



Autism & Law Enforcement: 25 Field Response Tips by Dennis Debbaudt

Law enforcement professionals may unexpectedly encounter or be asked to find a person with autism. Recognizing the behavior symptoms and knowing contact approaches can minimize situations of risk--risk or victimization of the person with autism, and risk to the officer. You may learn the person has autism from dispatch, family member or someone at the scene, or the person himself or herself.

The following are 25 field response tips for officers:

1. Make sure the person is unarmed and maintain a safe distance because they may suddenly invade your personal space.
2. Talk calmly and softly.
3. Speak in direct, short phrases such as: "Stand up now." or "Get in the car."
4. Avoid slang expressions, such as: "What's up your sleeve?" or "Are you pulling my leg?"
5. Allow for delayed responses (10-15 seconds) to your questions or commands.
6. Repeat or rephrase.
7. Consider use of pictures, written phrases/commands, sign language or computer images.
8. Use low gestures for attention; avoid rapid pointing or waving.
9. Examine for presence of medical alert jewelry or tags, or an autism handout card.
10. Model calming body language (such as slow breathing and keeping hands low)
11. Model the behavior you want the person to display.
12. A person with autism may not react well to changes in routine or the presence of strangers, even a uniformed responder.
13. Officers should not interpret the person's failure to respond to orders or questions as a lack of cooperation or a reason for increased force.

14. Seek information and assistance from parent or others at the scene about how to communicate with and de-escalate the person's behavior.
15. Avoid stopping repetitive behaviors unless there is risk of injury to yourself or others.
16. If the individual is holding and appears to be fascinated with an inanimate object, consider allowing subject to hold the item for the calming effect (if officer safety is not jeopardized by doing so).
17. Evaluate for injury: person may not ask for help or show any indications of pain, even though injury seems apparent.
18. Be aware that the person may be having a seizure
19. Be aware of person's self-protective responses and sensitivities to even usual lights, sounds, touches, orders, and animals - canine or mounted patrol
20. If possible, turn off sirens and flashing lights and remove canine partners, crowds, or other sensory stimulation from the scene
21. If person's behavior escalates, use geographic containment and maintain a safe distance until any inappropriate behaviors lessen
22. Remain alert to the possibility of outbursts or impulsive acts
23. Use your discretion. If you have determined that the person is unarmed and have established geographic containment, use all available time to allow the person to deescalate themselves without your intervention.
24. If in custody, alert jail authorities. Consider initial isolation facility. Person would be at risk in general prison population.
25. REMEMBER: Each individual with autism is unique and may act or react differently. PLEASE contact a professional who is familiar with autism. (Debbaudt & Legacy, 2005)

Autism & Law Enforcement Contacts:

Autism is America's fastest growing developmental disability. The rate of autism has seen a dramatic increase. Autism is estimated to affect as many as one in every 88 children (CDC-NCBDDD, 2012). Research indicates that people, who have developmental disabilities, including autism, will have up to seven times more contacts with police than a member of the general public. (Curry et al, 1993)

Children and adults with autism now live, work, go to school and recreate in the community. Law enforcement professionals will have field interactions with children and adults with autism, their parents and care providers. Autism Recognition, Response and Risk Management training sessions are designed help officers make these interactions safer, less stressful, and more informed.

People with autism are as different from each other as we all are. They may inherently present autism spectrum-based behaviors and characteristics in different combinations and degrees.

Each person will have a different level of independence as well. Some persons with autism will have a caregiver with them at all times. Others will live semi or fully independent lives. Both may have public safety or criminal justice contacts. You will hear terms such as low functioning autism, high functioning autism, and Asperger syndrome to describe the condition. In most cases, the person will have difficulties following your verbal commands, with reading your body language, and will have deficits in social understanding. As with Alzheimer's patients, children and adults with autism may wander away from care and into danger.

Whether as offender or victim-witness, persons on the autism spectrum will present dilemmas in the interview and interrogation room. Their concrete answers, conceptions, and reactions to even the most standard interrogation techniques can cause confusion for even the best trained, seasoned veterans. Autism-specific training can help criminal justice professionals save time and resources and avoid taking misleading statements or false confessions.

Autism Recognition, Response and Risk Management training sessions will help law enforcement, emergency response, and criminal justice professionals recognize the behavioral symptoms and characteristics of a child or adult who has autism, learn basic response techniques, learn about the high risks associated with autism, and will offer suggestions and options about how to address those risks, increase officer and citizen safety, and avoid litigation.

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For direct training, curriculum and video development, contact:

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