



Autism & Wandering/ Elopement

Managing Prevention & Response

A Comprehensive Guide for Caregivers



About This Guide

This guide was created in collaboration with families, clinicians, educators, first responders, and service professionals. It integrates current research, field expertise, lived experience, and collaborative input from caregivers and professionals.

The content reflects documented practices and the most up-to-date knowledge reasonably available at the time of publication. Practices, laws, and standards may change over time.

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*Advancing Autism Safety Through
Science, Expertise & Collaboration*



What is Wandering/Elopement?

Wandering or elopement occurs when an individual leaves the care of a responsible adult, which can lead to harm or injury. Examples include:

- **Bolting** from caregivers or teachers at home, school or in public
- **Leaving** a school playground unnoticed
- **Exiting** the home while the family is sleeping
- **Walking away** from a group outing

While this behavior is common and temporary in toddlers, it can persist or reoccur in individuals with autism. Nearly half of children with autism are at risk of wandering/elopement.

Early Signs Include:

- **Avoiding stimuli** like noisy or bright settings
- **Moving quietly** to another room unnoticed
- **Running abruptly** when upset
- **Seeking quiet places** *inside* the home or other settings



HOW COMMON IS IT?

- Roughly **half of children with autism attempt to wander/elope from safe settings** like home or school, according to a study published in *Pediatrics*.¹
- Nearly **one-third of known cases** happen from school.¹
- **45% of cases occur from non parent supervision.**²

1. Anderson, C., Law, J. K., Daniels, A., Rice, C., Mandell, D. S., Hagopian, L., & Law, P. A. (2012). Occurrence and family impact of elopement in children with autism spectrum disorders. *Pediatrics*, 130(5), 870–877. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-0762>

2. McIlwain, L., et al. (2017). Mortality & Risk in ASD Wandering/Elopement, 2011–2016. <http://bit.ly/4iyeN21>





Understanding the Why's of Wandering/Elopement

Why Does Wandering/Elopement Happen?

Wandering/elopement is often a form of communication linked to a need for regulation or stimulation. Individuals may wander/elope to:

- **Avoid or escape** overwhelming situations, fears, stimuli (noise, commotion, lights) or demands
- **Reach something of interest**, or a quiet area
- **Seek regulation and stimulation**, such as leaving a noisy party to find a favorite place or topic

Anxiety & stress can increase wandering/elopement, especially if coping or emotional regulation skills are limited.

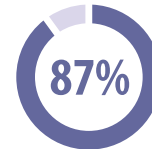
Why is It Dangerous?

People with autism who wander/elope are especially vulnerable to serious risks such as:

- Drowning
- Traffic accidents
- Becoming trapped in hot cars or prolonged exposure to outside elements
- Unsafe encounters or falling from a dangerous height

Drowning and traffic-related injuries are leading causes of death after wandering/elopement, making safety precautions essential.

Quick Facts



In 2025, drowning accounted for 87% of autism-related wandering/elopement fatalities.¹



Children with autism will typically head straight to the nearest body of water, usually within a half mile.¹



According to Columbia University, children with autism are 160 times more likely to die from drowning than the general pediatric population.²

1. McIlwain, L., Hudgins, C., Heaps, J. (2026). 2025 Review: Autism-Related Elopement Fatalities in the United States. (Report in prep)
2. Guan, J., & Li, G. (2017). Injury mortality in individuals with autism. *American Journal of Public Health*, 107(5), 791–793. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2017.303696>





Understanding the Autism/Water Connection

Key Takeaways

- *Missing children with autism are most often found in quiet settings, particularly in or near water.*
- *Water provides quiet comfort (regulation) but also sensory appeal (stimulation.)*
- *Even children who demonstrated fear or discomfort around water were found in water.*
- *Swimming lessons help, but do not eliminate risk.*
- *Hypervigilant supervision & water safety skills are essential.*
- *Always search nearby water first if a child or dependent with autism is missing.*

Why Are Children with Autism Attracted to Water?

Research shows that missing autistic children are often found in quiet and calm places that feel soothing (regulation.) Water can be especially soothing because it quiets overwhelming sensory input, but also provides sensory appeal (stimulation) with predictable sights, sounds, and movement.

Even if a child dislikes baths or swimming, this does not mean they will avoid water outdoors. Many children described as afraid of water have still been found in ponds, lakes, or pools. Always search nearby water first, regardless of type or temperature.



Keep Water Safety in Mind

- Ensure swimming competence and maintain hypervigilant supervision.
- Remember that swimming skills can greatly reduce risk but do not eliminate it.
- Secure pools and spas with self-closing, self-latching gates that your child cannot reach.
- Remove toys or objects that might attract attention when pools aren't in use.
- Inform trusted neighbors about your child's wandering/elopement tendencies and water safety needs.



Teaching Early Water Safety



When Can a Child Learn About Water Safety?

