

## Neighborhood Safety

### Preventing Wandering

To help your child be reunited with you in case they wander, consider having medical identification for your child. An ID should list your child's name, address, contact number and diagnosis. There are several different types of products you can look for, including ID bands, jewelry, and cards, and temporary tattoos. You may consider purchasing a GPS tracker for your child. Make sure that your child is comfortable with the type of ID you choose, and will not remove it without your knowledge. You may also want to provide your child with a cellphone, if they can understand how to use it and care for it responsibly. You may alert local authorities about your child's condition, and provide them with a picture and your personal contact information in case they find your child wandering.

In case your child gets lost outdoors, you can teach them to look for a mother with other children, or a person in a uniform, such as a police officer, or a public worker with a badge. You can also create a social story to teach them about what to do if they are lost, and then role play various situations as practice. Explain to your child what to do in case they are lost and cannot find you. If your child is lost in a public place where there are stores, you may want to ask them to go up to someone at the counter in a store and ask for help. If possible, teach them to say "I am lost. My name is Alex. My mother's phone number is this." If your child cannot speak, work with their therapists or teachers to help them learn to show their ID if someone asks their name.

### At the Playground

You can prepare a child in advance about how to be safe at a playground. For smaller children, consider visiting enclosed parks and play areas to prevent them from wandering. When your child is outdoors, and there are no physical barriers, you can create an imaginary boundary by using objects such as trees, benches etc. You can tell your child something like "No going beyond this tree" before you allow them to play outside. It may be helpful for you to teach your child to be mindful of dogs to avoid an unpleasant encounter with an aggressive dog. Point out "no go" areas, such as a lake or creek, or near a ledge where a child could get hurt. Look for playgrounds that include your child's favorite activities such as water and sand play, to reduce the chances of your child wandering off. Know your child's likely patterns of behavior so that you can anticipate what might attract them in the distance, or play equipment they might need extra help on. For example, some children are very careful on high structures and others seem unaware of danger and will need an adult to remain close enough to prevent falls. If your child has difficulty with a busy or noisy playground, pick quieter times to visit the playground.

### Pedestrian Safety

Teaching pedestrian safety is critical for children with autism. Often, you will need to use **social stories**, video modeling, role playing and real life practice to teach a child pedestrian safety.

**Crossing a street requires 100% accuracy**, and there is no room for errors. Therefore, after reviewing the instructions with a social story, you should follow up by showing your child videos of children crossing the street safely, and role playing how to cross the street until they are comfortable with the

process. Next, you need to practice several times, and in several different locations to see if they can cross the street safely. Never leave a child to cross the street on their own, until they are developmentally ready to do so, and you are absolutely sure that they can do it independently. Ensure that all caregivers understand that they need to help a child cross the street until you are confident that they will not make a mistake.

### Safety around Strangers

Children encounter unknown people every day, whether it is at a grocery store, or in a restaurant, or even at school. Teaching your child to differentiate between family, friends, acquaintances, community helpers and strangers is an important step towards keeping them safe. Begin by showing them pictures of family, friends and teachers, and discussing the idea of "known" adults that can be trusted. Let them know that these are people they are safe with and can turn to for help. Next, explain what an acquaintance is and give them examples of neighbors who you greet but don't know well. Explain that it is okay to talk to acquaintances, however, it is not okay to go anywhere with them, unless a caregiver has said it is okay.

Explain to them that community workers, such as police officers, fire fighters, security guards and people who work at the cash register in stores are safe adults to interact with, and in an emergency, your child can seek help from them. Show them examples of the types of uniforms they may wear, and role play asking for help. Talk to your child about behavior that makes a trusted adult no longer trustworthy, such as inappropriate touching. Finally, talk to your child about strangers as people who are not known to you and your child. Explain to them about never accepting gifts or candy from a stranger, and never going anywhere with a stranger. Be sure to role play various scenarios to clarify what you want your child to do in different situations. You may also tell your child a social story about what to do if they are approached by a stranger. Review these ideas frequently.

### Safety at a Neighbor's House

There may be occasions when you and your family might be invited to socialize with neighbors. Whether it is a casual play date, or a birthday party, it is up to you as a caregiver to decide whether it is appropriate to take your child to a specific social occasion. Prepare your child for what to expect. You could create a social story with visuals to review expected behaviors. You may be able to share the responsibility to keep an eye on your child with another caregiver or trusted adult at a social occasion, so you can have some time to socialize. This will ensure that someone is watching your child at all times. We have several helpful tips on how to handle family occasions, travel and shopping in a module called Planning for the Holidays.

### Conclusion

Remember to inform all of your child's caretakers when you take measures to keep your child safe. That way, they will know what to do in an emergency. Watch our "Safety in the Home" module for more information.