

# Understanding Safety Awareness for ASD Children

*A guide for parents, teachers, and caregivers*

Every child develops an understanding of safety through experience, learning, and support. However, some autistic children, particularly those with complex communication and learning needs, may have difficulty recognizing danger or responding appropriately to potentially hazardous situations.

A child may climb onto an unstable piece of furniture, approach a busy road, or move towards water without recognizing the possible consequences.

Others may understand a familiar safety instruction but struggle to apply it when they are excited, distressed, or in an unfamiliar environment.

These difficulties can be especially concerning for children who cannot easily communicate their needs, ask for help, or explain what has happened.

Supporting their safety requires more than teaching rules. We need to understand how the individual child perceives danger, identify the situations in which they may be vulnerable, and create environments that allow them to explore and participate safely.

## 1. Understanding the Child's Awareness of Danger

Safety awareness involves recognizing a potential hazard, understanding its consequences, and knowing how to respond.

Some autistic children may experience difficulties in one or more of these areas.

Sensory processing differences may influence how a child notices or responds to warning signals, such as traffic sounds, alarms, heat, or physical discomfort.

Communication differences may make it difficult to understand a verbal warning, express fear, or ask for assistance.

A child may also be strongly attracted to a particular object, activity, or location and move towards it without recognizing the surrounding hazards.

For example, a child who enjoys watching moving water may approach a pond or swimming pool without understanding the danger of falling in.

Another child may run away from an overwhelming sound or unfamiliar situation without recognizing the risks of nearby traffic.

These responses should not automatically be interpreted as disobedience or a deliberate disregard for safety.

Before deciding how to teach a safety skill, we need to understand what the child notices, what they understand, and how they respond in everyday situations.

## **2. Recognize Individual Safety Risks**

Not every autistic child experiences the same safety difficulties.

Begin by observing the child's behaviour in familiar environments and identifying situations that may require additional support.

At home

Consider climbing on furniture, reaching for hot surfaces, accessing medications or cleaning products, opening exterior doors, and handling sharp objects.

Outdoors and in the community

Observe how the child responds near roads, parking areas, playground equipment, and unfamiliar environments.

Around water

Pay particular attention to swimming pools, ponds, lakes, beaches, and other accessible bodies of water.

During transitions

Notice whether the child is more likely to run away or become distressed when leaving a preferred activity, entering an unfamiliar place, or experiencing overwhelming sensory input.

Some children may leave a supervised area unexpectedly, a behaviour often described as wandering or elopement.

Wandering can place children at risk of serious injury, particularly near water or traffic. Children with limited communication or difficulty responding to verbal instructions may face additional challenges if they become separated from their caregivers.

Recognizing these individual risks helps families and educators develop appropriate safety measures.

## **3. Create a Safe Environment**

Environmental safety measures are essential, particularly for children who cannot yet recognize or respond reliably to danger.

At home, secure medications, cleaning products, sharp objects, and other hazardous materials.

Anchor heavy furniture and televisions to prevent tipping. Consider window guards, appropriate stair barriers, and other protective measures based on the child's abilities and behaviour.

For children who may leave the home unexpectedly, secure exterior doors and consider alarms that alert caregivers when a door opens.

Ensure that safety measures do not prevent occupants from leaving the building during an emergency.

Around water, use appropriate barriers and maintain close adult supervision. Swimming lessons may help develop water skills, but they do not replace supervision or protective barriers.

The same principles apply in classrooms and other learning environments.

A child should have opportunities to explore and participate, but the environment must be adapted to their individual safety needs.

## **4. Teach Safety Skills Through Visual and Practical Learning**

Some children may benefit from clear visual information and opportunities to practise safety skills in familiar situations.

Begin with a small number of essential safety concepts, such as:

- STOP when approaching a road or unsafe area.
- WAIT for a familiar adult before leaving a designated space.
- HOT means an object may be unsafe to touch.
- HELP means finding or contacting a trusted adult when assistance is needed.

Use photographs, simple pictures, written words, gestures, or a communication device according to the child's individual abilities.