Children can begin water safety instruction as early as 6 months. The American Academy of Pediatrics supports parent-child water safety classes for infants 6 to 12 months, focused on comfort and safety, not independent swimming.¹

At this stage, lessons aim to:

- Help babies feel comfortable in water
- Teach parents safe handling in and around water
- Introduce floating and breath control through play

Some programs, such as Infant Swimming Resource (ISR), teach infants 6+ months self-rescue skills like holding their breath, rolling onto their backs, and floating until help arrives.² These lessons must be taught by certified instructors and tailored to development.

Swim lessons never replace constant supervision or safety barriers like pool fencing.



Key Takeaways

- Infant programs focus on comfort, confidence, and basic floating.
- 6 months is typically the earliest recommended age to start.
- Regardless of skill level, supervision and safeguards are essential.
- National programs include Infant Swimming Resource (ISR), Infant Aquatics, and Swim Float Swim.²

1. American Academy of Pediatrics. (2024, May 29). Swim lessons: When to start & what parents should know. HealthyChildren.org. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Swim-Lessons.aspx>
2. Infant Swimming Resource. (n.d.). Infant Swimming Resource™ <https://www.infantswim.com/>



This guide is a step-by-step framework that begins with simple steps and expands into a complete approach to **preventing wandering and elopement**. It contains four main categories outlined below. Expanded details are included in subsequent pages.

S Supervise, Secure, Safeguard

Supervision: Maintain hypervigilant supervision during time of transition, commotion/stress, and unfamiliar settings.

Security: Install adequate locks and alarms on all exit points; install fencing with a self-latching gate & gate sensor.

Safeguards: Safeguards include early swimming lessons, wearable ID, personal locative device, adaptive equipment, visual prompts, and teaching coping and safety skills.



A Address Triggers & Anticipate Vulnerable Times

Address Triggers: Identify sensory, emotional, or environmental triggers that may lead to elopement and work to reduce/eliminate those triggers.

Anticipate Vulnerable Times: Prepare strategies for transitions, new moves, parties, vacations, holidays, disrupted routines, and noisy, high-sensory environments.



F Form a Safety Circle & Emergency Plan

Form a Safety Circle: Alert trusted neighbors, relatives, and school staff about wandering/elopement, and ask for their help in monitoring your child or dependent. Teach them to search nearby water first if your loved one is missing.

Form an Emergency Plan: Create an emergency plan that pre-organizes a search response, and lists pre-identified water nearby.



E Emergency Response Focused on Nearby Water

Emergency Response: Call 911 and *immediately search nearby water*.

Activate Your Emergency Plan: Text your Safety Circle group or pre-assigned search partners to activate your emergency plan.



S: Supervision

Supervision Types

When caring for children or dependents with autism who are known to wander or elope, supervision must match the individual's level of risk. For some, standard supervision may be enough, such as checking in frequently and setting clear boundaries. But for those at heightened risk of running off, heading toward water, or entering unsafe areas, hypervigilant supervision is essential.



Xavier can become overwhelmed by certain sounds and has bolted before. At school and on field trips, a 1:1 aide closely supervises him and stays positioned behind him during transitions and outings for safety.



William was overwhelmed at a party and needed a quiet area. His mom's best friend agreed to closely monitor him on rotation with two other adults.

Supervision Roles & Considerations

Teachers, babysitters, relatives, and other caregivers all play a critical role in supervision. One designated adult should maintain constant visual contact, staying within arm's reach when risk is higher. In daily routines, this may mean a teacher walks behind the group during transitions or a babysitter stays close during outdoor play.

Supervision During Vulnerable Times

Certain times are especially high-risk: parties, gatherings, vacations, outings, school transitions, overnight stays, and new moves. These busy, unfamiliar settings create distractions, and when everyone assumes someone else is watching, no one truly is.

Children or dependents with autism may choose not to join group activities, and that's okay, but one clearly assigned adult must provide direct, vigilant supervision at all times.



While his cousins played frisbee at the park, Josef chose to engage with the slide instead. His aunt supported his preference by allowing him to play on the slide freely and at his own pace.

S: Security

Home Security

When a child or dependent is prone to wandering or elopement, home security is essential. Many caregivers use a combination of simple and affordable tools, often available from major retailers to help create a more secure environment.

Some families report success using keypad locks installed on the interior side of exterior doors to prevent their loved one from leaving the home overnight. However, it's important to carefully consider both the benefits and the potential risks of this approach. Fire safety, emergency evacuation, and overall household safety must always be part of the planning process in addition to wandering prevention.



Door/Window Alarms



Smart Locks with Text Notifications

"I was awakened at 2 o'clock in the morning by a text notification that our front door had been opened. I went to the door and saw my autistic son standing in the middle of the road."

Common tools to improve home safety and supervision include:

- **Door & window alarms:** Beeps if exits are opened unexpectedly
- **Home security systems:** Smart locks, cameras, and real-time notifications
- **Fencing with self-latching gates:** Adds a secure physical boundary
- **Baby monitors:** Helps track location and activity indoors
- **Addressing security breaches:** Check for screen tears, service workers going in/out, garage or pet doors breaches, and fence wear to reduce risk.

