

## **Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Autism Safety & Risk Management Dennis Debbaudt 2009**

Ensuring the safety of every student and staff member on campus should be addressed at all IEP meetings. Sharing information, considering worst case scenarios and proactive plans to be best prepared for an autism related emergency are the best options for lowering risk and increasing safety. Bring educators, school responding law enforcement and first responders, the school nurse, parents and specialists together to develop a safety and emergency plan for students with autism. Always, and proactively, inform responding law enforcement and first response agencies of any behavior plans and deescalation options that are used in general or are specific to a particular student.

### **Preventing victimization: educate non teaching staff**

There are many reasons why it is important to include transportation, maintenance, cafeteria, and other non-teaching staff in autism risk and safety sessions. For one thing, when these individuals learn to use basic spectrum communication and response techniques, they can become valuable assets for school security. For another, there are added benefits for the students, since these staff members may come to be viewed as teachers or administrators, and as such, the student may seek assistance from them. In addition, these employees can assist security by providing extra sets of eyes and ears, especially when it comes to monitoring episodes of bullying, teasing and taunting. Most importantly, the relationships developed with non-teaching staff can pay off in early recognition of school-place bullying.

It is predictable that the behaviors and characteristics that students on the spectrum inherently display will draw the attention of other students. Unaware that their behaviors, physical posture, vocal tone, apparent aloofness and social gaffes are attracting unwanted attention, students with ASD can make perfect targets for bullies (Debbaudt, 2003). Bullies typically become adept at selecting their victims. Their actions often take place quickly, and out of the sight and hearing space of teachers. Since bullying often occurs on the school bus, staff or surrogates can and should observe the interactions between the student on the spectrum, and his or her peers on the school bus. Likewise, security should exercise vigilance with respect to observing students entering and leaving schools; navigating the hallways between classes; and using the restrooms, cafeteria, and playground, since these are also target areas for bullies.

Finally, it is important to be mindful that older, more independent students on the spectrum may be at greater risk than those who require, and hence receive, more adult supervision.

It is well understood that early intervention and education are the keys to helping students with ASD to develop critical life skills. Helping students on the spectrum navigate the tough and confusing unstructured social spaces in school, and in life, is one of those critical life skills. Addressing this issue will take some forethought; however, security can learn valuable information through his/her contacts with drivers and aides, maintenance and cafeteria employees that can enable him or her to discover the seeds of bullying and to deal with it early and effectively.

## At the IEP: Working with Parents and Families

Campus security managers can enhance the parents' role in safety and risk management. Parents may be all too well aware of the risks their children on the spectrum face. For example, wandering away into potentially dangerous situations is a safety risk many parents confront on a regular basis. For parents, two of the diagnostic characteristics of autism--high tolerance for pain and the lack of fear of real danger--is a frightening and combustible combination. Combined with wandering, these and the risks described above affect families in their relationships with their neighbors, and during excursions outside of the home. Moms and dads may very well know what triggers their son or daughter's behaviors. They may also have well developed techniques designed to deal with or avoid those triggers, or they may know ways to de-escalate their child's behavior.

### Identify behavioral issues and share deescalation options

Parents and school administrators should work together to discover information about specific behavioral and sensory information about the student. Then use that information to develop strategies to help all staff respond appropriately. For example, the parents may know what triggers an episode of screaming or provokes a tantrum in their children. They may also be able to describe their children's fears or dislikes as well as offer valuable background regarding what their children's favorite items and topics of discussion are. This information would be invaluable to responding school staff that need specific strategies and tactics to "lower the temperature" during a behavioral outburst. Most importantly, they may provide options before restraint to successfully de-escalate a student's behavior. Consider using the *Autism Emergency Contact Form* as an information sharing starting point.

Information sharing can be a two-way street. Specifically, well-informed campus security can also provide valuable campus, home and community safety and risk management tips to parents.

### Conclusion

Encourage and create opportunities where persons with autism or Asperger Syndrome can interact with law enforcers in a safe, structured, non threatening and low anxiety environment. You can then learn from each other how to best interact. These educational opportunities will need to be discussed, planned and carried out. Autism advocacy groups should be encouraged to embrace these issues and help form partnerships with law enforcers. Mutual education and information sharing will always be the keys to successful resolution of autism related contacts and to increase safety and lower risk for persons with autism at home, on campus and in the community.

Be Proactive!

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#### Additional Reading & Viewing

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