

December 21, 2007

The New York Times

# Helping Police Officers Understand the Autistic

By [TINA KELLEY](#)

BRICK TOWNSHIP, N.J. — An autistic boy is discovered standing in the middle of a busy road, on his way to the beach. A young girl with autism outsmarts a number of locks, leaves the house before her mother wakes up and is found, naked but alive, in a neighbor's pool.

At a recent training for police officers here, both cases illustrated the often delicate task of dealing with people who suffer from autism, a devastating neurological disorder that often strikes in childhood and that impairs one's ability to communicate and to relate to others.

In the training, the officers were taught that turning off flashing lights and sirens on a police car could make the difference between a peaceful or chaotic encounter, and that if they asked someone with autism if they wanted to waive their rights, they might find that the person waved back at them.

People with developmental disabilities, including autism, have up to seven times more contact with law enforcement officers than others, according to an article in the [F.B.I. Law Enforcement Bulletin](#) in April 2001.

A co-author of the article, Dennis Debbaudt, who is also the author of "Autism, Advocates and Law Enforcement Professionals," led the training. He noted that a 2007 study by the federal [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) showed that 1 in 150 children in New Jersey have received a diagnosis of autism, a rate 15 times higher than previous estimates and among the highest in the country.

But when Mr. Debbaudt asked whether any of the police officers, from departments throughout New Jersey, had received training on autism, either at police academies or on the job, only a few raised their hands.

The training, sponsored by Parents of Autistic Children, a nonprofit service group based in Hazlet, featured videos, lectures and the personal accounts of parents whose children have a form of autism. Among them were Mr. Debbaudt and Gary Weitzen, director of the parents' group, whose son was the one found in the middle of the road, headed for the beach.

Mr. Debbaudt told the officers that they should understand autism “for the safety of others, and so you can go home safe to your families, so you can make the best use of your time and resources, enhance your communication skills and avoid litigation.”

He cited the case of Calvin Champion Jr., a 32-year-old man with autism who died in 2000 after Nashville police officers used pepper spray on him and subdued him. His family filed a federal lawsuit against the police and the social service agency caring for him, and was awarded \$4.4 million.

Mr. Debbaudt said he had heard of 6 to 12 cases each year in which people with autism are harmed, hit with a stun gun or killed by law enforcement officials.

The officers were told to take plenty of time and be calm when interviewing autistic people. Some are crime victims, some are suspects, but the majority who come to the attention of the police have wandered away from their caregivers, often without an understanding of the dangers of traffic or open water, which often attracts them. In fact, drowning is a leading cause of death for people with autism, Mr. Debbaudt said.

People with autism may be very afraid of or very drawn to police dogs, Mr. Debbaudt said. They may be attracted to an officer's badge and try to grab it, and they may panic if their routines are broken, if their favorite objects are taken from them, or if surrounding sights, sounds and smells overwhelm them.

Similar training sessions have been offered around the country. Autism Speaks, a nonprofit advocacy and fund-raising group, worked with the Chicago Police Department last spring, and it is working on a safety tool kit for all first responders, said Lisa Goring, director of family services for the group.

“We’ve heard from families as well as from professionals that they just need more instruction, certainly in terms of first responders understanding that a person with autism may not respond appropriately or may not respond at all when given a command,” she said.

A bill cosponsored by State Senator Loretta Weinberg would require autism awareness programs statewide for emergency medical technicians, police officers and firefighters. The bill was passed by the Assembly in March, and awaits action in the State Senate.

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company