

WANDERING & ELOPEMENT

People with Autism and intellectual or developmental disabilities are at increased risk for elopement. This may be due to:

- Lack of danger awareness or understanding safety rules
- Difficulty distinguishing strangers from people they know
- Escalated anxiety in unfamiliar situations or with changes in routine
- Intense interests or fixations on dangerous things like water or or trains

They may be at further increased risk for injury because:

- They may not have the language to call for help
- They may misperceive people trying to help them as threatening
- They may not attend to or understand immediate dangers like water or traffic

Types

- Wandering: wandering from place without a fixed plan or destination
- Goal-directed wandering: wandering with the purpose of getting to something
- Bolting/Fleeing: suddenly running or bolting away due to anxiety, stress or sensory overload
- Other: nighttime wandering; disorientation, boredom, transition or confusion

Statistics

- Nearly half of children with ASD engage in wandering behavior
- Over one third of children who elope can't state their name, address, or phone number
- Half of families report they have never received guidance on elopement from a professional
- Accidental drowning accounts for approximately 90% of lethal outcomes

Patterns and Triggers

- Determine what triggers may make your child/adult wander off or leave quickly
- Implement strategies to avoid known triggers
- Work on calming methods to help your child/adult cope with the trigger
- Address known goals; allow time to explore obsessions in a safe, supervised environment
- Determine if the person is trying to get away from something (noise? commotion? boredom?)
- Pay attention to transitions (new home, new school, or other stressors)

Secure Your Home

- Install secure dead bolt locks that require keys on both sides
- Install a home security alarm system or battery-operated alarms on doors and windows
- Place hook and eye locks on all doors, above your child's reach
- Fence your yard
- Print Stop Signs to hang on doors, windows, and gates

Teach About the Dangers

- Work on calming methods to help cope with the triggers and provide alternatives to eloping
- Use the types of language/lingo they like, and favorite characters, topics in your explanation
- Use social stories to teach the person about the dangers of wandering into traffic, water, and encounters with strangers
- Discuss a variety of possible scenarios and settings
- Consider adhering stop signs to all doors, windows, and gates

Wearable ID

- Medical bracelet
- Temporary Tattoos
- Shoe Tags

GPS Tracking Device Considerations

- Does the system involve trained emergency response personnel?
- Charging: How often? Battery life? Is your loved one protected during charging?
- Water Resistance: can the unit be worn when bathing, showering, swimming?
- Coverage: geo-fencing/perimeter notification, portability
- Pricing: initial costs and monthly fees

Neighbors

Give your neighbor a handout with contact information and a photo of your child. Also include:

- Does your child have a fear of cars or animals or is he/she drawn to them?
- Does your child gravitate towards pools or nearby ponds or creeks?
- Does he/she respond to their name or would a stranger think they are deaf?
- Are there sensory issues or meltdown triggers your neighbors should know about?

Inform First Responders (SPIN 911 in Monroe County)

- Name of child or adult, current photograph and physical description
- A listing of your child's favorite song, toy, character, etc.
- Names, phone numbers and addresses of parents, caregivers and emergency contacts
- Sensory, medical, or dietary issues and requirements
- Favorite attractions and locations where the person may be found
- Likes, dislikes, fears, triggers, and de-escalation techniques
- Communication: note if nonverbal, uses sign language, picture boards, or written words

Swimming

- Teaching your child how to swim DOES NOT mean your child is safe in water
- If you own a pool, install a fence with gates that self-close and self-latch taller than your child
- Remove all toys or items of interest from the pool when not in use.
- Neighbors with pools should be made aware of your child's tendency to wander

Stay Vigilant

- Monitor growth in motor skills, height, etc., since they may newly be able to unlock a door or open a window
- Changes in interests can dictate changes in preventative measures and response
- Changes in school settings will dictate new preventive measures and response
- Update your child's alert profile annually, and more often if there are changes in appearance
- Monitor physical changes at school and other non-home environments
- Neighborhood changes such as new neighbors, new pools, new items of interest, etc.

School Policies and Procedures

- Develop or update written district and/or school policies on supervision of students. Consider arrival and departure, transition times, lunch, recess, etc.
- Develop or update written district and/or school policies on wandering/elopement prevention
- Introduce the child to all security and administrative staff.
- Seriously address any reports of bullying or mistreatment of a child at school or on the bus

IEP Considerations

- Medical Diagnosis: ICD-10-CM Diagnosis Code Z91.83 (Wandering in Diseases Classified Elsewhere)
- Document fascinations, triggers, etc. in the Present Levels of Performance
- Add Wandering/Elopement to Special Alerts, along with appropriate emergency procedures
- Wandering-prevention measures for staff under Supports for School Personnel
- Utilize individual counseling and goals to teach safety skills and calming techniques
- Address triggers with a service (i.e. 1:1 supervision during transitions, etc.) or an accommodation (specific to the child)

Visit awaare.org for additional resources and information.