



Autism Spectrum Disorder Behavior Risks and Safety

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Goals

Understand the risks and why?

Categories of danger:

- Wandering
- PICA
- Victimization

Safety: (throughout the topics)

- At home
- In the community

Why is Their Risk Greater?

- Impulsive behavior is common.
 - Triggers may be running away spontaneously to an interest such as water, a train or a car, or running from a noxious stimulus to avoid it.
- Deficits in communication and social reciprocity impair the ability to communicate danger or understand warnings.
- Sensory gating leads to lability of emotion.
 - Decreased habituation to danger.
- Deficits of communication or tantrums, shutting down or running away may provoke caretakers.

Autism and Mortality

- Several studies including a 2022 meta-analysis showing increased risk of mortality in ASD patients.
- There is an excess number of deaths not associated with natural causes
- Fair to poor general health were associated with higher rates of mortality.
- Deficits in social reciprocity were associated with higher mortality.
- Female ASD patients had higher mortality as well.
- More studies need to be done to further characterize cause and effect of ASD and mortality .

Dangers

Wandering

PICA

Victimization

Wandering

Wandering

- Since 2011 there have been 1500 cases of a person with autism missing or found missing with 200 fatalities
- A third of all wanderings end in death or needing medical attention
- 71% of deaths are from drowning with natural bodies of water or canals being the most common location
- Greatest number of wanderings was in the age 10-14 years though those at age 5-9 years, had the highest mortality
- Those less than age 5 years of age are at the greatest risk of death from wandering, up to 60%

Water Safety for Autism Patients

- Autistic children and adults are often drawn to water, and they may not be cognitively aware of the inherent dangers or force of water
- During the pandemic fewer children in general received swimming lessons
- Based on a survey of parents with children diagnosed with autism, over half of them were wanderers
- The leading cause of death of those that wander is drowning

Safety Recommendations

- Start early- use stories or pictures to show water and water safety, be aware of those that may show an interest in water or those that may tend to wander
- Focus on sleep hygiene as children that are well rested are less hyperactive and less likely to wander
- Do developmentally appropriate swim lessons early – YMCA , Swim Angelfish videos on YouTube
- Consider swim lessons in full clothing to reproduce conditions of wandering
- Emphasize the dangers of water- both swimming pools and natural bodies of water

Safety Recommendations

- Take precautions to prevent wandering
 - Secure the home, be familiar with triggers, consider monitoring doors or location devices (many options available)
- Alert others the child or adult may come in to contact with that they have a tendency to wander and have an interest in water.

PICA

PICA

Eating all kinds of items- most commonly

- Soap
- Clothing
- Pebbles
- Household toxins
- Dirt

PICA – Why?

- Sometimes this is due to seeking the textural experience or sensory feedback
- Sometimes it is a difficulty to discern food from non-food
- Sometimes it is to seek out a nutrient they are deficient in (common with often limited diets)

PICA

- Healthcare providers should be aware of nutritional deficiencies such as iron or zinc as well as possible lead exposure
- Also, providers should be aware of dental issues, GI obstruction and infection risks

PICA Strategies

- Consult with a care provider for possible labs
- PICA proof your home and outings as much as possible
- Communicate with school or other care locations that your child has PICA
- Provide other stimuli as replacements
- Consider behavioral therapy with a specialist

Victimization

Autism and Victim Risk

Victimization takes on many forms-

- Social vulnerability leads to bullying such as being teased or persuaded
- Money or theft issues
- Abuse in the forms of physical, emotional and sexual

Victimization

- Social reciprocity deficits impede ability to understand or communicate safety concerns
- Non-verbal patients may not be able to report abuse
- Emotional lability and deficits in emotional expression can provoke care takers

Protective Factors

- Patients with greater social skills and peer or other social networks report less abuse than others without
- It has not been proven but social skills training may well reduce the rates of victimization
- Safety planning can be protective as well
- Teaching to consult a parent when there has been a questionable interaction
- Have consistent response to “no” so that kids with autism feel heard

Resources

Autism Speaks Safety Guide is comprehensive!

Autism Speaks Safety Guide

Top Safety Risk for Individuals with Autism:

- Wandering or eloping from safety
- Pica
- Drowning
- Household toxins
- Misunderstanding related to communication difficulty

Safety Plan Checklist:

- Does the person with autism tend to wander, run away or get lost in a crowd?
- Have your home, school and community activities been evaluated for safety? Have preventative measures been put into place in each of these areas?
- Does the person ALWAYS wear identification with a contact number listed?
- Have you let your neighbors/community know about your child with autism?
- Are safety skills included in the Individual Education Program in your school district?
- Have you contacted your local 911 call centers?

Be Prepared with Emergency Information at your Fingertips:

- Printable forms and handouts in the [Autism Safety Kit](#) to develop a multifaceted safety plan specific to a person with autism's unique needs
- Remember, a person with autism's safety needs can change as they get older or when there is a sudden change in routine, so the safety plan should be updated on a regular basis

Autism Speaks – Autism Safety Kit Links

[Safety & Wandering Prevention Checklist](#)

[Family Wandering Emergency Plan](#)

[Autism Elopement Alert Form](#)

[Neighbor Alert Letter](#)

[Seven Steps to Prevent Wandering at Your Child's School](#)

[School Alert/IEP Letter](#)

[Teaching Safety FAQ](#)

[Safety Log](#)

[Wandering Tips for First Responders](#)



Questions???

References

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- [Keep Kids with autism safe from wandering: Tips from the AAP](#) (HealthyChildren.org)
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