How to Host a Sensory Friendly First Responder Event for Children with Autism

According to survey data published in the journal Pediatrics, nearly half of families reported their children with autism wandered or eloped from safe environments. And more than a third of the children who wandered were unable to communicate their name and/or address. Finding and safely recovering a missing child with autism presents unique and difficult challenges for families, law enforcement, first responders and search teams. This running away or wandering behavior puts these children at risk of accidental drowning, traffic injury and other dangers. As police, fire and EMS personnel are often the first to respond in these situations, it is important that autistic children are comfortable with the various types of first responders, and not fearful or overwhelmed by their presence.

The goal of hosting a sensory friendly event is to familiarize children with autism to the sights and sounds associated with different types of law enforcement, fire and rescue units. This includes introducing them to police officers, firefighters and EMS personnel, demonstrating how different equipment looks, functions and sounds, and other things they may see in the case of a wandering incident, like special K-9 teams. Making these resources more familiar may help alleviate some of the fears children may associate with rescuers and rescue situations.

1. **Find the right partners** - If you have a school for children with autism in your community, approach them to see if they’d like to participate. Check with public schools and other community groups to find programs for children with autism. Approach local law enforcement/fire rescue through crime prevention or community policing units to see if they’d like to be part of the event.

2. **Assemble a planning committee** - Determine a date, time and agenda for the event. Find out from the school/community group personnel if they want lights and sirens, or if they wish to keep it more low key for the kids. Arrange to have Child IDs provided that include maps of existing hazards, including water. Distribute NCMEC Autism Wandering Tips to participating students and families.

3. **Keep it simple** - Sometimes less is more, especially with a population that can be overwhelmed with too much stimulation. Make sure the assets are positioned in a way it’s easy for kids to access and not too much for the experience.

4. **Publicize the event** - Let local media know, and follow-up, so the event gets good coverage. Make sure the host school/community group has obtained signed permission slips from students’ parents or guardians before posting any photographs or videos of students.

5. **Mobilize social media** - Letting your followers know what’s happening is a great way to spread the word. And remember, a picture is worth a thousand words.

6. **Observe what works** - The kids will let you know their favorite parts. At one event, a custom police microphone might be a big hit, but could over stimulate children at another event. Children with autism actively engage all five of their senses in order to process the scene. Ensure that if they reach out to touch something, it’s not too hot, sharp, or toxic if they then taste it.

7. **Make the event a learning experience for first responders** - Remember, they may not have a lot of experience dealing with children with special needs, so it may be new to many of them. Gather the first responders on the day of the event and ask an administrator from the school/community group to share some of the coping behaviors that may be observed while interacting with the kids.

8. **Get feedback** - Once the event is over, talk to parents and teachers to find out how the kids reacted. You’ll want to gather as much feedback as possible to make the next event an even bigger success!

9. **Be ready for different responses from the kids** - Having adequate support from teachers and aides help manage the kids and keep the event on track.

10. **Thank everyone who participated** - It takes cooperation and commitment to pull off an event like this. With the right partners, you can have a great and memorable event for the kids.
How to Host a Sensory Friendly First Responder Event for Children with Autism

WHAT SYMBOL-SUPPORTED RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO PREPARE FOR THE EVENT?

Vocabulary Strips, Helper Bingo, Sensory Communication Board, Vocabulary Communication Board, Word Definitions, and the First Responders social narrative - Consider providing symbol-supported materials to teachers and event facilitators 30 days before the event for planning, review, completion, and instruction.

WHAT SYMBOL-SUPPORTED RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO USE DURING THE EVENT?

Communication and Sensory Boards - Consider providing communication and sensory symbol-supports throughout the event. Have laminated familiar supports available for attendees to use for reciprocal understanding and learning. Any of the symbol-supported materials teachers and facilitators have used for planning could be helpful, but specifically the Sensory Scales and communication boards may need to be readily available on the day of the event.

WHAT SYMBOL-SUPPORTED RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO PROCESS AND DISCUSS AFTER THE EVENT?

Participant Survey - Encourage all attendees to complete the 2-page Participant Survey with trusted adults and return to a central location or contact person for compiling. Make a plan to share the results of the survey and your observation of what worked with the original planning team for future events.

Paragraph Completion - This symbol-supported Paragraph Completion activity assists attendees with processing and internalizing the lessons taught that day.

