



Responding to Individuals with Autism

Consider the following when interacting with an individual who you suspect may have autism:

- Maintain a calm and reassuring tone of voice with the individual.
- Talk in short, direct phrases such as, “Stand up now” and “Come with me.”
- Have only one person at a time speak to the individual with autism.
- Allow for delayed responses to questions and or directions or commands.
- Do not interpret lack of eye contact as a sign of disrespect.
- Be prepared for unusual or disrespectful language from an individual with autism.
- Carefully examine non-speaking individuals for the presence of medic-alert tags or other personal identification.
- If the individual’s aggressive or self-injurious behavior escalates, maintain a safe distance until the behavior lessens.
- Use pictures, gestures, or sign language to communicate.
- Move the individual to a quieter environment.

Difficulties with Rescue:

- Like a child, an adult with autism may be likely to hide in a fire situation.

- Families having children with autism often need to keep exterior doors and gates locked for safety reasons. Forced entry may be necessary. Interior doors may also be locked.
- Use EXTREME caution when rescuing a person with autism from heights. The individual may fight the rescuer. Firefighters should be secured before attempting such a rescue.

Important Safety Facts

- Individuals with autism often have a high tolerance for pain. They may not tell you that they are injured. If you suspect a possible injury, contact EMS.
- Due to underdeveloped trunk muscles, individuals with autism are at especially HIGH RISK for positional asphyxia during emergency restraint.
- Many children and adults with autism may bolt after rescue. Firefighters must stay with the individual until EMS, a family member, or other caretaker arrives.
- Individuals with autism may have extreme reactions to common objects or events.

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This information is adapted from materials developed by the Autism Society of America, Alaska Autism Resource Center and the Indiana Resource Center for Autism.



Autism Spectrum Disorders

Tips for Firefighters



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TIPS FOR FIREFIGHTERS



What is Autism?

Autism is a complex neurobiological condition that interferes with an individual's ability to communicate and interact with other people. Some individuals with autism also exhibit unusual behaviors (i.e. as rocking, spinning, or hand-flapping) especially when they are in unfamiliar or stressful situations.

When May Firefighters Encounter an Individual with Autism?

The most common times a firefighter may interact with an individual with autism are:

1. The child or adult's residence is the site of a structural fire.
2. The child or adult is involved in a motor vehicle or other accident to which firefighters respond.
3. The child is a student at a school that is experiencing a false alarm or actual fire.
4. Firefighters are involved in community awareness or other local events.

Autism Facts

According to the Centers for Disease Control, approximately one in 110 children will be diagnosed with autism this year.

There are adults and children with autism living throughout Kentucky.

Autism occurs four times more frequently in boys than in girls.

Fifty percent of individuals with autism are nonverbal (unable to speak) throughout their lifetime.

Some individuals with autism are highly intelligent, speak very well, and live independent lives. These individuals may drive cars, have jobs, own their own homes, etc.

Autism may also be called, "autism spectrum disorder", "PDD", "PDD-NOS", or "Asperger's Syndrome."



Recognizing Autism

Individuals with autism cannot be identified by their physical appearance. They are usually identified by their behavior. When in an unfamiliar or stressful situation, individuals with autism may:

- Run away when approached or given commands/instructions.
- Respond negatively to touch or requests for eye contact.
- Appear belligerent or rude.
- Repeat exactly what the firefighter says.
- Have difficulty judging personal space (stand too close or far away).
- Talk about seemingly unrelated topics such as favorite sports teams or computer games.
- Scream or vocalize loudly, especially if touched.
- Respond negatively to loud sounds (sirens) and flashing lights.
- Fight a rescuer due to fear.
- Engage in repetitive movements, such as hand-flapping or self-hitting.

