The Wandering and Water Safety Toolkit

For families of children who wander. Print it, keep it on the fridge, and share it with anyone who looks after your child.

Why water comes first. Wandering is common in children with autism, and when it ends badly, the cause is usually water. This toolkit gives you what to do before, what to do if your child is missing, and the water safety steps that matter most.

49%
of children with autism had tried to wander or bolt at least once after age 4, nearly 4 times the rate of their brothers and sisters.[1,2]

1 in 4
children who went missing were in danger of drowning, and nearly 2 in 3 (65%) were in danger of traffic injury.[1]

71%
of deaths after wandering were drownings, in US cases from 2011 to 2016. Traffic was next, at 18%.[2]

SECTION 1 Before they wander

a prevention checklist

- [ ] **A current photo on your phone**
  Take a new one often, and a quick photo of what they are wearing on busy days out.
- [ ] **Water near home, mapped**
  Every pool, pond, creek, ditch, fountain and retention basin within about a mile. Know the three closest.
- [ ] **Neighbors who know your child**
  The four or five households nearest you. A photo, your number, and one ask: if you see them alone, call us.
- [ ] **ID your child carries**
  A tag, bracelet or sewn-in label with your phone number and a note such as "Autism: may not respond to name."
- [ ] **Exits that make noise**
  Door and window alarms or chimes, and locks placed where a young child cannot reach. The goal is to know within seconds.[3,6]
- [ ] **Police told ahead of time**
  Many departments can note a child at risk of wandering, with a photo and where they are drawn to. Ask yours.[3]

SECTION 2 If your child is missing

do these in order, fast

1. **Call 911 and check the nearest water at the same time.** One person calls while another runs to the nearest water. There is no waiting period for a missing child.
   Alone? Call on speaker as you go.
   911 works in both the US and Canada.
2. **Tell 911 what matters.** Say "endangered missing child with autism" (or your child's condition), that they may be drawn to water, and whether they speak or respond to their name.
3. **Keep checking water, nearest first.** Pools, ponds, ditches, fountains, hot tubs, retention basins. Send one adult toward the nearest busy road.
4. **Send people to the places they love.** A playground, a bus stop, a store, a relative's house. Ask neighbors to check yards, pools, sheds and parked cars.
5. **Keep one adult at home, with a photo ready.** Children often come back on their own. Note the time, the place they were last seen, and what they are wearing.

A summary of published research and what parents have told us, not medical advice. Figures describe groups, not your child. Adapt it with your child's care team. Full articles with links: stepsafekids.com/wandering-and-elopement and stepsafekids.com/water-safety-and-wandering.

SECTION 3 Water safety

each fact, and what to do about it

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS	WHAT YOU CAN DO
160× Children with autism were 160 times as likely to die from drowning as children in general, in US death records from 1999 to 2014.[4]	**Start adapted swim lessons early.** The researchers called swimming lessons the top priority, ideally soon after diagnosis. Ask about one-on-one or adapted lessons, and make the last lesson in clothes and shoes.[4,6]
88% Of at least 98 autistic children and young adults found deceased after going missing in 2025, 88% drowned, most often in ponds, lakes and retention basins.[5]	**Fence and cover pools.** A fence at least 4 feet tall on all four sides, with a self-closing, self-latching gate, is the most studied protection for young children. Lock pool and hot tub covers.[7]
Minutes Drowning most often happens within a few hundred feet to half a mile of where the child went missing, and within a few minutes.[5]	**Add alarms, and search water first.** Alarms on doors, windows and gates, and a pool alarm.[6] If your child is missing, water gets checked while 911 is called.
No one is drown-proof Swim lessons help a great deal, but no single measure prevents drowning on its own. Layers work together.[7]	**Name a water watcher.** At pools, beaches and parties, one adult watches the water with no phone, and hands over out loud. Near open water or boats, use a well-fitted life jacket approved in your country: U.S. Coast Guard in the US, Transport Canada in Canada.

SECTION 4 Who to call

save these in your phone

911 **Emergency, in the US and Canada.** Always the first call when your child is missing, made at the same time as someone checks the nearest water.

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (US)
1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678), 24 hours. Call after 911 for extra search support.[5]

Canadian Centre for Child Protection (Canada)
missingkids.ca. Supports families searching for a missing child, after you have called 911.

National Autism Association (US)
877-622-2884 · nationalautismassociation.org. Wandering prevention resources for families. Not an emergency line.

Project Lifesaver (US and Canada)
projectlifesaver.org. Radio transmitter wristbands, run by local police and public safety agencies in many areas. Ask yours whether they take part and what it costs.

StepSafe Kids

We make a clip-on GPS tracker for children who wander, with live location and an alert when your child leaves a safe zone you draw. It is one layer, never a replacement for the steps above. Devices ship in early 2027 to the US and Canada.

Order at stepsafekids.com/shop · More free printables at stepsafekids.com/resources

SCAN TO VISIT THE SHOP

Sources

1. Anderson C, Law JK, Daniels A, et al. Occurrence and Family Impact of Elopement in Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Pediatrics*. 2012;130(5):870-877. pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23045563
2. National Autism Association. Mortality and Risk in ASD Wandering/Elopement, 2011-2016 (March 2017), which also reports the sibling comparison. nationalautismassociation.org
3. CDC. Wandering (Elopement), Child Development. cdc.gov
4. Guan J, Li G. Injury Mortality in Individuals With Autism. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2017;107(5):791-793, and Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, March 2017.
5. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. Autism and Wandering. missingkids.org/theissues/autism
6. National Autism Association. Water Safety and Drowning Prevention. nationalautismassociation.org/watersafety
7. American Academy of Pediatrics. Prevention of Drowning. *Pediatrics*. 2019;143(5):e20190850.