By thoughtfully combining these strategies, families can create a safer, more responsive environment that reduces wandering risks.



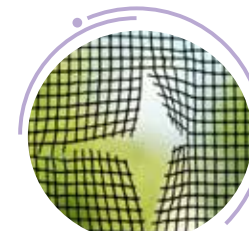
Self-Latching Gate



Pool Gate Sensor



Audio/Video Baby Monitors



Address Breaches

S: Safeguard

What Are Personal Safeguards?

Personal safeguards are individualized measures that reduce wandering/elopement risk by supporting safety, regulation, and safety skills. These include wearable ID, tracking devices, communication aids, and proactive skills like swimming and self-regulation.

Swimming & Water Safety

Start adaptive swim lessons early with autism-trained instructors. Teach rules like entering water only with an adult, waiting, recognizing boundaries, and floating, and practice skills regularly in different environments.



AngelSense (GPS)



Project Lifesaver (RF)

Locative Technology

Tracking tech can add a critical layer of protection. GPS options (like AngelSense) provide real-time location, while Radio Frequency programs (such as Project Lifesaver) work through participating law enforcement agencies.



Shoe or Wrist ID



Temporary Tattoo

Wearable Identification

Wristbands or shoe tags can list a child's name, diagnosis, and emergency contact. Temporary ID tattoos can be helpful during travel or crowded events where separation may occur.

Visual Tools

Building safety awareness takes time. Simple prompts like stop signs on doors, windows, and gates can remind your loved one not to exit alone.



Visual Prompts

Safe Space & Coping Strategies

Use calming techniques and tools, which can include deep breathing, fidget toys, and requesting a break. Provide a designated calming space at home or school for decompression, and ensure it cannot be locked as this will only increase anxiety. Examples include an indoor tent or a quiet area like a library or teacher's lounge.



Indoor Tents

S: Safeguard - Locative Technology

Locative Technology Considerations

There are different tracking device options that are available. Families should compare features to find the best fit for your loved one's unique needs. Tracking devices are only a supplemental tool and never replace consistent adult supervision.



Device Options



GPS

GPS units are operated by caregivers and purchased through retail methods, such as angelsense.com.



Radio Frequency

Radio frequency units run through law enforcement, such as projectlifesaver.org.



Questions to Consider

Consider these features when choosing a device:

- Geofencing and alert capabilities
- Customer service
- Battery life and charging needs
- Water resistance and function underwater
- Sensory needs
- Cellular coverage in daily locations
- Manufacturer reliability
- Overall cost



TIP

Always test the equipment as if it were a real emergency, and try it in different locations, terrain, and weather conditions.

S: Safeguard - Adaptive Equipment

Some children and dependent adults may experience frequent or intense wandering/elopement behaviors. Incidents can happen quickly, without warning, and often during everyday routines like sleeping, outings, or travel.

Protective and adaptive equipment is designed to reduce life-threatening risks while helping your loved one safely participate in daily life.



Why Adaptive Equipment May Be Needed

Children or dependent adults may:

- Leave the home at night while caregivers sleep
- Bolt suddenly in parking lots or public places
- Unbuckle or escape car seats during travel
- Move unpredictably in busy or unfamiliar environments

Because wandering/elopement can happen in seconds, families often need layered safety tools to reduce risk.



Safety Beds like Cubby Beds



Adaptive Strollers Like Wonderfold

Types of Adaptive Equipment

- **Enclosed or adaptive beds** are designed to help prevent night-time wandering and support safe sleep.
- **Adaptive strollers or secure wagons** are built to enhance security during community activities or in public spaces.
- **Adaptive car seats** provide added harnessing and security for those who unbuckle, escape, or move unsafely during travel.

Review Possible Funding Resources for Adaptive Equipment

State Assistive Technology Programs:
Funding guidance by state
www.at3center.net/state-at-programs/

Affirm: Pay-over-time financing
www.affirm.com

UnitedHealthcare Children's Foundation:
www.uhccf.org/apply-for-a-grant

United Way / 211 Resource Network:
Dial 211 or visit www.211.org

Variety: The Children's Charity
www.variety.org

zPods Sleep Foundation:
Grants Resource Center
www.zpodssleepfoundation.org/grants

For guidance or support:
info@autismsafetycouncil.org

Important Considerations

Adaptive equipment should always be selected with your loved one's individual needs in mind and reviewed regularly as they grow and change. These tools should balance safety with emergency and fire safety considerations and work as part of a broader safety plan that also includes supervision and skill-building.

S: Safeguard - Teach Swim Skills

Adaptive Swimming



Swimming is not only a valuable life skill, it's a critical safety tool. For autistic individuals, the risk of drowning is significantly elevated. Learning to swim in a supportive, adaptive environment builds confidence, increases independent mobility, and can dramatically reduce risk.

