

How can I help my child with autism be safe at home and in the community?

All parents are concerned about their children's safety, but parents of children with autism may have more challenges when it comes to teaching safety skills.



Children with autism spectrum disorder may be more likely to wander away from their homes or caregivers, bolt into traffic, or touch dangerous items in the home. They may need more intensive and highly structured teaching than typically developing children to learn basic safety skills.

Many families worry that their child is not safe playing in his front yard because he may run into the street. When this is a concern, it may be helpful to provide a clear boundary by painting a brightly colored line a few feet from the border of the yard. Then parents can teach the child to stop at the line.

Initially, a parent can hold the child's hand, walk with him, and stop at the line. When he stops at the line, he can be rewarded with a small treat, a piggyback ride, or a hug. Over time, the parent can "fade," or gradually stop providing, the physical presence and hand holding, but continue to reward the child when he stops at the line. Later, the visual support of the line can also be faded.

Another basic safety skill for children with autism is learning to follow the direction "stop." This skill is invaluable

in busy parking lots and in any public venue. Parents can start by having the child walk toward one parent while another adult is behind him. Then, the parent can say "stop," and the adult behind the child can prompt him to stop. The parent should wait progressively longer periods of time (from one to 10 seconds) while the child is stationary before giving him praise and a tangible or edible reward.



It is essential to teach the child to wait after he has stopped. Otherwise, he may learn to pause only briefly and then keep running toward danger. Once the child is stopping and waiting consistently, the parent should move behind the child and give the direction "stop." At first, the parent

should give the direction when she is only three-to-five feet from the child, so she can prompt the child if necessary. She should give bigger rewards when the child stops independently and small rewards when he needs a prompt. When the child is consistently successful without prompts, the parent should move further and further back. It is usually advisable for the child to be able to stop and wait from at least 20 feet or more.

As a child gets older, childproofing the home can become more challenging because devices like baby gates become ineffective. With highly structured teaching, some children can be taught that they should not open a door or cabinet if it has a stop sign on it. Other families may need to seek help from professionals who specialize in making homes safe for children with disabilities.

Many parents of children with autism are worried that their child will leave home unattended and become lost. Some children may be able to learn to seek out an appropriate adult such as a police officer if they get lost. Parents can practice helping children identify community helpers when they are on outings.

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Children can also be taught to answer basic questions such as their name, hometown, telephone number, and parents' names. If children are not able to communicate verbally, they may be taught to show a community helper an identification card or bracelet.

Safety skills are an essential part of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) document for children with autism. Parents should ensure that the school uses only well researched procedures to teach their child these vital skills. Teaching procedures based on the principles of applied behavior analysis and behavioral skills training procedures have been proven most effective.

No matter what method of teaching is chosen, parents and educators must collect data to determine if the child is mastering skills. It may take many months or even years for children with autism to learn basic safety skills.

It can be challenging to teach safety skills to children with autism, but

with systematic teaching and plenty of positive rewards, these children can enjoy new experiences while being safe in their homes and communities.

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"How can I help my child with autism be safe at home and in the community?" was authored by Shannon Kay, Ph.D., BCBA-D. For other columns authored by clinical experts, please visit www.mayinstitute.org/news.

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