

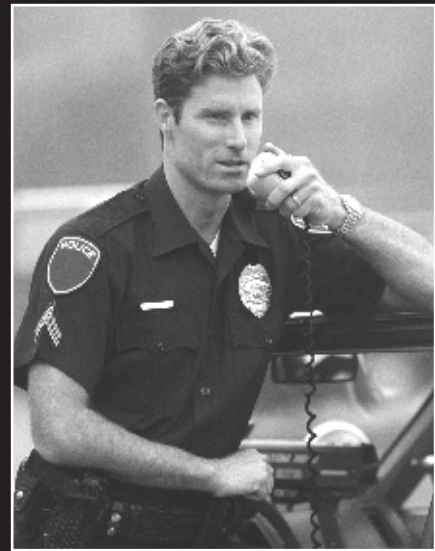
# Protecting Loved Ones with Autism

## Special Report Introduction

Every parent worries about the safety of his or her children. Whether it's concern over playing with fire, riding a bike without a helmet, or talking to strangers, families must strive to safeguard their children from harm until they are old enough, or able, to protect themselves.

However, for parents of individuals with autism, safety concerns extend far beyond those of a typical family. Issues such as sexual assault; lack of fear for danger in situations like street crossing and/or wandering off; issues with first responders and medical personnel; self-injurious behavior; and issues surrounding the justice system are top concerns weighing in the minds of parents of children on the autism spectrum today.

In this issue of the *Advocate*, you will read about the unique safety concerns families with autistic loved ones face. In *Victimization & Abuse*, Carolyn Gammicchia writes about what drove her to get involved with safety issues individuals with autism face and what she and her husband today are doing to stay involved; in *Managing Autism Safety*, Dennis Debbaudt presents critical advice for handling a loved one with elopement issues and talks about personal safety for persons with autism; and in *Child Abduction & Autism*, Adelle Jameson Tilton summarizes key steps you can take to prevent your child from being abducted. Each article includes valuable information on preparing for and preventing harm, and there is a resource page featuring helpful products and resources to assist you in your quest to protect your child. ■



# Victimization & Abuse of Persons with Autism

By Carolyn Gammicchia

## One Police Officer's Personal Perspective

**W**hen I was a teenager, I remember asking myself, "How can people treat others so cruelly," as I watched my older brother shuffle out of a jail cell barefoot and covered in a yellow plastic blanket. Still dazed from the events that had taken place the previous evening, he appeared to be too ashamed to look my father in the eyes. His face was bloodied and bruised and while I was able to look at my father, who by then was teary-eyed, I could see how deeply affected he was by his son's dehumanization at the hands of those who were supposed to protect him.



Officers Carolyn and Andrew Gammicchia

### SPECIAL REPORT

**T**hirty years later, treatment of persons with disabilities by law enforcement officers has improved a bit, but much more attention needs to be given to this important issue. Civil litigation has brought about change, but the genuineness and commitment to the delivery of mandatory training programs

continues to be lacking in local communities today.

It is unfortunate how I learned that it takes the death or serious injury of an individual to bring about court-ordered awards. And often the seriousness of the court's decision is lost along with the memory of the harmed individual.

### A Sister Remembers

**O**n the night my brother was arrested, his "crime" was having a seizure. Authorities found him completely naked outside of his home, in the middle of Michigan, one wintry night.

He had an eccentric nature; he felt shame, which he associated with his disorder, and so he was

alienated from his neighbors. They relished in calling the police when odd occurrences took place.

There was a violent struggle, and the officers took him away, without clothing which only further stripped him of his dignity. Also, the authorities failed to secure his home, which was an income property that my brother had worked very hard to purchase. He was proud of it and, that night, it mysteriously succumbed to a fire.

This situation involving my brother was one of many where law enforcement officers were involved. His rights were constantly ignored and violated and unfortunately, his life was one of misdiagnosis.

Despite testing with a genius I.Q. at the age of 12, he began having seizures shortly thereafter, a common occurrence in males with autism, and he was diagnosed with epilepsy. His condition ultimately resulted in the loss of his outgoing and confident soul.

