

Contact with Individuals with Autism Effective Resolutions

By DENNIS DEBBAUDT and
DARLA ROTHMAN, Ph.D.

In contemporary 21st century law enforcement, police managers have become increasingly proactive in their efforts to develop officer awareness of volatile circumstances and situations. They want their officers to learn to properly handle these situations not only for the safety of the officers and citizens involved, but also to avoid future potential litigation. Because today's work force is increasingly diverse, new laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, ensure that persons with developmental disabilities remain a part of that diversity.

Recent research concluded that the developmentally disabled are approximately seven times more likely to come in contact with law enforcement than others.¹ In light of this conclusion, law enforcement officers should receive training to prepare to evaluate information and



physical cues or body language that may indicate the person they come in contact with has autism. Because autism affects every sector of society, officers first must understand the condition. Second, they must learn to apply certain techniques in the initial contact or interview, which may increase the probability of appropriate responses and lead to a successful outcome of the encounter.

What is Autism?

Autism is a developmental disability that manifests itself within the first 3 years of a child's life. While some individuals with autism have mental retardation, autism is not retardation. It is a broad spectrum neurological disorder, which presents itself in a variety of symptoms that affects individuals differently. Estimates of persons having some form of autism exceed

500,000 nationally, becoming the third most common developmental disability in the United States.² Autism affects the normal development of the brain relating to social and communicative interaction. Individuals with autism have difficulty appropriately communicating with, or relating to, others.

When responding to a call that involves a person with autism, officers may face a situation that will challenge the training, instincts, and professional conduct of even the most experienced police veteran. Is the individual intoxicated? On narcotics? Or is the person developmentally disabled?

Where are Individuals with Autism Usually Found?

Because approximately 80 percent of patrol responses do not involve criminal activity, contact with individuals with autism may occur anywhere in the community.³ Because autism affects each individual differently, many people with autism often function well in society—they may have regular employment in a supervised or unsupervised workplace, and may live in traditional or assisted living homes. Therefore, the initial call for assistance to law enforcement may first appear as a domestic disturbance; however, upon arrival, the officers may receive information or otherwise determine that the subject is affected with autism and has reacted inappropriately to some event. The initial contact may be predicated by a request for medical assistance. Reports estimate that as many as 25 percent of individuals with autism will have seizures by the age of 21.⁴ Other calls may

involve complaints of strange behavior, such as being in an unfamiliar place or just wandering around or doing unusual things. Autistic persons have not developed the social awareness usually expected by others in the community. Law enforcement must not forget the characteristics of individuals with autism when responding to calls. For example, if they receive a call for assistance involving a stranger sitting on a porch swing or rocking chair or looking into the windows of a house, it may not indicate a person on drugs or a potential burglar, but rather an individual with autism who just wanted to self-stimulate through rhythmic motion or to see what was inside the house. In another example, a complaint from a store owner of a person rearranging items or display objects may not be a shoplifter, but, instead, an autistic individual engaging in the obsessive-compulsive

behavior of “ordering” those items in some sequence that other individuals may not notice.

While responding officers always must consider their own safety, as well as that of others, in such circumstances, their presence may cause further inappropriate responses by an autistic individual. Persons with autism do not know the implications of their behavior—they do not understand the consequences of their actions, especially aggressive actions. An officer’s approach may cause people with this condition to flee, sometimes failing to respond to an order to stop. Other autistic individuals may react by dropping to the floor or ground and rocking back and forth, averting eye contact with the officer. Officers should not interpret an autistic individual’s failure to respond to orders or questions as a lack of cooperation or as a reason for increased force.



Mr. Debbaudt heads a private detective agency and trains police officers nationwide on recognizing and responding to persons with autism.



Dr. Darla Rothman is a curriculum specialist and certified instructor with the Maryland Police and Correctional Training Commissions.

Although autistic individuals are usually self-abusing, they may escalate into tantrum-like behavior (e.g., screaming, pushing, kicking, hitting) from fear, frustration, or confusion. They can not conceptualize meanness or acts of purposeful injury to others. They just want the circumstances to change but do not know how to implement that change. This presents an obvious dilemma to responding officers.

What are Some Common Signs of Autism?

In the case of autism, there are no external indicators. Individuals with autism look like any other person; however, visual cues exist that an observant officer can use to help indicate they are dealing with an autistic individual. These often subtle cues may depend on the functionality level of the autistic person. Recognition of the behavioral symptoms of autism and the techniques of approach can reduce the risk factors of such encounters. These risks include the physical safety of the officers and of the individual with autism, as well as the resulting litigation from inappropriate responses to the incident by the officers.

Among the most difficult assistance calls are those that concern the welfare of children. When an officer responds to the scene of a complaint of possible child abuse and observes an adult wrestling with a screaming, struggling, red-faced child, the officer must use split-second judgment. Is this a possible kidnaping? Is this a blatant case of child abuse? Or could it be an extremely painful episode for the parent of a child with special needs

who, for whatever reason, is out of control? While the officer has a responsibility to resolve the call, patience and understanding will help reduce the stress for all involved, including the child who would be further traumatized if the officer acts aggressively against the parent.

One characteristic of autistic individuals, especially children, is their propensity to run. They do not believe that they are running away, but possibly just returning to a favorite place or going back to look at something attractive. They may not be lost and may be very content where they are; however, to the general public, unattended children are cause for concern.

