

# PFA Tips

## Wandering and Elopement at School

**S**afety is the first concern with wandering and elopement behaviors. Safety of the student who is trying to flee an area as well as the safety of the school staff. Often these behaviors aren't addressed early and they become a pattern for a student. Even worse, the natural response to run after the student might be an unintentional reinforcement for this unsafe behavior. The following information should be considered to develop a thoughtful and meaningful plan to curb elopement behaviors. *(This is an excerpt - to read the full article visit [pathfindersforautism.org/articles/safety/elope-at-school/](http://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/safety/elope-at-school/))*

As with all behaviors, especially when they reach a crisis level, and deal with the safety of a student, we often want and need quick answers and responses. Unfortunately, it is hard to put a behavior plan in place when there isn't any data. However, before we discuss the data collection process, there are some natural environmental supports that could be tried while you are collecting data.

### Preventative Measures to Help with Wandering and Elopement

#### Establish a safe area with clear boundaries

In a classroom this might be the back of the room (if large enough) or a designated area in the hallway (marked with tape or cones to visually show the boundaries). In a larger environment, it might be a space in the auditorium (again clearly marked) or an area near the student's location in the building. Establishing the assigned "safe wandering area" with the student should be done at the beginning of the class or before lunch/recess.

#### Place everyone strategically

If you know a student is prone to elopement, strategically place them away from an accessible door. It is recommended that a teacher, assistant or other adult be positioned near the student as well as the door to redirect the student if he attempts to leave.

#### Include staff throughout the building in the plan

Multiple staff – including those who may

not directly teach the student – need to serve as reinforcements throughout the building. Include them in the wandering and elopement plan and equip them with walkie talkies so they can assist quickly if needed. Staff also need to understand why a student might be "wandering in the hallway" and be aware of the "safe zone areas" designated for the student.

### The Elopement Plan

#### How a sample plan might read

An elopement plan might include:

1. If the student elopes from the classroom, an aid or adult will follow him.
2. The aid/teacher will immediately alert the support team through a call or walkie talkie.
3. The principal will immediately go to the front doors of the building. Assistant principal will cover the side exit, counselor will cover the recess doors, etc.
4. The person following the student will communicate with the support team what is happening (where the student is located, if they are walking, running, crying, etc.).
5. The team will communicate when the student is secure and debrief if the plan was effective.
6. An additional plan will need to be developed for returning the student to the learning environment after an elopement has occurred.
7. As with all behaviors that deal with the safety of a student, the incident should be documented, and parents should be informed immediately.

#### Developing a behavior plan

To develop a meaningful behavior plan,



specific data collection is critical. School teams often collect data through the process of a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) to gain more information about a specific behavior. However, you do not need to wait for an FBA to be conducted to start collecting data, especially for elopement.

#### Collecting the data to establish a baseline

1. First **identify the behavior** you are targeting. Example: Elopement.
2. Clearly **specify what elopement looks like** to someone observing the actual behavior. Example: Elopement is defined as: The student leaving his chair and running for the nearest exit to escape the classroom and/or the school building. The student runs full speed and is very quick and agile. The student will stop sometimes to look behind him to see if anyone is following but will continue to run until he is far away from an adult.
3. **Start a data collection sheet** to track the student's elopement (as defined above). The most common form of data collection is ABC data chart (antecedent, behavior, consequence). Example of an ABC data collect chart:

