



PUBLIC SAFETY EDUCATION

Understanding Wandering and Elopement

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49%

of children with autism attempt to elope
from a safe environment

91%

of U.S. autism wandering fatalities are
caused by drowning

6 in 10

people with Alzheimer's disease will
wander at some point

WHAT IS WANDERING AND ELOPEMENT?

Wandering refers to a person leaving a safe or supervised environment without intent — often without awareness of the danger they are entering. **Elopement** refers specifically to leaving a home, school, or care facility without permission or supervision.

Unlike a typical missing person scenario, individuals who wander:

- May be non-verbal and unable to communicate their name, address, or that they need help. More than one-third of children with autism who wander are never or rarely able to identify themselves.
- May not respond to their name being called.
- May be drawn toward water, highways, railways, or familiar landmarks.
- May not understand the concept of danger or how to seek help from strangers.
- Are at significantly elevated risk of drowning. Children with autism are 160 times more likely to die from drowning than the general pediatric population.

WHO IS AT RISK?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Wandering affects approximately 49% of children with autism — nearly four times the rate of their neurotypical siblings. Many are non-verbal and cannot self-identify or call for help. Peak risk occurs between ages 4 and 7, though the behaviour can continue into adulthood. According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, 1 in 44 Canadian children and youth were identified with autism in 2023-24.

Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia

The Alzheimer's Association estimates 6 in 10 people with Alzheimer's disease will wander. A 2024 pan-Canadian study of over 1.5 million home care clients found that a dementia diagnosis was associated with 18 times greater prevalence of critical wandering. If a person with dementia who wanders is not found within 24 hours, up to half will suffer serious injury or death.

Individuals with intellectual disabilities, acquired brain injuries, or other cognitive conditions may also be at elevated risk of wandering, particularly in unfamiliar environments or during times of distress.

THE EMERGENCY ALERT GAP IN CANADA

Canada's Amber Alert system requires evidence of an abduction before it can be activated. A non-verbal child with autism who walks away from home does not qualify. A senior with Alzheimer's disease who leaves a care facility at night does not qualify. The result is a structural gap in Canada's public safety infrastructure.

What an Indigo Alert Would Provide

Indigo Alert Canada is working province by province to establish a new emergency alert category for vulnerable missing persons — one that does not require evidence of abduction. An Indigo Alert would activate the public emergency broadcast system, give first responders a recognized protocol, and give families the critical early-hours mobilization that saves lives.

References

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