

# Autism and police officers

## Basic Autism Information for Police Officers:

Officers will come into contact with a person with a hidden disability in 10-20% of their calls.

Individuals with autism are 7 times more likely to come in contact with police than their typical peers.

Individuals with autism can't be identified by appearance. They look the same as anyone else. They are identified by their behavior.

Individuals with autism tend to have an under developed upper trunk and are at higher risk of positional asphyxiation. When restraint is required officers need to be aware of this medical fact and act accordingly.

Some individuals with autism do not have the normal range of sensations and don't feel the cold. They may not seek shelter if lost out in the cold. This should affect the way a search for a lost child with autism is conducted.

An individual with autism may not respond to directives, and that can be because they don't understand what's being demanded of them, or even just because they're scared, and the fact that they're scared is the only thing they're aware of -- they may not be able to process the language and understand a directive when fearful.

These individuals may have a weak understanding of cause and effect. They have little concept of consequences.

50% of individuals with autism are nonverbal throughout their life span; another 20% may present as nonverbal when highly stressed.

40% of individuals with autism will develop epilepsy or some other seizure disorder by the end of adolescence. Know that when dealing with an individual with autism, they may experience seizures.

There are certain times of the year that officers will be more likely to receive calls from our families. That would be early June, late August and the end of December. This is because of the special education school

calendar. These times are traditional breaks in programming, even in residential schools. Many residential schools CLOSE for breaks. Children who have been placed in residential settings do come home and the family may or may not be able to handle the situation. Some will have been placed due to behaviors that put themselves or others at risk. Another time is during summer camp season. There are new people, a new setting, and less structure. These kids thrive on routine. Any change in routine can cause behaviors to erupt.

Individuals with autism are strongly attracted to water. Drowning is a leading cause of death among children and adults with autism. Officers should check area pools, ponds and streams when looking for a lost child. Hoses, irrigation systems and fountains would also be very attractive to them.

### Identifying an individual with Autism

Officers may encounter Autism by one of its many other names. The differences are not important for officers. What is important is that they will be familiar enough to know that these are one form or another of Autism:

Autism

ASD - Autism Spectrum Disorder

Aspergers Syndrome and/or NVLD (Nonverbal Learning Disorder)

PDD - Pervasive Developmental Delay

PDD NOS - Pervasive Developmental Delay Not Otherwise Specified.

ID methods. Families use any number of ways to help children be identified.

Medic Alert Bracelets are one way but often individuals with autism won't wear the jewelry because they are sensory defensive.

Families will thread the ID into a shoe lace, into a belt or as a zipper pull. It may possibly be a necklace.

Some families put a business card into a small case and put it in a pocket of their children's clothing.

ID tags are sewn or stamped into the back of collars.

On vacation or in large crowd settings many of our families create temporary tattoos with the child's name and their cell phone numbers and place it on the upper shoulder.

## Working with an Individual with Autism

Officers need to remember to use the communication boards if they're faced with an individual who seems unable to communicate meaningfully.

Whenever possible, avoid touching these individuals. Some, but not all individuals with autism, will become more agitated and possibly aggressive when touched. Talk when you can. If possible write questions if talking isn't working.

Work quietly and gently when dealing with these individuals. Call for assistance from Crisis Intervention if you are dealing someone with autism. In Chester County we are currently developing an Autism training specifically for CI that should be in place very soon.

When an officer asks for identification use short simple questions. "*What is your name?*" or "*What is your address?*" may be more effective over the range of the spectrum than "*Give me your identification.*" Extra words or long difficult words makes it more difficult for these individuals to understand what is being asked. Use short simple words. Wait 3 seconds, then ask again. Processing requests takes time for these kids. If they are nonverbal or appear to be nonverbal, they may be able to write or type the information you need. Offer a pen and paper or computer. They also may be able to read, so writing questions may be helpful in getting information.

*PERMISSION: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do NOT alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction and you give credit to the author. For more first responder information on autism, go to Dennis Debbaudt's site at [www.autismriskmanagement.com](http://www.autismriskmanagement.com) or to Silent No More Inc. at [www.dol.net/~srz](http://www.dol.net/~srz).*

*Autism & Police Officers*