

CHILDREN ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM:

Search Protocols & Questionnaire for First Responders



The purpose of this document is to provide key information, guidance, and questions to ask families and caregivers in the event a child on the autism spectrum goes missing. In addition to these search protocols and questions, law enforcement and other first responders are encouraged to consult Home Safe's [*Understanding Children on the Autism Spectrum: A Guide for First Responders*](#), as well as free resources to help find missing children, including deployment of Team Adam and all the other coordinated resources available through the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® such as poster distribution, victim and family support, and analytical services by calling **1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678)**.

THE INITIAL RESPONSE

The recommendations below are offered to help guide law enforcement and other first responders in the initial response and search for the child. Law enforcement should:

- Conduct search of residence/care facility and attached property or yard. It is recommended to search more than once as the child may be hiding or hidden.
- Identify and preserve the point where the child was last seen.
- Determine if any search measures that cause noise such as aircraft, canines, ATVs, or any other resources used to assist in searches may frighten the child or cause them to retreat further, and plan accordingly.



“ Any recovery and reunification experience can be traumatic for a child.”

- Use of trained search canines at the onset of the response could help ensure successful tracking. Consider deploying as soon as possible even before ground searches. Ensure the canines are trained for the type of search needed (i.e., tracking, air and ground scent, water certified, etc.)
- Collect a recent photo of the child, DNA (tooth/hairbrush), and scent article such as uncontaminated shoes, clothing, or sheets, with proper permission.
- Ask about the child's behavioral and cognitive functioning and any information about the interests or other characteristics that may assist in searching for the child.
- Identify hazards in the area where the child was last seen, and dispatch personnel to those locations to search for the child, paying special attention to any bodies of water and specific locations of interest to the child, such as their favorite places. Keep in mind that a missing child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may find their way to places that have already been searched so consider posting search personal to especially hazardous places like bodies of water.

- Secure identified hazardous areas near where the child was last seen to prevent the child from entering those areas.
- Establish roadblocks and containment measures of the child's known routes to prevent them from traveling further away from the place last seen, using all appropriate means, such as road, bike, and air patrol.
- Use ground sweep teams and road, off-road, bicycle and/or horse mounted patrols and air support observation along travel corridors, routes to favorite places, previous locations visited, and any other areas of interest.
- Consider using a mass notification system to help alert the local community via a rapid-response, neighborhood-alert program using high tech phone systems.
- Determine if an Endangered Missing Advisory should be issued.

“ The deployment of personnel trained in search and rescue protocols is highly recommended to assist in the investigation to safely locate the missing child.”



SEARCH AND RESCUE MEASURES

The search and rescue measures below may help in safely locating a missing child on the autism spectrum. The deployment of personnel trained in search and rescue protocols is highly recommended to assist in the investigation to safely locate the missing child. Law enforcement should:

- Provide information immediately to search and rescue personnel about the child's behavioral and cognitive functioning and any information about the interests or other characteristics that may assist in searching for the child.
- Establish an Incident Command System (ICS) that includes a search and rescue manager.
- Use search and rescue personnel accustomed to the existing geography whether urban, suburban, or rural.
- Document all resources used in the search and what areas they were searching, and maintain current maps of search areas to determine the probability of detecting the child and additional resources to deploy.
- Initiate search and rescue efforts with an emphasis on bodies of water, high hazard areas, travel corridors, routes to favorite places, previously visited locations, and any other areas of interest suggested by those who know the child.
- Attempt to attract the child by using their favorite things, such as playing a favorite song or driving a favorite type of vehicle into the search area. Audio tape parent or caregiver's voice and play over loudspeaker.
- Use night-search techniques, if appropriate, such as projected lights and patterns, especially spinning patterns, or other types of favorite visuals to attract the missing child. **Note:** Be aware night searches could be hazardous to the child if the terrain includes dangers such as cliffs, drop-offs, mine shafts, or bodies of water. Attempting to draw a child into these areas could lead to tragic consequences if these are not identified by searchers and secured prior to using attraction devices.
- Consider using track traps (a trail area, either prepared or naturally occurring, that shows tracks well) on favorite trails to track the child's movements at night.

CONSIDERATIONS IN THE EVENT OF A PROLONGED SEARCH

If search efforts do not result in the safe recovery of the missing child, the recommendations noted below are provided to assist in the planning for a prolonged search and rescue effort. Law enforcement should:

- Evaluate the overall effectiveness of the search operations and adjust as necessary for the next operational phase.
- Determine if there are any gaps in the original search area and consider searching those areas again.
- Estimate immediate and long-range resources and logistical requirements for deployment of those resources.
- Assign new or additional personnel for the prolonged search operation.
- Consider expanding the search area, assessing the distance the child could have walked during the time frame they have been missing and their resiliency. Children on the autism spectrum have been known to walk several miles, often exceeding the initially established search containment area.
- Consider using trained search and rescue personnel with volunteer searchers to enhance the search capabilities.



NOTE: All children who are missing over an extended period of time are at risk of exposure to weather and environmental hazards; dehydration; lack of adequate nutrition, food, or medication; traffic-related injuries or incidents; falls, especially down steep terrain; and even potential encounters with others who would intentionally try to harm or exploit them.

RECOVERY AND REUNIFICATION MEASURES

Any recovery and reunification experience can be traumatic for a child. The considerations noted below are recommended to de-escalate and/or minimize any heightened emotions or anxieties the child may experience at the time of recovery.

