



# Autism & School Safety

A Guide for Caregivers



# About This Guide

This guide was created in collaboration with families, clinicians, educators, first responders, and service professionals.

It integrates knowledge from:

- **Current research**
- **Field expertise**
- **Lived experience**

The content reflects proven practices and the most up-to-date knowledge available at the time of publication.

**This guide is for informational and educational purposes only.** It is not intended to serve as medical or legal advice and should not replace consultation with qualified healthcare providers, behavioral specialists, or legal professionals.

**Every child, individual, and family is unique, and decisions about safety planning and intervention should be made in collaboration with trusted professionals familiar with your individual needs.**



*Advancing Autism Safety Through  
Science, Expertise & Collaboration*

# Understanding Common Terms



When planning for your child's safety at school, it helps to understand **common terms used in education**, behavior support, and special education.

## Glossary of Terms

**Wandering/Elopement** – When a student walks or bolts from a safe area or school, resulting in risk.

**Restraint** – Any method used to physically hold or immobilize a student.

**Seclusion** – Placing a student alone in a space where they cannot leave.

**Aversives** – Unethical and often prohibited practices that use discomfort, fear, or unpleasant stimuli (e.g., hot sauce, physical correction) to control a child.

**Bullying** – Repeated harmful actions by peers, including verbal, physical, social, or online harassment.

**Pica** - The ingestion of non-food substances.

**Trigger** – Anything in the environment or interaction that can cause a student to feel upset, overwhelmed, or panicked, and may lead to unsafe behaviors.

**Antecedent** – A trigger or event that happens immediately before an unsafe behavior, which can help staff prevent future behaviors.

**IEP (Individualized Education Plan)** – A legally binding plan that outlines a student's academic and functional supports, including safety accommodations.

**De-escalation** – Techniques used by staff to calm a student and prevent unsafe behaviors from increasing.

**Positive Behavioral Supports** – Strategies that teach and reinforce safe, appropriate behaviors rather than punishing behaviors.

**Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)** – A process to understand why a student behaves in certain ways, identifying triggers and functions of behavior.

**Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP)** – A plan created from the FBA that outlines proactive strategies, supports, and staff responses to prevent unsafe behaviors.

**BCBA (Board Certified Behavior Analyst)** – A professional trained to assess behavior and design interventions for students with autism or other behavioral needs.

**AU Classroom** – A classroom designed specifically for students with autism.

**Mainstream Classroom** – A general education classroom where students with disabilities learn alongside their neurotypical peers, sometimes with support or accommodations.

**Sensory Overload** – When a student experiences overwhelming sights, sounds, or other sensory input that can lead to distress, meltdowns, or unsafe behavior.

**Transition** – Moving from one activity, classroom, or environment to another.

**Near-miss Incident** – A safety-related event that could have caused harm but did not; tracking these helps prevent future incidents.

**Co-regulation** - When a calm, supportive adult helps a child manage emotions and regain behavioral control.

**AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication)** – Tools and strategies (e.g., communication boards, devices, or apps) that help students express needs, feelings, and safety concerns.

# About Autism and School Safety

Students with autism may face unique safety risks at school that require proactive planning and awareness. Common safety topics include wandering or elopement, bullying, restraint and seclusion, sensory overload, communication barriers, and escalating behaviors that may become unsafe.

Wandering/elopement can place a child in immediate danger if they leave supervision, while bullying may go unnoticed when students struggle to recognize or report harm. Sensory overload from noise, lighting, or unexpected changes can lead to distress or unsafe behaviors without proper supports. Communication differences, including limited speech or use of AAC, may prevent students from expressing fear or needing help, increasing vulnerability.

Recognizing these risks is critical because many are preventable with planning. Supervision strategies, safeguards, and clear policies reduce danger, while attention to sensory and communication needs helps prevent escalation.

When schools address safety through thoughtful placement, accommodations, behavior supports, and emergency planning, students with autism are better protected and able to learn safely.