His life ended in a state facility, where he was dehumanized by the people our family thought would provide him with necessary care.

Today I look at what happened to my brother, not only as a sibling of someone on the spectrum, but also as the mother of a child affected by autism. I also have an additional prospective as a police officer. In my years growing up and especially following my brother's death, I realized that if first responders are not appropriately trained, my son as well as others with autism, could be subjected to the same types of situations that my brother had faced.

## Getting Involved

**M**y journey and drive to influence change began when I attended a two-day symposium entitled "Under-

standing and Preventing Violence Against Persons with Disabilities." It was there that I learned the possibility that my son, and others, could be victimized were statistically greater than I had imagined. In addition, I noticed I was the only law enforcement officer present. Why weren't more law enforcement agencies sending their personnel? What could be done to ensure that the appropriate services were provided to those with disabilities who have been victimized?

## Taking Action

**M**y husband, Andrew, also a police officer, and I created the LEAN On US organization. LEAN stands for The Law Enforcement Awareness Network, and was founded to share resources, provide a path for individuals with hidden disabilities or mental illness to obtain information and ask for assistance, and provide an arena for law enforcement officers and first responder personnel to share situations involving persons with autism that they have faced.

Our child, like others with autism, is five to 10 times more likely to have contact with police officers, and four to 10 times more likely to be a victim of a crime. In addition, he was 50 to 99 percent more likely to be victimized by someone he knew such as a family member, care provider, bus driver, etc.

One study also indicated that 83 percent of women and 32 percent of men with developmental disabilities experience sexual abuse. In the non-verbal population amongst all disabilities, the chances of victimization are even higher due to the inability to properly communicate and/or lack of methods available to do so.

So with these statistics we knew we needed to do everything to ensure the safety of persons with autism.

## What To Do & How

**S**ome may find this odd, but our first reaction was to stop taking our son into the community. Parents wanting to protect a child, have been known to do this. But we soon realized that knowledge is key. Abuse prevention allows individuals with disabilities the ability to identify, prevent and stop violence. It teaches ways to keep safe.

To protect a child, it is essential to provide education to loved ones, and reiterate the importance of safety. To do this, you have to be able to identify the true risks factors for individuals with disabilities, and find ways to address each one. The following are examples of common risks with appropriate actions in identifying and dealing with victimization and abuse of persons with autism:

### *Risk 1:*

Persons with physical disabilities may depend on others to meet some of their basic needs. Personal care providers may be involved in the most intimate and personal parts of the individual's life, which can increase the opportunity for abusive acts.

### *Action:*

Educate those with autism spectrum disorders on what is appropriate touch and what is not. Identify all parts of the body in either words or with visual supports. This is vital in cases where personal care providers are involved, as it allows the person with autism to know if they are being victimized.

### *Risk 2:*

Many individuals with disabilities have limited vocabulary or communication skills, which pose barriers to disclosing abuse or assault. A perpetrator may believe that he/she can get away with abusive behavior since the individual would not be able to report it.

**Action:**

Educate those with autism that touching, beyond what you normally do to show affection to people they know or who assist with hygiene, may not be appropriate. Some parents have felt that explaining such things could encourage inappropriate behavior, but this has been found to be untrue. Even in the most severe cases, overt or negative changes in behavior are often a sign that victimization has occurred. Allow communication through behavior to come out.

**Risk 3:**

Some persons with disabilities use a communication board or electronic device to communicate. But many of these devices do not include vocabulary for reporting abuse or other victimization.

**Action:**

In cases where a device is used, ensure it is equipped with appropriate vocabulary and that your child understands the device can be used to describe inappropriate situations, too. If the device is taken away, ensure that another mode of communication, such as a visual support or sign, can be substituted.

**Risk 4:**

Individuals with autism are taught to be compliant, obedient, and passive to the wishes of others. They may not be taught about boundaries - that they have the right to say no to painful or unwanted touches.

