

Police Article: What is an Appropriate Response?

By Dennis Debbaut

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 people with autism may be hypersensitive to stimuli, officers should attempt to avoid quick motions and gestures that person may perceive, even remotely, as threatening.

Understand that touching people with autism may cause a protective "fight or flight" reaction. Officers should never touch a person with autism 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. A person with autism 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 is unfolding and be willing to adjust your actions accordingly. Visually evaluate for injuries because people with autism can have an extremely high threshold for pain or be able to ask for help.

Maintain a safe distance until any inappropriate behaviours lessen, but remain alert to the possibility of outbursts or impulsive acts. Be able to retreat, if necessary, to de0escalate the situation until you can determine what is going on at the scene.

Excerpted from the article "Contact with Individuals with Autism: Effective Resolutions" by Dennis Debbaut and Darla Rothman Ph.D. that appeared in The FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, April, 2001

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BIO

Dennis Debbaudt is the parent of a son with ASD and is an investigative journalist. Since 1994, he has presented frequently on autism safety and risk management to law enforcement, educators and autism support audiences in the U.S., Canada and United Kingdom. He is the author of numerous articles, books and videos on the subject. Contact him at ddpi@flash.net or visit www.autismriskmanagement.com/