

Autism & Law Enforcement: Recognition, Response and Risk Management
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Objectives

Identify behaviors and characteristics associated with autism
Review risk and safety issues
Review recognition and response options
Discuss ways law enforcement is working with the autism community

Why should first responders recognize autism?

Provide for the safety and welfare of all citizens--go home safe to your families
Make best use of available time & resources
Enhance communication skills
Avoid litigation

What is Autism?

Definition -- Autism is a developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life.
Autism is a broad-spectrum neurological disorder
Autism Spectrum Disorder, Asperger's Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Delay-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), Fragile X
Autism impacts the normal development of the brain in the areas of social interaction and communication skills

Incidence

More prevalent in males
Occurs in approximately 1-150 births (CDC, 2008)
Lasts a lifetime

A Spectrum Condition

Low, middle, high functioning
Independence level
Public safety & criminal justice risks

Public Safety Risks:

Accompanying medical conditions
Medication requirements
Behaviors draw attention--Increased 911 responses
High pain threshold, may not recognize danger
Sensory issues
Self-stimulating behaviors & unusual attachment to objects
Wandering
Up to seven times more contacts w/police (OSERS)

Criminal Justice Risks:

May not respond to stop or other commands
May invade personal space of others
Extreme reactions to changes in routine
May produce false confession or misleading statement
Parents or care providers unprepared to assist

Common reasons for assistance calls:

In area where no one knows him or her
Parent or caregiver actions misinterpreted
Caregiver becomes incapacitated
Retail settings
Behavior has become escalated
Medical emergency, fire or natural disaster

Suggested Responses

Make sure person is unarmed
Approach in quiet, non-threatening manner
Seek and use available information at scene
Talk calmly in moderated voice
Use simple & direct instructions
May need to repeat and rephrase questions
Allow for delayed response time
Ask if person has autism and for ID card
Avoid touching, if possible
Evaluate for injuries
Maintain safe distance
Be alert to sudden outbursts--be able to appear to retreat to deescalate
Be aware of sensory issues-fight or flight
Resist impulse to act quickly
Review handout & card

Is Sensory Over-stimulation a Factor?

Look for outward behaviors
Move person to a quiet place
Calm creates calm

Reduce Sensory Influences

Sirens, Lights & Radio
Crowds
K-9 Partner
Odors
Touch
Deescalation
Use available time
Use space, posture, positioning, buffers
Best approaches to avoid litigation

Restraint

Restrain with knowledge
Hypotonia-low muscle tone
Seizure
Resistance
Turn on side often
Continue communication
Model calm behavior

Arrest & Incarceration

Document autism in initial report

Be alert to unknown medical condition & medication requirements

Consider medical evaluation

Uplink alert supervisor, prosecutor and mental health professional for immediate evaluation

Alert jail authorities--person is at risk in general population

Contact caregivers

Dangerous Wandering

Leading source of law enforcement contact

Expect followup 911 calls re: traffic & home entries

Alzheimer's parallel

Wandering prevention & care may look like abuse

Project Lifesaver, Take Me Home

ID and informational handouts

Photo-ID

ID medical alert bracelet or necklace

Clothing tags with name and phone numbers

Informational handout

911 Data Base Alerts

Dispatch operator training

Flag w/key data-Priority Dispatch

Operator alerts first responders

Offer program proactively

Developing A Checklist for 911 Systems

Name, physical description, photo

Parents, other caregivers and emergency contact persons names, home, cell and pager phone numbers

Attractions, locations, water sources

Sensory, medical, or dietary issues and requirements, if any

Likes, dislikes--approach and de-escalation techniques

Method of communication, if non-verbal - sign language, picture boards, written word

ID wear - jewelry, tags on clothes, printed handout card

Offender Trends

Physical, phone or internet stalking & threats

Shoplifting

Peeping Tom

Accomplice or sidekick

Sexually-based offenses

Other violent crimes

Interview & Interrogation

Usually mid to higher end of spectrum; independent:

Answers may seem unconnected Eye contact

May present as argumentative, inattentive

Influence of standard interrogation techniques

Videotape interrogation?

