

# During Autism Acceptance Month, Cy-Fair First Responders Share Ten Tips to Keep Kids on the Spectrum Safe

*April is National Autism Acceptance Month. Cy-Fair Fire Department shares tips to help keep kids on the spectrum safe.*

HOUSTON, TX, UNITED STATES, April 4, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Everyone wants to keep children in their community safe. That's not always easy, because kids are curious, energetic, stubborn, and often don't have a well-developed sense of caution. There can be an extra layer of challenge involved with children on the autism spectrum, because they may not perceive common dangers or respond to others in expected ways.

"As first responders, one of our top priorities is to respond effectively and empathetically in all situations," says Casey Sturgis, who is one of Cy-Fair Fire Department's EMS training captains. "We train to understand autism so that we can be as prepared as possible to interact with both kids and adults on the spectrum. That said, we want to do everything we can to help families and community members prevent emergencies in the first place. Whenever possible, we would rather meet these wonderful individuals under positive circumstances."

In recognition of National Autism Acceptance Month, Sturgis shares advice that will help family members of autistic children, as well as the community at large, think about and prepare for some of the situations first responders regularly encounter.

Meet and get to know members of the community. One of the most effective ways to keep autistic children (and adults) safe is for people in the area to know who they are and what behaviors to look for.

"One of the most important things for community members to bear in mind if they see someone who isn't behaving in expected ways is: It may not be about you!" says Sturgis. "The individual in question could have autism, dementia, or even diabetes. They may be lost. If they're peering in windows, they may not be trying to break in; they may be looking for their home. Try not to automatically assume the worst. Instead, get out and meet your neighbors. Let the neighbors meet your autistic loved ones. The key here is to be curious, not furious."

Keep current information on hand that emergency personnel might need. Emergencies sometimes happen involving children. They may be related to a child's autism; for instance,

they've run away from home or they've accidentally locked themselves in a vehicle. The emergency may be totally unrelated to autism; for instance, if a child has fallen and broken a bone. Good information to have nearby includes:

- A current photo
- Height and weight
- List of allergens and medications
- Contact information for other family members
- Contact information for the child's medical provider

It can also be helpful to make a list of any useful information on how to approach and interact with the child, as well as their needs and differences.

"Even parents might not know all of these things off the top of their heads, or be able to recall them in the midst of an emergency," Sturgis points out. "It's a good idea to leave a printed list in the home, especially for the benefit of other caregivers like babysitters or grandparents."

Secure all windows and doors in the home. Many individuals with autism display wandering (or elopement) behavior, meaning they may leave a safe or supervised area without permission or awareness of potential dangers. Parents may need to look beyond typical locks and "childproof" doorknob covers. Methods that may be effective include:

- Installing an alarm system that will be triggered if a window or door is opened. Make sure the alarm is set up so that it will sound throughout the home, not just in the room where the breach occurred.
- Installing fingerprint doorknobs for exterior doors. These doorknobs use biometric fingerprint recognition to unlock doors and can be programmed to respond only to caregivers.
- Installing exterior cameras that send an alert to a person's phone if motion is detected. Interior cameras are an option too. This can alert parents if a child is trying to exit the home. If they are successful, parents will know which direction they went.

"The National Autism Association provides a free 'Big Red Safety Box<sup>®</sup>' that contains a wandering-prevention toolkit for families of autistic individuals," Sturgis shares. "The toolkits contain educational materials, door/window alarms, and more." Families can apply for one here: <https://nationalautismassociation.org/big-red-safety-boxes-now-available/>

Consider using monitoring technology. This might be a wearable device like a watch (such as the Theora Care system <https://theoracare.com/>, which has an optional locking clasp to deter removal) or GPS tracker that clips onto clothing. Some options include a speakerphone and an SOS button. If the child has a smartphone, parents can download a location tracking app like Life360 <https://intl.life360.com/>. (Note that Theora Care has monthly fees, and Life360 may have monthly fees depending on the plan.)

