

# When a Student with Autism is Missing

## TIPS FOR CREATING A SCHOOLWIDE EMERGENCY PLAN

*Guidance for School Administrators and Staff*



**National  
Autism Safety  
Council™**

*A resource provided by  
the National Autism Safety Council*

## About This Guide

This guide was created in collaboration with families, clinicians, educators, first responders, and service professionals.

It integrates knowledge from:

- **Current research**
- **Field expertise**
- **Lived experience**

The content reflects proven practices and the most up-to-date knowledge available at the time of publication.

**This guide is for informational and educational purposes only.** It is not intended to serve as medical or legal advice and should not replace consultation with qualified healthcare providers, behavioral specialists, or legal professionals.

Every student is unique, and decisions about safety planning and intervention should be made in collaboration with trusted professionals familiar with each student's needs.



National  
**Autism Safety**  
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*Advancing Autism Safety Through  
Science, Expertise & Collaboration*

# Why Create a Schoolwide Emergency Plan?

## Nearly Half of Children with Autism Wander or Bolt Away

Wandering, also known as elopement, occurs when a student with autism leaves a supervised area, placing them at significant risk of serious injury or death. Students may quietly slip away from classrooms, recess areas, or school activities, often moving quickly toward water, roadways, or other environmental hazards. **These behaviors are not intentional misbehavior; they are frequently driven by sensory overload, anxiety, or a need for regulation or stimulation.** A diminished sense of danger, and other co-factors, increases vulnerability to life-threatening situations.

Recent incidents during the 2024 and 2025 school years underscore the urgent need for a clear, schoolwide emergency response plan. Multiple students with autism tragically drowned after leaving classrooms, playgrounds, or field trips, while others were seriously injured or killed after entering traffic. These events highlight the real and immediate risks associated with elopement.

Changes in routine further increase the likelihood of elopement, as many students with autism rely on predictable schedules for comfort and a sense of safety. Disruptions like assemblies, substitute teachers, schedule changes, or classroom transitions, can trigger anxiety, stress, or sensory overload, leading to an elopement event. **Because children with autism often move directly toward water or roadways, every minute is critical.** These realities reinforce the importance of clearly defined procedures to prevent harm and ensure a rapid, coordinated response whenever a student is missing.

## Quick Facts



*Nearly half of children with autism wander/elope from safe settings like home or school, according to a study published in Pediatrics.<sup>1</sup>*



*29% of children with autism who eloped were reported to have gone missing from classrooms or schools.<sup>1</sup>*



*In 2025, drowning accounted for 87% of autism-related wandering/elopement fatalities.<sup>2</sup>*

1. Anderson, C., Law, J. K., Daniels, A., Rice, C., Mandell, D. S., Hagopian, L., & Law, P. A. (2012). Occurrence and family impact of elopement in children with autism spectrum disorders. *Pediatrics*, 130(5), 870–877. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-0762>
2. McIlwain, L., Hudgins, C., Heaps, J. (2026). 2025 Review: Autism-Related Elopement Fatalities in the United States. National Autism Safety Council. (Report in prep)

# It's Important to Prepare and Plan

School administrators play a critical role in protecting students with autism by ensuring a clear, practiced, schoolwide emergency response plan is in place when a student is missing.

**Research and incident reviews consistently show that many students with autism who elope are drawn quickly and purposefully toward water or roadways,** often without responding to verbal cues or recognizing danger.

Because these students may leave quietly during recess, transitions, or classroom activities, delays in recognition and response can significantly increase risk. For this reason, wandering/elopement response should be treated as a time-sensitive emergency.

## Preparation and Planning

*Administrators should ensure that staff understands:*

- Which students are autistic and at risk
- When elopement is most likely to occur (e.g., transitions, recess)
- Which hazards are nearby (ponds, drainage areas, rivers, busy streets)



**TIP**

**Have photos of the student readily available for responders and search teams.**

Emergency plans should prioritize immediate action, including rapid internal alerts, assigned search roles, and clear thresholds for contacting 911. Effective plans also emphasize coordination and communication.

Law enforcement should be notified immediately for assistance, and searches of nearby water and roadways outside the school should be concurrent with searches inside the school, not after.

Administrators should designate who initiates the response, who contacts emergency services, who notifies parents, and who maintains supervision of other students.