Where to Find Adaptive Swim Lessons

Here are some national swim facilities and local places to ask about adaptive or special-needs swim lessons:



- **SafeSplash Swim School:** Offers Adaptive Aquatics at participating locations. safesplash.com
- **Big Blue Swim School:** Provides Adaptive Swim Lessons using the Swim Whisperers® method. bigblueswimschool.com
- **British Swim School:** Provides Adaptive Swim Lessons at participating locations. britishswimschool.com
- **Local YMCA:** Many YMCAs offer adaptive swim or “special needs” swim lessons. Ask your local YMCA branch or search online.
- **Other Local Options:** Check community recreation centers, parks & rec departments, or disability-focused organizations in your area for adaptive or inclusive swim programming.



Tips & Recommendations for Families

Tour the pool during a lesson, meet the instructor, and share your child's needs. Start with private or small-group lessons to reduce overstimulation, use visual supports, and break skills into manageable steps.

It's always wise to keep the same instructor and schedule for consistency, as well as focus on core water-safety skills. Be sure to use your child's interests to keep lessons engaging. Consider full clothing for the final lesson to practice realistic self-rescue skills.

S: Safeguard - Teach Safety



Who is a Trusted Adult?

This teaching tool from the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children is available at missingkids.org.

Teaching Safety Basics

Helping children and dependents with autism understand safety is key to reducing overall risk. Teaching these skills takes honesty, patience, repetition, and approaches tailored to how they learn and communicate.

Start by explaining who a trusted adult is and use visual tools to show who they can turn to for help. This might include:

- Parents or guardians
- Teachers or school staff
- Caregivers or therapists
- Close family friends

Reinforce that they should always stay close to these trusted adults, especially when outside the home or in new places.

Consider Honest, Simple Explanations About Dangers

Use visuals and gentle, clear language to teach safety, connecting dangers to experiences your child or dependent understands. For example, when discussing water, use simple language to explain the risks of entering it alone.

- "Going into water alone can make us very sick, like a bad tummy ache."
- "Going into brown or dirty water alone can make us feel really bad."
- "Going into water without Mom or Dad can hurt us and keep us from doing our favorite things, like eating chicken nuggets or playing with Legos."

This approach can also be adapted for other dangers: entering traffic, a hot car, going to transit stations, or entering the woods alone.

Continue to speak about dangers in simple language, even if your child or dependent appears to not listen or understand.



S: Safeguard - Teach Regulation

It's important for your child or dependent to understand what's happening inside their body when they feel overwhelmed or upset. To help, you can:

- **Explain that their nervous system can feel “sick” or “too big” sometimes.** When this happens, they might want to run away or hide. This is their body's way of trying to feel better.
- **Show them safe places they can go to calm down or feel better,** whether it's a quiet corner, a cozy tent at home, or a calm unlocked room at school.
- **Co-regulate,** and model regulation by staying calm and supportive during times when they are overwhelmed or upset.



Recognizing What the Nervous System Needs



When your child or dependent tries to leave or escape, it usually means their nervous system needs either regulation (less noise, fewer demands, and more calming activities), or stimulation (specific activities that help them feel engaged and grounded), or both.

Recognize these signs early, and help them get what they need in the moment, just like you would if they were sick with the flu. This might mean allowing them rest, lowering lights and sounds, reducing tasks, and using simple language to show you understand and support them.



Consistency and Patience Are Key

- **Keep talking about safety** and these important concepts every day, even if they don't respond right away.
- **Maintain** repetition, which helps build understanding over time.
- **Use social stories, visual aids, and consistent routines** to reinforce these lessons.
- **Make them a part of their own safety planning,** and use their preferences and learning style.
- **Build confidence:** your ongoing support will help your child or dependent learn how to stay safe and feel secure.

A: Address Triggers

Understand Clues to Look For

What are Triggers?

Triggers are cues or experiences that cause a strong emotional, physical, or behavioral reaction. For individuals with autism or other sensory or emotional sensitivities, triggers can be anything that overwhelms the nervous system, such as certain sounds, textures, words, environments, or changes in routine. These triggers can lead to behavioral responses that help the person cope or communicate discomfort. Understanding and addressing your loved one's unique triggers is one of the most powerful ways to prevent wandering/elopement.

Most wandering/elopement behaviors are triggered by the need for **regulation** (reducing stress or discomfort), **stimulation** (seeking sensory input or preferred activities/topics), or **both**. Observing when and where anxiety or excitement rises can help you identify potential triggers and intervene early.

Clues to Look For:

Sensory Avoiding (Signals a Need for Regulation):

- **Escalating behaviors:** crying, shouting, pacing, aggression, self-injury
- **Avoidance:** covering ears, refusing foods or textures, withdrawing
- **Defensive positioning:** pivoting body away from stimuli, such as the sound of someone chewing at the dinner table

Tip: Observing these signals can help you identify triggers, and make necessary modifications or accommodations to prevent further escalation, like elopement.



