Autism and Safety

“Every child needs to be kept safe. Children with autism need twice the protection.”

-Christina Adams
Autism and Safety

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Special Needs and Safety

• 9 million children (under 18 years) in U.S. have special needs
• 13% of U.S. Children
• Children with developmental disabilities (both physical and psychological) have higher rates of injury
• Children with cognitive, emotional, or social limitations have significantly higher rates of injury

» SafeKids Worldwide
Increased Risk of Injury and Accident in Children with Autism

Results:
The 12 month study of injury in the autism group and in the ADD/ADHD group was approximately twice that of the unaffected controls. Children with autism were not significantly different from children with ADD/ADHD in reported injuries. Compared with unaffected controls, children with autism were 2.2 times more likely to have a reported injury.

A previous report documented elevated death rates in individuals with autism for accident related deaths such as suffocation and drowning. (Shavelle et al., 2001)
ADHD and Safety

- Get hurt more often
- Highly active
- Impulsive
- More likely to be admitted to a hospital for inpatient, outpatient, and emergency care
- Medical bills during study period:
  - Children with ADHD $4,306
  - Children without ADHD $1,944
Why are children with autism more prone to unintentional injuries?

- Lack of impulse control
- Little understanding of danger
- Seek stimulation (vestibular)
- Altered sensory perception (high pain tolerance)
Safety in the Home

• Unsafe behaviors exhibited by individuals with autism:
  – Climbing
  – Breaking
  – Jumping
  – Peeling
  – Cutting
  – Pulling down
  – Throwing – utensil, plates, cups
  – Dumping drawers
  – Climbing out of or breaking windows
  – Putting things in mouth - pica
Curiosity could lead to:

- Putting items in appliances
- Flushing things
- Touching hot surfaces
- Turning hot faucets
- Inserting items into electrical sockets
- Chewing on wires
- Crawling in the washing machine
- Playing with matches, lighters, or fire
Provide a Safe Home Environment
1. Establish priority area for modification

- Modify most used areas
- Modify dangerous areas
2. Arrange Furniture Appropriately

- Move furniture away from shelves or places a child can climb
- Place items out of reach on shelves
- Gates and barriers to provide safety from falling down stairs and limiting access to other areas of the house
3. Use Locks Where Appropriate

• Place locks on interior doors where individuals should not have free access

• Some parents feel more secure at night with a locking mechanism in place to prevent “nighttime wandering”.
  – Use a lock with keyhole/key
  – Use a hook and eye lock
  – Use a slide bolt

*make sure you always have immediate access
4. Safeguard Your Windows

- Window locks
- Replace glass windows with Plexiglas
5. Make Electrical Outlets and Appliances Safe

- Cover or remove electrical outlets
- Use knob covers for faucets, ovens, and stove burner
- Use locks or door knob covers to limit access to areas with washer/dryer, appliances, and power tools
- Conceal wiring for electronics and appliances
6. Lock Dangerous Items Away

- Detergents
- Cleaning supplies
- Pesticides
- Medications
- Mouthwash
- Small items

*Keep Poison Control # on Refrigerator
1-800-222-1222

- Scissors
  - use child safety scissors
  - provide supervision during cutting activities
- Knives
- Razors
7. Label Everyday Items

• Visual labels on functional items (anything that has relevance to the child)

• By labeling the environment:
  – Child may better understand what is expected
  – Child may be less likely to engage in undesirable behavior
8. Organize Everyday Items

- Organize functional items in labeled see-through plastic bins
- Place items in places child can see and easily access

More Organization = Less Frustration
9. Provide Appropriate Seating

- Sturdy and stable chair
- Away from curtains and furniture
- Seat with belt (if needed)
- Booster seat
10. Use Visual Signs

• Use visual signs for setting expectations and rules
  – Dividers
  – Tape boundaries
  – Signs
11. Secure eating utensils and place settings by using:

- String
- Velcro
- Plastic or rubber plates, bowls, and cups
- Plastic utensils
12. Safeguard Bath Items/Toys

- Store bath toys in a plastic bag or bin away from tub (save these items for after washing)
- Store bath items in plastic bag or bin
- Replace open-lip bottles with pump to prevent emptying or ingesting contents
Specific Safety Considerations and Strategies for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Fire and Burn Prevention

