

Safety in the Home

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Most parents and caregivers view safety as a significant concern regarding their children in the home. Stairwells and doorways, covering electrical outlets and using childproof locks on cabinets are among the most common safety concerns.

In response to these concerns, the Autism Society has partnered with law enforcement and a preparedness organization to create a Safe and Sound packet. The packet contains an emergency decal that can be placed on your door and a Personal Information Record.

For parents of “typical” children, such safety precautions are usually necessary for the first few years of life and no longer requires the use of modifications. However, for parents of children on the autism spectrum, there are additional issues to consider when addressing the safety of the individual with autism, family members, and the individual with ASD.

Consider the many behaviors an individual with autism may engage in that could be unsafe: throwing objects, climbing on surfaces, dumping drawers and bins, and climbing out of or breaking windows. Or consider what can happen when things converge: putting items in appliances, flushing things down the sink or toilet, touching burners, turning on the stove, chewing on wires, crawling into a washer or dryer. Finally, consider the potential dangers that can result from these behaviors.

Often children with autism who display such behavioral concerns do not understand the ramifications of their actions, which can be devastatingly tragic at worst. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the caregivers in the home to both prevent and respond to these behaviors to keep everyone safe.

There are several environmental and safety modifications that can be made in the home as well as teaching appropriate behaviors. The following suggestions have been found helpful in preventing dangerous behaviors and promoting safety: using locks for security or limiting the individual’s access to labeling every functional item and area and using clear communication.

Parents sometimes balk initially at the idea of having to place locks on doors or cabinets, place alarms or cards. They often say: “This is not a classroom.” However, your home is indeed a natural learning

Establish priority areas for modification. Modify the most important areas first – the individual’s bedroom since these are the primary areas of interaction for many children. When getting started, think about some children, it would be a recreation/family room, while for others it might be the bedroom or kitchen.

In addition, consider the behaviors to be modified and the relationship of those behaviors to the environment. Reinforce behavior through positive and negative reinforcement. Remember, behaviors always serve some purpose. Understand it. If the individual likes to put things in the toilet or run hot water in the bath, modifications in the house, modifications should begin with securing exterior doors with locks.

ARRANGE THE FURNITURE APPROPRIATELY

Arrange the furniture in a way that “makes sense” for the activities the individual is expected to do. Try to ensure that there are clear table surfaces and appropriate chairs. If the child frequently runs out of doors so he or she is unable to escape. Limit the need for excessive movement and/or transition. Modifications may include climbing.

Keep furniture surfaces clear (if the individual is a “sweeper”) and place items out of reach on shelves. Use barriers to prevent falling down steps or to limit access to certain areas in the home.

USE LOCKS AND ALARMS WHERE APPROPRIATE

For individuals who run away or leave the home without supervision (also referred to as “elopement”), lock exterior doors and windows. This may prevent the child from leaving, or at the very least notify you if they do.

Some parents also express grave concerns about their child leaving their bedroom at night. It is a concern for the family – parents need to get sleep while being assured their child is secure. It is advisable to address your child’s tendency to wander or run/dart. You may also want to find out if programs such as Take Me Home (autism/how-the-autism-society-can-help/safe-and-sound/take-me-home/) or Smart911 (<http://www.smart911.org/>)

It is also helpful to reach out to our local affiliates and other parent groups for suggestions and support. Supportive and affective methods to manage the most challenging aspects of ASD. Search “Autism Society Affiliate” resource database, Autism Source (<http://www.autismsource.org/>).

Door and window alarms can be a key investment in keeping your child safe. Consulting a professional can advise you of the legal and larger safety implications of the security measure you are considering. If you choose to put locks on the doors, use locks that you can easily open: a hook-and-eye lock, or a slide-bolt. Some rooms may need a room for quick and easy access. It is imperative that you have immediate access to any locked room.

It may also be necessary to use safety locks (often plastic devices) to secure items that may be unsafe. Use safety locks in the bathroom and kitchen cabinets to prevent access to items in the cabinets.

Safeguard Your Windows

If your child likes to climb out of windows, place locks on them. Hardware stores carry special locks windows, replace the glass panes with Plexiglas to prevent injury. Some parents must place wooder

MAKE ELECTRICAL OUTLETS AND APPLIANCES SAFE

Cover or remove electrical outlets and access to electrical appliances. Use plastic knob covers (also stove burners. Lock the door to the room or rooms with the washer or dryer, appliances or power to

Ensure that all wiring for appliances and electronics is concealed in a way that the child cannot play have a curious interest in how things work, but that can be coupled with a pervasive “unawareness” combination when it comes to electrical materials.

LOCK HAZARDOUS ITEMS AWAY

Secure items that are dangerous if ingested, such as detergents, chemicals, cleaning supplies, pesti chew. It is easy for an individual with autism to confuse a bottle of yellow cleaning fluid with juice ba may be poisonous or toxic) out of a bottle.

Also, pills that look like candy can easily be eaten by mistake. Place such items out of reach or in ca permanent place that is clearly in view.