Sensory Seeking (Signals a Need for Stimulation):



- **Repetition:** repeatedly watching or listening to a favorite sound, song, or clip
- **Patterns or movement:** spinning objects, water reflections, lining up toys
- **Rigidity:** difficulty transitioning away from favored activities and strong desire for preferred items, textures, foods, or places

Tip: Identifying preferred stimuli allows you to create scheduled activities around this topic. For example, if a child is fixated on stacking books, schedule this activity so they know when to expect it. This allows them to enjoy their favorite topic in a safe environment, instead of leaving the home or classroom to seek out the activity on their own.

In some instances, children or dependents may wander/elope to avoid stressful stimuli *and* seek preferred stimuli. For example, a student overwhelmed by a noisy classroom may move to a quiet space like a pool or pond that is also sensory-appealing.

A: Address Triggers

Review Sample Scenarios



Sample Scenario: Water

Sophia loves pools, bathtubs, splashpads, and tries to approach a neighborhood pond during walks. Her family and a Board Certified Behavioral Analyst (BCBA) identified water as a source of both stimulation and comfort for Sophia, and worked with her family to:

- **Schedule supervised water play** and swim lessons at consistent times.
- **Use visual aids** to teach her safety skills, and to stay with an adult near water and avoid unsafe water sources.
- **Provide routine, predictable outlets** to meet her sensory needs.

These supports let Sophia enjoy water safely while reducing wandering/elopement risk.



Sample Scenario: Unique Fixation

Connor often runs from the classroom during noisy transitions or when teachers become frustrated. He leaves on foot to the highway towards his favorite exit signs, his unique fixation. A Board Certified Behavioral Analyst (BCBA) worked with his teachers and family to:

- **Adjust the classroom environment** and provide co-regulation strategies.
- **Introduce a visual schedule** and a quiet space to manage stress.
- **Create safe ways to explore his fixation**, such as miniature replicas, drawings, and videos.
- **Develop visual aids** to teach safety skills.

These strategies allowed Connor to safely engage with his special interest while preventing elopement.



A: Address Triggers

Use Calming Strategies

Calming strategies help reduce nervous system overwhelm before distress escalates into unsafe behavior. When a child or dependent has tools, space, and support to regulate, the urge to escape or seek relief through exiting decreases. These strategies are most effective when used proactively and consistently as part of everyday routines.

Reduce or Eliminate Known Triggers

If a sound, texture, phrase, or environment consistently causes distress, look for ways to reduce exposure or provide alternatives.

Give Time and Space

Quiet moments and low-demand environments allow the nervous system to reset.

Encourage Self-Calming Skills

Support calming routines, breaks, and preferred regulation activities.

Allow Flexibility

Offer choices and access to quieter or less stimulating spaces during busy or overwhelming situations.

Use “Look-Forward” Lists

Highlight upcoming positive events to support predictability and ease transitions.

Teach Deep Breathing and Regulation Skills

Practice simple techniques like paced breathing or grounding exercises during calm moments.

Break Tasks Into Steps

Use “first/then” strategies to make transitions more predictable and manageable.



Use calming tools to support regulation, predictability, and comfort in daily environments.

Calming tools can include:

- Quiet “escape” spot (tent, reading nook, or pillow fort)
- Noise-canceling headphones or sunglasses
- Weighted blankets or fidget toys
- White noise machine or soothing visuals (lava lamp, calming light)
- Visual schedules, calendars, or social stories for predictability
- Written notes or visuals to explain anxiety and support self-awareness

A: Anticipate Vulnerable Times

What Are Vulnerable Times?

Moments when children and dependents with autism are more vulnerable to wandering/elopement include specific situations, environments, and times of day. Here's a breakdown of common vulnerable times:



1. Times of Overstimulation or Commotion: Loud noises, crowded environments, flashing lights, chaotic group settings (e.g., stores, parties, school assemblies)



2. Transitions or Changes in Routine: Moving between activities like changing classrooms, shifting from play to bedtime, starting or ending the school day



3. Periods of Stress or Emotional Distress: Stressful environments, demands, frustration with tasks, or exposure to triggers or unexpected situations



4. Family Gatherings, Holidays, Vacations, Recent Moves: Situations that involve unfamiliar environments, extra people, and disrupted routines



5. Overnight While Family is Sleeping: Nighttime elopement if the child or dependent wakes up and becomes restless, curious, or anxious



6. Outdoor Activities: School recess, playing outside, going camping, or on a hike



7. Co-napping with a Parent or Babysitter: Shared rest or naps when a child or dependent may wake up before the caregiver

Recognizing these patterns allows caregivers to plan preventive strategies, such as environmental safety measures, visual schedules, calming routines, and door alarms, to help reduce the risk of wandering/elopement.



F: Form a Safety Circle & Emergency Plan

Why Forming a Safety Circle is Important

Autism-related wandering and elopement can happen quickly, and the best way to respond is to be prepared in advance. A Safety Circle is a network of trusted individuals who understand your loved one's risks and needs. This, combined with a clear Emergency Response Plan, ensures your family can act quickly and safely if your child is missing.

