



SPARK FOR AUTISM WEBINAR | JUNE 16, 2026

# Autism & Water Safety

Understanding Water Attraction  
and How to Reduce Risk



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# About National Autism Safety Council (NASC)

- NASC unites expertise to prevent injury and premature death in the autism community.
- Our mission is to promote and protect the safety, mental health, and well-being of individuals with autism, and their families, siblings, and caregivers.



*Public awareness and education*



*Cross-sector training programs*



*Research-to-practice integration*



*National safety standards and tools*



*Collaboration and resource development*

## When most people think of water safety, they think:

- Teaching kids to swim
- Wearing life jackets on boats
- Not running at the pool
- Neurotypical scenarios, like a pool party or beach trip





But for children and dependent adults with autism, **water safety often begins long before they reach the water.**



## Water safety is different for our community.

- **Unique Water Attraction:** Water draw can result in a child leaving *alone in active pursuit of water*, especially ponds, any time of day.
- **High Elopement Risk:** Elopement can happen silently, within seconds, even under active supervision.
- **Communication Differences:** May not be able to call out for help, or respond to name or verbal commands like 'stop.' Teaching safety skills may not translate, or be acted upon.
- **Swim Lesson Access:** Adaptive swim lessons may be difficult to access or complete.
- **Water Risk:** The hazard is *every* type of water, even unappealing or shallow water.

## Why are children with autism attracted to water?

- **Sensory Avoidance:** Water and areas around water can be quiet, calming, and soothing for an overstimulated nervous system. Water submersion can act as a sensory "mute button."
- **Sensory Pursuit:** Water's movement, patterns, reflections, and sound can be powerfully appealing.
- **Both:** a child may leave a noisy party (sensory avoiding) and pursue a preferred topic or place (sensory seeking), often water.



## But even those who fear water may still go to water.

- **Aversion is not protective.** Children described as afraid of water have still been found in water.
- **Every child is different.** A child can love pools and dislike showers, enjoy baths but avoid water on the face, or prefer ponds and lakes over pools.
- **Understanding is key.** Identifying triggers and preferences can help guide prevention, skill development, and aid response.



# Water Attraction & Aversion

*Look for clues in their behavior.*

## Signs of Attraction

- Pulling toward water
- Seeking preferred water sources
- Upset when leaving water
- Fixation on water features
- Bath/shower frequency

## Signs of Aversion

- Avoiding baths/showers
- Distress with water on the face
- Distress around faucet or toilet sounds
- Upset in certain water environments, like pools



*Water attraction and aversion can exist in the same child.*

# Understanding Elopement

- Elopement (bolting, wandering) occurs when a child or dependent leaves a safe, supervised space undetected.
- Nearly half (49%) of children with autism wander or elope from safe settings.<sup>1</sup>
- It can happen quickly and silently even when supervised.
- Has its own diagnostic code: Z91.83.

## The Water Connection

- ❖ Missing children with autism are commonly found in or near water.
- ❖ They typically head straight to the nearest body of water usually **within a few hundred feet**.
- ❖ Always call 911, specify 'autism,' and **search nearby water FIRST** when a child with autism is missing.



1. Anderson, C., Law, J. K., Daniels, A. M., Rice, C., Mandell, D. S., Hagopian, L., & Law, P. A. (2012). Occurrence and family impact of elopement in children with autism spectrum disorders. *Pediatrics*, 130(5), 870–877. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-0762>

A simple breakdown of the most common reasons for elopement:  
**Cope, Nope, or Hope.**



THEY  
**ELOPE TO COPE**

Leaving a safe area to escape an overwhelming or painful environment in order to self-regulate.



THEY  
**ELOPE TO NOPE**

Anticipating a known trigger or demand and getting out before it hits in order to avoid.



THEY  
**ELOPE TO HOPE**

Hoping to get to something: a favorite place, person, sensory input, unique fascination, or calm. For children, typically the goal is to reach nearby bodies of water.

