



A PARENT GUIDE FOR

# Talking to Kids with Autism about Safety and the Police



Developmental Pediatrics  
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS



Children's Hospital Colorado



JFK Partners  
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO  
ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

*The purpose of the parent resource guide and social story are to provide resources for families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder navigating police interactions. The parent guide and social story are meant to be used together. The resource guide and the social story are meant to be read with your child as often as needed.*

This resource guide has several sections:

- 1 | Intro for parents and caregivers**
- 2 | Safety products and resources**
- 3 | Books and websites**
- 4 | Parent support groups**
- 5 | Materials for your child**

Disclaimer: The University of Colorado, Department of Pediatrics, JFK Partners and Children's Hospital Colorado created this Parent Resource Guide for families as a reference tool. Neither the University of Colorado, nor Children's Hospital Colorado endorses or claims to have personal knowledge of the abilities of all of those individuals or organizations listed as resources. The resources listed in these pages are not intended as a recommendation, referral, or endorsement of any resource or as a tool for verifying the credentials, qualifications, or abilities of any organization, product or professional. Users are urged to use independent judgment and request references when considering any resource associated with diagnosis or treatment of autism, or the provision of services related to autism.

# Intro for parents and caregivers

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*The authors of the parent resource guide and social story recognize that this project focuses on Black and Brown parents and youth. This was purposeful. We fully acknowledge that Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other people of color have different histories and experiences with the police. Our hope is that this resource can be useful for many different people with acknowledgement that there is also a need for more specific resources for Brown, Indigenous, Latinx and other communities of color.*

## **Think about your own experiences, values, and opinions about the police.**

What message do you want your child to hear? How may your experiences impact how you talk with your child about the police?

## **Look over the materials before sharing them with your child.**

This guide has many resources for parents and caregivers of children with ASD who may need support about police safety. Some resources may be appropriate for your child while others may not. You can also preview many books through YouTube or libraries before buying or reading them to your child.

## **Think about your child's skills right now as well as what skills your child still needs to learn.**

It can be useful to help think about where your child's strengths and challenges are when choosing resources and starting this conversation. For instance, does your child know their diagnosis? Are they able to use coping strategies, such as deep breathing, when faced with a stressful situation? It can be important to practice using these skills and having a plan if a stressful situation comes up.

## **Picking the right time to talk to your child.**

This conversation will likely happen over time as your child grows up. Ideally, conversations around police safety start early, before an unexpected encounter happens. It is often helpful to think about what information your child needs in the moment given their own unique needs.

## **Talking about police by skill level and age.**

Find more information on talking to children about racism and social justice in the following two articles on Children's Hospital Colorado's website:

- "Talking About Racism with Kids"
- "Talking About Racism with your Children: Starting the Conversation"

## **People who are less verbal.**

- Use visuals to support conversations, such as social stories and comic strip conversations. These visuals describe what to expect in a situation using pictures and words. See below for an example of a social story.
- Use real examples and simpler language to describe abstract concepts.
- Repeating conversations and skills or doing "role plays" is helpful. Have shorter conversations and repeat every so often.

# Safety products & resources

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*Resources and services often differ widely between counties and states and change over time. We suggest starting the process of finding relevant resources for your family and watching for changes in programming in your specific area.*

## SMART911

This program allows people to register phone numbers with important information (such as diagnoses, medical conditions, allergies, and medicines), which are then automatically displayed when that phone number places an emergency call. More information can be found at [smart911.com](https://smart911.com).

## CIT officers

When calling 911, ask if a Crisis Intervention Trained Officer (CIT) can be there due to your child having ASD or a mental health diagnosis. More information can be found at [citac.co/about](https://citac.co/about).

## Safety Planning

Safety.com has guidelines and tips that can be useful in thinking about when drafting a safety plan for your child with ASD. More information can be found at [safety.com/autism-safety](https://safety.com/autism-safety).

## Big Red Safety Box

The Big Red Safety Box from the National Autism Association is a free toolkit that offers preventative safety tools for people with ASD. This includes safety window clings for homes and cars, an ID bracelet and safety wristband. More information can be found at [nationalautismassociation.org/big-red-safety-box](https://nationalautismassociation.org/big-red-safety-box).

## Safety Products & Services

AutismSpeaks has made a large list of resources to get window decals, ID cards, and other safety products for children with ASD. Many of these resources are free or low cost. More information can be found at [autismspeaks.org/safety-products-and-services](https://autismspeaks.org/safety-products-and-services).

# Books and websites

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## Books for kids about racial injustice and police

- *Mama, Did you Hear the News?* by Sanya Whittaker Gragg (ages 5-10)
- *Something Happened in Our Town*, by Marianne Celano, PhD, Marietta Collins, PhD, and Ann Hazard, PhD (ages 4 to 8; also available to read online at [apa.org](https://apa.org))
- The American Psychological Association has also made a list of updated resources for children, caretakers, and teachers to talk about diversity and social justice, available at [apa.org](https://apa.org).

## Social Stories

- *Autism & The Police: A Book for Black and Brown Kids*
- Teachers Pay Teachers offers many social stories at low cost about social justice, police interactions, and safety. These stories may be found at [teacherspayteachers.com](https://teacherspayteachers.com) by searching "social stories police."

