



Safety for Persons with Autism

Excerpted from articles by Carolyn Gammicchia and Dennis Debbaudt in the "Advocate" (2nd Edition 2003), published by The Autism Society of America

When Carolyn Gammicchia, a police woman in Detroit, was a teenager, she watched in horror as her older brother with Asperger syndrome shuffled out of a jail cell, barefoot, and covered in a yellow plastic blanket. His face was bloodied and bruised. On the night he was arrested, his "crime" was having a seizure. This night changed her life.

What goes wrong when an individual with autism suffers such dehumanization at the hands of those who were supposed to protect him? Incidents usually begin innocently, but can grow dangerous if a person with autism becomes irate and some atypical behavior (e.g., over-reacting to touch) is interpreted as potentially harmful.

For Persons With Autism

According to Gammicchia, knowledge is the single most important factor in helping to prevent victimization of individuals with disabilities. It is critical that we teach people with autism about appropriate touch and the vocabulary for reporting crime, abuse, or victimization.

If faced with sudden police interaction, Debbaudt recommends

- remaining calm; do not attempt to flee or make sudden movements;
- carrying and presenting a personal information card with contact details and how best to communicate effectively;
- obtaining permission or signaling intentions before reaching into coat, pants pocket, or the car glove box;
- asking officer to contact an advocate, family member or friend; and
- invoking the right, if arrested, to remain silent and demanding representation by an attorney.

For Law Enforcement Officers

Autism communities across the country are sponsoring autism recognition workshops so that police officers and first responders can learn about unusual behaviors and characteristics that persons with autism present in varying combinations and degrees. Because each individual is unique in levels of independence, it is almost impossible to make generalizations.

Officers need to understand that most individuals with autism

- have basic verbal and nonverbal communication difficulties;
- may not recognize uniform, badge or police vehicle, nor understand what is expected of them;
- lack fear of danger, and
- have a high likelihood of victimization, as a result of bullying, teasing, or taunting.

Circumstances they should be prepared to identify immediately and deal with appropriately include:

- unusual behaviors and characteristics that draw attention and can be misinterpreted as evidence of drug abuse, psychosis, defiance, belligerence, or criminal behavior or activity;

- associated medical conditions such as seizure disorder, asthma, low muscle tone or use of medications,
- a fight or flight reaction;

Whenever a person with autism is taken into custody, it is critical for the first responder to follow procedure and document that (s)he has learned that the person has autism. Officers must know that the person with autism may:

- have extremely low muscle tone, high tolerance for pain, or mechanical asphyxia which could require alternate restraining techniques;
- present dilemmas in the interrogation room, including possibility of false confession or misleading statements;
- lack credibility as a witness and will require alternate victim-witness interview techniques; and/or
- need to be segregated from the general prison population and require an evaluation from a qualified health professional.

In these specially designed response training sessions, officers will learn better ways to avoid mistakes that could lead to lawsuits, negative media scrutiny, lost confidence from the community, morale problems, and lifelong trauma for all involved.

Recommended Steps

Families and law enforcement agencies must work together with local advocacy groups, to bring formal and informal training to local law enforcement and first response professionals. To schedule a law enforcement or school resource workshop, contact Dennis Debbaudt at <<http://debbaudt.topcities.com/>>, (772)398-9756 or ddpi@flash.net.

Encountering Autism, a video presented by Bill Davis, is a training aid for emergency responders, retailers, hospitals and others on how to communicate and interact with persons with autism. To order, go to <www.discountlearning.com>. Davis is a tireless crusader whose mission to educate the community about autism began soon after his own son's diagnosis.

School districts must make life skills training a priority for students with autism spectrum disorders. We must also empower our loved ones with autism by teaching them to understand the legal system to their fullest capabilities and to respond as appropriately as they are able when encountering law enforcement officials.

Back to Carolyn Gammicchia: as a mother of a child affected by autism, she and her husband, also a police officer, created LEAN (Law Enforcement Awareness Network) On Us - an e-mail discussion group geared toward first responder agencies and those serving the community. Join by sending an e-mail to TheLawEnforcementAwarenessNetwork@yahoo.com. See <<http://www.autism-society.org>> for full transcripts of the articles.