Create Your Safety Circle

A Safety Circle is a group of people who can help prevent, notice, and respond if your child or dependent is missing. They can include:

- **Family members:** Siblings, grandparents, aunts/uncles
- **Neighbors:** Those nearby who can help quickly
- **Friends and local caregivers:** Babysitters, coaches, therapists
- **School personnel:** Teachers, aides, administrators



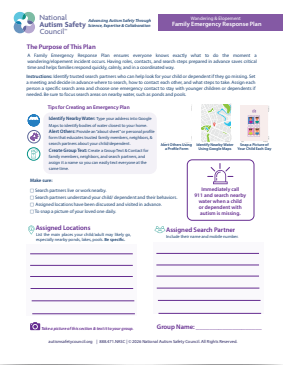
Tips for building your circle:

- Explain the risks of wandering/elopement and your loved one's typical triggers.
- Share strategies for safely approaching and engaging your loved one.
- Provide photos, descriptions, and any identifying features.
- Establish clear communication channels (text, phone tree, or app).

Develop an Emergency Response Plan

A written plan ensures everyone in your Safety Circle knows what to do immediately if your child or dependent is missing. **Include Key Elements:**

- **Immediate Actions:** Call 911, search water, alert neighbors
- **Child/dependent Information:** Photo, medical info, sensory needs
- **Local Contacts:** Police, local search and rescue, schools, neighbors
- **Communication Plan:** Who contacts whom first, and how updates are shared
- **Safety Tools:** GPS trackers, ID bracelets, or other agreed-upon safety measures



This Family Emergency Response Plan is available within this toolkit, or at autismsafetycouncil.org

Practice the Plan

Conduct periodic drills with family and your Safety Circle, and review and update regularly as routines or risk factors change.



E: Emergency Response Focused on Nearby Water



Emergency Response

When a child or dependent with autism wanders or elopes, time is of the essence.

It's critical to:

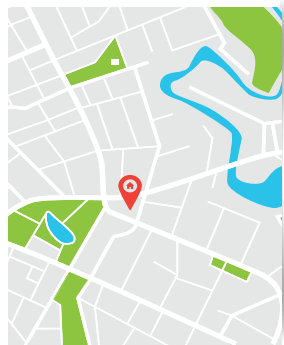
- Stay calm and call 911 immediately.
- Search ponds, pools, canals, lakes or other water closest to the last known location.

Too often, families or teachers will attempt to find the child on their own, wasting valuable time. Because most agencies have search tools and can mobilize quickly, calling 911 immediately is a lifesaving action.

Another important step is to immediately search nearby water sources. Drowning is the leading cause of death related to wandering, making water a top priority for parents, caregivers, and community members alike.



Immediately call 911 and search nearby water when a child or dependent with autism is missing.



Identify Nearby Water Before an Emergency Using Google Maps

Why Search Water First?

According to the most recent annual data review by the National Autism Safety Council, 86% of wandering-related deaths in 2025 were due to drowning. Nearly every child was found within half-mile of their last known location, underscoring the importance of quick and thorough water searches close to where the child was last seen.

Water sources are not always obvious. In addition to pools, lakes, and rivers, they may be go to less conventional water hazards such as:

- Drainage ditches
- Stormwater retention ponds
- Horse troughs or livestock watering stations
- Backyard fountains, or inflatable slides
- Icy puddles or partially frozen bodies of water
- Decorative ponds in parks or community spaces





General Awareness Letter

This is a resource to provide to your loved one's school, IEP team, local aquatics facility, homeowners association, etc., as needed.

To Whom It May Concern,

Children and dependents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are at increased risk of wandering or bolting from safe environments, which can lead to tragic outcomes. Many experience challenges with sensory processing, impulse control, movement disorders, and awareness of danger, making it essential for communities to understand how to help keep them safe.

Research shows that nearly half of children with autism wander or elope,¹ and that, on average, eight children with autism die per month in the U.S. after wandering or bolting from various settings.² This behavior is not a result of poor parenting, but a serious safety concern requiring education and vigilance. In 2025, accidental drowning accounted for 87% of wandering-related deaths among individuals with autism.² Many may not recognize danger or respond when called, increasing the risks of drowning, traffic accidents, falls, and hyper/hypothermia.

Most wandering/elopement incidents are driven by the need for regulation (reducing stress or discomfort), stimulation (seeking sensory input or preferred activities/topics), or both. Most often it occurs when a person is attempting to escape overwhelming sensory stimuli such as loud noises, bright lights, or crowded spaces. The behavior is common enough to have its own medical diagnosis code (Z91.83).

Because of the critical nature of this issue, we respectfully ask for your support in providing resources and safeguards that protect individuals with autism. These may include:

- **Modifying the classroom** to be sensory-friendly, as well as practicing co-regulation.
- **Providing access** to swimming lessons and protective or adaptive equipment.
- **Allowing special locks** in apartments, as well as fencing.
- **Allowing fencing** around homes, pools, and playgrounds.
- **Allowing locator** technology to assist in tracking.
- **Maintaining close and constant supervision** at school.
- **Installing simple door chimes** at school.

