

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN PUBLIC SAFETY AND INVISIBLE DISABILITIES

Ethan Puskas, NRP
Paramedic Supervisor



Most people within the community know that people with autism (and related disabilities) are exponentially more likely to have negative interactions with law enforcement and public safety in general than the population. In fact, when compared to neurotypical peers, autistic individuals are seven times more likely to be in a police encounter (Lartey, 2024), three times more likely to die from a traumatic injury (Guan et. al, 2017) and 45% more likely to be physically or sexually assaulted (Gibbs et. al, 2021).

Those are some scary statistics that should concern both caretakers and individuals on the spectrum. I have written extensively on training police, fire, and EMS to interact with people on the spectrum, but the fact remains that individuals and caretakers are the final advocates for themselves and the ones they care for. Pushing for more training and awareness from first responders remains vital, but being able to advocate for yourself and your loved ones can be priceless. So what can parents, caregivers, and individuals on the spectrum do? Lots!

- **Build relationships** - Get to know the first responders in your area. Visit police stations, ambulance stations, fire trucks, and more. Make sure anyone who might be responding to your house knows about you or your loved one. Setting the expectation early is incredibly beneficial.
- **Practice** - As corny as it sounds, practicing social interactions others may see as intuitive is part of Autism; it doesn't have to end when 911 is called. Practice with your loved ones on when to call 911, what to say, how to identify yourself to police and first responders, etc.
- **Exposure** - Sit on the stretcher in an ambulance. Ask questions about what might happen if you or your loved one needs to go to the hospital. Ask what happens if the fire department needs to come, find out what their tools sound like so it's not as much of a scare if it happens for real. Exposure to these things before a real-world emergency does wonders. If you or your loved one drives, know what a police traffic stop might look and sound like.
- **Registries** - Many advocate for and against voluntary disability registries. In today's political climate, I see both sides of the coin. I think for people who are unable to appropriately self advocate, the benefits are worth it. But I completely understand people who are unwilling to sign up for these. If your area has one, they are usually ran by your county's 911 center (I.e, Allegheny County Special Needs Registry)
- **Discuss wandering & water** - Have honest discussions if your loved one wanders or has risks of being near water. You'll be surprised how much they may learn.
- **Self rescue/swim lessons** - Drowning is the number 1 cause of death for individuals with Autism. Any form of self rescue swim skills may very well save a life.
- **Discuss safe reporting of violence and abuse** - Make sure your loved one understands who they can talk to if they are being bullied or abused. If they're nonverbal, ensure to monitor for the signs of abuse; bruising in different stages of healing, inexplicable wounds, and aversion to certain people to name a few.

People with Autism face risks in their daily lives, many originating with forced interactions with law enforcement/public safety and their responses (stimming, evasive behavior, meltdowns, etc) being misconstrued as noncompliance. I wish I could say every officer, paramedic, and firefighter in Pennsylvania knows these signs by now, but that isn't the case. As long as that's the reality, part of the burden will fall on parents, caregivers, and individuals on the spectrum. We can all be part of that change, to make our streets and communities safer for us, but the above steps help us keep ourselves safer in the meantime.

About: Ethan Puskas is a paramedic supervisor with Foxwall EMS, just outside of Pittsburgh. Ethan is diagnosed high-functioning Autistic and advocates for autism education within the public safety sector. Ethan lives with his wife, Sarah, and his brother, Elijah, who has more profound Autism. In his free time, Ethan plays a fair amount of computer games, bikes, and runs. Ethan has worked with the Autism Connection of Pennsylvania for several years on training for first responders and written in EMS journals on the subject.

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Guan, J., & Li, G. (2017). Injury mortality in individuals with autism. *American Journal of Public Health*, 107(5), 791–793.

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