

PFA Tips

When They Wander or Run Away

It wasn't that long ago so it's still fresh in my mind. The realization that I could no longer take my kids places alone. The nightmare of being at the grocery store check-out and watching my four-year old son run out the automatic door and straight into the parking lot. Forget the fact that I left my open purse and wallet sitting there on the counter. The true horror was that I was forced to run after him, leaving behind my three-year old daughter. And so the rule became that two adults had to accompany my two kids whenever we left the house. He ran away from the house too, but at least strangers weren't in my home surrounding my daughter. So what do we do if we have a child that elopes?

Teach your child water safety
71% of deaths related to wandering are caused by drowning. That's right – 71%. Teach your child to swim, doggy paddle, or float.

Call 9-1-1 IMMEDIATELY

The longer you wait, the greater the head start your child has. Be TRUTHFUL to the police regarding how long your child has been missing. It's easy to fall into the trap of saying, "It's only been 15 minutes," when it's really been 45. That time frame changes the rescue team's search perimeter. And tell 9-1-1 your child has autism.

How quickly can you describe your child?

Keep a current picture of your child easily accessible so if they elope you can help neighbors and law enforcement identify them on the streets. Before outings, take a picture on your phone to have with you. Pay close attention to what they are wearing each day, which is something you may not notice as much once they no longer need your help picking out clothes and getting dressed. And don't wait for that annual check-up to log their height and weight. You want to be able to quickly provide as many descriptive details as you can, and preferably on ID cards or information sheets you can distribute.

Awareness of self and dangers

Our kids may not have real awareness of dangers in their environment. How often have we witnessed our kids run out into a street? Some may also be seeking sensory input, so running or running into objects may help feed that. But our kids aren't watching what's going on around

them when they take off. Practice crossing streets during a non-crisis time. Maybe carry a paper stop sign to hold up, giving them a visual reminder. For older children, try prompting instructions into a less conspicuous Bluetooth.

Fleeing school

Inform ALL staff at the school of your child's elopement issues so teachers will be on the lookout if they see them heading towards a door, or to keep a sharp eye on them at recess. Accompany your child on field trips, or make certain that a person is assigned directly to your child for the trip. Just because a teacher knows your child has tendencies to run away doesn't mean that the teacher will keep an eye on them. When my son was in preschool, one of the teachers admitted to me that they lost another child three times during that day's field trip.

49% of children with ASD elope, often from a safe environment

27% of children with I/DD elope

33%+ of children with ASD cannot communicate their name, address or phone number

71% of deaths related to wandering caused by drowning

Take your child to the local police and fire precincts

There are multiple reasons for doing this. First, introduce the first responders to your child and make them aware they have autism. This way if they see them out in



the community and they seem out of place, they will be aware that maybe they have run away. A second reason to introduce your child to local law enforcement, especially if your child is older, is so that if your child is approached by the police, misunderstandings can be avoided. If your child does run away, we want them to know who is safe to approach. Introduce them to the "safe" people they can go to for help. And practice the steps of what to do if your child ever becomes lost. For more tips read "PFA Tips: How to Interact with Police" at <https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/safety/parent-tips-how-to-interact-with-police/>.

Tattoos and tags

We don't think twice about buying ID tags for our dogs, but how many of us consider personal identification for our kids? Whether it's an ID bracelet for the wrist or ankle, a shoelace tag, or a pretty necklace designed for your daughter, this piece of "jewelry" could tell first responders what your child can't. Another option is to go with ink. SafetyTat offers a variety of child ID temporary tattoos, while If I Need Help designs scannable clothing tags and patches.

continued on back



Super pet

I will admit, when we got my dog, the intent was to have him trained to be a service dog that could perform search and rescue operations. That didn't happen, but he's a great family pet. Service and therapy dogs can be a true gift. But be prepared for the commitment and the cost as training can run about \$10,000. To find training centers and service dog programs, go to our Provider Directory and choose Category > Therapy and Companion Dogs.

Tell me a story

Social stories can be effective ways to describe a situation and the appropriate social or behavioral responses for that situation. Depending on your child, they may respond best to a story that features them as the main character or star, or they may feel less defensive if the story is about a fictional character. Your speech therapist, psychologist, or special educator might also be able to help create a social story specific to your child.

Don't fence me in

If your child elopes, you may need to do just that. Be sure to check with your homeowners association or rental office for rules of what's allowed. Are your neighbors considering a fence? If so, maybe you can share the costs of your common sides. Get multiple vendor quotes and explore funding options.

Technology to the rescue

There are low and high tech gadgets out there to alert us when our children leave, and help track them. For the home, consider door and window alarms or motion sensors. Bells offer a good, low-cost alternative. On the doors, you can use locks that are placed at the top of the door, keeping in mind that at some point your child will grow, or will be able to stand on a stool to reach the lock. Two-way key locks (a key is required on both sides) are another option. But keep the keys out of reach and out of sight – how many of our kids see us do something only once and can then do it themselves? Technology, such as GPS devices, can be an amazing tool, but tracking should be the last step. Always start with preventive measures and preparation. Before making any purchase, do your homework on the product, and consider if your child would remove a device they need to wear.

Why do they run?

In addition to devices designed to prevent our kids from eloping, and gadgets to find them when they do, behavior therapy may serve as a more lasting tool. A behavior therapist can work to determine the function of the elopement, whether it's escaping a difficult situation, running to a preferred activity, or seeking something sensory. Once the function is identified, appropriate interventions can be developed.

The ICD-10-CM code Z91.83 Diagnostic Code for Wandering

Effective October 1, 2011, wandering was added to the diagnostic coding system clinicians use, which is known as the International Classification of Diseases. The wandering code is not linked to a specific diagnosis, nor is it part of the diagnostic codes used for autism or intellectual disabilities. The ICD-10-CM classifies behaviors and risk factors in addition to diseases and syndromes; as such, the wandering code is used in conjunction with other diagnostic and symptom or procedure codes. This code is intended to capture information about individuals, with any condition classified in the ICD, who wander. Wandering should be coded if documented in the medical record by the provider (i.e., physician).

If your child is given this diagnostic code, you may want to share that information with your IEP team. This code is not really a legal aspect of the IEP. However, if you know that your child wanders and the school states they do not see this behavior, having this code will support the perceived risk that they may run away. It also serves a purpose for data collection and should be addressed in your child's Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP).

Additional Resources

"When They Wander or Run Away" recorded webinar
<https://pathfindersforautism.org/when-they-wander-webinar/>

PFA Tips: Wandering and Elopement at School
<https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/safety/elope-at-school/>

Identification Tools
<https://pathfindersforautism.org/resources/safety/identification-tools/>

Tracking Devices
<https://pathfindersforautism.org/resources/safety/tracking-devices/>

PFA Safety Resources <https://pathfindersforautism.org/resources/safety/>

Pathfinders for Autism Provider Directory
<http://pathfindersforautism.org/providers-services/>

Written by Shelly McLaughlin, Director of Safety Programs, Pathfinders for Autism

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