- Teach basic concepts of hot and cold
- Working smoke detectors
- Create visual signs (as needed) to depict escape route and dangerous areas
- Practice escape routes regularly
- Assign one family member the specific duty to get the child with autism out of the house and stay with them to make sure they do not re-enter or wander
- Take child to fire station so that they can see what a fireman looks like with all their gear on (this includes: oxygen mask, bulky coats, and helmet)
- Develop social stories about smoke detectors, fire alarms, and the dangers of touching hot objects and fire.
Passenger Safety

• May be non-verbal or have limited verbal skills
• Fill out safety ID Card and place with insurance information in glove box
• Use sticker identification on car, car seat, or seat belt
Pedestrian Safety

- May wander or run away from adult
- May have delayed processing of external dangers
- May dart into busy parking lot or street

- Use handicap parking permit (if needed)
- Caregiver walk on outside part of sidewalk
- Consider child harness or leash
- Active and constant supervision
Playground Safety

- Active parental supervision
- Perimeter fencing
- Teach appropriate use of slides, swings, etc.
- Check child thoroughly after falls
- Teach stranger danger
Poison Control

- Teach basic concepts of safe and poison
- Use visual cues to identify poisonous items (Mr. Yuk stickers or STOP sign)
- Keep poisonous items locked away (for older children, a more advanced locking mechanism may be needed)
- Children with pica need to be actively supervised at all times to prevent ingestion of natural poisons in the environment
Water Safety

Drowning is the #1 preventable injury for children with autism.

Children with autism:
May have no fear of water
May be drawn to water
May jump into water without knowing how to swim
Drowning Statistics

- Children drown without a sound
- 1 inch of water
- Nearly 9 in 10 drowning-related deaths occurred while a child was being supervised
Water Safety (cont.)

- Active parental supervision
- Water Watcher Program
- Perimeter fencing
- Door alarm
- Door locks
- Social stories
- Visual cues on gates to pools
- Visual schedule for getting in and out of pool
- Swim lessons
- Coast Guard approved life jackets
Community Involvement

• Identification
  – MedicAlert bracelet, necklace, or shoe tag
  – Wristband
  – Label garments
  – Identification card

• Autism t-shirt

• Information Form for First Responders

• Autism information cards
Introduce Intervention Techniques to Teach Safety

- Social stories
- Activity schedules
- Visual rules
- Signs/charts
- Peer and adult modeling
- Reinforcement for safe and appropriate behaviors
- Consistent consequences for unsafe and inappropriate behaviors
Social Stories

• Photographs, pictures, and words
• Safety topics
  – Smoke detectors
  – Fire drills
  – Staying away from fire
  – Strangers
Personalize stories
Read Frequently
Explain subtle cues in social situations
Break down situations into easy-to-follow steps
Topics for Safety Social Stories

• Who Is a Stranger?
• Joshua Hears the Fire Alarm
• Joshua Swims Safely
• Joshua Knows the Safety Signs
• Safety Checklist for the Football Game
• Joshua Wears a Helmet
Visual Rules

• Photos and pictures
• Can assist in understanding
  1. What they are not supposed to do
  2. What they are expected to do.
Prepare for an Emergency

• Get informed
  – Community hazards
  – Community disaster plans
  – Community warning systems

Make a plan
  Provide Identification for individual with autism
  Choose out-of-town contact
  Decide where to meet
  Complete a communication plan
  Safe places
Checklist

- Fire Extinguisher
- Smoke Alarms
- Insurance Coverage
- First Aid/CPR
- Inventory Home Possessions
- Vital Records and Documents
- Reduce Home Hazards
Assemble a Disaster Supply Kit

- Food
- Water
- First Aid Supplies and Manuals
- Flashlight and radio
- Batteries
- Medications
- Contact numbers
- Sanitation and hygiene products
- Augmentive communication devices
- Calming tools
- Clothes, shoes, jacket, and blanket
- Ear plugs
- Favorite toys
Topics for Social Stories Related to Disasters

Tornado Warning

The Electricity Goes Out

Joshua is Lost

Joshua’s Phonebook
Individuals must be able to demonstrate the following skills to live independently:

- Safety
- Good judgment
- Competence
- Understanding

*Environmental modifications should be faded out over time.*
Safety Goals

• Keep your child and others out of harms way
• Ensure your child is ready and able to learn
• Being able to reach his/her full potential
Resources

- www.safekids.org
- www.redcross.org
- www.aap.org
- www.drowningpreventionalliance.com
- www.medicalert.org
- www.autismriskmanagement.com