AutismONTARIO

Elopement in Autism

Research highlight

Why does this research matter to the autistic community?

Elopement is when a child leaves a safe space without permission, putting themselves in danger.[1,2] Also called "wandering" or "bolting," it is one of the most stressful safety concerns families of autistic children face.[1] Many families feel alone in dealing with this, but research shows they are not. Understanding what the research says can help families feel more prepared and better supported.[2]

What does the research show?

How common is elopement?

49%

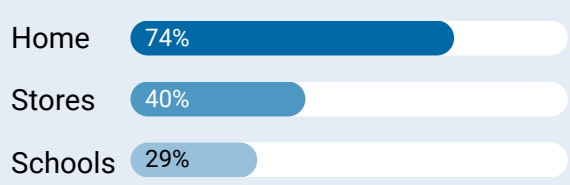
of autistic children have eloped at least once after age 4.

Nearly 4x the rate of siblings without autism[1]

Most common in children with an intellectual disability or limited communication skills.[2,3]

Where does it happen?

Elopement most often happens in familiar, everyday places, not unfamiliar ones.[1]



Percentages reflect families who reported elopement at each location.

Why do children elope?

Elopement reflects a need, not a defiance.[5] Research shows three main reasons.

- To reach a place they enjoy.
- To escape an overwhelming situation.
- To seek a calming sensory experience (e.g. going near water).[1]

How does it affect families?

- Elopement risk disrupts families' sleep and limits participation in everyday activities outside the home.[1]
- Most families reported recieving no guidance from any professional on how to manage elopement.[1]

What are the risks?

Physical danger
Children who elope are at risk of drowning or traffic injury.[1]

Leading cause of death
Drowning is the most common cause of death in elopement cases.[8]

What does this mean?

Take steps to prevent elopement.
Steps like high door locks, door alarms, and registering your child with local emergency services can make a real difference, and work best when started before an incident happens.[2,5,6]

Learn about what elopement is and why it happens.
When families and professionals work together to figure out why a child elopes, safety plans are far more effective.[7]

What's still missing or unclear?

We do not yet know how well different prevention strategies work, as most research describes what families use but does not measure whether those strategies are effective.[2]

Families from diverse cultural and language backgrounds are rarely included in elopement research, and no studies to date have looked at elopement in families whose primary language is not English.[2]

Most elopement research has focused on young children. There are very few that examine elopement in autistic youth and adults.[7]

References

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3. Rice, Zablotsky, Avila, Colpe, Schieve, Pringle, & Blumberg- Wandering in autistic children and those with intellectual disability (2016)
4. Guan & Li- Injury mortality in autistic individuals (2017)
5. Boyle & Adamson- Elopement: Functional analysis and intervention review (2017)
6. Gattuso, McNulty, & Bauer- Elopement and wandering: Practical tips for primary care providers (2019)
7. Thomas, Nasca, Cohen, & Strohmeier- Elopement in autistic teens: Functional analysis and intervention (2023)
8. National Autism Association- Wandering and elopement: Mortality and risk report (2017)