By increasing education and implementing these protections, we can help prevent tragedies and create safer environments for individuals with autism, their families, and communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lori McLwain".

Founder, President
National Autism Safety Council

1. Anderson, C., Law, J. K., Daniels, A., Rice, C., Mandell, D. S., Hagopian, L., & Law, P. A. (2012). Occurrence and family impact of elopement in children with autism spectrum disorders. *Pediatrics*, 130(5), 870–877. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-0762>

2. McLwain, L., Hudgins, C., Heaps, J. (2026). 2025 Review: Autism-Related Elopement Fatalities in the United States (report in prep)



Sample Physician Letter

This is provided as an example only for your loved one's physician.

[Child's Full Name]
Date of Birth: [MM/DD/YYYY]

Dear [Recipient],

[Child's Name] has been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), which presents certain challenges and safety risks. [Child's Name] currently attends [School Name] in [Town/City].

[Child's Name] has a documented history of wandering from safe environments, including an incident in [Year] when [he/she/they] wandered from [brief description of incident/location]. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), wandering/elopement incidents can place individuals with ASD in dangerous and life-threatening situations, making it a critical safety concern for families and caregivers.

If given the opportunity, [Child's Name] is likely to wander/elope from secure settings. [His/Her/Their] wandering behaviors are often a way to escape bothersome noise, stress, or commotion, with a particular attraction to bodies of water. Additionally, [Child's Name] has experienced fleeing episodes triggered by meltdowns or emotional escalations.

Due to this history, [Child's Name] has been assigned the medical diagnosis of Wandering (Medical Code Z91.83). To ensure [his/her/their] safety, close and constant adult supervision is medically necessary at all times, along with appropriate safeguards. These may include safety beds, adaptive strollers or car seats, adaptive swimming lessons, architectural barriers, door alarms or locks, fencing, visual cues, and a school-wide emergency response protocol.

A Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) is recommended to identify the underlying causes of [Child's Name]'s elopement behaviors. Under no circumstances should [Child's Name] be left unattended, as doing so poses serious risks to [his/her/their] health and safety.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

[Physician's Name & Credentials]
[Physician's Contact Information]

Social Story: *Stay Safe in My House*

Customize with your own images.

My Name Is: _____



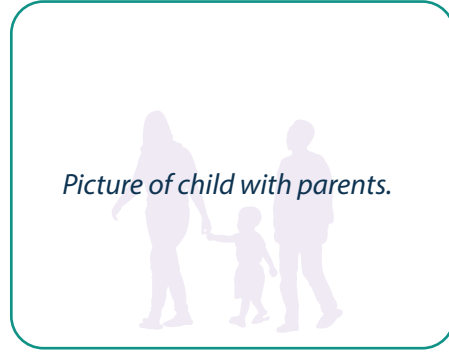
This is my house.



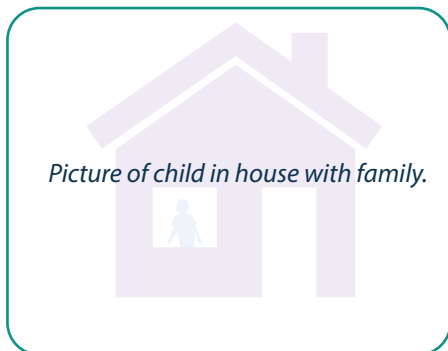
**I live in my house
with my family.**



**It's important for me
to stay in my house.**



**When I stay in my house,
my parents will know
where I am.**



**Staying in my house will
keep me safe.**



**Mom & dad will be
happy I am safe.**

Tool: *Wander Watcher Tag*

Cut, laminate or cover in plastic, and use a hole punch for the opening. This can be worn around the neck.



I'm the
**WANDER
WATCHER**

- I'm the designated **Wander Watcher** of a child/dependent with autism.
- My only job is **active supervision to prevent wandering/elopement**.
- I will keep the individual **within sight and reach** at all times.
- I will **stay alert**.
- I will **avoid distractions** (phones, conversations, tasks).
- If I need to stop watching, I will clearly **pass the tag to another adult**.
- If the individual is missing, I will call 911 and **search nearby water first**.



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Autism Emergency Profile Date: _____

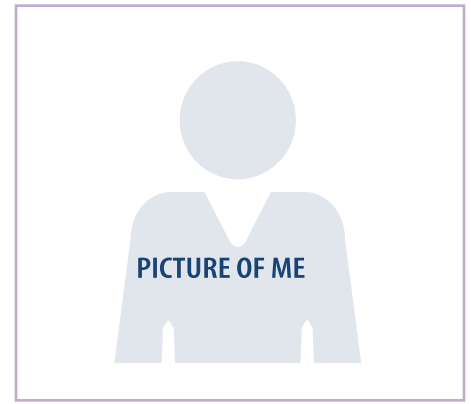
 Name: _____  Age/DOB: _____

 Caregiver: _____

 Phone: _____ Alt Phone: _____

 Address: _____

Radio Frequency Tracking Number (if applicable) _____



Height: _____ Weight: _____

Hair Color: _____

Eye Color: _____

Birthmarks / Scars: _____

My Style of Communication

- Nonspeaking Speak verbally Short phrases
- AAC device Spelling through keyboard or other
- Gestures/visuals Selective/Minimal