**Action:**

Provide individuals with autism the opportunity to make choices daily and empower them to be non-compliant and that some activities are not appropriate. Allow them to say "no," and give them an "action plan," to escape in instances such as attempted abductions.



Left to right: Andrew, Nicholas, Carolyn and Alex Gammicchia.

**Risk 5:**

Many people with autism grow up unaware of the dangers of abuse. Without information on sexuality, abuse prevention education, and personal safety strategies, your child may not know how to get help from others or how to access emergency services.

**Action:**

Include requests for this type of education in your child's IEP. If provided to the general education population, your child has a right to the same. Oversee that the proper modifications are made; the use of visual supports may assist with anxiety experienced due to the subject matter.

**Risk 6:**

Many communities lack an accessible domestic violence shelter or a rape crisis center specifically centered on supporting individuals with disabilities.

**Action:**

To address this, order, "Sexual Assault: A Survivor's Handbook," a series of three paperback books written by Nora Balaerian, Ph.D., for and about people with developmental disabilities who

have been sexually assaulted, and to teach others about sexual assaults. Also, confirm that a trained forensic interviewer is on hand to assist should you need him or her. If the center does not staff one, call your state protection and advocacy agency obtain one. Remember that having someone who is unfamiliar with disabilities administer an interview will be very uncomfortable and is likely to increase the anxiety level of the victim.

**Risk 7:**

People with autism and other disabilities have traditionally been oppressed and segregated from their communities, and placed into congregate care residential facilities (i.e., group homes, state schools, nursing homes, foster homes). They are at a high risk of repeated victimizations from multiple perpetrators, and may lack access to telephones, family, social support, police and advocates.

**Action:**

We must make sure that programs such as recreational activities, classes, higher education opportunities, and employment opportunities are available and

accessible. Families that have a loved one living outside of their home should have an emergency backup plan should victimization occur. Remember, never place blame on yourself, the victim or others.

## Legal Action Against Those Who Hurt Others

It is very important to prosecute individuals who victimize those with autism. An article published by Raja Misha, "In Attacks on Disabled Few Verdicts" in the June 10, 2001 edition of *The Boston Globe*, indicates that despite the evidence, many law enforcement agencies end up dropping a majority of their cases.

It was revealed that out of 342 cases reported between 1997 and 1999 in the state of Massachusetts, only 5 percent of those obtained a conviction, compared to 70 percent of crimes involving those without disabilities. A victim's inability to testify, the reluctance to initially report the crime due to blaming themselves, and lost evidence due to a lack of experience in handling crimes with

those diagnosed with a developmental disability, were to blame.

## Drawing Conclusions

Where do we go from here? We need to become active advocates in this area and to take what has been created, and use it to implement an across-the-board-agenda for every individual who is involved in the life of someone with autism.

We need to ensure that our loved ones with autism are active within their communities, and become educated in the ways that will best protect them. We must allow them to harvest healthy and empathic relations, not dependent ones that can create abuse. And we need to train all of those who have contact with those affected by autism so they are able to provide a safe haven in a time of need.

It is imperative we have a Federally-legislated program to assist with the training of teaching first responders about *all* developmental disabilities. Awareness efforts would help to lower horrendous numbers of victimization. That, and the education process for those affected, may be the only chance for our son to not repeat his uncle's fate.

## A Special Thanks

Our family would like to thank the many advocates and parents who work tirelessly on this subject. Two other *Advocate* contributors, Dennis Debbaudt who, for many years, was the only individual who trained first responders about autism; and Bill Davis for his endless efforts to promote safety for those with autism. I would also like to thank Craig Stoxen of the South Carolina Chapter of the Autism Society and his staff who have trained many first responders through their "Autism Informed Response" program.

I'd like to pay tribute to my brother, Mark Coriaty, who also had many triumphs in his life. He taught me two things: 1) empathy and; 2) to make sure that we celebrate and cherish every person and honor the differences between us all. These lessons have assisted my husband and I in raising our sons. ■

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Austin Safe Place Web site, [www.austin-safeplace.org](http://www.austin-safeplace.org).

