ASD and Wandering: Facts, Recommendations, Recovery, and Resources

Facts:

- **Approximately 49% of children with ASD wander** (National Autism Society, 2011)
- Children with ASD wander from home (74%), the store (40%), and school (29%)
- It occurs because of attention challenges, visual interests, and escape behaviors
- Complicating factors include limited expressive/receptive language, poor safety awareness, learning difficulties
- 79.4% of deaths with children with ASD are related to wandering and accidental occurrences, including drowning, suffocation
- Specific cases of drowning issues resulted in litigation and/or passage of federal laws: Avonte Oquendo, Kevin Willis, Omarion Humphrey

Recommendations:

- Develop a site-specific wandering/elopement plan with all involved team members including principal, teachers, support staff, behavior team, specials staff
  - Identify elopement team members
  - Create a clear, systematic responsibility designation system for elopement plan
- Use environmental supports, such as barriers (ie closed doors, screened in windows, fences)
- When a student is identified as missing:
  - Enact the elopement plan immediately
  - CALL 911
  - Alert parents/guardians
- Recovery Process
  - Remain calm and matter of fact when interacting with the student
  - Limit talking/touching, and **DO NOT** provide preferred items (ie screens, toys, food)
  - Verbally discuss FACTS the student will understand:
    - “You were at . . . “
    - “You go to school at . . . “
    - “You stay in room . . . “
    - “Your teacher is . . . “

Resources:

- National Autism Association’s Big Red Safety Box® for families and teachers
- Project Lifesaver®
- Autism Alliance of Michigan® GPS Program
ASD and Wandering:
Facts, Recommendations, Recovery, and Resources

Adapted from Wandering and the Role of Occupational Therapists by Jeannie Kunz, MOT, OTR/L, BCP
AOTA Board Certified in Pediatrics

References:

ANDERSON, C. ET AL. (2012). OCCURRENCE AND FAMILY IMPACT OF ELOPEMENT IN CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS. AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS. 130:870, PP. 870-877


GUAM, JOSEPH AND LI, G. (2017). CHARACTERISTICS OF UNINTENTIONAL DROWNING DEATHS IN CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER. INJURY EPIDEMIOLOGY. 4:32, PP. 1-4

