

Responding to Autism: A Telecommunicator's Approach

In most emergency situations, the first step taken by the individuals involved is to call 911. Telecommunicators play a key role in figuring out the type of emergency that is occurring and determining the proper staff and equipment needed in the particular situation. It is extremely important for these professionals to understand autism and the types of behaviors that individuals with autism might display in emergency situations. With the proper training, 911 officers will be able to provide the best and most effective response to ensure the safety of individuals with autism.

Quick Facts:

1. It is essential to determine if the person you are talking to on the phone has autism or the person who is in need of emergency personnel has autism. Autism has a few names including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Aspergers, Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD) and of course Autism.
2. Listen very carefully to how the person is speaking. Listen for key words and phrases.
3. A person with autism may speak differently. They might repeat the same words or only say one word or short phrases. They may repeat lines from movies or books. This is called "scripting". The call may sound very different from all other calls the operator receives. Their voice may appear "computer like" or "robotic"
4. Though at first you might think the individual on the phone is incoherent or impaired in some way, make sure to take each call seriously and listen as intently as possible.
5. Per normal procedure, make sure to find out as much as you can – who, what, where, when and how.
6. Try to get information from the caller about the person – what they are afraid of or, what to do, and what to avoid.
7. Remember that a high percentage of people on the autism spectrum are non-verbal, so make sure to clarify this and ask if the individual in question will answer to their name.
8. Advise a supervisor and proper personnel that the person they are attending to has autism and remind them to respond accordingly.

Lost Child - Autism Specific Call-Intake Questions

The recommendations noted below are offered to help telecommunicators when taking calls concerning children with special needs. First obtain a full description of the child including height, weight, hair color, and clothing worn. Then ask:

- Is the child wearing or carrying any tracking technology device? If so, which one and how is location information accessed?
- Is the child attracted to water? If so, can the child swim?
- Is the child attracted to active roadways/highways?
- Does the child have a fascination with vehicles such as trains, heavy equipment, airplanes, or fire trucks?
- Has the child wandered away before? If so, where was he or she found?
- Does the child have a sibling with special needs? If so, has that sibling wandered away before? If so, where was the sibling found?
- Where does the child like to go? Does the child have a favorite place?
- Is the child nonverbal? How will the child likely react to his or her name being called?
- Will the child respond to a particular voice such as that of his or her mother, father, other relative, caregiver, or family friend?
- Does the child have a favorite song, toy, or character? If so, what or who is it?
- Does the verbal child know his or her parents' names, home address, and phone number?
- How does the child respond to pain or injury?
- What is the child's response to being touched?
- Does the child wear a medical ID tag?
- Does the child have any sensory, medical, or dietary issues and requirements?
- Does the child rely on any life-sustaining medication?

- Does the child become upset easily? If so, what methods are used to calm him or her?