*Author's note: Remember to stay abreast on the progress of the H.R. 1350 bill which, if passed, would add provisions for training of school safety personnel and first responders to teacher training programs.*

*Carolyn Gammicchia and her husband, Andrew, are the proud parents of two boys, Alexander and Nicholas.*

*Carolyn is on the board of director's for the Autism Society of Michigan, and serves on two National ASA committees as well. She is an advocate for the Autism Tissue Program. Her brother was a donor into the program, in 1999, following his death.*



*Nicholas Gammicchia enjoys personal attention from his dolphin friend.*

# Managing Autism Safety

## Information for Parents, Persons with Autism, Law Enforcement & First Response Professionals

A parent's worst nightmare is the thought of witnessing his or her child being harmed. For parents of children with autism, the risk level is high. An individual without autism may identify with certain things or situations as being dangerous, but an individual with autism is likely to not recognize the same red flags. So life for parents of children with autism can be a struggle when dealing with the most common, everyday details. As a result, we feel overwhelmed and lost as to how to keep them protected.



Dennis Debbaut

By Dennis Debbaut

### SPECIAL REPORT

What happens when the people whose full-time job is to protect and serve, such as law enforcement and first responders, are the ones harming an individual with autism? Incidents like these can begin innocently - often with a person with autism who is nonverbal and irate - but then grow dangerous, as misunderstood behavior interpreted as being unsafe to others. Children and adults who lack basic education about how to

react well when interacting with the police can certainly be taught, though.

Autism communities across the country are increasingly sponsoring autism recognition and response workshops throughout the U.S. for law enforcement and other first response professionals. Moreover, persons with autism, parents and caregivers want to know what they can do to help ensure the safety of the child or adult

who has autism.

### Educating Yourself, Your Neighbors

Children and/or adults with autism who have sensory or medical issues or display atypical behaviors are likely to attract the attention of neighbors or passers-by. So while we understand that the behaviors and characteristics of persons with autism spectrum disorders

(ASD) are actually attempts at communication, others may see them as dangerous or suspicious.

Someone may dial 911 for assistance, and law enforcement and/or first response professionals will respond. That said, public education and awareness remains our best tool for keeping our children and adults, and ourselves, protected.

Law enforcement professionals suggest that you get to know your neighbors. It advises them about potential behaviors your child exhibits, which may be misconstrued.

Try to arrange for a visit to introduce your family. Prior to your visit, decide what information to present: important names to note, location of your home, your home and mobile number, and a picture of the child or adult. Also provide them with a simple handout on how to communicate with your child in an uncomfortable situation.

Neighbors can be extremely helpful if your child wanders off, and getting to know those who live nearby is a great effort in reducing a chaotic situation, as it gives them the opportunity to call you before they call the police. In addition, it may also lead to better social interactions for people with autism in your neighborhood.

## Elopement & Runners

**E**lopement and runners are situations when persons are out of control and run away from caregivers and into the community. An incident can occur anywhere to anyone, and the first time is often the worst time.

The child or adult may run into oncoming traffic, into a neighbor's home, unlocked vehicles, or peer into a neighbor's windows. Also, these so-called runners are often attracted to water such as pools, ponds, and lakes. Without a fear of real danger and in spite of not knowing how to swim, they

jump in. They have also been known to obsessively turn on water spigots.

If you or someone you care about lives with a person who has elopement issues, contact law enforcement, fire and ambulance agencies to advise them, as shown below.

### *Key Details You Should Give to First Responders:*

- Individual's name, a current description and photograph.
- Medical alert jewelry, nonpermanent tattoo; clothing with sewn in labels.
- Name of parents and care providers.
- Home address, contact phone numbers, including work, cell, and pager.
- Any sensory, medical, or dietary issues.
- Inclination for elopement and atypical behavior or characteristics that may attract attention.
- Favorite attractions and locations where the person may be found.
- Favorite toys, objects, or discussion topics.
- Likes, dislikes, and approach and de-escalation techniques.
- Method of communication, if nonverbal-sign language, (e.g., picture board, written word).
- Map and address guide to nearby properties with water sources and dangerous locations highlighted.
- Blueprint or drawing of home, with bedrooms of person(s) with autism highlighted.

