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## Wandering a major problem among children with autism: What you can do

by Carla Kemp, Senior Editor



**Editor's note:** For more coverage of the 2020 AAP Virtual National Conference & Exhibition, visit <https://www.aappublications.org/news/2020/08/21/nationalconference2020>.

For years, developmental behavioral pediatrician Paul H. Lipkin, M.D., FAAP, has been trying to draw attention



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to the dangers of wandering and elopement by children with autism.

Studies have shown that 25% to 50% of children with autism have attempted to elope, which is defined as leaving a supervised, safe space and being exposed to potential dangers such as open water, traffic and weather.

Yet, many pediatricians still are unaware of the problem.



"So here we have a condition, a circumstance occurring in children with autism that is resulting in many children every year having serious injury and death, yet pediatricians are doing very little about it because they lack the knowledge and familiarity with the issue and don't know the resources," said Dr. Lipkin, director of medical outpatient services at Kennedy Krieger Institute and associate professor of pediatrics at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

Dr. Lipkin hopes to change that during a session titled "The Dangers of Autism: Safety and the Wandering Child," which can be accessed [via the virtual platform](#) through Jan. 31, 2021.

"I'm hoping pediatricians who are interested in autism or are interested in making sure that children with developmental problems in their practice remain healthy will be interested in learning more about this and what they can do," he said.

In a 2011 [survey](#) by the Interactive Autism Network, nearly half of parents said their child had attempted to elope at least once after age 4. Among those who went missing, 24% were at risk of drowning, and 65% were in danger of traffic injury.

When Dr. Lipkin became director of the network in 2013, wandering remained an issue with serious consequences for children - and it still is a problem today.

"Pediatricians have been increasingly tuned in to diagnosing and managing autism spectrum disorder in their practices, but they still might not be aware of the lifelong management issues for children with this disorder," said Dr. Lipkin, a member and past chair of the AAP Council on Children with Disabilities and member of Section on Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics. "Being tuned in and taking action to prevent wandering and elopement fits in the role of the general pediatrician in providing preventive care."

During the session, Dr. Lipkin discusses the nature of the problem and provides strategies and resources, including the National Autism Association's [Big Red Safety Box](#), that pediatricians can share with parents to help prevent injuries and death.

As he was preparing his talk, he said he was striving to go beyond the typical lecture format.



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"I want to bring personal stories and personal information to it," he said. "... My intent is for it to be an appeal to people's hearts to understand the problem and to absorb it as something important that they should latch on to."