How to make a wandering safety plan.

Esta lección en español

What it is. **Wandering** (some call it elopement or bolting) is when a child leaves a safe place without an adult knowing: out the front door, away in a store, off the playground. A **wandering safety plan** is one page, written before it happens, that tells every adult how to stop it, how to search, and how to approach your child once found.

Why it matters. It is common, and it is the one behavior where minutes count. In a survey of more than a thousand families, about half of autistic children had tried to wander after age four (Anderson and colleagues, 2012). Water is the biggest danger: drowning is a leading cause of injury death for autistic children who wander (Guan and Li, 2017). You do not need a diagnosis, a waitlist or anyone's permission to write this plan tonight.

HOW TO DO IT YOURSELF

How to write a wandering safety plan yourself, in five steps.

1. **Write down where and when it happens.** For one week, every time your child heads off, note the time, the place, what happened just before, and where they went. Use a four-term data sheet. Most wandering has a pattern.
2. **Guess what they get out of it.** Running *to* something (water, a swing, the neighbor's dog) or running *away* from something (noise, a hard task, a crowd)? That is the behavior's function, and it tells you what to teach.

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3. **Secure the place.** A chime or alarm on every outside door, locks high up or out of sight, a fence latch they can’t open, and pool or bath water never left unwatched. Tell your closest neighbors, with a photo.
4. **Teach a safer way to get the same thing.** If they run to the swing, teach them to ask for it: a word, a sign, a picture card (functional communication). If they run from noise, teach “break, please” and honor it fast at first. Also practice “stop” and “wait” as a game, with a big reward each time.
5. **Write the one page and share it.** Photo, what they like, what scares them, how they talk, how to approach, places they head to first, and your phone number. Give a copy to school, sitters, grandparents and neighbors. Keep one by the front door.

If your child is missing: check water first (pools, ponds, bathtubs, creeks), then call 911 right away and say your child is autistic and may not answer to their name. Do not wait to see if they come back.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Leo and the front door.

Made-up example. The child, the family and the days below are invented to show the method.

Leo is six. Twice in a month he slipped out the front door and was found at the park swings down the block. His mom writes down every attempt for a week.

What she saw	What she did
All 5 attempts were in the afternoon, after he saw the swings out the window.	Guessed he runs *to* the swings. Moved the couch so it faces the yard instead.

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The door made no sound.	Put a chime on it and a lock up high. Gave the neighbor across the street a photo.
Leo had no way to ask for the park.	Made a “park” picture card. Every time he handed it over, they went within minutes at first.
Week 4	He handed her the card most afternoons. One try at the door, caught by the chime.

What made it work: the locks bought time, and the card gave Leo a faster, safer way to get the swing than the door did. Locks alone keep him in; teaching him to ask is what makes him stop trying.

MISTAKES TO AVOID

Ways a plan fails.

- Locks only, nothing taught. The reason they run is still there, and one day the door is open.
- Chasing as a game. If running gets a fun chase, the chase reinforces running. Practice “stop” when calm, not only in the moment.
- A plan only you know. The sitter, the teacher and grandma need the same page.
- Forgetting water. Many children are drawn to it. Swim lessons and fenced pools save lives.
- Teaching “break, please” and then not giving the break. If asking doesn’t work, running will.

TRY IT

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One question, then the answer.

A made-up case: Ava bolts out of the grocery store every time the cart reaches the loud freezer aisle. What is she probably getting, and what would you teach?

▼ Show the answer, and why

She is probably getting away from the noise. Teach her a fast way to ask for the same thing: headphones, or a “break” card that takes her outside with you for a minute. Skip the freezer aisle for now, then bring it back slowly. Why: when the safe ask gets her out as fast as running did, she has no reason to run.

Something to keep

Fill in your plan, then print it.

WANDERING SAFETY PLAN · IF FOUND, CALL THE NUMBER BELOW

Name

If missing: check water first, then call 911. Say this child is autistic and may not answer to their name.

Glue a recent photo here

How they communicate	
Places they head to first	
What they love	
What upsets them	

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How to approach	Speak softly. Kneel down. Do not grab. Offer a favorite.
Medical needs	
Call first	

WHERE DRAGEN HELPS

When the plan isn’t enough.

If wandering keeps happening after a month, or you can’t find the pattern, a behavior analyst can run a functional assessment and build the teaching plan with you. Ask any provider to show you their data, and use the provider check before you sign.

Free on this page, and yours to keep: the lesson and the printable plan. No email, no login.

SOURCE

Where this comes from.

Anderson, Law, Daniels and colleagues (2012), “Occurrence and family impact of elopement in children with autism spectrum disorders,” *Pediatrics*, 130(5), 870–877. Guan and Li (2017), “Injury mortality in individuals with autism,” *American Journal of Public Health*, 107(5), 791–793. Teaching a safer way to ask: Carr and Durand (1985), *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 18, 111–126.

Examples on this page are made up. They contain no client, student or family information. This lesson teaches a method; it does not replace your BCBA, your doctor, or

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emergency services.

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