

NATIONAL ACADEMY ASSOCIATE



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ASSOCIATES

SEARCHING FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS



PLUS!

Leadership:
Challenges
for the
21st Century

Motorists traveling on U.S. Route 60 in Mesa, Ariz., were horrified one evening last May when they saw a young child walk into the path of oncoming traffic. Several pulled over to try to coax the child to the shoulder as cars swerved around him. They didn't know that the 9-year-old, Au-Juna Banks-Taylor, was a child with autism but noticed he covered his ears when they shouted at him. Unfortunately, the driver of a Chevy S-10 pickup truck did not see the boy until his vehicle struck and killed him.

Several weeks later the parents of a 4-year-old boy with autism, Aiden Bower, tucked their son into bed at their home in Holiday, Fla. When they checked on him an hour later, the window screen in his bedroom had been pushed open. Aiden was gone. His body was later found at the bottom of a neighbor's swimming pool. The next month, a 5-year-old Madison, Wis., boy with autism, Jeremiah Conn, was reported missing from a relative's home in Stoughton. His shoes were spotted at the edge of a retention pond. Jeremiah had also drowned.

The number of children with autism in the United States has skyrocketed, with one in every 88 children coping with autism and related disorders. At the same time, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), has seen another disturbing trend: a spike in the number of these children wandering away from safe environments with grave consequences.

► HARM'S WAY

While many people know that adults suffering from Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia can wander off, they don't realize that many children with special needs, especially the severely afflicted, often exhibit similar behaviors. Nearly half of children with autism will repeatedly try to wander away from safe environments, according to the Interactive Autism Network. In many cases, they bolt to something they have fixated on such as a body of water, a highway sign, or a train, increasingly with deadly consequences.

Searching for these children poses significant challenges to law enforcement officers because they often exhibit behaviors not seen in unaffected children. Many are nonverbal and therefore unable to respond to searchers. Some are sensitive to sound, and yelling out the child's name or using search dogs, ATVs, or helicopters may drive them further away. They can exhibit a diminished sense of fear, causing them to engage in high-risk behavior. They often seek out small enclosed spaces, which may be overlooked during initial searches.

Although many runaway children with special needs can fall into harm's way quickly, they can also be very resilient. In some cases, children have been found safely many days after being reported missing and many miles away.

A 15-year-old boy with autism ran out of a children's hospital in Chicago during a visit there with his father in June. He was spotted two days later—and 25 miles away—by a woman who recognized him from the media coverage. Another child with autism, Robbie Wood Jr., 8, wandered away from his family in October 2011 while visiting a densely forested park in Hanover County, Va. More than 6,000 volunteers searched for the child until he was found alive in a drainage ditch six days later. He was lethargic and suffering from the elements but in remarkably good health.

► FIRST RESPONSE

After Robbie Wood was safely recovered, Robert Lowery, senior executive director of NCMEC's Missing Children Division, and his staff met with representatives of autism organizations, health professionals, and search-and-rescue experts

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WHEN AUTISTIC KIDS RUN AWAY FROM HOME, THEY PRESENT LAW ENFORCEMENT WITH A SET OF UNIQUE CHALLENGES.

JOHN RYAN

CHILDREN



PHOTO: ©ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

to see what more could be done to find these children safely when they are reported missing. They devised a “Response Guide for Law Enforcement” (www.missingkids.com) with protocols and checklists to help call takers and first responders navigate the unique challenges.

NCMEC considers runaway children with special needs to be critically missing and deploys Team Adam, a rapid-response corps of highly trained, retired law enforcement officers, to assist law enforcement on the scene, says Lowery, a former assistant police chief in Missouri. Because so many of the fatalities are due to drowning, first responders should immediately search nearby bodies of water and attempt to contain the child in a specific area, he adds.

“You can’t treat a child with special needs as a conventional runaway,” says Lee Manning, a former incident commander in tactical operations for Massachusetts State Police and a veteran Team Adam consultant who has been deployed on many of these cases, including the Robbie Wood incident. “You have to get the right resources in there fast.”

According to Lowery, one of the most important steps for first responders is to listen intently to the parents or caregivers to learn their child’s specific behaviors and where he or she might try to go. Important questions to ask the parents or caregivers include: How will the child likely react to searchers? Will the child hide? Will he or she run? Is the child verbal or nonverbal? To whom will the child most likely respond? Does he or she need life-sustaining medications?

A reporter and his cameraman covering the disappearance of a 7-year-old boy with autism in Australia in February took action when they were told the child was attracted to water. They headed to a nearby creek, where they saw the child, waist deep and clutching reeds to stay afloat. While the reporter filmed, the cameraman jumped into the fast-moving water and rescued the child, who had shed his clothing.

“With increased awareness about autism and quick response to these cases, we can bring more of these children home safely,” says Nancy McBride, NCMEC’s national safety director. “I didn’t realize what these parents are dealing with on a day-to-day basis.”

► UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS

Autism is a spectrum disorder, and no two children are alike. First responders need to tailor their searches around the unique characteristics of each child. For example, when an 8-year-old boy in Twin Peaks, Calif., had been missing more than 24 hours in September 2011, sheriff’s deputies used loud speakers to blast the music of Ozzy Osbourne in the search area. They played the boy’s favorite songs, including Osbourne’s “No More Tears.” It worked: out he popped up from behind a bush. Searchers have also been known to grill hot dogs and hamburgers, hoping the aroma will lure a hungry child out of hiding, or if a search continues into the night, set out bedding with a favorite stuffed animal. If a child is obsessed with fire trucks, bringing a fire truck to the scene might draw out the child.

Six-year-old Christian Baucom was fascinated by hogs. Christian, who had autism and was nonverbal, was reported missing by his foster parents the afternoon of March 27 of this year. They told searchers about the hogs on their property, so Missouri Highway Patrol drained a pond near the hog pen. Divers discovered his body the next day. His twin brother, Jason, also a child with autism, had drowned in another pond seven months before.

Lori McIlwain, executive director of the National Autism

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Association who helped Lowery's team better understand the issue, tracks cases of runaway children with autism and has watched the numbers grow on her computer screen at an alarming rate; as many as six children are reported missing each week. And those are just the children reported missing. By August, there had already been 20 deaths this year alone, nearly all from drowning.

"There are more cases because there are more kids with autism," says McIlwain, whose son, Connor, who also has autism, wandered away from school but was safely recovered by a kind stranger. Connor was seven and mostly non-verbal when he left his school in October 2007 to go find his favorite highway exit sign. The man who spotted him walking down the road thought he looked too young to be alone.

It was clear to McIlwain after her son's frightening close call that many professionals were not aware of the growing problem or even how to respond to it. Her organization collaborated with five other national autism groups to develop a Website (<http://awaare.org/>) to promote more awareness about wandering.

McIlwain was shocked that her son's school did not call her or law enforcement. The man who picked up her son asked him his name and where he lived and when he didn't answer assumed he had been warned not to talk to strangers. When Connor was turned over to a police officer, her son was scolded for running away. Even his pediatrician was not aware that chil-



Savannah Martin was seven years old when she slipped out of her house and drowned in a nearby pond.

PHOTO COURTESY BETH MARTIN

dren with autism frequently wander from safe environments.

But parents of children with special needs know only too well, and they will go to great lengths to prevent their children from wandering. McIlwain now uses a tracking device known as Project Lifesaver. The company works with law enforcement and provides training in the use of the specialized electronic search-and-rescue equipment.

In desperation, some parents sleep on the floor next to their children's beds or nail their windows shut, despite the fire hazard. One mother said she turned her home into a fortress, with keycode locks on all the doors, windows bolted so they will only open so far, and a backyard fence facing inward so her son can't climb out. Despite her best efforts, her son

picked the lock with a knife to escape.

"My son has wandered at airports, on ferries, in hotels," another mother wrote to McIlwain. "It's terrifying. He waits until your attention is elsewhere for a moment, then he's gone."

Beth Martin, a single mom with three children, slept with her 7-year-old daughter, Savannah, in their Lawton, Okla., home because of concerns she may wander at night. She also took showers with her because it was simply too risky to leave her alone for that long.

Last year after returning from church Martin popped some noodles in the microwave to cook for four minutes. Knowing



PHOTO: MAJ. BRET JOHNSON, MISSOURI HIGHWAY PATROL

Divers found the body of 6-year-old Christian Baucom at the bottom of a hog pond 200 yards from his house.

Savannah would be transfixed—she loved watching the noodles swirl round and round—Martin thought it would give her enough time to run upstairs and use the bathroom.

In less time than it took to cook the noodles, Savannah was gone, along with her 2-year-old brother who had been with his 11-year-old sibling earlier. Martin frantically searched the house and ran to a neighbor's for help. Then she heard her eldest scream, "They're in the pond!"

Thankfully, her 2-year-old was wearing a bike helmet, which kept him afloat. She spotted Savannah's Sunday school dress floating in the water and hoped she had shed her clothing, as some children with autism often do. But it was Savannah. Her neighbor dove in and pulled her out. Martin began CPR, but it was too late. Losing Savannah was devastating enough. But then people began blaming her, saying she was

negligent. A posting on Facebook accused her of killing her daughter and said she should be in jail.

► Active Wanderers

Parents are frequently blamed when their children wander away from home. "It is looked at as bad parenting," says McIlwain, whose organization was among those that successfully pushed for a medical diagnostic code for active wanderers.

Among other things, having a formal code will classify tracking devices as medically necessary and reimbursable by insurance; combat the misconception that wandering is simply behavioral; and increase awareness of physicians, school administrators, and others.

Martin said the only way she was able to cope with the death of her daughter and the accusations that she was to blame was through emotional support from the autism community. Now she has joined NCMEC's Team HOPE, a support group that helps other parents whose children are missing or exploited.

"It's happening so much," says Martin. "I take every story personally. These are children, and children families love." ■ FBINAA

John D. Ryan is the CEO of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC). He was named to the position in June after serving more than 12 years on the NCMEC board. Prior to his work with the NCMEC, Ryan was senior vice president and deputy general counsel at AOL Inc. He also worked for 14 years at the Office of the District Attorney in Bronx County, New York, where he served as an assistant district attorney.