**Local law enforcement and first responders should be familiar with the school's layout and the specific risks associated with autism-related elopement.** Plans should also account for how staff safely approach and support a student once located, using calm, non-threatening strategies and avoiding escalation and restraint unless there is imminent danger.

# What's an Incident Command System?

An **Incident Command System (ICS)** in schools provides a standardized framework for managing school emergencies. Adopting an ICS will help school personnel work with emergency responders to provide a coordinated response. You can develop an ICS to:

## Establish Clear Roles

Roles can include an Incident Commander, Operations Coordinator, Liason Officers, etc.

## Ensure Unified Command

Unified command and clear communication during incidents are critical to ensuring safe recovery.

## Support Coordination

This includes coordination among staff and external first responders.

## Plan for Reunification

Ensure reunification procedures are in place once the student is found.

## Build Readiness

Ensure readiness through training, drills, and simple tools (apps, lanyards, role cards.)

## ICS for a Missing Student

An ICS for a missing student involves immediately activating a pre-defined team to manage the search, ensuring a rapid, organized response.

The Incident Commander directs operations, including immediate campus lockdown/search, notifying law enforcement, coordinating with parents, and managing staff roles, often utilizing the 5 C's:

1. **Command**
2. **Control**
3. **Coordination**
4. **Communication**
5. **Collaboration**

ICS can be practiced in discussion-based (tabletop) exercises to familiarize personnel with ICS procedures; and during operations-based drills for elopement, bus evacuation, fire, lockdown and tornadoes



## Did You Know?

Key ICS roles and actions for a missing student can include:

- **Incident Commander (IC):** Principal or designee who establishes the command post, assesses the situation, and makes key decisions
- **Operations Section:** Conducts a systematic search of the school, including classrooms, restrooms, playground, and hiding spots
- **Planning Section:** Maintains documentation of the incident, timelines, and personnel involved
- **Logistics Section:** Manages communication devices (radios, PA systems) and transportation if needed
- **Liaison Officer:** Acts as the primary point of contact for law enforcement and emergency responders
- **Public Information Officer (PIO):** Manages communication with parents, guardians, and the media

# Keep Schools S.A.F.E for Autistic Students



Keeping students with autism safe at school requires careful planning, clear communication, and proactive supports. This S.A.F.E. framework helps schools focus on four key areas to **ensure their students are protected, supported, and able to learn in a safe environment.**



## **S – Support, Supervision, and Safeguards**

- Ensure each student with autism has the best classroom placement for their specific needs: AU classroom, special education classroom, mainstream classroom, or other options.
- Make sure all staff knows each autistic student and what to do if they are running or walking alone.
- Ensure students have adult supervision during class, transitions, lunch, recess, and high-stimuli activities.
- Confirm that safeguards are in place to prevent wandering/elopement, including door/window alarms, well-maintained fencing with self-latching gate, sensory tools, and visual aids.



## **A – Address & Accommodate**

- Ensure each student's sensory, emotional, and behavioral triggers are well understood and accommodated.
- Provide each student with preferred communication supports (AAC devices, visual schedules, social stories) to assist them in expressing needs, which can prevent unsafe situations.
- Make sure environmental accommodations (lighting, noise, quiet spaces) are available.
- Provide a safe, open space each student can run to instead of outdoors (e.g., library, indoor tent)
- Avoid the unnecessary use of restraint, seclusion, or any practices that may worsen elopement behaviors.



## **F – Functional Planning & Behavior Supports**

- Provide a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) if a student's behavior affects their safety.
- After the FBA is completed, make sure a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) is established and emphasizes prevention, co-regulation, and positive behavioral supports.
- Review triggers, antecedents, and safe staff responses with teachers and aides.
- Ensure staff are trained in autism-specific de-escalation strategies.



## **E – Emergency Response**

- Keep an emergency profile about each student's likes/dislikes, triggers, medications, and current photo.
- Make sure your schoolwide emergency plan is in place and staff is aware of their roles; run practices drills.
- Restraints should only be used in imminent danger to prevent injury, never as punishment.
- Confirm parent notification procedures for any safety incidents.
- Document all incidents and hold a debrief meeting to identify antecedents, gaps, strategies.

