

Dealing with Police or Emergency Responders: How We Can Help Our Loved Ones on the Spectrum

By Kate FOLEY

One of the very real fears many parents of children on the spectrum face is: what can be done to help our children when we are not around? I run a local support group with two other wonderful women, and our meetings usually center around a specific autism-related topic. One month we opted to flesh out our concerns about safety.

We asked our local fire department to come and our local police. What we discovered was that although our first responders are trained in nearly everything, autism is an enormous subject where even those who are educated in it often do not fully understand it. There are more and more stories that flood the internet, both positive and negative, about police and people on the spectrum. What can we do to remain on the positive end? How do we help our first responders help our loved ones?

In my quest to understand what we could do to help, I was pulled down a rabbit hole. There are many different types of law enforcement (police, sheriffs, state police), within which there are boroughs, cities, and municipalities that each have a different budget for training. On top of that there is a lot for first responders to learn on a basic level that is necessary to save lives. Luckily, my rabbit hole led me to one of the most informed persons on the topic, a man by the name of Dennis Debbaudt. He has a son on the spectrum and was one of the featured interviews in the HBO special *A Night of Too Many Stars* back in 2017. Dennis has been setting out to inform law enforcement about how best to keep everyone safe when responding to a situation where someone with autism might be involved. His line to me regarding his own son and an experience



that started him on this path was: “How can someone know what they don’t know? How can we help our own first responders to best help our children?” His advice to me was to start with my own local police department and go right to the top. Chances are they will have resources set aside for training their officers and some may even have training in place for situations concerning persons with autism. Mr. Debbaudt is a wealth of information, having trained police for decades on the topic of autism. There are many available resources on Mr. Debbaudt’s site (<https://www.autismriskmanagement.com/downloadable-resources/>), including information about training sessions for law enforcement.

One of the greatest resources out there to help you feel more at ease is [The National Autism Association](https://nationalautismassociation.org/resources/awaare-wandering/be-edy-booklets/). Their website is not only where you are able to find The Big Red Safety Box to help those of us with children who tend to wander (<https://nationalautismassociation.org/resources/awaare-wandering/be-edy-booklets/>), but they also have a wealth of information for first responders, teachers, and caregivers. Most of their booklets are free and downloadable, so you can print them and take the information right into your local police department.

All of these are great resources that can help us better inform our local law enforcement. However, what should our loved ones do if they find themselves face to face with a police officer, or any emergency responder? According to Autism Speaks, many first responders may have little experience with someone with autism. Here are some tips from Dennis Debbaudt on the Autism Speaks website about helping first responders and our loved ones should an emergency arise:

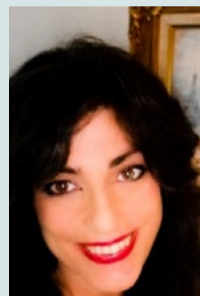
- Develop a handout card that can be easily copied and laminated.
- Avoid making sudden movements to reach for the handout card.
- Do not attempt to flee.
- Do not make sudden movements or reach for items.
- Try to remain calm.
- If you are a victim or are reporting a crime, you may want the police to contact a family member, advocate, or friend who can help you through the interview process.
- Carry the phone number of an advocacy organization or personal advocate, relative, or friend.

(Debbaudt, 2006 b).

Personally, I keep a sign in my car that lets an emergency responder know there is someone in the car with autism. If you feel it is necessary, you may wish to ask for someone with CIT training (Crisis Intervention Team). They will be more likely trained in dealing with people who have autism. Another important resource is [SMART 911](#) which is set up to inform

911 operators that someone attached to your home or phone number may have autism and what might be the best way to approach the situation.

These are all excellent resources and a great place to start. Although my own research often seemed overwhelming, considering all the different organizations, it's important to start at the beginning, make a plan for your loved one, and try to get to know your own police department or first responders, perhaps by downloading some of the other resources and sharing them with those in your community.



Kate Foley is an author/illustrator with a background in communication, education, and theater, whose personal experience in parenting a child with autism as well as one without has led her to create stories to help children navigate their complex emotions while teaching them to celebrate the uniqueness of themselves. Kate has a degree from Keystone College in communications as well as an elementary education certification for K-6. She studied theater at Mansfield University and for her professional development was grateful to have received training in effective leadership and communication skills from some of the best in their fields at Lehigh University's Iacocca Institute. In college, she and some friends ran a nonprofit theater group, the Footlights Players, which earned money for local charities. She also heads up a local group for parents with children on the spectrum, teaches a small, inclusive preschool class based in drama and play therapy for children both on and off the spectrum, and is a committee member of CHATID, a local advocacy group for all people with disabilities. Kate lives for both the quiet moments and those filled with wild, raucous laughter. She has been known to indulge in too much coffee and even more chocolate while living in Carbondale, Pennsylvania, with her husband, two beautiful children, and her cat, Mrs. Norris.

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