For example, a visual STOP sign may be introduced during a familiar play activity before practising the response in a carefully supervised outdoor setting.

A child who understands written words may benefit from pairing a clear word with a familiar visual example.

Others may respond more readily to photographs of actual locations, objects, or people.

Avoid relying exclusively on spoken instructions, particularly for children who have difficulty processing language or responding quickly.

Allow time for the child to understand the information and demonstrate their response in an accessible way.

## **5. Help the Child Apply Safety Skills in Everyday Situations**

Recognizing a safety symbol during a structured activity does not necessarily mean the child can apply the same skill in a different environment.

A child may stop reliably when shown a familiar picture but continue walking when approaching an unfamiliar road.

For this reason, safety skills need to be explored gradually in different situations, with appropriate adult support.

Begin in a familiar, low-risk environment.

Demonstrate the desired response and provide opportunities for the child to participate.

As the child becomes more familiar with the skill, introduce it in other carefully supervised settings.

Observe whether the child recognizes the relevant safety cue and responds appropriately without relying on the same prompt every time.

Do not create dangerous situations to test the child's understanding.

Safety teaching should increase the child's opportunities for independence while maintaining the supervision and environmental protection they need.

## **6. Understand and Prevent Wandering**

A child may leave a safe area for different reasons.

They may be trying to reach a favourite place, explore something interesting, escape an overwhelming sensory experience, or move away from an activity they find uncomfortable.

Understanding what happens before the child leaves can help identify possible triggers and develop safer alternatives.

For example, a child who repeatedly runs away from a noisy classroom may benefit from access to a familiar quiet space and an accessible way to request a break.

A child who is strongly attracted to water may need additional environmental safeguards and a carefully planned approach to outdoor activities.

For children at risk of wandering, families and educators should develop an individualized safety plan that includes supervision arrangements, environmental safeguards, emergency contacts, and procedures for responding if the child goes missing.

Identification bracelets or GPS tracking devices may provide additional support, but they do not replace direct supervision or other safety measures.

If a child goes missing

Call 911 immediately. Inform emergency responders about the child's communication abilities, known interests, and any nearby water or other hazards.

Arrange for nearby water to be searched urgently while following emergency responders' instructions. Do not delay calling for help while searching independently.

## **7. Prepare for Emergencies**

Emergency situations may be particularly difficult for children who are sensitive to alarms, unfamiliar people, sudden changes, or unexpected physical contact.

Introduce emergency procedures gradually, using accessible visual information and familiar routines.

For example, a simple picture sequence may help a child understand what happens when a fire alarm sounds and where they need to go.

Practise the routine in a safe, predictable way without unnecessarily exposing the child to distressing sounds or situations.

Parents, teachers, and caregivers should share information about how the child communicates, what may cause distress, and which approaches help them respond.

Emergency plans should also identify who is responsible for assisting the child during an evacuation.

## **8. Work Together to Support Safety and Independence**

Families often have valuable knowledge about their child's interests, communication patterns, sensory sensitivities, and responses to unfamiliar situations.

Teachers and other professionals can build upon this knowledge by observing the child in different environments and identifying additional support needs.

Share information about safety skills the child has demonstrated, situations in which they need assistance, and strategies that have been helpful.

Review the safety plan as the child grows, develops new abilities, or begins participating in different environments.

The goal is not to restrict the child's opportunities for exploration or independence unnecessarily.

It is to provide appropriate protection while helping them develop greater understanding and participation at their own pace.

## **Final Thoughts**

Safety awareness develops differently for every child.

Some autistic children may recognize familiar dangers but have difficulty responding in unfamiliar situations. Others may require ongoing supervision and environmental safeguards because they cannot reliably recognize or communicate danger.

By observing the child's individual responses, identifying potential risks, and introducing accessible safety skills, we can create opportunities for safer exploration and greater independence.

Teaching safety is important, but it must always be accompanied by appropriate supervision and environmental protection.

We begin by understanding what the child recognizes, how they respond, and where they need support. From there, we can help them explore their world more safely and confidently.