Quick Facts to Know

• Wandering is significantly more common among children with autism compared to other children.
• Drowning is a leading cause of accidental death for children with autism.
• Nearly one third of people with autism are nonverbal.
• People with autism may have difficulties communicating when stressed, confused or afraid.

A person with autism might:

• Have an impaired sense of danger and may wander to bodies of water, traffic or other dangers.
• Have delayed speech and language skills.
• Not respond to their name or verbal commands.
• Avoid eye contact.
• Engage in repetitive behavior (ex. rocking, hand flapping, spinning).
• Mimic phrases and behavior.
• Have sensory perception issues.
• Not understand sarcasm or figures of speech.
• Not understand personal space.
• Have epilepsy or seizure disorder.
• Fear a person in uniform (ex. fire turnout gear) or exhibit curiosity and reach for objects/equipment (ex. shiny badge or handcuffs).
• Hide in tight, small spaces.

First Responder Checklist

• Maintain sense of urgency when searching for a missing person with autism. Even if they have wandered before, the challenges related to autism can put them at great risk.
• Speak to the parent or caregiver to learn about likes and dislikes and places the person with autism may seek or avoid.
• Determine how the person communicates and if they will respond to his or her name.
• SEARCH WATER FIRST. Identify nearby bodies of water (pools, ponds, rivers, etc.).
• Warn the person when you are going to touch them before doing so and allow extra time to process questions/statements.
• Avoid interrupting repetitive behaviors unless they are a threat to safety.
• Avoid using lights and sirens when possible.
• Be calm and patient, speaking simply when giving directions.
• Give lots of praise and encouragement.

We encourage law enforcement agencies to contact Autism Speaks’ partner, The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) for additional assistance and resources, including search-and-rescue experts who immediately deploy to provide recommendations and technical assistance in critically missing cases.