

Developing Risk and Safety Life Skills for Persons with Autism

by Dennis Debbaudt 2009

Learning to recognize that men and women in uniform are people you can go to and stay with during an emergency is a lesson we all learn. Persons who have autism can learn these lessons when we teach these safety skills at home, reinforce them at school and practice them in the community. Make building safety skills a part of the daily routine. They are learned best when they are delivered early and often, and are suited to a child or adult's age and ability levels.

Plan cross educational opportunities for students with autism and law enforcement professionals. Provide them in a safe, non-threatening environment.

These opportunities can result in improved and safer field interactions and develop skills that will last throughout careers and lifetimes for both populations. Students with autism will learn that law enforcers in uniform are safe "go to" people in times of emergency. This can help demystify police in uniform, and teach that inside the uniform are good people who are also neighbors and friends.

Law enforcers who have had a basic training about autism can learn for themselves, for example, what communications in the field with persons who have autism will look and sound like and when to use the specialized autism-related tactics they learned during training. Police officers will get the opportunity to meet the children and adults who have autism that live in their community. Best of all, the initial contact will be in a safe, relaxed, controlled environment, not during the oftentimes emotionally charged atmosphere of a sudden field contact.

Building skills for children and less independent adults

To establish these life skills education for children or less independent adults who have autism, form partnerships with teachers and law enforcement professionals to help develop a simple curriculum that helps expand skills that will enhance their safety in the community and build personal resilience to risk.

Formally or informally, invite a variety of law enforcers to sit among, not stand in front of, the students. The session should be designed to last about ten minutes, be delivered as frequently as possible, and by as many different officers as possible. Rotation of officers reinforces the message to students that police officers can and will look and sound differently. Rotation also makes the skill easier to generalize for the student and will allow more officers to participate without generating extraordinary time constraints for one particular officer. Officers can be asked to talk in their own words about the life skill that is being taught at the time.

Skills to build:

1. Recognize and respond as best they can to law enforcers, their uniforms, badges and vehicles
2. Stay with--not run from--safe, "go to" police or other uniformed first responders
3. Keep an appropriate distance when interacting with a law enforcer--or anyone else
4. To avoid making sudden movements, i.e. hands into pockets
5. Carry and safely produce an ID card
6. Disclose their autism, carry and/or produce an autism information card
7. Recognize inappropriate touching or sexual come-ons directed at them
8. Effectively report bullying or other incidents
9. Tell someone they need help, or use the phone to request it (Debbaudt and Coles, 2004 b)

Further, officers can participate in mock interviews, for example, by asking the student what their name is and if they have an ID card. With permission from all involved, consider videotaping the visits then using the videotape as a learning tool whenever possible.

These life skills lessons will be learned best when they become part of our daily routine. Augment the skills by practicing them at school and at home. Ultimately, plan field tests in the community to gauge progress.

Building skills for the more independent person with autism or Asperger syndrome

Persons with autism who are able to navigate the community without assistance should strongly consider developing a personal handout for the police and develop the skills necessary to appropriately disclose their need for an accommodation.

Remember that the initial uninformed contact with police presents the highest potential for a negative outcome.

What can and should the independent person living on the autism spectrum expect during sudden or even expected interactions with law enforcement, customs and immigration, first responders such as fire rescue, paramedics, hospital emergency room professionals or other security professionals?

With few exceptions, law enforcers and other first responders will have had little or no training about how to recognize, communicate and respond well when they interact during field contacts with a person on the spectrum. There may be little understanding of the significance of the words Asperger Syndrome, or autism when they hear them.

You can expect a higher level scrutiny from law enforcement and security personnel when traveling in the 21st century.

Expect public or private sector scrutiny at:

- Airports
- Security checkpoints such as government buildings, schools, any secured facility
- Drive-up or walk-up guard shacks
- Building entrances
- Campus
- Shopping malls or districts

In these days of heightened security? Anywhere!

So, what are the best options for the independent spectrum person during a sudden interaction with a law enforcer during an emergency or non emergency situation?

Should you disclose your autism or AS? When? To whom?

Disclosure tools and options

What's the best tool to use when you make the decision to disclose your autism or Asperger syndrome to a police officer? A handout card.