# Elopement: Most Vulnerable Times

*Based on Outcome Data*



1. Times of Overstimulation or Commotion



2. Transitions or Changes in Routine



3. Stressful Moments, Triggers, Unique Fears



4. Family Gatherings, Holidays, Vacations, Recent Moves



5. Overnight While Family is Sleeping



6. Outdoor Activities



7. Co-napping with a Parent or Babysitter

## Autism-Related Elopement Fatalities in the United States - 2025

Sex:  Age:  State:  Water Type:  Cause:

As of 06/13/26



Elopement Related Fatalities\*  
**101**

Avg per Month  
**8.4**

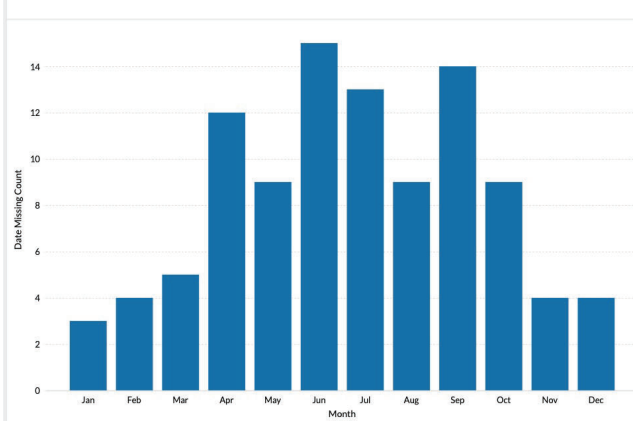
Drowning Fatalities  
**86.1%**

Drowning in Ponds  
**44.8%**

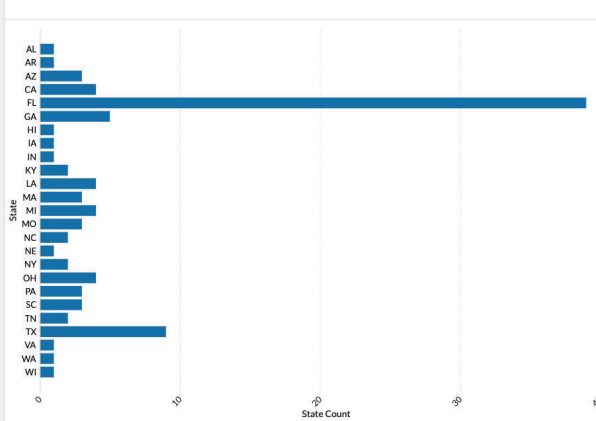
States w/ Available Data\*\*  
**25**



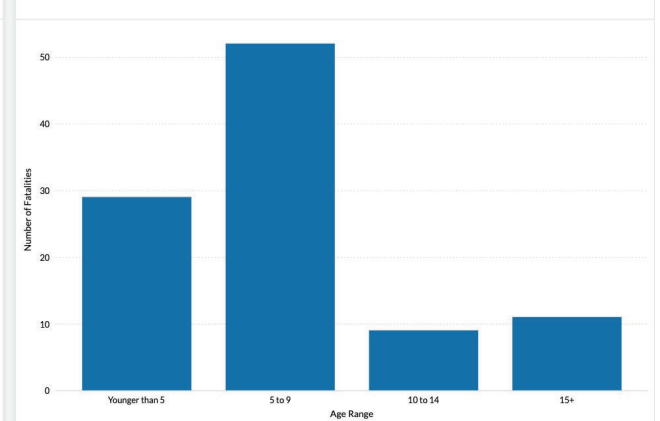
Fatalities by Month 2025



Fatalities by State 2025



Fatalities by Age Group 2025

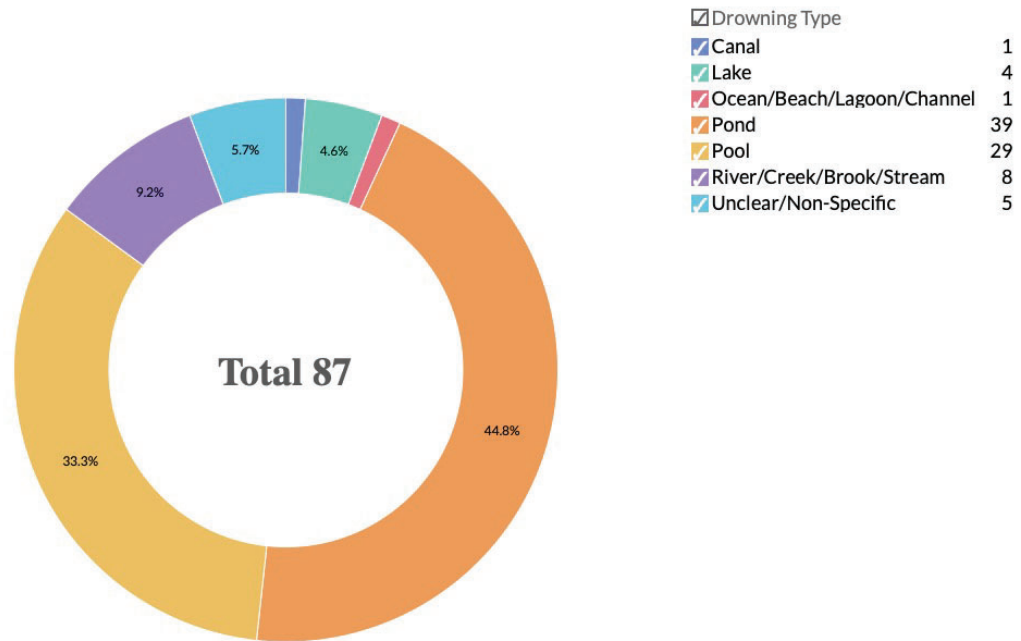


# 2025

- Average of 8.4 elopement fatalities per month – 86% caused by drowning
- Vast majority were 9 or younger, with the 5 to 9 group accounting for the largest share
- Florida's elevated count likely reflects a combination of year-round water exposure, tourism, and one of the nation's most robust reporting systems.

Source: National Autism Safety Council, 2025 Review: Autism-Related Elopement Fatalities in the United States (McIlwain, Hudgins, & Heaps, 2026). Data provided is as of 06/13/26. Dashboard counts update in real time as new cases are confirmed and may continue to increase.

