MISINTERPRETED BEHAVIORS

Many individuals on the autism spectrum do not understand the rules and boundaries of social behavior. Many respond impulsively to their feelings without regard to certain social mores. Others react inappropriately as a result of sensory regulation problems. These individuals can become overstimulated and may have what appears to be an unprovoked “meltdown.” Because of these and other symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), it is possible for individuals to find themselves in trouble with the law without any awareness of having done something wrong or without any understanding of what they did that got them into trouble.

Individuals on the autism spectrum may exhibit behaviors that can be misinterpreted by others. Consider these situations:

- An individual may not understand personal boundaries and personal space issues. An autistic teenage boy likes a girl. He has a feeling and an urge to go over, reach out, and touch her inappropriately. The girl is frightened and reports the incident to the authorities.
- An autistic individual, not knowing how to respond appropriately to a police or other safety officer, runs when asked something as simple as his name. The police officer assumes the individual is guilty of something or, at the very least, acting disrespectfully. The teenager is wrestled to the ground, cuffed, and brought to the police station.
- An autistic individual is in a shop, handling the merchandise. The store owner doesn’t like the way the individual is handling the item and tells him or her to leave the store. The individual leaves the store, still holding the item (without having paid for it). This is shoplifting.
- In an effort to make a friend, the autistic individual follows a mean-spirited suggestion of a “friend” to do something hurtful to another. For example, a student is egged on by a group to take someone’s backpack. In addition to
being a form of bullying, the backpack has also been stolen.

In any of these incidents, the individual on the autism spectrum may be reported to the police, where he or she will have to deal with the law enforcement system. The law enforcement system is not always understanding of and sympathetic to disability and may not be aware that these behaviors are not a choice, but rather a manifestation of the individual’s disability.

A supportive community needs to be vigilant about making sure that individuals on the autism spectrum are as knowledgeable as possible about socially appropriate behavior. However, it is impossible to be prepared for every eventuality. Help promote positive interactions by:

- Registering with your local police department. Many police precincts have forms to complete that allow families or individuals to describe behaviors, ways to communicate, and ideas to help calm the individual.
- Using a medical identification bracelet to alert law enforcement and emergency personnel that the individual has a disability.
- Carrying a card in your wallet (or the wallet of the autistic individual). Often, individuals on the autism spectrum may be unable to speak for themselves in a stressful situation. The card should describe that the individual is autistic and how autism may affect the individual’s behavior.
- Taking advantage of some of the available personal tracking devices to stay safe.

Police and other public safety officers in many cities have undergone specialized trainings about ASD and other disabilities. Nonetheless, not every safety officer has the same sensitivity and not every officer has participated in the training. It is always important to prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

Related Articles:

- Sensory Processing and Sensory Integration in Individuals with ASD
- Friendship, Teenagers, and ASD
- Bullying

Additional Resources:

- Autism Safety Project, from Autism Speaks®
- Safety Products, from Autism Speaks®
Asperger Syndrome in the Criminal Justice System
Red Safety Box Program
premise_alert_form (For PA)

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