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Risks to Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders Who Run Away

Children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) sometimes run away from safe situations. This behaviour puts them at great risk. How often do these children run away, and what are the common outcomes? We searched scientific literature and found that from 25 to 49% of children with ASD run from safety. Many of these children do encounter danger, but risks related to bodies of water are not especially common.

What is the research about?

Running away, elopement, wandering, bolting, and fleeing describe behaviours of leaving a safe place. These behaviours put children at risk of danger. Children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are more vulnerable and are at greater risk when they run away. When the danger risk is high, families may need help from the police.

Our local police officers wanted to know more about children with ASD who run away. They wanted to know how common this problem is in Canadian children with ASD. They also wanted to know if these children often wander to bodies of water.

What did the researchers do?

We conducted a systematic literature review. This means we searched large databases to find information about children with ASD who elope. We reviewed the articles we found and discarded any that did not include children with ASD, or those that did not assess how often elopement occurs.

What did the researchers find?

Our first search for Canadian information found no relevant articles. We then searched for all information related to elopement in children with

What you need to know:

Running/bolting/fleeing from safe environments is a common challenge for children with an autism spectrum disorder. Considering how common this issue is, families need help with prevention interventions.

ASD, regardless of where the articles were from. The second search found 57 articles. When we reviewed these 57 articles, we eliminated 47 that were not relevant.

Of the 10 articles about elopement frequency in children with ASD, all of them were from the United States of America. Four of the articles studied large samples of more than 1,000 children. These four articles reported different rates of elopement in children with ASD.

The first large sample study by Anderson et al. (2012) found that 49% of children with ASD (age



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4 - 17 years) had run away at least once in their life. By comparison only 13% of their siblings had run away. Of those children with ASD who ran away, there were dangers that caused serious concern in 53% of cases.

The study by Kiely et al. (2016) looked at elopement in children with ASD, children with ASD and an intellectual disability, and children with an intellectual disability but no ASD diagnosis. They found different rates of elopement across the three groups. Thirty percent (30%) of children aged 6 - 11 years who had an intellectual disability diagnosis (no ASD) eloped. Children with an ASD diagnosis were more likely to elope and this difference was statistically significant. Forty-one percent (41%) of children with both an ASD and intellectual disability diagnosis eloped, and 42% of children with only an ASD diagnosis eloped. Rice et al. (2016) also found higher rates of elopement in children with an ASD diagnosis compared to children without ASD who had an intellectual disability.

The other large sample study was conducted by McLaughlin et al. in 2018. They reported the lowest elopement rate. They found only 25% of children aged 6 - 17 years with ASD eloped within the last year.

Are children with autism more likely to elope to water?

We did not find any scientific evidence that children with ASD are prone to run to water. There are some cases of children with ASD drowning (McIlwain and Fournier, 2012; 2017) as reported in the media, but this outcome is not very common.

Why is it important?

This research is important because keeping children safe is the primary goal of caregivers, educators, health professionals, and first responders. This research is the first of its kind to review the literature about elopement in children with ASD. Our results indicate:

1. There is a need for Canadian research on elopement prevalence.
2. Elopement is a common issue families of children with autism face. Therefore, clinicians should be prepared to support families with prevention interventions such as teaching safety skills.
3. Although some children may run to water, many other children do not. Based on this information, police and other first responders should plan for individualized search and rescue strategies.

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