Once you have contacted your local police or emergency agencies, ask them to red flag the information you provided in their 911-computer database. Keep printed handouts of the above bullets in your home and car, and provide trusted neighbors and friends with

copies in the event that you or your care provider suddenly become incapacitated and unable to communicate.

In addition, be sure to contact your local law enforcement agency to see if your community has a 911-system alert or red flag program intact if so, they will be able to enter any details that are specific to your child's disorder.

For severe elopement, consider contacting a professional locksmith, security company or home improvement professional.

## For Persons With Autism

**P**ersons with autism who navigate the community without assistance should consider developing a personal handout for the police. Remember that initial, uninformed contact with an officer often carries the highest potential for a negative outcome.

### *Tips For Persons With Autism Faced With Sudden Police Interaction:*

- Try to remain calm; do not attempt to flee or make sudden movements.
- Let the officer know you have autism. If nonverbal, use alternative communication, such as a simple sign language, to indicate the need to write or present an information card. If unable to answer questions, carry a generic or person-specific autism information card.
- Obtain permission or signal intentions before reaching into coat, pants pocket, or reaching into car glove box.
- Ask officer to contact an advocate, if necessary.
- For the best protection of all involved, if arrested, invoke the right to remain silent and ask to be represented by an attorney.
- If you are a victim or are reporting a crime, you do not

need to have an attorney present to speak to the police, but you may want the police to contact a family member, advocate, or friend who can help you through the interview process.

- Carry the phone number of an advocacy organization or personal advocate, relative or friend.

## Personal Safety

Everyone should take precautions to avoid becoming a victim of criminal activity. Unfortunately, persons with autism may need to take extra precautions. In order to avoid detection, arrest, and prosecution, criminally-bent individuals become skilled at picking out easy victims. Robbers and con artists will notice unusual behavior when they select their next victim, and criminals are notorious for operating in public places.

### *Tips To Avoiding Victimization From Street Crimes Or Abusers:*

- Always let someone know of your travel plans.
- Know the time schedules for buses and trains so you can identify and use the safest nearby pickup zone.
- Avoid unfamiliar areas; when possible, travel in groups or walk with a crowd.
- Do not dawdle or appear rushed in a crowd.
- Always park in a secure, well-lit area and keep car doors locked; take a good look around a parking lot before unlocking doors and exiting vehicle.
- Avoid gawking; do not maintain eye contact.
- Carry a whistle or other noise-makers. Carry a cell phone

- Do not carry large amounts of cash.
- Dress to suit the area.
- Do not wander or explore off well-traveled pedestrian walkways or roads.
- If approached by a stranger who wants your money or possessions, give them up. They can always be replaced.
- Resist requests to go with strangers. If necessary, run away, yell and scream. Get to a public place and immediately phone the police.

Persons with autism should also try to find out what local advocacy groups are available to them, or become involved in ongoing law enforcement training sessions. Visit ASA's Web site, [www.autism-society.org](http://www.autism-society.org), to access local chapter's contact information nationwide. If you contact a chapter and/or organization that has not yet addressed autism-safety issues, suggest that they do so immediately. Give yourself the opportunity, through your local police advocacy groups, to interact with and learn from law enforcement professionals in a relaxed atmosphere. This also gives them the opportunity to learn from you.

## For Law Enforcement Officers

According to a 1993 study, children and adults with autism and other developmental disabilities are seven times more likely than others to come in contact with law enforcement agencies. Interacting with a child or adult who has an autism spectrum disorder will challenge your experience and training.

Persons with autism will present unusual behaviors and characteristics in different combinations and degrees, and each person will have a different level of independence. Some with

autism will have a caregiver with them at all times. Others will live semi or fully independent lives. You will hear terms such as low-functioning/high-functioning autism and Asperger's Disorder to identify the level of their condition. In most cases, the person will have difficulties following verbal commands, reading your body language, and have deficits in social understanding.

