

Autism, Wandering & Water Safety: What Providers & Educators Need to Know

FAST FACTS

- **Wandering**—also known as elopement or bolting—is significantly more common in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) than in neurotypical children. Four- to five-year-olds with ASD are nearly five times more likely to wander, and 25% to 50% of caregivers of children with ASD have observed wandering behaviors in the past six months.
- Nearly half (49%) of fatal wandering incidents begin at home. Many children with ASD are drawn to water, which may contribute to the fact that drownings account for 71% of fatal wandering. Drowning is the leading cause of death among children with ASD.
- Only 1 in 3 caregivers report receiving formal guidance on this topic from a provider.
- Parents of children with ASD who wander often change their routines—limiting outings or avoiding outside supervision—to keep their child safe. Constant vigilance, care coordination, and daily caregiving demands can understandably lead to caregiver fatigue.
- While safety is never a guarantee, home modifications, therapeutic supports, and emergency preparedness can help prevent wandering and drowning.

ACTIONS FOR CAREGIVERS TO TAKE	TALKING POINTS	SUPPORTING ACCESS
Home Modification	It is essential to install physical barriers as soon as possible once wandering tendencies are identified. These may be temporary or permanent depending on the child's needs.	Some organizations provide free or reduced-cost products like door locks, window guards, and alarms. Find more information on the Autism, Wandering & Water Safety webpage .
Tracking Technology	Wearable tracking and monitoring devices can aid caregivers and first responders in quickly locating a child who has wandered.	There are many types of tracking devices, and organizations that can help pay for them. Visit the Autism, Wandering & Water Safety page for more information about various options.
Alerting Emergency Responders	Preparation is key for a fast and successful response, including introducing the child to first responders, and/or maintaining a packet of information with the child's current picture, interests, and communication needs that the caregiver can easily hand to first responders	Visit the Autism, Wandering & Water Safety webpage to register a phone number with 911, and learn more about information to compile in a wandering event.
Adaptive Swimming Lessons	The ability to swim can prolong the window of time first responders have to find a child who has wandered and entered water.	A list of adaptive swim lessons and financial resources is available through the Department of Public Health
Enhancing Communication Skills	Therapies like ABA can curb wandering behavior by enhancing a child's ability to communicate. These therapies can also work on skills like asking for help if they have wandered.	You can find an ABA provider through DisabilityInfo.org and other therapeutic providers through Treatment Connection .
Supporting Families and Caregivers	Coping with the very real fear of knowing the risks associated with wandering is difficult and may lead caregivers to change their behaviors, such as limiting outings in public or not leaving their child under family or friend's supervision	For more resources, visit your local Autism Support Center , and considering contacting the Parental Stress Line (1-800-632-8188)

FOR MORE INFORMATION including a non-exhaustive list of financial resources, tracking devices, emergency preparedness planning tools, and Autism Support Centers visit:

mass.gov/AutismWaterSafety AND [Autism Support Centers](#)