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RECOVERING MISSING YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

Understanding Unique Actions and Behaviors

Recovering a missing child with special needs can present a unique challenge for families, law enforcement, and first responders. The behaviors and actions of a missing child with special needs are often much different than those of a missing non-affected child. While behaviors will differ from child to child, missing children with special needs may:

- Wander away, run away or bolt from a safe environment.
- Exhibit a diminished sense of fear causing them to engage in high-risk behavior such as seeking water or active roadways.
- Elude or hide from search teams.
- Seek small or tightly enclosed spaces concealing themselves from search teams.
- Be unable to respond to rescuers.

Response Recommendations

While cases of missing children with special needs are treated as critical incidents requiring elevated responses by law enforcement and first responders, children with autism have an unusually high mortality rate and are especially at risk. The unique behaviors of a child with special needs must therefore be carefully considered by law enforcement and first responders when planning and conducting a search.

For unknown reasons, children with autism tend to wander from their safe environments and will gravitate towards bodies of water that include streams, ponds, lakes, rivers, creeks, storm-water retention/detention basins, and backyard and public swimming pools.

Because of this, it is strongly recommended first responders and search teams immediately check all nearby bodies of water in an effort to head-off the child. Children with autism may also exhibit other interests or fascinations posing similar dangers such as going to active roadways/highways, trains, heavy equipment, fire trucks, roadway signs, bright lights, and traffic signals.

It is worthwhile to note, however, that children with special needs have a natural self-survival instinct and are often resilient, allowing them to survive long periods of time — sometimes longer than a non-affected child. But a diminished sense of fear of their surroundings can allow special needs children to be highly mobile and cover great distances, necessitating an expanded search parameter. Children may seek shelter or conceal themselves





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in confined spaces making it more difficult for searchers to locate them. Especially In urban and suburban environments, it is highly recommended searchers focus their efforts on small confining spaces. Missing children with special needs may also have a fascination with or fixation on particular sounds, objects, especially moving or spinning objects, or certain foods. Consider use of attraction tactics, based on the unique behaviors and interests of the child, as a means to draw the missing child to the search party.

For example:

- *Blasting the child's favorite song on a boombox.*
- *Creating a setup or camp within the vicinity that contains the child's favorite colors, sounds, or smells.*

As with all critically missing children, time is a vitally important factor in a safe recovery. Law enforcement agencies are encouraged to contact the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children[®] at 1-800-THE-LOST[®] (1-800-843-5678) for additional assistance and resources, including search-and-rescue experts who may be able to immediately deploy to help find the child.

Sources

- "Missing Children." *National Center for Missing & Exploited Children*, <http://www.missingkids.com/theissues/missing>
- "Missing Children With Special Needs." *National Center for Missing & Exploited Children*, http://www.missingkids.com/content/dam/ncmec/en_us/desktop/publications/specialneedsaddendum.pdf
- National Autism Association, www.autismsafety.org
- National Autism Association, www.nationalautismassociation.org
- "About Autism-Related Wandering." *National Autism Association*, <http://awaare.nationalautismassociation.org>