



Question:

What is elopement and do you have any suggestions for what to do about the fact that my child with autism elopes?

Answer: The warmer weather lends itself to fresh breezes through open windows and screen doors, kids running in and out in search of drinks and a dry towel from being in the pool. For families raising a child with autism with elopement issues, summer time can be an added worry as doors and windows may be less secure. Elopement, which can be defined as running away from or leaving a designated area such as a classroom or the home environment, is one of the highest priority of challenging behaviors for individuals with autism spectrum disorders.

Elopement can be a frightening experience for family members as well as the individual with an autism spectrum disorder. In dealing with elopement, prevention is the first step. This can take the form of putting dead bolts up high on all doors leading to the outside, and installing window guards to prevent escape or dangerous falls. Sometimes an individual may wander into a neighbor’s yard or enter a neighbor’s house, even in the middle of the night. Alerting them as well as local police that your family member with autism elopes can help everyone react more quickly in case the unfortunate does happen. For school-aged children, parents can work with the child study team to develop a comprehensive written plan to address issues of elopement. This written plan should include a Functional Behavior Assessment and Behavior Intervention Plan. The Functional Behavior Assessment can help to answer why the elopement occurs and the Behavior Intervention Plan can teach replacement skills instead of eloping.

There are a number of products available to families who are raising a child who elopes. These range from alarms that indicate when a door is opened, to identification bracelets to tracking devices.

One program, Project Lifesaver, is a rapid response and recovery program offered in all twenty-one counties of the state of New Jersey for individuals with autism, Alzheimer’s and/or other disabilities. Project Lifesaver is a partnership with local law enforcement and is the self-proclaimed world’s most reliable program for locating missing persons. “Project Lifesaver relies on proven radio technology and a specially trained search and rescue team. Clients who are enrolled in the program wear a personalized wristband that emits a tracking signal. When caregivers notify the local Sheriff’s office that a person is missing, a search and rescue team responds to the wanderer’s area and starts searching with the mobile locator tracking system.” (The entire state of New Jersey is covered

by Project Lifesaver so families vacationing in the Garden State can feel a sense of security. Even if a family is vacationing out of state, the Sheriff’s office in that state may also be able to retrieve Project Lifesaver information.

There may be a cost associated with enrolling in the program and it may vary by county. For more information about addressing elopement as part of an Individualized Educational Program, please call us at 800.4.AUTISM. ■

Sheriff Office Contacts

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