

# Information for Police and Emergency Personnel

Emergency situations are extremely stressful for anyone. Some of us deal with stress better than others, and we all have our own way of getting through difficult times. Children with autism spectrum disorders can use certain behaviors as ways to cope with stress. Unfortunately, other people unfamiliar with the child may not be aware of their coping strategies or anger or frustration triggers, and may feel that the behavior is deliberately oppositional or that the child is emotionally unstable (or even psychotic). Community emergency responders may not even be aware that the child is on the autism spectrum at all if the parent is not present or able to communicate with officers (i. e. if there was an accident and the parent was incapacitated). The child's need for sameness, trouble with unexpected events, anxiety, etc. can interfere with their response to police officers or emergency personnel. Troublesome behaviors such as a loud voice, talking to him/herself, refusing to answer questions, difficulty in describing events, aversion to eye contact, to name only a few, could easily be misinterpreted as suspicious behavior.

Safety skills should be taught to the child as soon as developmentally ready, and those skills might include the obvious: knowing their home address and phone number, dialing 911, good touch-bad touch, stranger danger, fire escape plans, etc. They also need to include more subtle skills such as: reporting events in sequence, asking for help when needed, identifying 'safe' people who can help in emergencies, and self-advocacy (i.e. being able to say '*I don't understand the question*', '*I need a few minutes to calm down*', or even, '*I have autism and I have trouble lowering my voice when I'm nervous*').

It would be helpful to emergency personnel if they knew before arriving at your home that you have a child (or adult) with autism residing there and some basic facts about that individual. This would not only help the officer to assess the situation more objectively, but also to prevent the situation from escalating into a much bigger emergency because the child or adult was approached in a frightening manner.

## **INFORMATION PARENTS SHOULD SHARE WITH THEIR EMERGENCY RESPONDERS**

**(Courtesy Mary Young, 2002)**

Talk to your local police/fire departments. This information can be added to most 911 emergency response systems. When an emergency call is made from your home, a computer screen with this additional information can be programmed to alert emergency

responders to the situation in your home.

Ü Name of child or adult.

Ü Physical description of the child or adult (height, weight, eye color, special identifying features).

Ü Recent photograph: this should be sent to your emergency responders and updated routinely.

Ü Name of parents or care providers.

Ü Address.

Ü Phone numbers – home, work, emergency, cell phone, pager.

Ü Emergency person contact information (name, phone numbers, address, etc.).

Ü Description of behaviors or characteristics that may attract attention.

Ü Favorite attractions and locations where person may be found.

Ü Likes, dislikes and approach techniques for the individual.

Ü Sensory, medical or dietary issues, if any.

Ü Method of communication (if nonverbal—sign language, picture board, written word).

Ü ID wear (jewelry, tags, name on clothes, non-permanent tattoos).

Ü Map and address grid to nearby properties with water sources, dangerous features.

Ü Locations highlighted.

Blueprint or drawing of home with bedrooms of the individual with disabilities highlighted.