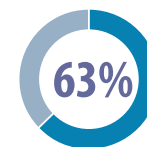
## Quick Facts



*29% of children with autism who eloped were reported to have gone missing from classrooms or schools.<sup>1</sup>*



*In one sample year, students with disabilities in the U.S. accounted for about 75% of restraints and seclusions.<sup>2</sup>*



*63% of children with autism, ages 6 to 15, had been bullied at some point in their lives.<sup>3</sup>*

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. ProPublica & National Public Radio. (2014). Schools nationwide still use restraint and seclusion despite decades of warnings. ProPublica.
3. 1. Zablotzky, B., Bradshaw, C. P., Anderson, C. M., & Law, P. (2014). Risk factors for bullying among children with autism spectrum disorders. *Autism: the international journal of research and practice*, 18(4), 419–427. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361313477920>



Keeping students with autism safe at school requires careful planning, clear communication, and proactive supports. The SAFE framework helps parents focus on four key areas to **ensure their child is protected, supported, and able to learn in a safe environment**. Use this guide as a tool to ask questions, review the IEP, and work with school staff to prevent safety risks before they happen.



### **S – Support, Supervision, and Safeguards**

- Make sure your child is in the best classroom placement for their specific needs: AU classroom, special education classroom, mainstream classroom, or other options.
- Ensure your child has adult supervision during class, transitions, lunch, recess, and other activities.
- Confirm that safeguards are in place to prevent wandering, elopement, or accidental injury.
- Consider adding safe supervision strategies in your child’s Individualize Education Plan (IEP) or safety plan.
- Use a no-consent letter prohibiting the use of seclusion practices, or unnecessary restraint.



### **A – Address & Accommodate**

- Address all common safety risks: elopement, bullying, restraint, seclusion, pica, unsafe behaviors.
- Ensure your child’s sensory, emotional, and behavioral triggers are well understood and accommodated.
- Include communication supports in your child’s IEP(AAC devices, visual schedules, social stories) to assist your child in expressing needs, which can prevent unsafe situations.
- Make sure environmental accommodations (lighting, noise, quiet spaces) are available.



### **F – Functional Planning & Behavior Supports**

- Request a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) if behavior affects safety.
- After the FBA is completed, make sure a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) is established and emphasizes prevention, co-regulation, and positive behavioral supports.
- Review triggers, antecedents, and safe staff responses with teachers and aides.
- Ensure staff are trained in autism-specific de-escalation strategies.



### **E – Emergency Response**

- Confirm that a schoolwide emergency plan is in place if a student is missing, including calling 911.
- Ensure staff know how to safely assist your child during emergencies.
- Restraints should only be used in imminent danger to prevent injury, never as punishment.
- Confirm parent notification procedures for any safety incidents or near-misses.
- Document all incidents and near-misses, and take pictures of any unexplained injuries.



## Support, Supervision, and Safeguards

### The Right Support Begins with Best-Fit Placement

Every child with autism has unique strengths, triggers, communication needs, and safety vulnerabilities, making school placement a highly individualized decision. Proactive planning before the school year begins is one of the most effective ways to promote safety and should consider not only academics, but also social, sensory, structural, and behavioral needs.

An autism (AU) or special education classroom may not automatically be the best fit for every student. In some cases, it can increase triggers when students have competing sensory needs or behaviors. Likewise, general education settings may be overwhelming without adequate supports. For some students, alternative options such as partial-day programs, online learning, or homeschooling may better support safety. **The goal is not to fit the child into a setting, but to fit the setting to the child.**



### Supervision and Safeguards

Equally important is ensuring consistent adult supervision throughout the school day, including during transitions, lunch, recess, and other unstructured times when safety risks are often highest. Parents should ask what specific safeguards are in place to prevent wandering, elopement, or accidental injury and how staff monitor high-risk areas. These safeguards may be written into the IEP or a formal safety plan. When supervision responsibilities and safety strategies are documented, staff are more consistent, substitutes are better informed, and parents can be confident that supports will be used proactively to keep their child safe.

### Safeguard Examples

- **Door chimes or alarms** to alert staff if a student exits a space
- **Close adult supervision** during transitions between classrooms or activities
- **Architectural barriers**, such as maintained fencing with self-latching gates
- **Sensory aids**, including ear defenders, white noise, indoor tents, or other unlocked quiet spaces
- **Classroom modifications** that reduce sensory overload
- **Visual supports**, such as stop signs, social stories, and visual schedules



## Address Safety Issues and Accommodate Sensory Needs

It's important to proactively identify common safety risks and ensuring your child's needs are built into their daily school environment.