Processing Information

During questioning, initial contact or in a courtroom setting

Inability to quickly process and respond

Be a poor listener

Be unable to deduce what others are thinking and why they are thinking it

Repeats words, statements, body language and mannerisms

Communication Dilemmas: Interrogation

Language problem--expressive v receptive

Takes cues & clues from investigators

Will do what it takes to keep a friend

May produce false confession

Tips for Interviewer/Interrogator: Be Patient

Be sure subject understands legal rights

Pre-test for lying skills

Ask questions that rely on narrative

Ask series of unrelated yes/no questions to determine style and dependability

Seek advice of/consider contacting a specialist

Follow gut instincts

Find Communication Success:

Involve people the person knows and trusts

Describe beforehand (use photos) new persons and venues

Assure that new persons/venues are safe

Utilize fine rote memory skills

Teach rules of program with visual aids

Create a chronological list of the program

Develop a poster with bullet points

Use pictures to describe actions and situations

People with Autism: Perfect Victims

Neighborhood Resentment

Theft & street crime

Restraint

Criminal Gangs

Verbal & physical intimidation

Adult care

Sexual abuse

Restraint

Schools, child and adult care

Training

Restraint for compliance

Criminal Gangs

Isolation in community

Known to recruit persons with ASD and other DD's to run drugs

Manipulated by promises of friendship and belonging

Left holding the bag

Verbal & Physical Intimidation

Targeted by bullies & tormenters
Harassment often escalates into physical assault
At school, work or home neighborhoods
May not recognize initial abuse and torment
Perpetrators proceed without fear of being caught

Adult Care Facilities

Workforce underpaid; under trained
Attractive to abusers: easy access to victims
Underreported: victims may not report incident or recognize the criminal act
Low credibility as victim-witness

Sexual Abuse

Naïve often passive nature
Women especially vulnerable
Adult care staff, family member or others encourage aberrant behavior, reward it or teach that it is normal
Eye contact
Sex and sexuality education

Investigation of disclosures of abuse or victimization

Are you the first to interview victim?
Interview others with knowledge away from scene
Establish work and relocation histories
Is this the first incident?
Sensitivity about hiring, background & litigation
May assume disclosure cannot be proven; choose not to report to law enforcement
Perpetrator could be other person w/disability

Victim-Witness Interviews: Specialized Training

Preparation--discuss w/prosecutor
Consider two interviews, videotape?
Seek fresh records & background information
Discover communication styles
Avoid use of body language to communicate
Use simple phrases & communication
Avoid authority clothes
Prepare questions in advance
Relaxed venue
Make sure words/terms used have same meaning to subject & interviewer
Establish alternative timelines
Be alert to fatigue
Pre-test for truth telling
(Review handout)

Partner, Plan & Practice

Partnerships: Law Enforcement, Schools, Parents
Plan cross educational opportunities for students with autism and Asperger's syndrome and first response professionals
Provide in a safe, non-threatening environment
Improve outcomes for both populations
Develop skills for careers and lifetimes

Life Skills Education for Persons with ASD

Early & often, suited to age and ability levels, delivered in school through IEP

Anticipate close scrutiny

How to interact well with law enforcement and first responders

Critical Life Skills are a Two-Way Street: Cross Educate

Recognize & respond to police

Stay with, not run from safe, go to persons

Reduce fear of uniform, badge, vehicles

Do not make sudden movements

How to remain calm

How to call for help; report incidents

How to carry and show ID & information card

Avoid being a victim

Demystify first responders

Police are people, too--moms, dads, neighbors

Videotape examples

Mock interviews

Reduce stress of sudden encounters

Use simple curriculum

Educate in a safe, relaxed, controlled environment

Practice at school & home--make part of daily routine

Programs to Consider

Community policing philosophy & programs

911 Data Base Alerts

Include autism issues-CIT

Roll call briefings

Recruit academy and veteran in-service training

Specialized interviewing skills

Identify and utilize objective autism resource persons

Cross-educational opportunities

Mental health courts, diversion, probation & incarceration

Establish partnerships with families, educators and autism advocacy groups

Summary

Enhance public & officer safety--reduce exposure to liability when you:

Recognize associated risks

Learn recognition and response options, utilize training

Apply communication and public relation skills

Work with people with autism, their families, caseworkers, and advocacy organizations

Video

Autism & Law Enforcement Roll Call Briefing Video. (2004) Debbaudt Legacy Productions, Port St. Lucie, Florida. (video and booklet)

Books

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