



Wandering Off (*Elopement*)

What is wandering off (*elopement*)?

This is when a person tries to leave the safety of a responsible person's care or a safe area. Harm or injury may then happen. Wandering happens in many ways. For example, running away from adults at school or in public, leaving the classroom without permission, or leaving the house when the family is not looking are kinds of wandering. Wandering is common in all toddlers. However, sometimes, wandering may continue or come back in older children and adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Children with ASD have challenges with social skills and safety. That is why wandering can be dangerous and why there is a risk of serious injury.

How common is wandering off in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?

Research shows that about 1 in 3 young children with ASD has tried to wander off. This behavior may continue to happen in older children and even teenagers and adults with ASD. This is concerning since many people with ASD may not be able to share their names, addresses, or phone numbers if they get lost.

What happens to children with ASD who try to wander off?

Up to half of children with ASD who wander are missing long enough to concern their parents. In one survey, 1 out of 3 parents said they have called the police to help find a wandering child. Two out of 3 parents said their wandering children had close calls with traffic injuries. About 1 out of 3 parents reported near drowning in water. Older children and adults with ASD who wander may also have challenges with law enforcement officers. This might happen when they do not answer officers in a way officers expect or if they can't communicate at all. Untrained officers may mistakenly think that people with ASD are drunk or are using drugs.

Why do children with ASD wander off?

Children with ASD wander off for a variety of reasons. Some parents of children with ASD say their children have these reasons for wandering.

- Enjoying running or exploring
- Wanting to go to a place they enjoy (such as the park)
- Trying to get out of an anxious situation (such as challenges at school)
- Looking for a special interest (like when a child who loves trains heads for train tracks)
- Trying to get away from uncomfortable things like loud noises, bad tastes, etc

What can be done to decrease wandering?

- *Know that wandering can happen anywhere and anytime.* Parents and caregivers should pay close attention and not get distracted when caring for a child with ASD. This is especially true during events with a lot of people, such as family get-togethers or outings. Settings like these create changes in routine, which can increase the risk of wandering. Children with ASD often get fixated on objects or places and may wander to get close to an object or get to a location. It is also important for parents and caregivers to provide extra supervision if a child is playing outside and/or around water.
- *Secure your home.* This might include putting on dead bolt locks, a home security alarm system, alarms on doors and windows, or fencing around your yard.
- *Teach different behaviors.* If a child is wandering to get something or to get away from a situation, teach her other ways to ask for what she wants.
- *Alert your neighbors.* By knowing your neighbors, you can lower the risk that comes with wandering. Think about giving your neighbors information about your child that you think might help prevent wandering.



What else can help keep my child safe?

- *Make a family wandering emergency plan.* Make sure your family has a plan in case of a wandering emergency. Have other caregivers such as grandparents or school staff help make the safety plan. The Autism Wandering Awareness Alerts Response and Education Collaboration and the National Autism Association Big Red Safety Box program have sample plans that can be downloaded (see the Resources section on this page).
- *Keep an emergency form.* Make up-to-date information cards about your child, with a picture and a description of what your child looks like. These can be given to neighbors, police, and school staff in case your child wanders.
- *Consider home safety measures.* Low-cost home changes may be helpful, such as door and window alarms. You can also place STOP or safety alert signs on home windows, doors, or car windows (see the Resources section).
- *Consider a tracking device.* These devices can be worn on the child's wrist, ankle, or shoes. They find the child through radio frequency or with GPS tracking. Check with your local law enforcement agency for more information (see also the Resources section).
- *Consider an ID bracelet or another ID device.* Medical ID bracelets and devices can have a name, a telephone number, or other important information. If your child will not wear a bracelet, it can be placed on shoe strings. There are many other ways to identify your child (like temporary tattoos) (see the Resources section). When your family is vacationing away from home, it is especially important that your child has some form of ID that can be easily seen in case of wandering.
- *Teach safety skills.* Work with your therapy team to understand your child's safety skills and then teach skills to help your child identify herself and stay safe (eg, say your name, respond to "Stop," wear and show an ID bracelet).
- *Teach your child to swim.* Ask your pediatrician if there are groups that offer swimming lessons for children with special needs in your area. If you own a pool, fence it in completely and have gates that self-close and self-latch higher than your child's reach. You can also install a pool alarm, which is triggered by waves from a human that has entered the pool after the alarm has been set. You can also contact the National Autism Society for a list of states that offer swim lessons as a part of its Autism & Safety program: <https://nationalautismassociation.org/resources/autism-safety-facts/swimming-instructions>.
- *Alert area police and fire departments.* Your community may have programs that allow you to give police, firefighters, or other first responders information about your child before wandering happens. This information could include emergency contact information, a photo, and any other information about your child that might help.
- *Consider medical or behavioral treatments.* A behavioral specialist may help with wandering at home, in the community, or at school. Treatment of anxiety, attention problems, impulsivity, or hyperactivity may also lower wandering risk. Talk with your child's doctor or a behavioral specialist about assessing and treating all the mental health conditions your child has.

Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics HealthyChildren.org:
www.HealthyChildren.org

Autism Wandering Awareness Alerts Response and Education Collaboration: www.awaare.org

Interactive Autism Network (IAN) elopement and wandering studies

- Anderson AM, Law JK, Marvin AR, Lipkin PH. Elopement patterns and caregiver strategies [published online March 5, 2019]. *J Autism Dev Disord*. doi:10.1007/s10803-019-03961-x
- Anderson C, Law JK, Daniels A, et al. Occurrence and family impact of elopement in children with autism spectrum disorders. *Pediatrics*. 2012;130(5):870–877. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4524545>. Published October 8, 2012. Accessed May 2, 2019
- "IAN Research Report: Elopement and Wandering": https://iancommunity.org/cs/ian_research_reports/ian_research_report_elopement
- "Nearly Half of Children With Autism Wander or 'Bolt' From Safe Places": www.kennedykrieger.org/stories/nearly-half-children-autism-wander-or-bolt-safe-places

National Autism Association:
<http://nationalautismassociation.org>

National Autism Association Big Red Safety Box program: <http://nationalautismassociation.org/docs/BigRedSafetyToolkit.pdf>



Resources (*continued*)

National Autism Association “Swimming Instructions: Locations That Offer Special Needs Swimming Instructions”: <https://nationalautismassociation.org/resources/autism-safety-facts/swimming-instructions>

Handout derived in part from Autism Wandering Awareness Alerts Response and Education Collaboration. *Autism and Wandering*. Portsmouth, RI: National Autism Association; 2014. <http://awaare.nationalautismassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/wanderingbrochure.pdf>. Accessed August 26, 2019. “IAN Research Report: Elopement and Wandering” reproduced in part in handout with permission of Kennedy Krieger Institute, Baltimore, MD. This information appeared originally at www.iancommunity.org/cs/ian_research_reports/ian_research_report_elopement.