Sturgis also encourages families to familiarize themselves with Project Lifesaver (<https://harriscountycit.org/project-lifesaver-jump-page-2-2/>), a program for individuals with

cognitive disabilities such as autism, dementia, and TBI who have a history of wandering from the home. The program provides a free small arm bracelet equipped with a tracking radio frequency. Families can apply for the program here:

[https://apps.harriscountysoc.org/LifeSaver/HCSO\\_LifeSaver.aspx](https://apps.harriscountysoc.org/LifeSaver/HCSO_LifeSaver.aspx)

Know where to look for the missing child (or where to tell others to look). What happens if parents or emergency personnel can't find their missing child? Know where their safe spots are and where they might be likely to go. It might not be far: It could be a place in the home or on the property, like a closet or shed in the backyard.

"If your child isn't on your property, is there a favorite place they might go, like a friendly neighbor's house or a nearby park?" asks Sturgis. "Is there anything they might be drawn to and try to follow, like a garbage truck, a firetruck siren, or a dog? They're often drawn to water, so always check nearby pools, ponds, creeks, and other sources of water first."

Familiarize children with emergency services, and teach them that first responders are there to help. "Those of us in emergency services want everyone in the community—not just individuals with autism—to know that we are there to help," Sturgis says. "As much as possible, talk to your child about what they may see and encounter in an emergency situation. Show them pictures and videos of firefighters, police officers, EMTs, and so on. Attend community events where kids can have positive interactions with us and get to know us as safe individuals."

Make sure your child carries some type of medical alert ID. Medical alert bracelets are readily visible to emergency personnel; however, they are not a popular option as many autistic children do not like to wear jewelry. A medical alert shoe tag may be more appropriate.

"Some families also have their children carry an ID card," says Sturgis. "A major benefit of ID cards is that they can give more detailed information beyond medical needs, such as the child's communication preferences and information about how they may react (e.g., atypical body language, lack of response to questions, or a tendency to run away). Community members can obtain free photo IDs at their local library."

Understand what causes stress and what soothing behaviors look like. People who have an autistic family member know what situations tend to be triggering for them. Share this information with others who interact with your child on a regular basis, like teachers, neighbors, and family friends. Avoiding stressful situations reduces the likelihood of unsafe behaviors.

"It's also helpful to identify and share what your child's soothing behaviors look like," says Sturgis. "This is helpful information for the public to know as well. Under stress or when there is a new environmental stimulus, many kids on the spectrum will engage in fidgeting, rocking, parroting, and yelling. If you can't remove or avoid the stressor, just let them engage in these behaviors as that's the fastest way to soothe them."

Carry a “calm down” kit. A calm down kit includes things that will help children stay calm, such as earplugs or headphones, sensory comfort items, and fidget toys.

“Most parents do carry a calm down kit, and the Cy-Fair Fire Department also has one on our apparatus,” shares Sturgis.

Get familiar with communication boards. A communication board is a tool that enables individuals who struggle with verbal communication to convey and receive important information by pointing to pictures and symbols. Communication boards can be customized for a variety of situations, ranging from everyday requests to emergency situations. Here is an example of a communication board used by first responders: <https://widgit-health.com/downloads/paramedic-board.htm>

“Most people with an autistic child are familiar with communication boards since they are frequently used by teachers, therapists, and in the home,” says Sturgis. “It’s also a good idea for members of the general public to become familiar with this useful two-way tool. In an unexpected or emergency situation, you can easily search for and pull up a communication board on your phone if you need help communicating.”

“Autism is better diagnosed than ever before,” concludes Sturgis. “This April, as we recognize National Autism Acceptance Month, we encourage all community members to learn more about their neighbors on the spectrum: who they are, what makes them unique, and how to best support and interact with them.”

For more information about autism and a list of community resources, visit the Texas Health and Human Services’ Children’s Autism Program webpage:

<https://www.hhs.texas.gov/services/disability/childrens-autism-program>

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About CFFD:

The Cy-Fair Fire Department (CFFD) provides professional fire and emergency medical services to the citizens of Northwest Harris County, Texas. From its beginnings in the late 1950s, the Cy-Fair FD is now one of the largest, busiest combination fire departments in the United States, with over 38,000 emergency responses each year. CFFD covers the 164-square-mile area of Harris County Emergency Services District #9 (HCESD9) in the unincorporated part of Northwest Harris County. Responding from 13 stations strategically located throughout the territory, the 550-plus men and women of the fire department are among the best trained and equipped firefighters, emergency medical technicians (EMTs), and dispatchers in the nation.

Dottie DeHart

DH&C

[dottie@dehartandcompany.com](mailto:dottie@dehartandcompany.com)

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