The Class Newspaper Activity - This small or large group discussion activity template is designed to help event attendees learn from each other and have dialogue about their experiences. Consider copying, binding, and classroom publishing a completed work that remains a constant in a classroom library or home reading collection.

The Personal Story Activity - This activity helps event attendees define, articulate, and process their personal thoughts and experiences from the day’s events. If laminated and bound as a book, this can be a self-published work by an individual student that is kept, re-read, and shared with home care providers.

All Symbol-supported Materials - Disseminate any printed materials or digital PDFs to first responders, parent, caregivers, media, and attendees with the goal of communicating effectively to children with autism during a safety event.

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<td>police dogs</td>
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1 of 4
Vocabulary Strips

1. ambulance
2. police car
3. fire truck
4. helicopter

2 of 4
Vocabulary Strips

hot

loud

touch

don’t touch

3 of 4
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  firefighter | siren |
| fire truck | firefighters | **female**
  police officer | fingerprint |
| badge | police car | **male**
  firefighter | police ATV | police dog |
| lights | help | helicopter | speaker | police officers |

1 of 6
## Helper Bingo

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**3 of 6**

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5 of 6
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Directions: Use these definition creation pages to help students construct sentences or definitions about people, equipment, sights and sounds related to emergency situations.

Police officers

Police car

Police dog

Police station

1 of 3
Directions: Use these definition creation pages to help students construct sentences or definitions about people, equipment, sights and sounds related to emergency situations.

**A firefighter**

__________________________

__________________________

__________________________

**Firefighters**

__________________________

__________________________

__________________________

**Firefighters**

__________________________

__________________________

__________________________

**Firefighters**

__________________________

__________________________

__________________________
Directions: Use these definition creation pages to help students construct sentences or definitions about people, equipment, sights and sounds related to emergency situations.

**Lights**

Lights ___________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

**Sirens**

Sirens _____________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

**Helicopter**

Helicopter __________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

**Police motorcycle**

Police motorcycle __________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

3 of 3
First Responders Help

by People Everywhere
Sometimes, emergencies happen.
An emergency means you need help right now!
When you have an emergency, you call 9-1-1.
There are weather emergencies,
smoke and fire emergencies.
accident emergencies,
and people emergencies.
First responders help people in emergencies.
First responders come when people call 9-1-1.
First responders are: police officers, deputies, firefighters, and paramedics.
First responders use special vehicles to help quickly.

12
These special vehicles can be loud! The sirens tell us they are on the way!
Police cars, fire engines, and ambulances have flashing lights too.
The flashing lights tell people that help is coming!
First responders are special people who can help in emergencies.
The End
Directions: Use these Sensory Scales to help Sensory Event Participants gauge and communicate their sensory well-being. Use the companion piece, I need, to help them identify next steps.
Directions: Use these Sensory Scales to help Sensory Event Participants gauge and communicate their sensory well-being. Use the companion piece, I need, to help them identify next steps.

I need __________.

- noise-cancelling headset
- hat
- sunglasses
- tissue
- bathroom
- snack
- drink
- short break
- nothing

2 of 2
Sometimes, \_

happen and you need

right now! When you have an

emergency, you \_ 9-1-1. \_

help \_

in emergencies. First responders

use special \_. Special vehicles can be

with flashing \_.

Lights and sirens tell us help is \_.
Title: ____________________________________

By: ____________________________________

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Today I saw ____________________.
I saw a ________________ too.

3
Today I heard ____________________.
I heard a __________________ too.
I liked the __________________.
I did not like the ____________________.
If I need help ______________.
The End
What were the best parts of the day?

- special vehicles
- officers
- police dog
- helicopter
- motorcycle
- finished
- other

If I have an emergency, I will:

- call 911
- talk to officer
- talk to firefighter
- ask for help
- other

Today, I used these to learn:

- eyes
- ears
- hands
- brain
- friends
- first responders
- other

1 of 2
Next year, please have more:

- first responders
- special vehicles
- special animals
- lights
- sirens
- other

These made me uncomfortable:

- first responders
- special vehicles
- special animals
- lights
- sirens
- other

This is how I feel about the event:

- excited
- happy
- okay
- sad
- mad
- other
Today we saw..
This made our class feel..