### Fatalities by Water Type 2025



Source: National Autism Safety Council, 2025 Review: Autism-Related Elopement Fatalities in the United States (McIlwain, Hudgins, & Heaps, 2026). Data provided is as of 06/13/26. Dashboard counts update in real time as new cases are confirmed and may continue to increase.





**S** **Supervision**

Designate one responsible person to supervise on rotation. No phones or distractions.

**A** **Assessment of Environment**

Assess environment, nearby water hazards, and security needs.

**F** **Fencing & Alarms**

Use self-latching gates, well-maintained fencing, pool covers, water submersion alarms, GPS geofencing.

**E** **Education**

Use preferred communication and visual supports to teach 'wait,' 'stop,' holding wall, floating basics. Enroll in adaptive swim lessons.

**S** **Sensory Needs**

Know triggers, sensory preferences, and aversions. Understand water attraction and aversion patterns to guide prevention and response.

**W** **Wearables**

Use a Coast Guard-approved life jacket. Avoid floaties and other inflatables for safety training.

**I** **Informing Others**

Inform neighbors, babysitters, teachers, and first responders about elopement and water.

**M** **Making a Plan**

Create an emergency response plan. Learn CPR and keep rescue equipment nearby for day or nighttime. If missing: call 911 and search water FIRST.

## Match Supervision to Risk Level

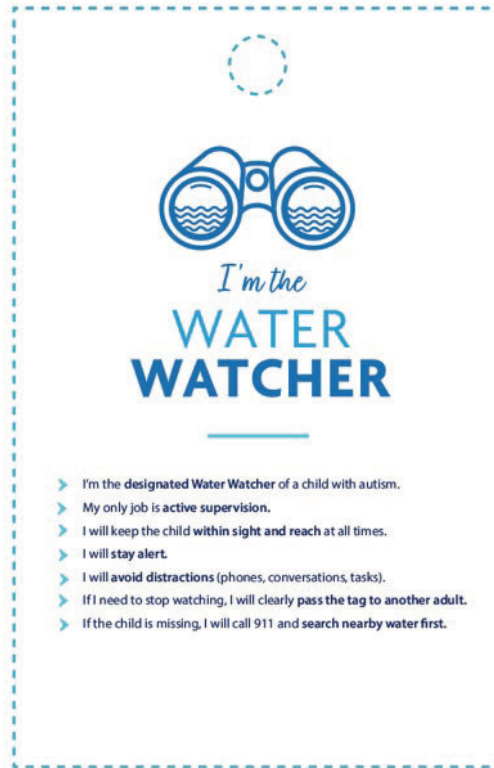
Some children need standard supervision. Others need one-to-one supervision. **Many need supervision that stays multiple steps ahead.**

The key question to ask for various environments and scenarios: *'What's my child's level of risk right now?'*