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Police unwittingly may charge parents of autistic children with endangerment, which forces them to attend hearings to retrieve their bewildered children from protective services. Moreover, a child found alone may not respond to an officer's efforts and consolation because they are quite content to stay where the officer found them. Individuals with autism, particularly children, usually cannot process multiple stimuli at one time. Brights lights, sirens, K-9 partners,

different smells, loud voices, or attempts at consolation may push an individual with autism to react in a way that may make it impossible to regain their attention and may jeopardize the safety of those involved in the incident. For example, an autistic person may abruptly flee into busy traffic, because they do not realize the inherent risk in that act.

What is an Appropriate Response?

Law enforcement officers are trained to handle unexpected situations they may encounter on routine calls. By understanding the nature of autism, responding officers can manage calls involving individuals with this condition more effectively. Officers can use the acronym AUTISM to help them remember the methodology they should use when dealing with individuals with autism. They should—

Approach the person in a quiet, non-threatening manner. Because autistic persons may be hypersensitive to stimuli, officers should attempt to avoid quick motions and gestures that an autistic person may perceive, even remotely, as threatening.

Understand that touching the autistic person may cause a protective “fight or flight” reaction. Officers should never touch an autistic person on the shoulders or near the face. Autistic hypersensitivity includes being touched and even extends to invasions of their personal space.

Talk to the person in a moderate and calm voice. Although officers may have to repeat their directions or questions several times, they should be patient and wait for

answers. Speaking loudly will not help and may even be viewed as threatening.

Instructions should be simple and direct with no use of slang. An autistic person will take an officer's statements literally. "Do you think that's cool?" or "Up against the wall!" probably will cause confusion and result in an inappropriate or unexpected response. Officers should use specific commands, such as, "stand up" or "go to the car, now" to reduce the chance of confusion.

Seek all indicators to evaluate the situation as it unfolds.

Maintain a safe distance until any inappropriate behaviors lessen, but remain alert to the possibility of outbursts or impulsive acts.

What If a Crime Has Been Committed?

If officers take an individual into custody and even remotely suspect that the person may be developmentally disabled or autistic, to reduce the risk of abuse, injury, or both, they should segregate the individual and never place them in the general incarcerated population before a mental health professional can evaluate them. Once professionals have determined that the individual is developmentally disabled, officers should contact the prosecutor's office for further advice or directions.

Oftentimes, individuals with autism confess to crimes they did not commit because of their desire to please and willingness to accept an authority figure's version of events, even if untrue, or because of their inappropriate responses or interpretations to questions from the

Indicators that an Individual May Be Autistic:⁵
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• the individual actively may avoid eye contact even if you change your location to be in the person's line of sight;• the individual may be nonverbal (50 percent of autistic persons do not speak) or may have limited vocabulary and point or use gestures;• the individual may speak in monotone without expected inflections;• the individual may repeat exactly what the officer says;• the individual may engage in repetitive physical actions, such as hand flapping, finger flicking, or twirling objects;• the individual may rock back and forth, pace, or engage in self-abuse (temper tantrums are an expected response to fear, confusion, or frustration as an effort to stop the stimuli);• the individual may have a pigeon-toed gait or running style;• the individual may not respond to verbal commands or sounds;• the individual may not understand body language or recognize command presence, or a police uniform;• the individual may be dressed inappropriately for the weather, such as a tee shirt and shorts in winter;• the individual may not ask for help or show any indications of pain, even though injury seems apparent; and,• the individual may wear medical alert tags or possess other written material indicating their autistic condition.

interviewer. This response often results from "conditioning" they received throughout their lives by caregivers.

The interviewer must ask specific questions toward what information is sought and avoid ambiguity. For example, if the interviewer asks, "Did you take the money?" the person with autism most probably will say "Yes," whether or not the individual actually took it. Investigators should ask a more

clear question, such as, "What did you do?" allowing time for the individual to provide a response. If the investigator asks, "Were you with your family or John?" the autistic person may respond, "John" because that was the last choice of the sequence. If the investigator asked the question again, but reversing the order, the autistic person may answer, "my family" for the same reason. Neither may be correct. Investigators should ask a more specific

question such as, "Who were you with?" thus reducing the influence of suggestion to the subject.

Conclusion

As the American work force becomes more diverse and requires more professional law enforcement, officers in the 21st century will confront situations that demand high levels of performance and insight resulting from more comprehensive training. Dealing with individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities requires officers to have additional training to handle these situations. When responding to calls for assistance involving

individuals who are autistic, education, perception, and understanding can help officers avoid situations that can become unpleasant or even dangerous. Remembering the adage that no call is "routine" will help ensure that the resourceful officer will keep their composure and evaluate the sensory data or cues on the scene. This behavior will resolve the incident in the best spirit of their duty to protect the public, especially those who cannot protect themselves. ♦

Endnotes

¹ K. Curry, M. Posluszny, and S. Kraska, "Training Criminal Justice personnel to

Recognize Offenders with Disabilities," Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services News in Print, (Winter 1993).

² The Autism Society of America, <http://www.autism-society.org>; accessed December 12, 2000.

³ Based on author research and survey of law enforcement agencies.

⁴ Supra note 2.

⁵ D. Debbaudt, (handout developed for the Wayne County, Michigan, Workshop Series for Trainers and Officers of Law Enforcement), September 21, 1996.

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