- Bring a parent, caregiver, or guardian immediately to the recovery site, whenever possible, and tell the child that person is on the way.
- Maintain a calm and relaxed environment and limit the number of people communicating and interacting with the child.
- Approach the child at their level, kneeling if necessary, and speak with a calm tone using simple phrases.
- Avoid touching the child, if possible. Many children on the autism spectrum have adverse reactions to physical touch. If restraint is necessary, use techniques to reduce the need for prolonged touching of the child.
- Do not assume the child understands everything being said and done at the recovery scene, even if they are a teenager or older child.
- Use communication aids such as written instructions, drawings, or prompts, if possible.
- Reduce sensory input such as lights, sounds, and the number of people within the area.
- Understand children may exhibit behaviors, such as jumping, spinning, or flapping hands. Many children on the autism spectrum use these behaviors to calm themselves when excited or nervous.
- Give simple commands, one at a time. Give the child time to process commands and requests before starting again.
- Use a task-and-reward process to ease anxiety and enhance compliance using phrases such as, "First we are going to stay here, and then your father is going to come here."

CHILDREN ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR FIRST RESPONDERS

Incident Name _____

Today's Date _____

Time _____

Below are questions for first responders to ask of families and caregivers in the event a child on the autism spectrum goes missing.

Lost Child

Full Name _____

Preferred Name (Identify the best name the child responds to e.g., a nickname)

DOB _____

Gender (for NCIC) _____

Home Address _____

Home Phone _____

Zip _____

Physical Description

Height _____

Weight _____

Age _____

Build _____

Eye Color _____

Hair Color _____

Glasses _____

Distinguishing Marks (scars, moles, tattoos, or piercings)

Medical ID

Overall Appearance

Photo Available (Y /N)

Clothing

	Style	Color	Size	Other
Shirt/Sweater				
Dress				
Pants/Belt				
Hat				
Rain Gear				
Gloves				
Shoes				
Sole Pattern				
Jacket				
Additional Clothing				
Name on Clothing				

Point Last Seen

Time _____

Where _____

How _____

Seen by Whom _____

Weather Conditions at Time Last Seen _____

Current Weather Conditions _____

Direction of Travel Last Seen _____

Reason for Leaving _____

Mood (confident, confused, other) _____

Next of Kin

Name _____

Address _____

Home Phone _____

Cellphone _____

Relationship to Child _____

Close Friend

Name _____

Address _____

Home Phone _____

Cellphone _____

Family Doctor/Pediatrician

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____

After Hours Phone _____

Other Contact Information _____

Caregiver

Name _____

Address _____

Home Phone _____

Cellphone _____

School

Name _____

Address _____

Teacher's Name _____

Phone _____

After Hours Phone _____

Outdoor Experience

Familiar with Area _____

Favorite Places/Location _____

Any water or construction sites nearby or along routes of travel? _____

Previous Missing Incident

When (including details on time of day) _____

Where (including exact locations like GPS coordinates) _____

Circumstances (including how the child was recovered) _____

Health/General Condition

Medical or dietary issues/life-sustaining requirements _____

Overall Health _____

Overall Physical Condition _____

Known Medical/Dental Issues _____

Disabilities _____

■ Mental _____

■ Physical _____

■ Intellectual _____

Medication _____

Dosage _____

Side Effects _____

Impact if medication not taken _____

Sensory or Behavioral Triggers

Reaction to lights, sirens, aircraft, canines, people in uniform, strangers including how the child will respond to each

Response to pain/injury _____

Response to being touched _____

Methods used to calm child if upset _____

What are the child's fears and reactions to being alone or isolated?

Other information to be familiar with _____

Witness Information

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____

Relationship _____

Comments

Actions Taken

By Family/Friends/Caregiver _____

Results _____

Others _____

Comments

If public-safety telecommunicators did not provide the following information, obtain it after verifying basic identification and description information

Locative technology worn/carried (Y /N)

If yes, how are tracking measures initiated? _____

Child attracted to water (Y /N /U)

If yes, is there a specific body of water? _____

Child able to swim (Y /N /U)

Child attracted to active roadways/highways (Y /N /U)

Child attracted to trains, heavy equipment, airplanes, fire trucks or flashing/neon lights (Y /N /U)

If yes, is there a specific one? _____

Previous missing incident (Y /N /U)

If yes, what were triggers? _____

Where located? _____

In the prior event(s), was the child leaving a situation or moving toward a target destination?

Sibling with intellectual/developmental disability _____

Sibling with previous missing incident _____

If so, where located? _____

Able to speak or non-speaking _____

Able to use sign language _____

Use of communication aids such as a letter board or tablet computer

Reaction when name is called _____

Responds to voice of mother, father, other (Y /N /U)

Knows name of parent/caregiver (Y /N /U)

Knows own address, phone number (Y /N /U)

Dislikes/Fears _____

Favorite song, toy, or media character

The Kevin and Avonte Program: Reducing Injury and Death of Missing Individuals with Dementia and Developmental Disabilities



Through the *Kevin and Avonte Program: Reducing Injury and Death of Missing Individuals with Dementia and Developmental Disabilities*, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), in partnership with [NCMEC](#), [The Arc](#), and the [Bureau of Justice Assistance](#), Office of Justice Programs at the U.S. Department of Justice, supports local jurisdictions' efforts to reduce the number of deaths and injuries of individuals with forms of dementia such as Alzheimer's disease or developmental disabilities such as autism who, due to their condition, wander from safe environments.

CONTACT US: homesafe@theiacp.org

Visit us:
theiacp.org/projects/home-safe

Visit The Arc's webpage:
thearc.org/our-initiatives/criminal-justice/pathway-justice/

Visit NCMEC's autism webpage:
missingkids.org/theissues/autism



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