

Awareness and education of first responders about disabilities increases their ability to provide appropriate response. Recognizing behaviors associated with autism will allow you to best respond to the situation.

A person on the autism spectrum may:

1. Not respond to a uniform, badge, or other emergency response symbols.

Autism may limit a person's ability to recognize and differentiate uniforms and other common symbols. Pointing out these items to allow the person to focus is helpful.

2. Not provide I.D. when asked. Be patient and speak slowly and calmly. Keep questions simple and allow time for answers. Repeat or rephrase. The person may not be able to speak. Check for ID jewelry, an ID card, or ID sewn into the individual's clothing.

3. Lack awareness of danger. Gently persuade or remove the person from the dangerous situation. Offer an alternative to the dangerous action. Be aware that if the person is anxious there is a risk they could bolt without warning.

4. Continue to do something after being told to stop. Demonstrative, non-threatening gestures may communicate more effectively than a verbal command. Demonstrate what you want the person to do. Repeat the behaviors and instructions. Use a communication board if possible and allow time for processing of information before responses are given. Draw a simple picture of what you'd like the person to do (i.e. picture of a stop sign).

5. Appear to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs. The actions of people with ASD can appear to be odd or inappropriate. When asked about drug use, the person may admit to having taken drugs if they take prescribed medications. Avoid making assumptions about alcohol or drug use.

6. Become self-injurious. Under stress an individual may become self-injurious. Use the least invasive technique possible to ensure the individual's safety.

7. Become aggressive. Restraints should only be used if the individual's or other's safety is at risk. Individuals with ASD may have a poorly developed upper trunk area. Positional asphyxia could occur so it is critical

to ensure that a prone position is not used and the person is moved to a secure and quiet place away from distractions. Also, the individual may be hypo-sensitive and not feel pain the same as others. Therefore, typical indications of pain would not be evident. De-escalation techniques to calm or distract the individual are safer and more effective.

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.
- If you need to restrain an individual with autism remember that due to underdevelopment trunk muscles he or she is at especially HIGH RISK for positional asphyxia.
- Many children and adults with autism have little or no understanding of common dangers. A missing child or adult with autism may quickly be in a life-threatening situation.
- If the individual with autism, or suspected of having autism, is arrested segregate the individual from the general population if at all possible.

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Autism Spectrum Disorders and Law Enforcement



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TIPS FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT PERSONNEL

Autism Facts

One in 59 children are diagnosed with autism each year.

Children and adults with autism are seven times more likely to come into contact with police than their typical peers.

Autism may also be called, “autism spectrum disorder” (ASD), “PDD”, “PDD-NOS”, or “Asperger’s Syndrome.”

Autism affects boys five times more often than girls.

50 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.

Most individuals with autism become easily upset in unfamiliar situations and unscheduled interruptions.

Individuals with autism have a higher rate of epilepsy than their typical peers.

Individuals with autism may have extreme reactions to seemingly benign objects or events (e.g. train whistle).

Recognizing Autism

When in an unfamiliar or stressful situation, individuals with autism may:

- Run away when approached or given commands
- Respond negatively to touch or requests for eye contact
- Appear belligerent or rude
- Repeat exactly what the officer 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 due to hypersensitivity
- Fight a rescuer due to fear
- Engage in repetitive movements (such as hand-flapping, or self-hitting)
- Reverse pronouns such as “Can I stop?” instead of “Can you stop?”
- Give misleading statements or false confessions

What is Autism?

Autism is a spectrum disorder that affects every individual to a differing degree. It is a neurological condition with a variety of symptoms that affect individuals in different ways. It knows no racial, ethnic or social boundaries. People with autism may have difficulties in communication and social understanding (i.e. use gestures, language or pictures to communicate). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is now known to be more common than previously thought (1 in 68, Centers for Disease Control), affecting as many as 65,000 Kentuckians.

When May Police Encounter an Individual with Autism?

The four most likely reasons that a police officer may interact with an individual with autism are:

1. The child or adult is missing.
2. The child or adult is exhibiting dangerously aggressive behavior at home, in school, or in a community setting.
3. The child or adult is a victim of a crime or accident.
4. The individual has broken the law.

