF YOUR LOVED ONE IS MISSING FROM YOUR HOME.**

☒ Clearly state your child's name.

☒ State that they have a cognitive impairment, provide the diagnosis, state they are endangered and have no sense of danger.

☒ Provide your child's radio frequency tracking number (if applicable).

☒ Provide your child's date of birth, height, weight, and any other unique identifiers such as eyeglasses and braces.

☒ Tell them when you noticed that your child was missing and what clothing he or she was wearing.

☒ Request an AMBER Alert be issued (if your child is a minor) or a Silver Alert be issued (if your child is an adult).

☒ Request that your child's name and identifying information be immediately entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) Missing Person File.

☒ Search known areas your child would likely be, or attracted to. If you have an emergency point person assigned to contact neighbors, pick up your other children from school, watch your children, etc., alert them while searching known areas your child would likely be. If you have other small children, never leave them unattended.

.....

TIP: create an emergency point person who can contact neighbors, fax your alert form to local law enforcement, and assist in making arrangements for your other children.

Should your child go missing, make sure this contact has a cell phone, knows what your child is wearing, any identifying features, where your child was last seen, how long your child may have been gone, any medical needs or allergies your child may have, your child's likes and dislikes and main attractions. Ideally, the emergency contact will be a relative or close friend. Provide your emergency contact with a copy of this plan and ask them to keep it in a safe, accessible place.

EMERGENCY CONTACT NAME: _____

EMERGENCY CONTACT NUMBER: _____

16

TIP: List the main places your child may likely go within the neighborhood, as well as the most dangerous areas nearby, such as ponds, lakes, pools, etc. Search these areas first if you have assigned "search angels" ahead of time, make sure they know which location is assigned to them. Draw maps of these locations, or physically show the volunteers the location to which they are assigned before an emergency happens.

LOCATION NAME	LOCATION DESCRIPTION
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

TIP: Before an emergency happens, assign at least five (5) willing "search angels" who will commit to searching for your child in the event of an emergency. Make sure they would be immediately available (are typically home) are willing, and know and understand which search location is assigned to them.

NAME	NUMBER	ADDRESS	ASSIGNED LOCATION

OTHER NUMBERS:
LAW ENFORCEMENT FAX NUMBERS: (in case local law enforcement does not have your child's information on file, have your assigned emergency point person fax it.)

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC): 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)
LOCAL MEDIA CONTACT NUMBERS:

OTHER NOTES: (make any notes you feel may be important in case of a wandering emergency)

Keep this document with you at all times. Keep a copy in a safe, accessible place within the home. Keep this with your child's first responder alert form, documentation of diagnosis, medical papers and any other important information.

17

DECREASE THE RISK OF ELOPEMENT AND INJURY

- ▶ Social stories
- ▶ Routines to stay safe,
- ▶ Repetitive instructions
- ▶ Preparation
- ▶ See our safety guide!

18

PLACARDS minimize the distance to be traveled between the person's parked vehicle and ultimate destination

Appropriate supervision

Practice practice practice safe pedestrian behaviors

Family routines, ABA, IEP

HOW TO DECREASE RISK OF TRAFFIC INJURY

19




Application for Disabled Parking Placard/Plate

Mail to: Medical Affairs, PO Box 55889, Boston, MA 02205-5889 • 857-368-8020 • mass.gov/rmv
Do NOT fax this application

This application is completed for individuals who are severely restricted in mobility/ability to walk due to a neurological, orthopedic, arthritic, or other medically debilitating qualifying condition. I acknowledge the RMV grants disabled parking on the basis of necessity and not as a convenience. Disabled parking misuse carries heavy fines and strict license suspension penalties.

Clinical Diagnosis (Required): _____

Symptoms such as pain and ICD Codes are not considered a clinical diagnosis for Disabled Parking and will result in an application denial.

Duration of placard to be issued (check one): ☐ Temporary ☐ Permanent

If temporary, please estimate number of months of disability: _____

Please check **ALL** that apply:

☐ Unable to walk 200 feet without stopping to rest; list any necessary ambulatory aids: _____

→ Autism spectrum disorder

→ Permanent

↓

High risk of elopement and injury, poor safety awareness

20



How do we keep kids from wandering into pools?