Law enforcement agencies should proactively train their sworn workforce, especially trainers, patrol supervisors, and school resource officers, to recognize the behavioral symptoms and characteristics of a child or adult who has autism, and learn basic response techniques.

A training program should be designed to allow officers to better protect and serve the public and make the best use of your valuable time, and avoid mistakes that can lead to lawsuits and negative media scrutiny, loss of confidence from the community, morale problems, and lifelong trauma for all involved. A good autism recognition and response workshop is designed to inform law enforcement professionals about the risks associated with autism, and should offer suggestions and options about how to address those risks.

### *Some Risks Officers/First Responders Should Be Prepared To Identify:*

- Any type of behavior that draws attention.
- Misinterpreting those behaviors and characteristics as evidence of drug abuse or psychosis, defiance, belligerence, or criminal behavior or activity.
- Lacks fear of dangers.
- May not recognize uniform, badge or police vehicle, nor understand what is expected of them.
- Associated medical conditions

such as seizure disorder, asthma, low muscle tone or use of medications.

- Fight or flight reaction.
- Basic verbal and nonverbal communication difficulties.
- Persons who may have extremely low muscle tone, high tolerance for pain, mechanical asphyxia will require alternate restraint techniques.
- Bullying, teasing, taunting especially of those with higher functioning autism or Asperger's Disorder.
- Dilemmas in the interrogation room, including possibility of false confession or misleading statements.
- High likelihood of victimization; lack credibility as victim-witness will require alternate victim-witness interview techniques.

Whenever a person with autism is taken into custody, it is critical for the first responder to follow procedure and document that he or she has learned that the person has autism.

Ask jail authorities to segregate persons with autism from the general prison population and seek counsel from the prosecuting attorney and an evaluation from a qualified health professional.

## Life Skills Education for Students with ASD

Autism recognition, response and risk management is not a one-way street. Just as much as law enforcers and first responders need to recognize and respond to children and adults who have autism, adults need to recognize the needs of the law enforcers. It is never too early or too late to begin educating children and adults with autism about how to recognize and respond to law enforcement professionals.

Ask that the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) teaches critical life skills, such as: not running or making sudden movements; how to call for help; how to respond to requests for information such as a name, address or phone or whether there is an injury; how to carry and show an ID; not touch other people or destroy their property; and how to recognize a law enforcer or first responder as someone they could approach if in danger.

## Recommended Steps

Work with local advocacy groups, which you can locate under "Resources" on ASA's main Web site, ([www.autism-society.org](http://www.autism-society.org)) to bring formal and informal training to your local law enforcement and first response professionals. Work with your school district to make life skills training available for students who have autism spectrum disorders.

Establish a network of community contacts. Be available as an autism resource contact to the law enforcement community.

Understanding and education are the keys to avoiding unfortunate situations. Public understanding of the unique behaviors, associated vulnerabilities, and issues of concern to individuals and families affected by autism will continue to be our most effective weapon against misunderstandings and unfortunate incidents. We must also empower our loved ones with autism by teaching them to understand the legal system to their fullest capabilities, and to respond as appropriately as they are able when encountering law enforcement officials. ■

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Debbaudt, D. (2003) *Avoiding Unfortunate Situations*: Internet article <http://policeandautism.cjb.net/>

**Resources:** Please see our special resource page, page 31.

*Dennis Debbaudt, who has a son with autism, will be hosting workshops and speaking engagements across the country from September 19, 2003 – November 15, 2003. For more information, send an e-mail to [ddpi@flash.net](mailto:ddpi@flash.net). To schedule a law enforcement or school resource workshop, call 772-398-9756 or send an e-mail to [ddpi@flash.net](mailto:ddpi@flash.net).*

*Today, Dennis and his brother, Gene, who is a 34-year veteran of law enforcement and former FBI supervisor, offer investigative services, which include: review of police procedures for autism-related criminal defense and civil plaintiff lawsuits and case consultations for defense attorneys, prosecutors and law enforcement agencies through their agencies in Florida and Michigan. For more information, go to <http://debbaudt.topcities.com/>. ■*

**B**ill Davis joins Carolyn Gammichia and Dennis Debbaudt as having the longest track record of advocating for the safety of persons with autism. His career as an instructor and activist began after his son, Chris, today age 9, was diagnosed with autism. Concerned about how police, firefighters and others might misinterpret his son's traits, Davis began a mission to educate his community about the disorder and, today, is a tireless crusader for the rights of all persons with autism.

