PFA Tips

How to Interact with Police

This article has two sections: one for individuals with autism or other intellectual/developmental disability, and one for the caregivers.

HOW TO INTERACT WITH POLICE:
IF YOU HAVE AUTISM OR OTHER INTELLECTUAL/DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY

There aren't "special" rules for individuals that may have a disability when it comes to how you should interact with a police officer. We are all expected to obey the law and there are rules that everyone should follow when in the presence of police. Following these rules can help make sure both you and the officer stay safe.

Show your hands

You always want to let a police officer see your hands, otherwise she may be concerned that you are hiding a weapon. You may have an item in your pocket that helps you feel calm – like a fidget – but NEVER put your hands in your pocket when you are approached by an officer. Explain that you are feeling stressed and your calming item is in your pocket and ask if you may reach into your pocket to get it.

Stay in place

Running away might make a police officer think you have done something wrong, even if you haven't. Just stay where you are and allow the officer to come and talk to you, or to continue doing his job.

Never touch a police officer

If you try to touch any part of a police officer's uniform, the officer may think you are grabbing for her gun, badge, or that you are attempting to hurt her. If the police think you are trying to hurt them, they may put you in handcuffs to keep themselves safe.

No hugging

If you really love police, offer a handshake. If you really, really want to hug an officer, ALWAYS ask first.

Don't stand so close

Sometimes it may be hard to judge how far apart you are standing from another person. But that can get you into trouble if you stand too close to an officer. She may mistakenly think that you want to pick a fight with her, or worry that you want to grab something from her belt. If you aren't sure if your distance is ok, then ask.

Never touch a police officer's dog

Police officers' dogs, also known as K9s, are actual police and are working when they are in uniform. They are police officers too, so just like all other officers, you may not touch them.

It's ok to ask someone if they are law enforcement

Some police uniforms have light blue shirts and dark blue pants, some are all dark blue, some are all black, some are brown, and some police don't wear a uniform at all – just regular clothes. With so many different looks it can be confusing. So if you aren't sure, it's always ok to ask someone if they are police. All police carry a badge AND have a police identification card that has their picture, like a driver's license.

Disclose your diagnosis

You may have difficulty looking at someone's face during a conversation, may not respond quickly to instructions, or you may not be able to tolerate the lights and sirens from the police cars. If a police officer understands these difficulties you may have, she will have an understanding of the accommodations you may need. Items you could show an officer include a medical alert bracelet or a disability disclosure card.

It's ok to say you don't understand or don't know

It's understandable to want to please



someone. So we might be tempted to answer a police officer's question even if we don't understand what we're being asked. Or we might provide information that isn't correct, just so we can feel like we've responded. But we're not helping if we aren't offering good information. Or worse, the police may mistake our attempts at being helpful as outright lying to cover up something. And that can get us into trouble. Police would prefer that if we don't understand what they are asking, or if we truly don't know an answer, that we tell them.

Police are moms, dads, and other regular people too

Police officers have regular lives outside of their jobs just like you have different interests and activities outside of school or your job. And, just like you, they want to have friends. So if you see an officer out in the community, it's ok to say hello, ask them how their day is, and introduce yourself. You may just make a new friend.

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HOW TO INTERACT WITH POLICE:

IF YOU ARE A CAREGIVER

Face it, if the police have been called to the scene, then something "not so routine" is happening. As a caregiver to an individual with autism or other intellectual/developmental disability, how can you help make this a better interaction?

Allow the individual to be addressed

Police are being taught to address the individual with autism or other intellectual/developmental disabilities rather than assume that a caregiver needs to speak on the person's behalf. This does not mean that the police will not still want to speak with you, just that they will also want to hear from the individual. If the individual does not use verbal communication, please let the officer know which method of communication is most effective for the person.

Be clear you are there to help

In a crisis situation, your presence could be mistaken as someone attempting to obstruct an officer's efforts. Identify your role as a caregiver and offer assistance. You may also request to be present during an interview.

Offer up triggers and passions

You may be the only person on a scene with the key to end someone's meltdown or crisis. The person's passion may be the redirection tool that can turn a situation around. Providing a list of a person's triggers can help prevent an officer from creating a meltdown situation. If your loved one is missing and police are called, knowing the person's passions can assist the officers in their search.

The truth is necessary

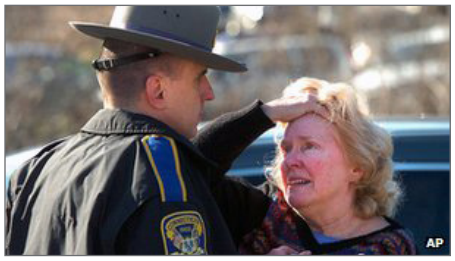
As parents we might alter the truth for different reasons; fear we'll look like bad parents, or fear we'll portray our loved one in a bad light. But police absolutely need the truth. If you call for help to find your missing child, the police need to know how long the child has been missing because the amount of time gone changes their search parameters. If your loved one has missed medication which helps him function, the police need to know that. If your loved one has carried out threats in the past, the police need to be aware of that fact. These pieces of information could change how they approach your situation.

Fill out a First Responder Form

Fill out this form before a crisis. During times of high stress, it can be difficult for us to recall the most basic of information.

Practice, practice, practice

Practice how to interact with police with your loved one. This will help prepare her should she have an encounter with law enforcement.



Visit your local precinct

Introduce your loved one to the officers in your local precinct so that the first interaction between them isn't a crisis situation. This way the officers may become familiar with your family so they will recognize your loved one's signs of frustration and escalation, and have a conversation about the best techniques to help your loved one return to calm. Your loved one may also respond differently to an officer if it's someone familiar to them.

Additional Resources

First Responder Forms and other safety resources
http://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/safety/

PFA Webinar – Promoting Positive Interactions with Law Enforcement: A Panel Discussion
https://pathfindersforautism.org/interacting-with-police-webinar/

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