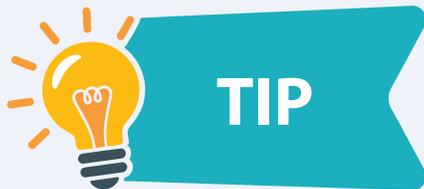
# Sample Scenarios

A student is considered missing any time they are unaccounted for at school, on school grounds, at a school activity or while traveling to and from school. To prepare assigned staff, administrators may use sample scenarios during training, such as:

- **A student leaves the playground** unnoticed and the school is located near a retention pond.
- **A student bolts from a classroom** during a transition and exits through an unlocked side door toward a parking lot.
- **A student separates from a group** during a field trip near a roadway or public space.

Reviewing scenarios like these helps staff practice rapid decision-making, clarify roles, and understand why every minute matters.

A well-designed schoolwide plan is not only ideal for meeting policy requirements, it can save a life by ensuring that when a student with autism is missing, the response is **immediate, coordinated, and focused on the most serious risks first.**



## Identify nearby water and other hazards ahead of time



- **Google your school address**, or field trip locations.
- **Identify nearby water sources**, such as ponds, canals, lakes, or retention basins near each address. Pools may not appear on the map, so document any nearby locations that have a pool. You can also make a request to city planners to help provide this information.
- **Identify nearby busy roads** and freeways
- **Include this information in your emergency plan under ICS**, and share it with emergency responders.
- **Search the closest water location** (whether it's a pond or pool), and busy roads concurrently with indoor searches if an autistic student is ever missing.

 Search...



# Wandering/Elopement Sample Emergency Response Plan

**Please note:** This plan is provided as an example only. Suggested steps and the encouragement to focus on nearby water and roadways is based on case outcome data of school-related ASD elopement fatalities over the last 20 years. If a student is missing, make sure searches outside the school are concurrent with the search inside the school.

## Step 1 Example:



- **Stay calm.**
- **Notify the school office** that a student with autism is missing and note last known location.
- **Avoid loud reactions** that could increase anxiety and escalate behaviors.

## Step 2 Example:



- **The Principal or Administrator on Duty** assumes the role of Incident Commander (IC) until relieved by emergency responders.
- **Ensure pre-assigned searchers search inside and outside concurrently.** Focus on checking nearby water (e.g., ponds, pools) and busy roads, especially if the student left an outdoor playground.
- **If the school has an indoor pool,** prioritize this search location.
- **Coordinate closely** with first responders.

## Step 3 Example:



- **Use two-way radios** or mobile phones to maintain communication.
- **Make sure searchers understand** to focus on nearby water and roadways.

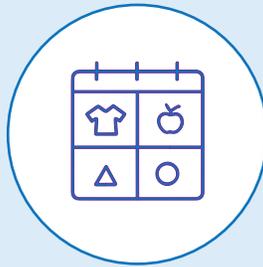
# Additional Step Examples

## Step 4 Example:



- **Maintain a log** of all actions, including who searched which areas and times.
- **Notify the parents** of the incident.

## Step 5 Example:



- **Provide visual or communication supports** once the student is located, e.g., AAC devices, social stories, picture prompts, plus preferred items, or food to guide them safely back.
- **Staff should remain calm and reassuring**, using familiar routines if possible.
- **Maintain hypervigilant supervision** as repeat elopement is common.

## Step 6 Example:



- **Hold a staff and parent debrief** to review antecedents, response, and identify gaps in prevention.
- **Update the school's safety plan** and the student's IEP or individual safety plan if needed.
- **Document the incident thoroughly**, including triggers, response actions, and outcomes.

# Resource Guide

When schools understand the unique risks associated with autism-related wandering, including attraction to water and vulnerability to traffic, they are better equipped to respond quickly and decisively.

**Preparation, staff training, and clear protocols save valuable time and reduce confusion when every moment matters.**

With the right tools and planning, schools can create safer environments for all students and respond effectively when safety is at risk.



## **Safety Resources and Training:** **National Autism Safety Council**

autismsafetycouncil.org  
info@autismsafetycouncil.org  
888.471.NASC(6272)

## **Ukeru Systems**

Training programs for schools and agencies to reduce restraint and seclusion practices.  
[www.ukerusystems.com](http://www.ukerusystems.com)

## **National Center for Missing & Exploited Children:**

missingkids.org  
1-800-THE-LOST

## **Safety & Security Products:**

### **AngelSense GPS for Schools:**

angelsense.com

### **Basic Door Alarms**

available at major retailers