- 1) Develop a handout card that can be easily copied and laminated
- 2) The handout is replaceable. You can give it away to the officer on the scene
- 3) Carry several at all times
- 4) The handout card can be generic or specific to you
- 5) Work with an AS support organization to develop a generic handout
- 6) Work with persons whose opinions you trust and value to develop a person specific handout

How to present a handout to a police officer

What's the best way to tell the officer that you have a handout?

- (A) Avoid making sudden movements to reach for the handout card
- (B) Obtain permission or signal your intentions before reaching into coat or pants pockets, briefcases or bags, or in to glove compartments of vehicles
- (C) Verbally let officer know you have AS and have an information card for them to read. If nonverbal, or if sudden interactions render you nonverbal or mute, consider using a medical alert bracelet for an officer to read that alerts them to your condition of AS and the fact that you have an information card.

Disclosure to a police officer

The decision to disclose will always be yours to make. If you have learned through experience that disclosure would be helpful, you may decide to disclose to a police officer.

Law enforcers report that they make their best decisions when they have their best information. A good, strong AS disclosure that includes the use of an information card, contact information for an objective AS professional, and proof of diagnosis should be considered.

Plan and practice disclosure techniques

Plan your response and practice with others for a sudden encounter. They will happen to all of us. Your preparation is your best chance to have a successful interaction with law enforcement.

1. Discuss these risks with people that you trust
2. Develop a hard person specific disclosure handout
3. Develop a personal plan of how you will use the handout
4. Practice through role playing with people you know and trust
5. Develop disclosure handouts and role play when, where and how you would use them.
6. Adapt and amend disclosure handouts. It's only paper. They're not written in stone.

Further suggestions for you to consider during sudden interactions with police:

- (1) Do not attempt to flee
- (2) Do not make sudden movements
- (3) Try to remain calm
- (4) Verbally let officer know you have autism. If nonverbal, use alternative communication tools, such as a simple sign language card, that indicates the need to write
- (5) Obtain permission or signal intentions before reaching into a coat or pants pocket, or reaching into a car glove box
- (6) If unable to answer questions, consider use of a generic or person-specific autism information card
- (7) If you lose the ability to speak when under stress, consider wearing an alert bracelet or necklace that is easy to see--one that lets the reader know you have an information card
- (8) Ask officer to contact an advocate, if necessary and possible
- (9) If you are a victim or are reporting a crime, you may want the police to contact a family member, advocate or friend who can help you through the interview process
- (10) Carry the phone number of an advocacy organization or personal advocate, relative or friend (Debbaudt, 2006 b)

Avoiding street crime

Everyone should take precautions to avoid becoming victims of criminal activity. Unfortunately, persons with autism may need to take extra precautions. In order to avoid detection, arrest, and prosecution, criminally bent individuals become skilled at picking out easy victims. Robbers and con artists will notice unusual behavior when they select their next victim. An unarmed robber or con artist will operate in public places. Anywhere there's regular pedestrian traffic or large public gatherings will afford a criminal the chance to identify or mark victims. If you are threatened or asked to give up money or valuables, do not resist. Give them what they want. These things can be replaced. Once in a safe area, call the police. To avoid victimization from street crimes or abusers: Avoid areas that are unfamiliar to you.

- Consider carrying a cell phone
- Travel in groups if possible or walk with the crowd
- Do not dawdle or appear rushed in a crowd
- Park in a secure area
- Keep car doors locked
- Take a look around the parking lot before unlocking doors and exiting vehicle
- Arrive with the crowd to work, school, events
- Avoid gawking
- Do not maintain eye contact
- Let someone know of your travel plans
- Do not carry large amounts of cash
- Dress to suit the area
- Stay in well lit areas
- Do not wander or explore off well traveled pedestrian walkways or vehicular avenues

Author, Dennis Debbaudt, is the parent of a young man who has autism, an author, law enforcement trainer and producer of autism-related videos and curriculum for law enforcement and first response agencies. His materials are in use by NYPD, Chicago Police Department, and the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office among hundreds of agencies in the U.S., Canada and United Kingdom.

Dennis can be reached via his web site: <http://www.autismriskmanagement.com/>
email ddpi@flash.net or call 772-398-9756.

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