

# Autism Awareness Month

Priscilla Deal, M.S., BCBA

## Wandering & Autism

Elopement (also known as wandering or bolting) is when a child leaves an area without permission or notification which usually leads to placing that child in a potentially dangerous situation. Elopement from an area (i.e. home, classroom, etc.) is a relatively common problem in children with autism.

Each child is different and each child wanders for different reasons. Therefore, there are many ways to decrease wandering behaviors. However, there are also some general recommendations which can be applied across all children. In this newsletter, I will focus on 2 areas which parents and schools should be aware of and can improve upon: Reducing Risks and Antecedent Interventions.

**Note: The suggestions below do NOT negate the need to conduct a full Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) to deal with consistent, ongoing elopement attempts. A FBA will reveal the reason why the child is engaging in elopement behavior. Understanding WHY will help your behavior analyst develop consequence Interventions. Consequence interventions are not discussed in this newsletter since they are specific to each child.**

April 1, 2015  
Week 1

### In this newsletter:

At home	1
At school	2
In the community	2
Interventions	3
Getting Help	3



## Reducing Risk at Home

Modify your home environment to make it safer:

- All doors and windows should have deadbolt locks
- Install alarms that beep when a door opens
- If an alarm is too costly then place bells on all doors and windows.
- Talk to your neighbors about your child's wandering behavior. Your neighbors are an extra set of eyes and that could be very helpful when your child is in danger. Explain to them that you have a child who wanders AND may not respond to their name. Give photos of your child to your neighbors. Make sure they have your contact information so if your child ever wanders into their yard or street they can call you immediately.
- Get an ID bracelet or shoe tag for your child.
- Teach your child to respond to their name and to answer basic "WH" questions (e.g. What's your name?)
- If there is a gathering at your home then assign at least 3 people (beside yourself) to keep an eye on the child at all times.

**"Your neighbors are an extra set of eyes and that could be very helpful when your child is in danger."**

## Reducing Risk At School

Schools should ensure that there are building policies, procedures and protocols in place to prevent and address instances of wandering and elopement, particularly for students with developmental disabilities. These should include, but are not limited to, the following:

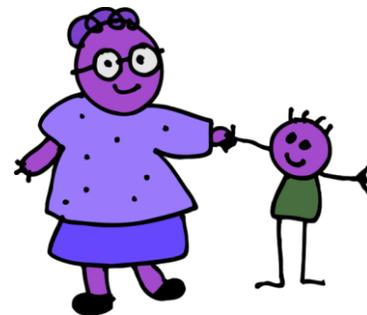
- Staff training on awareness and response
- Supervisory notification and 911 calls
- Communication protocols with local police
- Use of school-wide communication and alert systems (e.g. color code emergency levels that all staff understand)
- Pre-assignments to staff for building and ground searches
- Procedures for assuring that crisis response and law enforcement officials have access to floor plans of the school interior, school grounds and road maps of the immediate surrounding area
- Immediate family notification, regardless of severity (every elopement attempt is a serious incident and needs to be reported using an ABC data method)
- Identification of students with known elopement behaviors to ALL local building principals, hall monitors, and security guards
- Ensuring students with known elopement behaviors carry basic identification information at all times. Even if the child does not wander, disposable ID bracelets should be worn during all field trips and/or events.

**“Every elopement attempt is a serious incident and needs to be reported...”**

## Reducing the Risk in the Community

Always (ALWAYS) be prepared when you are out in public. Children with and without developmental disabilities wander in public places, meaning your child is even at a greater risk.

- Hold your child’s hand. Parents have told me “but my child won’t hold my hand”, well this is NOT an option. Your child MUST hold your hand as if their LIFE depended on it ... because one day it may. If your child can wiggle out of your hand then hold their wrist.
- Carry a recent photo of your child on you at all times.
- Plan your outings in advance. Prepare your child for where you are going by telling them or by showing them pictures.
- Make sure your child has an ID bracelet. If your child does not regularly wear a ID bracelet then they should for ALL special outings and events. Keep a pack of disposable ID bracelets available for special events/outings.



**“Hold your child’s hand... this is NOT an option.”**

## Antecedent Interventions

Antecedent interventions are designed to alter the environment BEFORE a behavior occurs. Some antecedent interventions which may be useful at decreasing elopement behavior include:

- Providing the child with verbal praise (or the delivery of a preferred food or toy) for staying near you (e.g. "Good job, staying next to me")
- Providing verbal praise (or the delivery of a preferred food or toy) for holding your hand (e.g. "Good job holding my hand")
- Teaching your child to request (with words, a picture, or sign) to go outside. Your child should be taught this from an early age and should NEVER be allowed outside unless

he/she FIRST asks permission.

- Figure out your child's triggers for wandering and teach replacement behaviors: Some children wander away when they see an interesting object, when it is loud, or when it is crowded. Pay attention to what triggers your child BEFORE they attempt to wander. Do they cover their ears? Or do they hide behind you? Are they staring at an object? Find the trigger and teach a replacement. For example, if they seem to need a break from a loud noisy environment then teach them to request "BREAK" before they have the chance to engage in the wandering behavior.

## Getting Help

I have worked with children with autism for more than 10 years and I cannot emphasize enough the importance of seeking professional help for a child's wandering behavior. Wandering is a SERIOUS and DANGEROUS behavior and a behavior intervention plan can make a difference.

As mentioned, the suggestions above do NOT negate the need to conduct a full Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) to deal with consistent, ongoing elopement attempts. A FBA will reveal the reason why the child is engaging in elopement behavior. Understanding WHY will help your behavior analyst develop consequence Interventions, which are often necessary in eliminating a dangerous behavior.

If you are in the Miami Area and need help in handling your child's elopement behavior, call 305-662-6448.

### **Gomez Behavior Services**

Priscilla Deal, M.S., BCBA  
6910 SW 88<sup>th</sup> Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor  
Miami, FL 33156

**Phone:** 305-662-6448

**Fax:** 305-662-6448

**Web:** [miamibehaviortherapy.com](http://miamibehaviortherapy.com)

**E-mail:** [info@miamibehaviortherapy.com](mailto:info@miamibehaviortherapy.com)

**For Free Autism Tips from  
Priscilla Deal, M.S., BCBA Like  
Us On Facebook at**

[Fb.com/miamibehaviortherapy](https://www.facebook.com/miamibehaviortherapy)