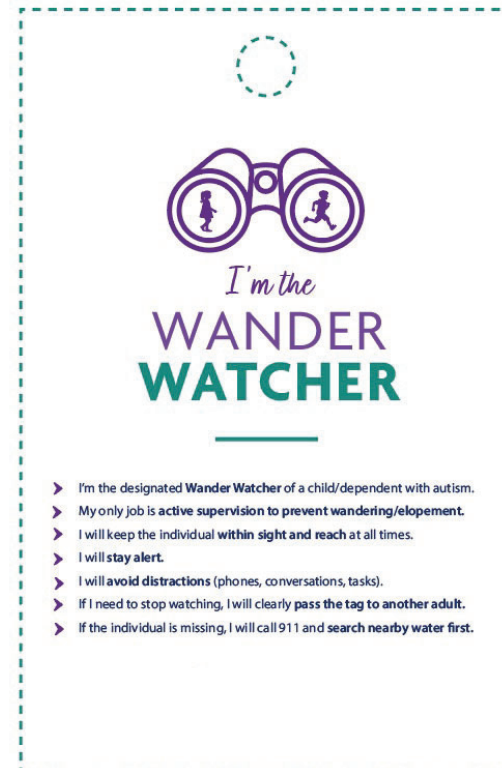


Cutouts available at [AutismSafetyCouncil.org](https://AutismSafetyCouncil.org)

A vertical rectangular cutout with a dashed blue border. At the top center is a small dashed circle. Below it is a blue line-art illustration of binoculars with wavy lines in the lenses. Underneath the binoculars is the text "I'm the WATER WATCHER" in a mix of blue and teal fonts. A thin blue horizontal line is below the text. At the bottom is a list of six bullet points in blue text.

I'm the designated Water Watcher of a child with autism.  
My only job is active supervision.  
I will keep the child within sight and reach at all times.  
I will stay alert.  
I will avoid distractions (phones, conversations, tasks).  
If I need to stop watching, I will clearly pass the tag to another adult.  
If the child is missing, I will call 911 and search nearby water first.

*For water-related activities*

A vertical rectangular cutout with a dashed teal border. At the top center is a small dashed circle. Below it is a purple line-art illustration of binoculars with silhouettes of a person walking in the lenses. Underneath the binoculars is the text "I'm the WANDER WATCHER" in a mix of purple and teal fonts. A thin teal horizontal line is below the text. At the bottom is a list of six bullet points in teal text.

I'm the designated Wander Watcher of a child/dependent with autism.  
My only job is active supervision to prevent wandering/elopement.  
I will keep the individual within sight and reach at all times.  
I will stay alert.  
I will avoid distractions (phones, conversations, tasks).  
If I need to stop watching, I will clearly pass the tag to another adult.  
If the individual is missing, I will call 911 and search nearby water first.

*For year-round vulnerable times, indoors or out*



## Make Sure Water Watchers Understand

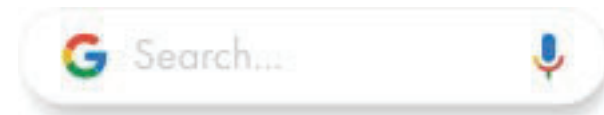
- Most caregivers picture splashing, yelling, and a child calling for help.
- Real drowning often looks very different. It can be silent, with little movement and no call for help.
- **Water Watchers should avoid relying on noise to alert them to danger.**

## Water-Mapping to Identify Nearby Water

- ✓ **Google your home address**  
Identify all bodies of water near your home and every location your child regularly visits school, relatives' homes, vacation rentals.
- ✓ **Document pool locations**  
Pools may not appear on Google Maps. Ask neighbors. Document any nearby home with a pool.
- ✓ **Include this in your emergency plan**  
Share your water map with all caregivers, family members, neighbors, and first responders.
- ✓ **Search closest water location FIRST**  
If your child is missing, your pre-mapped water locations become your search priority before random searching begins.