When these risks are acknowledged upfront, staff can plan appropriate supports, monitor high-risk situations, and intervene early. Addressing safety in advance helps prevent misunderstandings, reduces escalation, and protects students who may be more vulnerable due to communication or sensory differences.

Just as important is making sure your child's sensory, emotional, and behavioral triggers are well understood and accommodated across settings. Supports should include communication tools that allow your child to express needs, discomfort, or distress before situations become unsafe.

### *Schools should proactively address risks such as:*

- **Wandering/Elopement** by increasing supervision, using safeguards, and creating written safety plans
- **Bullying** by monitoring high-risk areas, enforcing anti-bullying policies, and providing reporting supports
- **Restraint** by focusing on prevention and limiting use to imminent danger only
- **Seclusion** by avoiding isolation and clearly defining the use of quiet spaces
- **Pica** by supervising closely, limiting access to non-food items, and coordinating supports
- **Meltdowns** or unsafe behaviors by identifying triggers and using proactive, calming strategies



### Examples of accommodations may include:

- Communication supports, such as AAC devices, visual schedules, and social stories
- Environmental accommodations, including adjusted lighting, reduced noise, and access to quiet or calm spaces
- Eliminating triggers or exposure to phobias or fears
- Sensory supports and supervision strategies that reduce anxiety and limit access to unsafe items for students with pica

These accommodations should be documented in the IEP, shared with all staff, and consistently implemented.



## Functional Planning and Behavior Support

When a child's behavior affects safety, such as elopement, aggression, or self-injury, parents can request a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA). An FBA helps identify triggers, patterns, and the function of the behavior, allowing the school to move beyond guesswork or punishment. This assessment provides a foundation for thoughtful planning and ensures that safety concerns are addressed through data and observation rather than assumptions.

The results of the FBA should be used to develop a **Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP)** that emphasizes prevention, co-regulation, and positive behavioral supports.

### *A strong BIP identifies:*

- **Clear purpose of behavior:** Identify what the behavior communicates or achieves for the student.
- **Triggers and antecedents:** List situations, demands, or sensory factors that increase risk.
- **Strategies:** Include environmental, sensory, and instructional supports used before behavior escalates.
- **Co-regulation supports:** Describe how staff helps the student regulate emotions and stress.
- **Positive replacement behaviors:** Teach safe, appropriate alternatives to unsafe behaviors.
- **Staff response steps:** Outline exactly how staff should respond early, during escalation, and after an incident.
- **De-escalation focus:** Emphasize calming, supportive strategies over consequences.
- **Safety limits:** Clearly state that restraint may only be used in situations of imminent danger.
- **Training and consistency:** Ensure all staff, including substitutes, are trained on the BIP.
- **Data and review:** Track incidents and review the plan regularly to make improvements.

Safety limits should be explicit, stating that restraint may only be used in situations of imminent danger.

Parents should confirm that the BIP is consistently implemented and reviewed, that all staff, including substitutes, are trained on the plan, and that data are collected to monitor effectiveness and make adjustments.



## Emergency Response

**Emergency Response planning ensures that students with autism are kept safe** during critical situations and that staff respond quickly, consistently, and appropriately.

Parents should confirm that the school has a **school-wide emergency plan** in place, which includes procedures if a student goes missing or is at risk of elopement. This plan should also clearly outline how and when 911 or other emergency services are contacted, ensuring that staff can act immediately to protect the student's safety.

Key components of an effective emergency response plan include:

- **Staff training:** All staff should know how to safely assist and support your child during emergencies, including fires, lockdowns, or missing-student incidents.
- **Clear restraint guidelines:** Restraints may only be used in situations of imminent danger to prevent injury, never as a form of consequence, control, or convenience.
- **Parent notification procedures:** Parents should be notified promptly of any safety incident, close calls, or emergency involving their child.
- **Evacuation and shelter protocols:** Ensure accommodations are in place for your child's sensory or communication needs during drills or real emergencies.
- **Communication tools:** AAC devices, visual schedules, or other supports should be available so the student can understand instructions and remain calm.