He also created the three one-of-a-kind products below to assist you in keeping your child protected:

### 1) Video: Encountering Autism

An excellent training aid for emergency responders, retailers, hospitals and more. Addresses challenges emergency responders may encounter when they arrive at a scene and provides guidance on how to communicate and interact with autistic individuals. Also discusses uncontrollable behavior. Price: \$39.00.

### 2) Book: *Dangerous Encounters: Avoiding Perilous Situations with Autism: A Streetwise Guide for all Emergency Responders, Retailers and Parents* By Bill Davis and Wendy Goldband Schunick.

Targeted toward emergency responders, retailers and retail security, to name a few, *Dangerous Encounters*, takes readers through everyday situations, stressing safety and awareness. Discusses situations such as a person with autism rearranging CDs or books by color, which could be misinterpreted as suspicious behavior. Price: \$19.95.

### 3) Autism Safety Sticker

Sticker reads "Person with Autism," which Davis advises parents to use in their home and vehicle. Price: \$5.00.

Visit [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) to purchase book and [www.discountlearning.com](http://www.discountlearning.com) to purchase video or sticker.

### Additional Resources:

1) **SafePlace**, an Austin, TX-headquartered organization offers a variety of services to people with disabili-

ties, such as: a **National Training and Technical Assistance Project**, a three-year project being funded by the U.S. Department of Justice; a **Resource Lending Library**, which features over 350 items featuring books, curriculum kits, videos, audiotapes, anatomically correct dolls, models, games, and more available for checkout either in-person or via mail; **Sexuality Education**; and **Caregiver Abuse Prevention**.

Type [www.austin-safeplace.org/programs/disability/default.htm](http://www.austin-safeplace.org/programs/disability/default.htm) into your Web browser, or visit their main Web site, [www.austin-safeplace.org](http://www.austin-safeplace.org), to learn more.

2) **The Autism Society of Illinois** sells decals that read, "**Emergency Alert – Occupant with Autism – May Not Respond to Verbal Command.**" Call (630) 691-1270, send a fax to (630) 932-5620, or send an e-mail to: [AutismIll@aol.com](mailto:AutismIll@aol.com) for more information.

3) **The South Carolina Autism Society** publishes a brochure with important reminders and tips for ensuring the protection of your loved one with autism. To obtain a copy, visit their Web site at [www.scautism.org](http://www.scautism.org), where you can download a PDF version; their toll-free number is (800) 438-4790.

4) **Medic Alert** provides low-cost bracelets and medallions that you can imprint with the wearer's name, key details (i.e. has autism, seizures, etc.) and a toll-free number which, if dialed, will pull up file information such as appropriate contact information, medications, etc. For more information, visit [www.medicalert.org](http://www.medicalert.org).

5) **The Autism Society Of North Carolina** bookstore offers a video, *Autism Awareness for Law Enforcement Video*. The video, narrated by Dennis Debbaudt, highlights five teenagers with various levels of autism from the spectrum. Price \$15.00.

### E-mail Group:

Join "The Law Enforcement Awareness Network," an e-mail discussion group geared toward first responder agencies and those serving the community, by sending an e-mail to: [TheLawEnforcementAwareness-Network@yahoogroups.com](mailto:TheLawEnforcementAwareness-Network@yahoogroups.com).

By Adelle Jameson Tilton

**W**hat could possibly be worse than having your child taken from you? For parents of ASD children, this problem is magnified due to the issues the disability itself imposes. How do you tell a child with limited or no receptive/expressive language to avoid strangers?

