

Dear Legislators:

Elopement is one of the most difficult behaviors for school personnel to manage. Many children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) have this behavior (some studies report as many as half Occurrence and Family Impact of Elopement in Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders - PMC), which involves leaving a safe location (home, school classroom, etc) abruptly with no thought to safety. Restraints (locking children in their room, for example) are dangerous and never appropriate and yet some families resort to them out of desperation so they can sleep or attend to the needs of another child. Teachers work to learn strategies - such as blocking a doorway with one's own body without touching the student - that work when children are small but may be useless when they grow to be taller and stronger than the teacher.

Parents and teachers need to work together to keep children safe and if possible, to teach them not to elope. It can take years to work on this behavior, and some people with ASD will be elopement risks for their entire lives. In order to try to teach a child not to elope, the behavior must be documented and discussed as part of the child's Individual Education Plan, IEP, which under special education law IDEA outlines the specific services and supports a child may receive while in school.

Elopement may require a child to have 1:1, or even 2:1 (for an older child) support at school in order to safely maintain the child in the classroom. This is expensive, and it is understandable that school systems will want to avoid this level of service unless necessary. This is a conflict of interest that may prevent the behavior being mentioned to parents.

Many parents report feeling shame around the fact that they cannot manage to keep their child safely at home or safely with them while in the community. This is one reason they do not mention the behavior to their child's teacher.

This mutual silence can be deadly, as mentioned. Requiring schools and daycare centers to record and report episodes of elopement is a basic first step in safeguarding children now and effectively planning for their future.

Doreen Engel