**Be prepared for an emergency.  
Identify nearby water ahead of time.**



*Visit [SearchWaterFirst.org](https://SearchWaterFirst.org)*



# Layers of Protection

*Multiple overlapping layers help reduce risk.*



## Layer 1

### Home and Personal Safeguards

- ✓ Door/window locks and alarms on all exits
- ✓ Communication and sensory supports
- ✓ GPS or RF locative devices
- ✓ Baby monitors
- ✓ Safe escape area (with white noise, comfort items)
- ✓ Visual tools
- ✓ Mesh screens are maintained
- ✓ Safety plans in place

## Layer 2

### Yard & Property

- ✓ Four-sided fencing with self-latching gates
- ✓ Gate alarms or sensors
- ✓ GPS geofencing
- ✓ Pool fencing separate from yard fencing
- ✓ Fencing is maintained

## Layer 3

### Pool & Water Areas

- ✓ Pool surface alarms (motion-detecting)
- ✓ Water submersion alarms (wristband or pool)
- ✓ Pool safety covers and drain covers are maintained and inspected
- ✓ Coast Guard-approved life jacket
- ✓ Pool toys and visible attractors are removed

*Safety planning should extend across settings, including home, school, transportation, community activities, vacations, and visits with family or friends.*



## Thinking Beyond the Pool:

Ask yourself, 'If my child entered the nearest pond, lake, creek, or retention basin today, what would our family need to safely respond?'

*Most caregivers will instinctively enter the water to reach their child. **Planning ahead can help protect both the child and rescuer.***

*Plans can include who calls 911, who retrieves rescue equipment, who responds to the water, and what additional supplies may be needed at night.*

# Teaching Water Safety Skills

## Build Familiarity

Build familiarity with baths, showers, water sounds, water pressure, and water on the face in positive ways. Gradual introduction can help build comfort and confidence around water. The earlier the better.

## Use Visual Supports & Learning Tools

Place stop signs at eye level near water access points. Teach 'wait' and 'stop' through consistent visual & verbal prompts. Use social stories, visual schedules, songs, and favorite characters/interests to reinforce water safety skills.

## Sensory-Safe Environment

Provide routine, predictable sensory experiences and outlets in controlled environments. Build positive associations with water while respecting sensory differences.

## Routine, Repetition & Practice

Schedule supervised water play at consistent times. Rehearse safety behaviors in low-stakes settings. Practice does not make perfect, but it builds familiarity, confidence, and muscle memory.

## Plain, Honest Language

Use simple, clear explanations about danger. Connect hazards to things they care about. Continue speaking even if they appear not to listen.

## Teach Regardless of Diagnosis or Swim Ability

Begin safety conversations regardless of diagnosis or swim skill. Concepts such as 'stay with an adult,' 'stop and wait,' and holding onto a rescue item or structure can be taught and reinforced anytime.

# Visual Aids Can Help

*Incorporate visual supports into schedules, social stories, and exit points.*





## Keep Communicating

*Even if your child appears not to listen, keep talking.*

Connect water danger to things your child already cares about. Simple, honest language works better than abstract warnings.

### Try phrases like:

- 'Going into water alone can make us feel really sick, like a bad tummy ache.'
- 'Water that is brown or dirty can make us feel very sick.'
- 'If you go near water without me, you might get hurt and we won't be able to have \_\_\_\_\_.' (Favorite character, food, activity, interest, or comfort item.)

Keep it honest, not scary. Connect the hazard to something real in their world. Repeat it consistently, across settings even before swim lessons start.

***Foundational safety concepts can stay with a child even when comprehension is hard to measure.***

# Adaptive Swimming Lessons

*Customized instruction for children and dependents with autism.*

- Tailored to each individual's abilities, comfort level, and learning style
- Small groups or one-on-one instruction to reduce overstimulation
- Sensory-friendly approaches: gradual water introduction, ear protection, quiet swim times
- Step-by-step instructions and visual cues to reinforce safety skills
- Repetition used intentionally to build muscle memory
- Teaches hazard recognition, safe entry and exit, treading, and floating

## Where to Find Adaptive Lessons

- Swim Whisperers® Directory  
**SwimAngelfish.com**
- SafeSplash Swim School Adaptive Aquatics at participating locations **SafeSplash.com**
- Big Blue Swim School Swim Whisperers® method **BigBlueSwimSchool.com**
- British Swim School Adaptive lessons at participating locations  
**BritishSwimSchool.com**
- Local YMCA: Many offer adaptive or 'special needs' swim programs
- Community recreation centers and disability-focused organizations
- Contact NASC for available providers:  
**info@autismsafetycouncil.org**



