

AUTISM AND WANDERING: How to Keep Our Loved Ones Safe

By Kate FOLEY

It was a beautiful day in early autumn. I was in my mother's backyard with my children, draining a little pool we had set up for them. I wanted to take them in and get them dried off because we were about to have some lunch.



My mother had wisely installed a latticed room on her back porch, complete with a door you couldn't open unless you pulled a string to lift the latch, which slid into a locking position. She had it installed after my son with autism, Brady, tried to escape through the pillars on the deck at the age of two. I brought the kids in, closed the door, slid the lock in place on the porch, closed the back door, and locked the bolt. Safe! Then the doorbell rang. I ran to the front of the house to answer the door while carrying my three-year-old daughter. I wasn't far from Brady, who was

four years old. I thought he was right behind me. I let my sister in and went immediately back to the kitchen where I expected to find my son eating—but he wasn't there! The door was unlocked, and so was the fancy pulley lock and slide bolt. Within probably two minutes, my baby was in the backyard wading in the mostly drained pool, thankfully safe. I cried. That could have easily ended so differently, and adding more arms to my body was the only solution I could come up with to solve future problems. I felt the weight of my own failure like a yoke. That scene was one that would play over and over in my head and keep me feeling terrified.

AWAARE (Autism Wandering Awareness Alerts Response and Education Collaboration) is an organization that works with six different national non-profits to prevent autism-related wandering incidents. According to their website, nearly half of all children with autism engage in wandering behavior, across all settings, and under adult supervision. The risk increases in correlation to the severity of autism symptoms and half of all families have never received guidance about wandering from a professional. Sadly, accidental drowning accounts for approximately 90 percent of wandering deaths. So what should we do? How can we prepare?

AWAARE suggests that we:

- Stay calm (easier said than done)
- Call 911
- Search nearby water first!
- Implement your Family Wandering Emergency Safety Plan

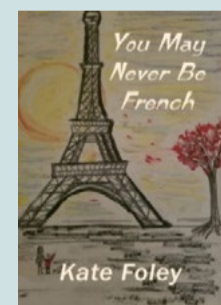
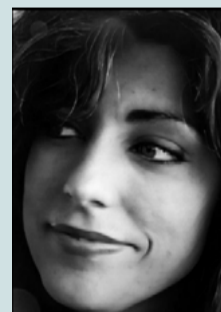
The National Autism Association's website has several toolkits available to help you make a plan, which should include making neighbors aware of your child's disability. You should also definitely get ahold of the Big Red Safety Box, which was a lifesaver for my family (literally). I first heard about the Big Red Safety Box in a speech therapy waiting room from another parent. Many answers are often right there in therapy waiting rooms, doctor's offices, and center-based classroom pickup lines. These are people who know what you are going through and have sought answers to many of the same questions. So, what will you find inside of the Big Red Safety Box?

- A Caregiver Checklist
- A Family Wandering Emergency Safety Plan
- A First Responder Profile Form
- A Sample IEP Letter
- A Student Profile Form
- Emotion Identification Cards
- Wandering Quick Tips
- 2 GE Wireless Door/Window Alarms with Batteries
- 1 Road ID Bracelet or Shoe Tag
- 2 Safety Alert Window Clings for Your Car or Home

- 1 Safety Alert Wristband
- 1 Child ID Kit from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

To keep your child safe, another essential step is to bring a copy of the first responder toolkit, also available on [The National Autism Association's](#) website, to your local police station. They also have free, downloadable social stories pertaining to the importance of not wandering off. They have stories with and without clip art just in case you would like to personalize them with your own photographs. Social stories are stories that walk people with autism through different situations and provide them with the appropriate behaviors so that they are prepared should such a situation arise.

Wandering can be a very scary possibility when faced with statistics of wandering deaths, but remember that there are resources available all around and support may be only inches away from you in a waiting room. My son has gotten much better about wandering, and that is with many thanks to the Big Red Safety Box, social stories, and the therapists and family members who have worked with us to create a safe environment.



Kate Foley is an author/illustrator and mother of two amazing little people. Her educational background is in Elementary Education, Communications, and Theater. She is also a committee member of CHATID, an advocacy group located in Scranton working to increase understanding within the medical community of people with disabilities. She runs a support group along with two other wonderful moms called ALIGN, for parents of children on the Spectrum. Kate's book, You May Never Be French (written for her son), addresses the many challenges of autism and the desire to belong through the lens of cultural diversity. Kate resides in Carbondale, PA, with her creative team (her children) and her husband, along with their two rescue cats, Adore and Winston Foley.

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