Secure items/materials that are dangerous or unsafe if used without supervision, such as sharp obj like to cut things (clothing, curtains, wires, books, etc.) into pieces with scissors or knives when unsi (child-safety scissors), and be sure to provide supervision when the child is involved in cutting activi candy, video games, lighters, matches, TV, DVD player, toilet tank covers) with a lock or ties.

LABEL EVERYDAY ITEMS

Place visual labels (symbols, photos, words, textures) on functional items, rooms, cabinets, drawers a well-labeled environment, a child with ASD may better understand what is expected and be less lik understands the function of an item (e.g., a piece of furniture), he/she is more likely to use it for its i are placed on the bed, the child may be less likely to view the bed as a trampoline.

Placing labels on drawers and closets may reduce power struggles over asking your child to put thir

ORGANIZE EVERYDAY ITEMS

Organize functional items in see-through plastic bins/boxes with visual labels (symbols, photos, wor Place the bins on shelves or in places the child can easily see and access. Once again, the better the more likely it will reduce the frustration level of a child on the autism spectrum and the less likely he

INSTITUTE APPROPRIATE SEATING

Ensuring the individual is seated properly at a table or work station can help prevent behavioral prob stimulatory behaviors and acts of aggression. For example, some children need to be seated in chai

Others may need to be seated in a place where they cannot easily escape from the table, such as ag posture (body at a right angle and feet flat on the floor) will help facilitate good learning and/or eatir

USE VISUAL SIGNS

Use dividers, tape boundaries, and signs as needed for setting expectations and limits. For example, visual boundaries and signs has helped some children understand that these items/ areas are off-limits. For children with autism, STOP signs will let them know what they are doing is dangerous. Using color tape to designate boundaries for children where their bodies need to remain.

SECURE EATING UTENSILS AND PLACE SETTINGS

When using utensils during mealtimes, consider tying utensils to a nylon string and attaching them to the table. If the child drops utensils, they will remain attached to the string. Children have “unintentionally” thrown forks across the room, so if you have throws or sweeps plates, bowls, and cups, secure them with adhesive Velcro and attach them to a table. For cups to prevent shattering of breakable items.

SAFEGUARD BATH ITEMS/TOYS

Consider keeping bath toys in a bag or bin away from the tub and unavailable until bathing and hair washing. This prevents power struggles while in the tub. You do not want a child flailing around in a slipper.

Keep bath items (soap, washcloth, shampoo, sponges, etc.) together in a plastic bin or rubber bag so the child will not empty or ingest the contents.

REMEMBER FIRE SAFETY

Regarding fire safety, it is important to keep lighters and matches out of reach or locked up. Place signs that children cannot turn them on. Always supervise children closely when there is an active fire in the fireplace or candles. Fire departments can provide stickers (called tot finders) for children’s bedroom windows so that in the event of a fire, they can be found quickly. While it may be difficult to teach an individual on the autism spectrum about the dangers of fire, it is important to behave when it comes to fire safety.

Developing social stories (with photographs, pictures, words) about smoke detectors, fire drills, fire exits, and fire safety on a regular basis is the place to begin. (A social story is a short, personalized story that explains the steps of a task or task into easy-to-follow steps.)

In addition to social stories, the use of visuals (photos, pictures) can assist the child in understanding the steps of a task supposed to do. For example, a “no touching the oven burners” sign could consist of a photograph of the oven burners with a red X over the photograph to visually display the rule for the child.

CONSIDER IDENTIFICATION OPTIONS

It is important that your child have proper identification in the event he/she runs away or gets lost at home. If a child with ASD becomes mobile, he/she may decide to walk out of the home without supervision. Children on the autism spectrum so leaving the home to go outside is common. Once outside the home, the child is vulnerable and may be in danger to their lives.

If the child will tolerate wearing a medical ID bracelet or necklace, get one (they can be found at your local pharmacy). If your child does not like to wear jewelry, so the next best option is to place iron-on labels into each garment. Some children can carry an ID card from a wallet or fanny pack and can learn to show their identification cards if they are not able to. Some children have also used specially designed tracking devices, perimeter systems or service dogs for children (see [this link](#)).

INTRODUCE INTERVENTION TECHNIQUES TO TEACH SAFETY

In addition to the physical modifications to your home, you will want to introduce behavior modification techniques appropriately. There is a wide variety of augmentative behavioral interventions that can be employed:


- social stories
- activity schedules
- visual rules
- signs/charts
- peer and adult modeling
- reinforcement for safe and appropriate behavior
- consistent consequences for unsafe or inappropriate behavior

Once general safety, good judgment, competence and understanding of what is expected can be developed, the home modifications and intervention techniques mentioned above can be faded over time. Introducing the home modifications and intervention techniques mentioned above in a safe and harm's way, they will also help ensure your child is ready and able to learn and, ultimately, better able to live independently.

RESOURCES

Most of the items and products (safety knobs for appliances, locks, etc.) mentioned above can be purchased at children's stores in your community. You can also contact your fire department to see whether they have any resources for you.

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