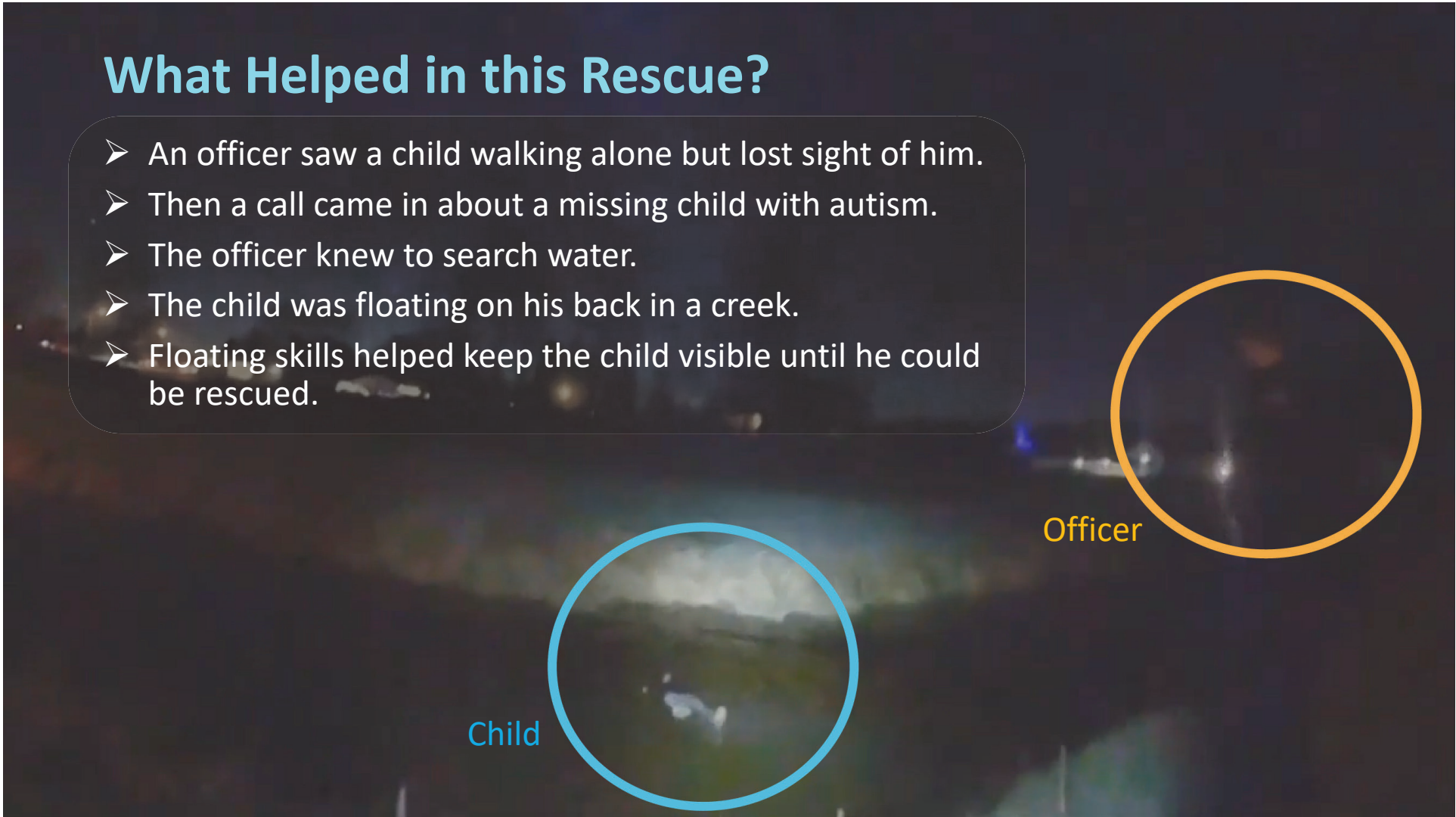
*Encourage local instructors to get certified  
at **SwimAngelfish.com***

## What Helped in this Rescue?

- An officer saw a child walking alone but lost sight of him.
- Then a call came in about a missing child with autism.
- The officer knew to search water.
- The child was floating on his back in a creek.
- Floating skills helped keep the child visible until he could be rescued.

