



LOCATING MISSING CHILDREN

With Autism Spectrum Disorder



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While cases of missing children with special needs require an elevated response by law enforcement and first responders, children with autism are especially at risk.

WHAT IS AUTISM?

- Autism is a unique, neuro-developmental disorder that is characterized by social and cognitive impairments, repetitive behaviors and communication difficulties.
- The chronological age of children with autism is irrelevant to their level of functioning.
- Other forms of autism include: Asperger’s Syndrome, a higher-functioning form of autism; and Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified, a milder form of autism.

HOW ARE THESE CASES UNIQUE?

- More than one-third of children with autism who wander or bolt are unable to communicate their name, address or phone number.
- Children with autism are strongly attracted to water, but have little to no sense of danger.
- Drowning is the leading cause of wandering-related death in children with autism.
- Missing children with autism may: run away from a safe environment, have a diminished sense of fear leading them to engage in high-risk behaviour, and seek small enclosed spaces to hide from search teams.
- Children with autism often wander or bolt to get to something of special interest (e.g., water or a road sign), to get away from overwhelming stimuli (e.g., loud noises or bright lights), or to escape an unwanted activity.

When an eight-year-old boy with severe autism went missing, his father was adamant that if he heard his favourite Ozzy Osbourne song, he would come out of hiding. “I heard them blaring ‘No More Tears’ and it was a very short time after that, we heard the rescuers had found him,” said the boy’s father.

— Story from NBC Los Angeles news, Sept. 15, 2011

“We took a different approach searching for this young boy. It was incredibly valuable to take the time to speak with his family and understand their unique child. What was he drawn to? What was he fearful of? You have to have an open mind and act quickly because every second counts. In collaboration with MissingKids.ca, we were able to engage the public which ultimately lead to the boy being located safely.”

— Investigating RCMP officer, responding to a report of a 16-year-old missing youth with autism

This sheet has been developed collaboratively by the following parties:



SEARCH TIPS AND CHECKLIST ON REVERSE

References

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It is strongly recommended to search and secure water sources first, regardless of whether the child is known to be attracted to water or not. Be sure to check creeks, rivers, ponds, lakes, storm-water retention/detention basins, backyard/public swimming pools and any other relevant bodies of water.

Questions to ask the searching family and caregivers of the missing child:

- Is the child attracted to water? Can they swim?
- Does the child wear a tracking device?
- Has the child been entered into an online registry for individuals with autism?
- Does the child have any other medical conditions?
- Does the child have a history of wandering? If yes, where have they been located before?
- Are there any sensory issues that may impede search efforts? (Fear of dogs, aircraft or other loud noises?)
- Is the child attracted to vehicles such as fire trucks, trains, airplanes or heavy equipment?
- Are they attracted to roadways/highways? Secure hazards to prevent the child from accessing those areas.
- Is the child verbal? How do they communicate best? Consider using sign language, picture boards or written words as alternate forms of communication.
- Does the child have a favourite song, toy or person they may respond to?
- Does the child carry or wear jewelry, an ID card/tag or a medical alert bracelet?
- What methods are used to calm the child?

Additional Considerations:

- Preserve the area the child was last seen.
- When night-search techniques are being used, be sure to secure any hazards that the child may be drawn into during the evening hours.
- Engage supplementary police resources such as search-and-rescue personnel who have experience with similar scenarios.
- Consider expanding the duration of the search due to the unique behaviors of the child that may allow them to survive longer than what is considered normal. Children with autism sometimes exhibit high levels of resiliency and have the ability to get further, faster.
- Evaluate the original search efforts to identify any gaps that could be searched again.
- When a child is located, maintain a calm environment and avoid using restraints. Ensure a parent or family member is immediately brought to the recovered child.
- Contact MissingKids.ca at 1-866-543-8477 (KID-TIPS), Canada's missing children resource centre. Caseworkers can provide support to the searching family as well as assist in managing community engagement and reunification.