# Crisis plans

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## What is a crisis plan?

A crisis plan is a written (printed) outline of information to help you and others be ready in case your child has a crisis and interacts with police. Crisis plans are very helpful, especially if your child wanders, has any aggressive behaviors or runs away.

## Things to add in your crisis plan

- Important personal information, including your child's:
  - Name
  - Age
  - Recent picture
  - List of any medicines
  - Home address
  - Important phone numbers and whether they might have a cellphone with them
  - Details about their ability to respond in a crisis and possible triggers
- Be sure to include if your child carries ID with contact information on their person.
- Writing down signs that are less worrisome or that things are getting better (pacing, flapping, humming) and signs that are more worrisome or that things are getting worse (covering ears, louder more distressed vocalizations), whatever those may be.
- Include actions that are helpful (for example: talk in a calm voice, turn off sirens, don't use touch) or may make the situation worse, especially during police intervention (such as physical contact, loud voices, drawn weapons).
- Include any known locations or people that your child tends to go to when they are upset.
- Think about when it may be useful or necessary to call the police.
- Outline what is useful for your child and be sure to think of back-up plans.

**Keep information specific and brief.** It may be useful to include a script of what to say about your child if you must call police. Think about who needs to have this information. A few options are:

- Police departments in your neighborhood or other places you go
- Advocates
- School contacts
- Therapists
- Friends or family members
- Neighbors

It may also be helpful to keep copies in personal cars or in your home for travel or unexpected events.

**Practice.** Think about practicing regularly with others in your family to problem solve issues when you are not in crisis. This will make your crisis plan stronger.

**Keep the crisis plan updated and go over it often.** Behaviors, triggers, and important information can change. Find a time to review and update your child's plan often. Be sure to replace old copies that others may have as well.

# Familiarizing your child with local police

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## How to connect with local police

Some families may find value in familiarizing their child with their local law enforcement agencies. This may be especially helpful for children who wander, elope (run away), or have challenging behaviors that have required police involvement in the past. However, we recognize that this may not be a good fit for all families. If contacting local law enforcement is not a good fit for your family, consider asking school, therapists, or other supports for suggestions and steps in decision-making in your plan to keep your child safe.

- Do a search to find your local police non-emergency number. Write it here: \_\_\_\_\_
- Set up a visit: This may vary widely based on where you live and the police departments that are in your area.
- Call the non-emergency number or information line for your nearest police office for more information.
- Visit your local police agency's website about specific services and programs that may be helpful.
- Clarify your needs. Different children need different things. Some common requests may include:
  - Increasing positive experiences with the police. Many police offices offer tours or have schedules of community events that may be useful.
  - Making a response plan. Some children have a higher chance of encountering police. You can call CIT officers (see above) if available or a community liaison at your local police department.
  - Thinking about who else needs this information, such as school resource officers, sheriff's officers, local security offices, and so on.

## Building the relationship:

As your child grows up, their needs change. It can be useful to do a visit each year around your child's birthday to help remind you to update this information. This helps any new officers get to know your child and have updated information (for example: medicine changes, updated pictures, etc.). Again, think about if there are other offices to share this information with each year.

# Black parent support groups

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There are many organizations that support Black families who have children with ASD, such as:

- The Color of Autism: [thecolorofautism.org](http://thecolorofautism.org)
- The Hatching Hope Foundation: [hatchinghope.org](http://hatchinghope.org)
- Autism in Black: [autisminblack.org](http://autisminblack.org)

# Other resources

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The University of Cincinnati has compiled a guide for individuals with developmental disabilities in interacting with the police that may be useful for some families. “A Guide to Interacting with Police for Individuals with Intellectual/developmental disabilities” may be found online at [ucucedd.org](http://ucucedd.org).

**Movies:** Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia has made a movie and workshop about police safety for people with ASD. “Be Safe, Not Sorry” may be found at [besafethemovie.com](http://besafethemovie.com).

**Virtual Reality:** Floreo has made a virtual reality platform that gives people a chance to practice interactions with police that can be found at [floreotech.com](http://floreotech.com).

The National Institute of Health (NIH) has made a free activity book for Black families for supporting their children in times of crisis. “An Activity Book for African Families: Helping Children Cope with Crisis” can be found at [nichd.nih.gov](http://nichd.nih.gov).

**Police training:** Autism Risk & Safety Management gives several materials for training police officers in supporting people with ASD. These resources can be found at [autismriskmanagement.com](http://autismriskmanagement.com).

This product, as well as the social story “Autism and the Police: A Book for Black and Brown Kids”, were carefully and mindfully crafted through partnerships between Developmental Pediatrics at Children’s Hospital Colorado and numerous parents, police, and other varied partners. Our team within Developmental Pediatrics consisted of Lindsey DeVries, PhD; Beth Bennett, PhD; Sara Mattie, LCSW; Caitlin Middleton, PhD; and Kendal Lattanzi MA, SLP-CCC. Additional thanks to Kendal Lattanzi for her artistic talents and illustrations. Of course, this project would not be possible without the contributions of our team members:

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