Parents should ask to review the plan and confirm that it is documented and incorporated into the IEP or safety plan when appropriate.

# Autism and School Safety: Questions Checklist



Use this checklist before enrollment, at IEP meetings, or whenever safety concerns arise.

## School and Classroom Fit

- Is the school a good sensory fit (noise, lighting, commotion, etc.)?
- Is classroom placement based on my child's needs?
- What communication supports are used?
- Are class size and adult support appropriate?
- How are multiple dysregulated students handled at once?
- Are alternative or lower-stimulus options available if needed?

## Supervision and Safeguards

- Who supervises my child during arrival, dismissal, recess, lunch, and transitions?
- What safeguards are used prevent wandering/elopement?
- Is there a school-wide emergency plan for elopement incidents?
- How are substitutes and bus drivers informed of safety needs?

## Emergency and Drill Planning

- Who assists my child during emergency drills?
- Are drills modified to reduce sensory overload or fear?
- Does staff know what to do if my child has a meltdown, shutdown, or runs?
- Are emergency procedures documented in the IEP or safety plan?

## Behavior Support and Prevention

- Are positive behavioral supports used to promote prevention and safe de-escalation?
- Are staff trained in autism-specific de-escalation?
- Does the school have written restraint policies?
- Is prone and supine restraint methods prohibited at this school?
- Are aversive and seclusion practices explicitly prohibited?

## Bullying

- How does the school prevent and respond to bullying of students with autism?
- Are staff trained to recognize subtle or social bullying?
- Are supports for bullying prevention included in the IEP if needed?

## Communication and Parent Notification

- When and how will I be notified of incidents or near-misses?
- Who is my primary contact person?
- How quickly will I be informed after an incident?



## Sample Letter Requesting a Functional Behavioral Assessment

**Subject: Request for Functional Behavioral Assessment, BIP, and IEP Meeting**

Dear [Principal's Name] and IEP Team,

I am writing to formally request a **Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)** for my child, [Student's Name], due to behaviors that are impacting safety and access to education. These behaviors include [briefly list concerns, e.g., elopement, unsafe behaviors, emotional escalation], and I believe a comprehensive assessment is necessary to better understand triggers and support needs.

Based on the results of the FBA, I am also requesting that the team develop a **Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP)** that emphasizes prevention, positive behavioral supports, and safe, consistent staff responses. My goal is to ensure that [Student's Name] is supported proactively and that safety strategies are clearly documented and consistently implemented across settings.

Additionally, I am requesting a follow-up IEP meeting to review the FBA findings, discuss the proposed BIP, and determine whether any additional supports, accommodations, or supervision should be added to the IEP. Please provide several dates and times within the required timeline so we can schedule this meeting.

Thank you for your attention to this request and for your continued collaboration. I look forward to working together to ensure [Student's Name] is safe, supported, and able to learn successfully at school.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Your Phone Number]

[Your Email Address]

Parent/Guardian of [Student's Name]

# + Autism Emergency Profile Date: \_\_\_\_\_

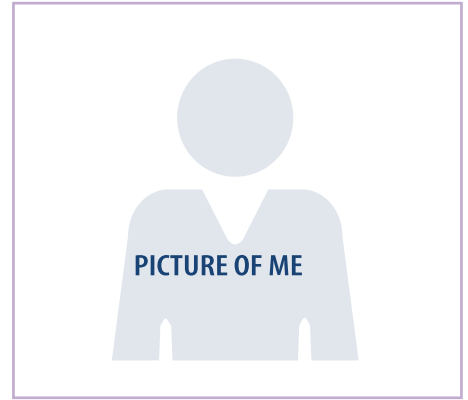
 Name: \_\_\_\_\_  Age/DOB: \_\_\_\_\_

 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**



## 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  
**Aqua-Tots:** aqua-tots.com  
Check with your local YMCA  
Google “adaptive swimming lessons near me”

### Safety & Security Products:

**AngelSense GPS:** angelsense.com  
**MedicAlert:** medicalert.org

### For Teachers:

**Ukeru Systems**  
Training programs for schools and agencies to reduce restraint and seclusion practices.  
[www.ukerusystems.com](http://www.ukerusystems.com)