Gaining some perspective is the first step. If a parent is controlled by fear, that fear will color all subsequent actions and reactions. As a result, poor decisions will be made, granted in a desire to do the right thing, and those decisions will actually be counterproductive to the real goal: protecting your ASD child.

Some basic hints and tips, and a few lifestyle adjustments, can reduce risks. So that said, please note the recommendations once made by Dennis Debbaudt, that will hopefully allow you to rest easier knowing that you have taken all possible precautions.

- In addition to knowing your neighbors, know your storekeepers, community service workers (parks & recreation and other city workers), delivery personnel (USPS, UPS, Fed Ex, etc.).
- Keep a list of anyone who enters your home (repair persons, utilities, workers, etc.).
- Identify and document (map out) nearby danger zones such as water sources, traffic, physical hazards, structures, bridges, utilities and so on.
- A responsible adult must always be nearby. Children cannot for any reason be left alone.
- A secured room to place a child or children briefly in the home. This is for the adult to be able to use the bathroom, tend to other children or meet other family needs. This is particularly important if your child is very determined on elopement.
- Keep child's name out of plain view.
- Consider technology alerts such as early warning, tracking and security systems.
- Identification. An ID bracelet is mandatory. There are many places those can be ordered, online or in at your local pharmacy. Basic information should be printed on the bracelet and it is helpful

to include a phrase such as "non-verbal autistic" on the bracelet.

In addition, I've added several hints of my own, which I have found very useful:

- Consider a service dog. These dogs are trained to work with ASD children and are invaluable. I know that his service dog because of an elopement incident that could have been tragic but was otherwise just another brief scare once, most likely saved my son's life.
- At family, church or social gatherings do not assume someone is watching your child. Develop a system where everyone present who is responsible for overseeing the child is aware that is their turn until a directly acknowledged "transfer of control" is passed.
- When in public, for example at a store or restaurant, do not overly use the child's name in a way that can be overheard. This is similar to #10 in the above list but here I am referring more to a verbal issue. Children will go to an adult who knows their name almost without exception. Even if your child is able to grasp the concept of "stranger" a person who knows their name no longer is a stranger.

It is important that parents and caregivers are aware of the issues of abduction but it is equally important to not be paralyzed with fear. Children need to be children whether they are Autistic or not, and following common sense and a few basic hints can instill a genuine sense of security. An ounce of prevention of course is worth a pound of cure and certainly is worth sleeping well and peacefully knowing you have done as much as possible to protect your child. ■

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*About the author: Adelle Jameson Tilton has a son with autism. Prior to his birth, she worked in the field of nursing, and she also holds a degree in journalism. Today, she is an autism advocate and a writer for the Autism/PDD Guide on [www.about.com](http://www.about.com), and also does freelance work for a variety of publications.*

By Jerry Newport

**A**dults with autism can be a public disaster waiting to happen. Too many assume that they can get away with self-absorbed behavior, but this sort of behavior can make them an easy mark for predators. Once, I was mugged in a Laundromat at night because I read a book, alone, and this actually invited my attackers to approach me and do their harm before I even knew what was about to happen to me. These days, there are two places that adults with autism are more vulnerable than ever:

1) In public: You cannot space out as you would if you were in the safety of those who know you. Once, I saw a peer, alone, standing on a street corner, holding his wallet up in front of him, counting money. Not smart! He got lucky that time.

People who exercise and take a self-defense class present themselves in a way that discourages

predators. But if you have autism, your judgment, even health, may not be the best. And for those adults taking medication, your judgment may be even more impaired.

2) Internet: Another caveat applies to the Internet. You must understand that if you meet or know someone in an autism chat room, it is not the same as reality, no matter how the conversation stirs you. And if that person wants to meet you in person, bring a friend along. If he or she only wants to meet you alone, forget meeting him, period. Oh yeah, I forgot... don't accept rides or candy from strangers, but you adults should know that by now! ■

*Jerry and his wife, Mary, will be keynote speakers on July 18, 2003 at this year's ASA National Conference.*

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