- Fully fenced in pools
- Pool alarms
- Neighborhood awareness

IMPROVE SAFETY NEAR WATER

21

Repetition: "DO NOT TOUCH the water without me"

Social Stories

Emergency plan
[healthychildren.org/](https://www.healthychildren.org/) AWAARE

WATER SAFETY: PREPARATION

22

SUPERVISION

"WATER WATCHER"= responsible adult
Must be a swimmer!
no devices, substances or distractions

EQUIPMENT

Life jackets
Bubbles and floaties do not
increase safety

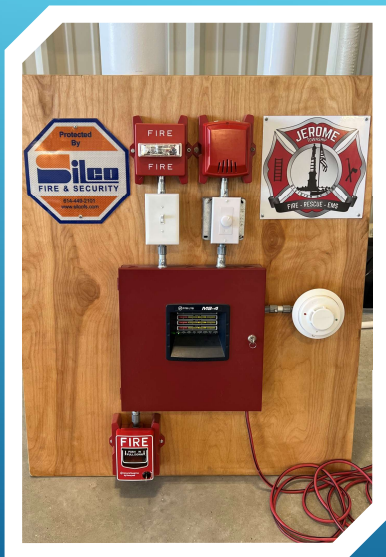
SWIM LESSONS!!

These may take time and repetition to become
acceptable sensory experience

May require more time and repetition to learn to swim

IMPROVE SAFETY IN WATER

23



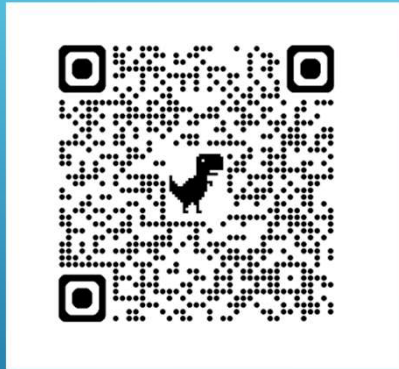
► Brad's Board

► Incremental, repetitive exposure to the fire drill
experience

► Prioritize safety awareness, consider including in IEP

FIRE SAFETY

24



← Life skills lady, September26.org

Fire Safety Resource Collection — PAAutism.org, an ASERT Autism Resource Guide

FIRE SAFETY RESOURCES

25

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children: [Autism & Wandering](#)

[Wandering prevention | Autism Speaks](#)

Autism Wandering Awareness Alert Response and Education: AWAARE

[Pedestrian Skills for Children with Autism: A Guide for Parents - ABA Centers of America: www.abacenters.com/pedestrian-skills-for-children-with-autism/](#)

[Keep Kids Autistic Children Safe from Wandering: Tips from the AAP - HealthyChildren.org: www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/Autism/Pages/Autism-Wandering-Tips-AAP.aspx](#)

[Wandering \(Elopement\) | Child Development | CDC: www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandsafety/wandering.html](#)

[Water safety: HealthyChildren.org: Pool Dangers and Drowning Prevention—When It's Not Swimming Time - HealthyChildren.org](#)

Social Stories:

[Social story. Not okay to runaway.](#)

[When Is Running Okay/ Social story for gestalt language learners/ #socialstory #toddlerlearning](#)

[Eloping social story - Emotional regulation social stories - ABA in School social emotional learning](#)

[Safety - Social Story](#)

[Social stories: I CAN BE SAFE.pdf](#)

SAFETY RESOURCES

26



Ask!

- Safety Awareness
- Elopement
- Swim Skills

Start the conversation...

WHAT CAN YOU DO
DIFFERENTLY ON
MONDAY?

27

[EN] Safety Guide EDITED – Boston Medical Center Autism Resource Specialists
-multilingual, written for caregivers

FWEP.pdf - Emergency Plan (American Academy of Pediatrics, AWAARE)

MVP SAFETY RESOURCES

28

Anderson C, Law JK, Daniels A, Rice C, Mandell DS, Hagopian L, Law PA (2012), Occurrence and Family Impact of Elopement in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Pediatrics* **130**, 870-877.

Autism & Safety Facts - National Autism Association

Center for Disease Control: [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov)

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

Kosuke T & Fumiyuki, N (2008). Teaching Pedestrian Safety Skills to a Child With Autism Who Exhibited Dangerous Behavior in the Street: A Case Study. *Japanese Journal of the special education* **45**, 489-500.

Peden AE & Wilcox-Pidgeon S (2020). Autism Spectrum Disorder and Unintentional Fatal Drowning of Children and Adolescents in Australia: an Epidemiological Analysis. *Archives of Disease Childhood* **105**, 869-874.

Wilmot K, Purcell C (2021), The Nature of the Risk Faced by Pedestrians with Neurodevelopmental Disorders: A Systematic Review. *Accident Analysis and Prevention* **149**, 1-10.

World Health Organization (2023): www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/road-traffic-injuries/

REFERENCES