

Wandering

It's common for autistic children to wander off or run away. Often they will wander or run off without any warning, and sometimes without being able to explain why they did it or where they were trying to go. There are a wide variety of reasons that some children run off, and the strategies used to keep children safe will depend on why they are running away. This resource will go through the most common reasons for autistic children to wander off or run away, and some strategies to try for each reason.

(A note about terminology: wandering or running off is often referred to as 'elopement'. This resource does not use that term because many autistic adults find it unnecessarily pathologising; many autistic adults have been told that they were 'eloping' and that it was a problem to solve when they were going for a walk, or leaving an uncomfortable situation – things that a non-autistic person would be allowed to do without any questions.)

Potential reasons for wandering or running off

Not enough alone time

Children, particularly young children, are often expected to be around other people for most or all of their day. For an autistic child who finds constant socialising exhausting, this can quickly become intolerable, and they may run away to get some space and time to themselves.

If you think this may be happening:

- Carve out a portion of the day where your child can be alone. (Picking out a day where nothing else needs to happen, leaving your child alone, and noting how long it takes for them to come and find someone else can give you a baseline for how much alone time they will generally need.)
- If your family uses visual schedules, put a block of alone time in the schedule. Make sure there are no interruptions from siblings or other family members, and try to minimise noise while the child's alone time is happening. (It doesn't need to be completely silent, or even particularly quiet – but try not to schedule one child's alone time alongside another child having noisy friends over, for example.)
- Talk to your child's teacher, early childhood centre, or anywhere else they spend a lot of time about having a quiet space they can go when they feel overwhelmed. Explain the purpose of the space to the child, and make sure that they are allowed to spend as much time in the quiet space as they want.

Feeling out of control, or lacking autonomy or freedom

If you think this may be happening:

- Go through your child's schedule and work out anything they can be given autonomy over. This will be specific to your child's age and developmental path, as well as your family's situation, but some examples are: letting your child choose when they want to get up, within specific barriers (get up at 8am, go through morning routines and get out the door, or get up at 7am and fit in an hour of TV, etc.); giving your child a choice over whether to attend playdates, extracurricular activities, and any other non-compulsory events at every stage in the process; and making sure there is an uninterrupted block of time at least every week where your child can do what they want.

Enjoying the sensory experience of running

If you think this may be happening:

- Make times to take your child to a park, sports field, or other wide open space where they can run around.
- Set up a schedule so that your child knows when the next time they get to run around is – coping with the need to run around is much easier if they know there's a time coming up when they're allowed to run.

Not knowing what the rules are

Things like when it's appropriate to wander off and when it isn't, or how far away your child can be from a parent or caregiver before it's dangerous, might be very clear to you, but vague, abstract, or easily forgettable to your child.

If you think this may be happening:

- Try having concrete rules about distance, and reminding your child of the rules for each situation before you enter it. For example, at home the rule might be not crossing the line between driveway and footpath (you can even draw a chalk line to reinforce this!), or in public the rule might be that your child must be able to see you all the time, or there can only be one streetlight or power pole between you. These kinds of concrete rules can work a lot better for autistic children than more vague statements like "stay close to mum" or "don't wander too far."
- If your child frequently wanders off from places like school or an early childhood centre, check whether the school or centre is fenced all the way around – and if not, whether you can draw chalk lines, string a rope across gaps, or find another way to make boundaries between 'allowed spaces' and 'not-allowed spaces' concrete and visible.
- Play games using objects as boundaries to help your child get their head around the idea of not crossing fences and other boundaries. Some examples could include racing towards a defined finish line, or games like red light green light, where players are only allowed to move if there's a picture of a green light showing.

Distraction or lack of impulse control

Some autistic children, particularly those with ADHD, will frequently get distracted by something and wander off to look at it, either forgetting not to wander or being unable to suppress the impulse to run off and look at a new thing.

If you think this may be happening:

- Keep the child as engaged as possible, to reduce the risk that they will run off because they've seen something interesting. This could mean interacting with the child, keeping up a conversation or playing a game with them; and/or letting them have a fidget toy, a device, or something else that will keep them engaged.
- Put measures in place to handle it when the child does run away. For children who wander off because they're distracted, putting rules in place or asking the child to tell you before they wander off is unlikely to help, because the impulse to go see the new exciting thing causes the child to forget everything else around them, including any rules they might have learned.
- If your child has a phone or another device like a smart watch, these can often be set up so that you can track their location. You can also connect your own smart watch to a phone so that your watch vibrates when your child's phone gets too far away from you. (If your child is not old enough for a smartphone yet, buying a cheap phone that is only used for location tracking can be a good option.)

Being unable to tolerate their current environment

Running away can be a response to being physically unable to be in a bright, noisy, or overwhelming environment for another second. If your child seems to suddenly run off for no reason and is unable to explain why later, this may be what's going on.

If you think this may be happening:

- Make a note of which environments your child runs away from most often. Is there anything about those environments that may be becoming overwhelming or distressing? (Check out our [Common Sensory Triggers resource](#) for some ideas.)
- Make a quiet, low-sensory, low-demand space in your home and/or in your child's school or early childhood centre. Giving your child somewhere safe to go where they can escape an overwhelming situation or environment can help to prevent them from running to somewhere unsafe.
- If you notice that your child consistently runs away from a particular environment like the supermarket or the swimming pool, stop taking them there (as much as possible).

An autistic adult's experience of running away from intolerable environments:

"For me, elopement or running away was another form of shutdown or escaping significant overload. Generally, I would go to the same places. If I got to the point of taking off, I was already in such a shut down that there probably wasn't anything you could say or do to stop me, and I would probably be quite fast. It can be somewhat unsafe because being in such a state means you may not be focused on your surroundings such as oncoming traffic. All that's in your mind is getting to where you're going. Once I would get to wherever it was that I'd taken myself to, I'd often need some time before I could leave. I couldn't really pay much attention to anyone or anything else.

It's like everything becomes too much and I have to escape as quickly as possible and the only place that feels safe and comforting is the place I've decided to go."

Finding running away or escaping fun

Young children and/or children with intellectual or learning disabilities may not understand that running away can put them in serious danger, and may struggle to tell the difference between running off across a busy road and playing a chasing game.

If you think this may be happening:

- Make time to play chasing games with your child around your lawn, a park, a school field, or anywhere safe. This can help meet the child's need for this kind of game and reduce the likelihood that they will try to instigate chasing games by running off at other times.
- Make it simple. Each time you enter a new situation or environment, ask your child if this place is for chasing or not for chasing (or whatever wording works for you). For some children, making this into a game where they have to pick the right answer can work (particularly if correctly guessing 'for chasing' immediately leads into a fun chasing game).