

A Message from
ILLINOIS ATTORNEY GENERAL
LISA MADIGAN



As a law enforcement officer, you have pledged yourself to ensuring the safety of Illinois residents. While carrying out this important work, you may be faced with unique issues when interacting with people with autism.

People with autism are seven times more likely than the general population to have contact with law enforcement. ⁱ These encounters may be more prevalent among people with autism for several reasons.

Individuals with autism may, due to sensory over-stimulation or other factors, become agitated and engage in escalated behavior that causes someone to contact the police. Some individuals with autism are prone to wandering and may be attracted to potentially dangerous locations.

People with autism are also at greater risk for victimization. In fact, children with autism are seven times more likely to be abused and neglected than their peers without disabilities. ⁱⁱ

I commend you for your continued work to safeguard Illinoisans and hope that you find the information in this brochure helpful as you address crimes involving people with autism.

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Autism

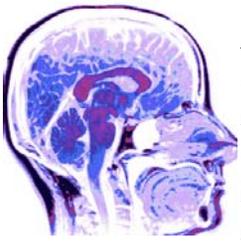
Autism

"to protect and to serve"

**Law Enforcement Guide
to Interacting with
People with Autism**



LISA MADIGAN
Illinois Attorney General



What is Autism?

Autism is a developmental disability that affects communication, social interaction, and decision-making skills. Autism is a spectrum disorder, which means that there is a wide variety in levels of functioning among individuals with this disability. In recent years, the incidence of autism has risen at a staggering rate – from 1 in 2,500 births in the late 1990s to 1 in 166 births today. ⁱⁱⁱ

Identifying Autism

While an officer cannot be expected to diagnose autism, understanding the common characteristics of autism may help you respond to an incident involving someone with this disability. While each person with autism is different, common characteristics include:

- Limited or no ability to speak
- Lack of eye contact
- Insistence on sameness
- Obsessive attachment to objects
- Self-stimulating behavior including hand flapping, body rocking, or attachment to objects
- Inappropriate behavior, such as laughing during a serious situation
- No fear of danger
- Over- or under-sensitivity to pain
- Tantrums or escalated behavior for no apparent reason
- Preference to be alone ^{iv}

Responding to a Call

To ensure the safety of all individuals involved, police officers responding to a situation involving someone with autism should:

- Make sure the person is unarmed and maintain a safe distance.
- Model the behavior you want the person to display.
- Use a quiet non-threatening voice.
- Use simple language.
- Avoid touching, if possible.
- Allow for delayed response.
- Turn off lights and sirens, if possible.
- Talk to people who know the person with autism, such as caregivers.
- Allow an agitated individual with autism to calm down without your intervention, if possible, and give them extra personal space. ^v

Restraint

If you must restrain a person with autism, consider the following tips to maintain safety for both yourself and the person being arrested:

- Avoid positional asphyxia. People with autism may have a difficult time supporting their airways during restraint due to underdeveloped chest muscles. Officers should turn the person on their side to ensure normal breathing.
- Keep in mind that many people with autism are prone to seizures.
- Be prepared for resistance. People with autism may not understand the futility of struggling even when they are restrained. Speak and act in a calm manner to encourage de-escalation. ^{vi}

Interviews

Whether you are interviewing a person with autism as a victim, witness, or offender, you should use the following tips to ensure a successful interview:

- Allow plenty of time.
- Avoid leading questions.
- Develop an understanding of the person's communication style before asking more critical questions.
- Plan questioning based on ability level.
- Do not take a lack of eye contact, the changing of subjects, or answers that are vague, evasive, or blunt as evidence of guilt.
- Ask questions that rely on narrative responses. "Yes" or "no" responses could be unreliable. ^{vii}

ⁱ Dennis Debbaudt, *Contact with Individuals with Autism*, The FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin (April 2001).

ⁱⁱ American Psychological Association, *Resolution on the Maltreatment of Children with Disabilities* (February 2003), available at www.apa.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ Center for Disease Control, *How Common is Autism Spectrum Disorder?*, available at www.cdc.gov.

^{iv} Autism Society of America, *Defining Autism*, available at www.autism-society.org.

^v Dennis Debbaudt, *Autism & Law Enforcement Roll Call Briefing Handout* (2005).

^{vi} Dennis Debbaudt, *Autism, Advocates, and Law Enforcement Professionals* 26-27 (2002).

^{vii} *Id.* at 44-59.