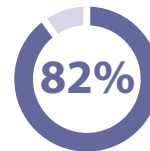




Understanding the Why's of Wandering/Elopement

Quick Facts



Since 1974, drowning has accounted for 82% of autism-related elopement fatalities¹



Children with autism will typically head straight to the nearest body of water²



According to Columbia University, children with autism are 160 times more likely to die from drowning than the general pediatric population³

1. McIlwain, L. Longitudinal surveillance and analysis of autism-related elopement fatalities, 1974 to present, maintained through the National Autism Safety Council.

2. McIlwain, L., Hudgins, C., Heaps, J. Autism-Related Elopement Fatalities in the United States 2025 REVIEW. National Autism Safety Council. February 2026.

3. 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>

4. McIlwain, L., et al. (2017). Mortality & risk in ASD wandering/elopement, 2011–2016. <http://bit.ly/4iyeN21>

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.