



# 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 of families and caregivers in the event a child on the autism spectrum goes missing.

In addition to these search protocols and questions, we encourage law enforcement and other first responders to consult the guide as well as free resources from the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC):



**Understanding Children  
on the Autism Spectrum:  
A Guide for Law Enforcement**



[MissingKids.org/autism](https://www.missingkids.org/autism)



For free assistance  
with searching for  
a missing child  
call NCMEC at  
**1-800-THE-LOST®**  
**(1-800-843-5678).**



## The Initial Response

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

- Conduct search of residence/care facility and curtilage.
- Identify and preserve the point the child was last seen.
- Collect a recent photo of the child, DNA (tooth/hairbrush), and scent article such as uncontaminated shoes, clothing, or sheets, with proper permission.
- 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. It is recommended search personnel stay at the bodies of water regardless of whether the child is there as the child may make their way there eventually.
- 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.
- Use of trained search dogs at the onset of the response could help ensure successful tracking.



- 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 has been issued.
- 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.





## Search and Rescue Measures

The search measures noted 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.

- Initiate search and rescue efforts with an emphasis on bodies of water, high hazard areas, travel corridors, routes to favorite places, previous locations visited, 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.



- 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 search and what areas they were searching, maintain current maps of search areas to determine the child's probability of detection and additional resources to deploy.



- Consider using track traps 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.

- 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:** In the event of an extended missing episode, all children are also at risk of exposure to weather and environmental hazards; dehydration; lack of adequate nutrition, food, or medication; traffic-related injuries/accidents; 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 caregiver, parent, 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 of these children 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 present as a teenager or older child.
- Use communication aids, 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
<b>Lost Child</b>				
Full Name			DOB	
Home Address			Zip	
Home Phone		Gender		
<b>Physical Description</b>				
Height	Weight	Age	Build	
Hair Color	Eye Color	Glasses	Medical ID	
Distinguishing Marks (scars, moles, tattoos/piercings)				
Overall appearance			Photo Available	Y N
<b>Clothing</b>				
	<b>Style</b>	<b>Color</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Other</b>
Shirt/Sweater				
Pants/Belt				
Hat				
Rain Gear				
Gloves				
Shoes				
Sole Pattern				
Jacket				
Additional Clothing				
Name on Clothing				
<b>Point Last Seen</b>				
Time	Where	How		
Seen by Whom				



<b>Health/General Condition</b>	
Medical, 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	
<b>Sensory or Behavioral Triggers</b>	
Reaction to sirens, aircraft, canines, people in uniform, strangers (will they run or hide)	
Response to pain/injury	
Response to being touched	
Methods used to calm child if upset	
Other relevant information	
<b>Witness Information</b>	
Name	
Address	
Phone	Relationship
Comments	
<b>Actions Taken</b>	
By Family/Friends/Caregiver	
Results	
Others	
Results	
Comments	

<b>If public-safety telecommunicators did not provide the following information, obtain it after verifying basic identification and description information</b>			
Locative technology worn/carried?	Y	N	U
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?	Y	N	U
Sibling with previous missing incident?	Y	N	U
If so, where located?			
Able to speak/non-speaking?			
Able to use sign language?	Y	N	U
Reaction when name called?			
Responds to voice of mother, father, other?	M	F	O U
Knows name of parent/caregiver?	Y	N	U
Knows own address?	Y	N	U
Knows own phone number?	Y	N	U
Dislikes/fears?			
Favorite song, toy, or media character?			

This project was supported by Grant No. 15PJDP-21-GK-02819-MECP and 15PJDP-21-GK-00998-MECP awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this program are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.