Best way to talk to me: _____

What Calms Me Down

- Fidget Phone / tablet Music/Show _____
- Snack (_____) Water bottle/other _____
- Noise-canceling Headphones Weighted Blanket

Other: _____

What Escalates Me

- Loud noise Crowds Being rushed Strong smells
- Touch Bright lights Changes Being startled

Other: _____

My Medical and Safety Information

- Seizures Asthma Diabetes Pica Panic Disorder
 - Self-Injurious Behaviors Allergies: _____
 - Wanders/elopes Other: _____
- Medications and/or Restrictions: _____

Medical Contacts:

My Doctor: _____

Preferred Hospital: _____

How to Help Me

- Stay calm and relaxed Give me time and space if safe
- Contact my caregiver Hold out a cookie, water, phone or fidget
- Use simple phrases Use first/then "First _____, then _____."
- I may try to leave again — please watch me



Immediately call 911 and search nearby water if a child or dependent with autism is missing



The Purpose of This Plan

A Family Emergency Response Plan ensures everyone knows exactly what to do the moment a wandering/elopement incident occurs. Having roles, contacts, and search steps prepared in advance saves critical time and helps families respond quickly, calmly, and in a coordinated way.

Instructions: Identify trusted search partners who can help look for your child or dependent if they go missing. Set a meeting and decide in advance where to search, how to contact each other, and what steps to take. Assign each person a specific search area and choose one emergency contact to stay with younger children or dependents if needed. Be sure to focus search areas on nearby water, such as ponds and pools.

Tips for Creating an Emergency Plan



Identify Nearby Water: Type your address into Google Maps to identify bodies of water closest to your home.



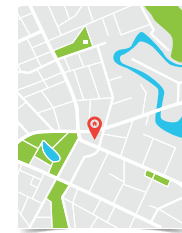
Alert Others: Provide an “about sheet” or personal profile form that educates trusted family members, neighbors, & search partners about your child/dependent.



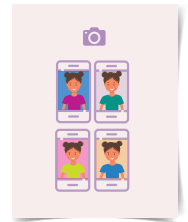
Create Group Text: Create a Group Text & Contact for family members, neighbors, and search partners, and assign it a name so you can easily text everyone at the same time.



Alert Others Using a Profile Form



Identify Nearby Water Using Google Maps



Snap a Picture of Your Child Each Day

Make sure:

- Search partners live or work nearby.
- Search partners understand your child/ dependent and their behaviors.
- Assigned locations have been discussed and visited in advance.
- To snap a picture of your loved one daily.



Immediately call 911 and search nearby water when a child or dependent with autism is missing.

Assigned Locations

List the main places your child/adult may likely go, especially nearby ponds, lakes, pools. **Be specific.**

Assigned Search Partner

Include their name and mobile number.

 **Take a picture of this section & text it to your group.**

Group Name: _____



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Tool: *Stop Sign*

Print and cut out stop signs and place them on exterior doors and windows. Use blank space for additional custom instruction that would resonate with your child, such as "Bluey Says Wait."





Resource Guide

Safety Resources:

National Autism Safety Council

autismsafetycouncil.org

info@autismsafetycouncil.org

888.471.NASC(6272)

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children:

missingkids.org

1-800-THE-LOST

Swimming Lessons:

Safe Splash: safesplash.com

Big Blue Swim School: bigblueswimschool.com

British Swim School: britishswimschool.com

Aqua-Tots: aqua-tots.com

Check with your local YMCA

Google “adaptive swimming lessons near me”

Safety & Security Products:

AngelSense GPS: angelsense.com

Vivint Home Security: vivint.com

Project Lifesaver: projectlifesaver.org

MedicAlert: medicalert.org

RoadID: roadid.com

For First Responders:

National Center For Missing & Exploited Children:

1-800-THE-LOST

Reverse 911: achildsmissing.org

Smart 911: smart911.com

Project Lifesaver: projectlifesaver.org

Take An All-Encompassing Approach

Ensuring your child’s safety requires a comprehensive, all-encompassing approach to both prevent and respond to wandering or elopement incidents. This approach includes helping your child develop self-help and safety skills, such as learning to swim and understanding basic safety concepts. These lessons can be taught through social stories, visual supports, prompts, and communication methods tailored to your child’s individual needs and abilities.

It is equally important for caregivers to identify and understand the reasons or triggers behind wandering or bolting behaviors. By recognizing what causes or contributes to these situations, caregivers can take steps to reduce or eliminate those triggers and create a safer environment.

Above all, the goal is for the at-risk child or dependent to gradually learn strategies to keep themselves safe, while appropriate safeguards and consistent adult supervision remain in place to provide protection and support.

Finally, families should remember that no prevention strategy or safety product can replace vigilant supervision.