

# Children on autism spectrum more likely to wander, disappear

4 February 2016

A new study by researchers at Cohen Children's Medical Center of New York (CCMC) suggests that more than one-quarter million school-age children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or other developmental disorders wander away from adult supervision each year.

More than 26% of [children](#) with special needs in the study had wandered away from a safe environment within the past 12 months, say the researchers, with public places being the most common location for it to occur. Children between the ages of 6 to 11 were more likely to wander than those ages 12 to 17.

Appearing Thursday in the online scientific journal *PLOS ONE*, it is the first published study to report the prevalence of elopement, or wandering, using a nationwide sample of school-age children with developmental disabilities, such as ASD, intellectual disability (ID), or developmental delay (DD).

"Wandering has become a greater concern," said Andrew Adesman, MD, chief of developmental pediatrics at CCMC and senior investigator of the study. "Not only does it pose a significant risk to the safety and well-being of children with developmental disabilities, but fear of wandering can be a daily source of stress and anxiety for parents of affected children."

In 2013, a 14-year-old Long Island boy with autism wandered out of his classroom and past a school security guard. The teen's body was found several months later on the shore of the East River.

"As the prevalence of autism spectrum disorders in the United States continues to rise, there is a need to better understand the behaviors that may compromise the safety and well-being of these children," said Bridget Kiely a research assistant in the division of developmental and behavioral pediatrics at CCMC and principal investigator in

the study.

Using data from a 2011 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey of parents and guardians of more than 4,000 children ages 6 to 17 with special health care needs, researchers divided the children into three groups: those with ASD only; ASD with ID and/or DD; and just ID and/or DD.

Researchers found that children with ASD (with or without associated cognitive delays) were more likely to wander off than children with cognitive impairment but no ASD. Across all groups, wanderers were more likely to not realize when they are in danger, to have difficulty distinguishing between strangers and familiar people, to show sudden mood changes, to over-react to situations and people, to get angry quickly, and to panic in new situations or if change occurs.

"The kids who are most likely to wander are the kids who are least likely to respond appropriately to police or rescue personnel - potentially further jeopardizing their safety," added Dr. Adesman. "First responders need to recognize that children or young adults with an [autism spectrum disorder](#) may over-react to some well-intentioned interventions and may be unresponsive to simple commands or questions"

In terms of prevention strategies, the researchers also found that caregivers of children with ASD and ID/DD were more likely than those in the other two groups to use fences, locks, alarms, electronic tracking devices or other measures to prevent wandering.

Provided by North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System

APA citation: Children on autism spectrum more likely to wander, disappear (2016, February 4) retrieved 19 September 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-02-children-autism-spectrum.html>

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