continued on back



Date	Time	Location	Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence	Response
2/26/20 Monday	11:30am	ELA/Mrs. Thompson-24 students	Mrs. Thompson asked Jack to take out his pencil to start the writing assignment.	Jack immediately yelled "no way" and darted toward the door. He got out the door and ran down the hallway toward the office screaming, "I am not writing!"	Aid immediately followed. Support team was called. Principal was waiting for him at the end of the hallway and was able to catch him.	Principal to the student, "I see you are upset about something. Let's walk together and catch our breath." Principal and student walk holding hands until student seems calm to talk. Jack brought his work to the office and completed it there.
2/27/20 Tuesday	9:00am	Homeroom/ Mr. Seward-23 students	Mr. Seward greeted Jack good morning and explained the morning activity. Jack saw the coloring paper activity on his desk and was directed to get his crayons.	Jack immediately bolted for the door. He knocked two students along the way. The classroom aid was near the door and was able to stop him. He screamed and cried he didn't want to write.	The aid helped Jack take deep breaths and told him once he did this they could go for a walk. Jack gave 3 breaths. The aid told him they had to hold hands and walk. Jack agreed. They went for a walk and talked about Jack's weekend.	The aid established what Jack wanted to do for his break. Jack said playdough. The aid told him he could use the playdough after he completed his morning paper. She offered to take turns coloring with him. She reminded him of the safety rules.
3/4/2020 Wednesday	2:20pm	Music Class-23 students	Mrs. Garner asked the students to draw a picture of what they see in their head when they heard Row Your Boat.	Jack immediately ran out of the classroom and out the front door of the building. He sat outside on the front stoop and cried.	The support team quickly got to Jack to make sure he was ok. Jack had to sit in the office for the rest of the day.	Jack sat in a chair and sang to himself until it was time to go home.
3/11/2020 Monday	9:00am	Homeroom/ Mr. Seward-23 students	Mr. Seward greeted Jack good morning.	Jack said hello and went to unpack. He heard something in the hallway on his way to his chair and ran into the hallway to find the noise.	The aid brought Jack back to class. She reminded him of the safety rules while they walked back to class.	

**4. Summarize the data collection period.** Example: Data collection for elopement was collected over a 2-week period (2/26/20-3/11/20), 10 school days. Of the 10 school days, Jack eloped (as defined above) 8 times.

**5. Discuss the data trends** using a Functional Behavior Assessment tool.

**Example**

**Time of Day:** Jack only eloped during times when he was in a general education classroom with more than 20 kids.

**Dates:** Three of the elopements were on Monday mornings.

**Antecedents:** Request to write or draw (5/8 times).

**Behavior:** Elopement from the class 7/8 times. Elopement from the building 1/8 times.

**Consequence:** Sitting in principal office, taking walks, giving him choices, reminder about first/then chart.

**Determine Function of Behavior by asking the main question:** What does Jack gain by eloping from the room or building????

6. Once you have a function for this behavior (in Jack's case to escape written work) the team can start working on **preventative strategies to decrease the student's behavior.** This is called a BIP (Behavior Intervention Plan).

**Behavior Intervention Plan for Elopement (Example)**

**Preventative Strategies:**

- Allow Jack to come into homeroom each morning with nothing on his desk.
- Read Jack's social stories on School Safety Rules and Staying in the Classroom Keeps Me Safe.
- Present Jack a choice of tools to practice his letters – the iPad or magnetic letter board.
- Establish what Jack will earn once he

practices his letters for 8 minutes.

- Give Jack alerts when a writing tasks are scheduled.
- Offer Jack choices for ways to complete the writing tasks.

**Teaching Strategies:**

- Read social stories each morning and discuss school rules.
- Model appropriate responses of replacement behaviors for elopement.
- Practice using those replacement behaviors every day.
- Reward Jack immediately when a writing task is introduced, and he reacts appropriately.

**Consequences:**

- Remind Jack of the safety school rules.
- Delay of earned break until he returns to class and finishes the work.
- Remind him Mom and Dad will be notified that he eloped.

**Track the data to determine if the interventions are working**

Once you have your data and a plan in place it will be important to continue collecting data using your ABC chart or other system. It will also be important to identify the Behavior Plan in your child's IEP or 504 plan.

**IEP objectives and goals**

Establish goals and objectives around each behavior to ensure progress monitoring is happening at school. School teams can easily write a behavior goal in an IEP once they have the baseline data. See the full article at <https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/safety/elope-at-school/> for sample IEP goals. The full article also includes a link to sample social stories.

**Additional Resources**

PFA Safety Resources (includes wandering and elopement tools)  
<https://pathfindersforautism.org/resources/safety/>

Wandering and Elopement at School from the Hussman Institute for Autism  
<https://pathfindersforautism.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Wandering-and-Elopement-at-School-from-Hussman.pdf>

Written by Lisa Frank, M.Ed.  
Educational and Behavioral  
Consultant, The Special Kids  
Company

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