Child

Officer





## Swim Skills Alone Are Not Enough

*This child's ability to float helped keep him visible until rescuers arrived. But cold water, time, and location can all become life-threatening, regardless of skill level.*

**Swim skills help, but they work best as part of a comprehensive safety strategy.**





# Use Safety Plans to Aid Response

Download this Family Emergency Response Plan (FERP) at [AutismSafetyCouncil.org](http://AutismSafetyCouncil.org)



## Wandering & Elopement Family Emergency Response Plan

**Develop an emergency response plan in case of a wandering/elopement emergency.** Before an emergency occurs, take time to meet as a family to discuss and decide where to search first, how everyone will stay in contact, and what specific steps to take if wandering happens. Be sure to keep a written copy of this plan in an easily accessible place.

### First Steps



- Identify Nearby Water:** Type your address into Google Maps to identify bodies of water closest to your home.
- Alert Others:** Use this emergency profile form to alert trusted family members, neighbors, & search partners.
- Create Group Text:** Create a Group Text & Contact for family members, neighbors, and search partners, and assign it a name so you can easily text everyone at the same time.

### Helpful Tools & Tips



Download This Profile Template | Identify Nearby Water Using Google Maps | Snap a Picture of Your Child Each Day

### Create an Emergency Plan

- ✔ **Arrange a meeting** with your family and trusted neighbors.
- ✔ **Explain** your child's tendency to wander or bolt, and share the alert form with them.
- ✔ **Designate specific search areas** for each willing family member and neighbor.
- ✔ **Choose one emergency contact** to stay with any younger children during an emergency.
- ✔ **Create a group text** thread and give it an easy-to-recognize name.
- ✔ **Send the group a photo or map** showing their assigned search area (see below).
- ✔ **Conduct a practice drill** as though it were a real emergency.
- ✔ **Review and update the plan** regularly, making adjustments as needed.



### Search Locations

List the main places your child/adult may likely go, especially nearby ponds, lakes, pools. **Be specific.** Search these areas first and stay there. If you've assigned search partners ahead of time, make sure they know which location is assigned to them. Discuss and visit the assigned location to which they are assigned.

Example: the pond on Maynard Road;  
Smith's pool on Ralph Street

### Search Partners

Before an emergency happens, **assign at least five willing search partners** who will commit to searching for your child/adult in case of an emergency. Make sure they are close by, understand your loved one, understand their responsibilities, and know their assigned search location.

Example: Neighbor Stacie, 919-555-1616  
Older Sibling's Name, 919-555-0808

1.		Assigned to	→	Name/Number
2.		→	→	Name/Number
3.		→	→	Name/Number
4.		→	→	Name/Number
5.		→	→	Name/Number

Our Group Name is: \_\_\_\_\_

Take a picture of this section & text it to your group.



### 90 Character Template

**[AGENCY]: MISSING CHILD w/AUTISM. [Age, race, sex, important visual descriptors]. SEARCH WATER NOW.**

### 360 Character Template

**[AGENCY]: MISSING CHILD with AUTISM. EXTREME DROWNING RISK. [Child Name], [Age], [Sex], [Description], NONSPEAKING. Last seen near [Location] on foot. SEARCH ALL WATER NOW (pools, ponds, drains, spas, tanks—even if covered or dirty) and inside cars. Child may HIDE. Stay at water if safe. IF SEEN, call 9-1-1.**

# Simple

## Evidence Based Template

Based on expert elopement and alerting research, the template uses clear, focused language to call community members to act quickly.

# Fast

## Compose in Moments

Basic details from first moments of a 911 call are enough to create a complete alert message.

# Direct

## Water-First Instructions

The template provides clear directions that do not require additional information or confirmation for action while providing the community with a way to help.

A new tool for dispatchers:

# WEA Template Tool

Template Developed by:  
The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children  
in consultation with the National Autism Safety  
Council, Dr. Jeanette Sutton, and Eddie Bertola, MA

# Keep Going

*Remember that each person with autism is on their own learning timeline.*

- Success looks differently for each individual.
- Sometimes tolerating water on the face is a victory.
- Instead of asking, 'Can my child swim?' Ask, '**What's the next water safety skill my child can learn?**'





# Water safety is a daily practice.

*Every layer added helps reduce risk.*



Download NASC's full **SafeSwim for Autism Guide**  
at [AutismSafetyCouncil.org](https://AutismSafetyCouncil.org)





And remember to always **Search Water First.**

**Thank you!**

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*For the latest tools and resources, follow NASC on social media.*

[AutismSafetyCouncil.org](https://AutismSafetyCouncil.org) | [SearchWaterFirst.org](https://SearchWaterFirst.org) | 888.471.NASC