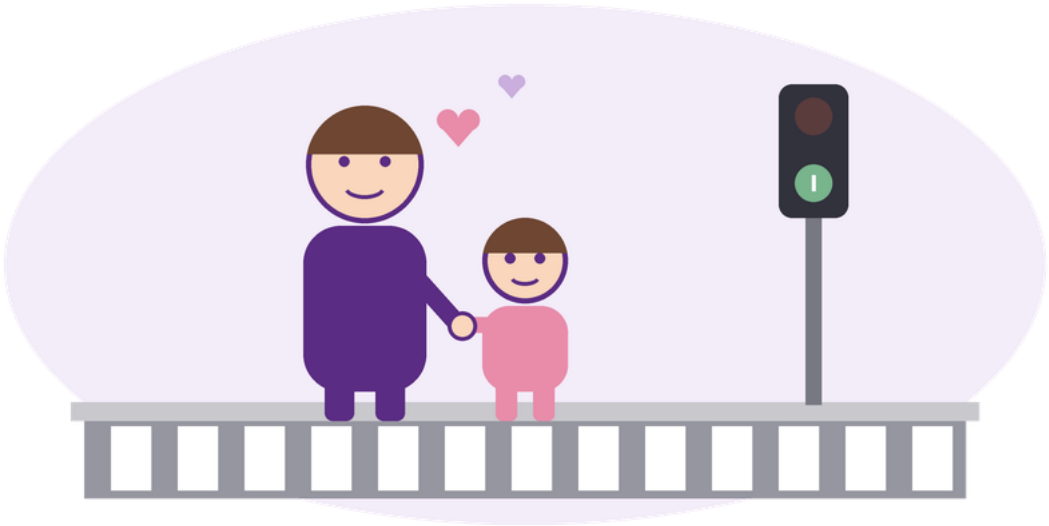
Keeping Safe

Helping autistic children understand danger, road safety and safe people



Many autistic children find it hard to understand danger. They may run towards a road, wander off, climb high or go with someone they do not know — not because they are being naughty, but because the risk is not obvious to them.

This guide explains why and shares practical ways to keep your child safe while building their understanding step by step.

Why danger can be hard to understand

It is about how your child processes the world, not behaviour

Danger is often invisible

We learn about risk by imagining what might happen next. Autistic children often think in the here and now, so "might get hurt" can be hard to picture.

Rules can be taken literally

A child who learns "cross at the green man" may not know what to do when there is no crossing or may think a car will always stop.

Skills may not transfer

Being safe at one road, shop or park does not always mean your child will be safe in a new place. Each place may need teaching again.

Sensory needs and strong interests

A noise, a bright light, water or something fascinating can pull your child away so quickly that they forget everything else — including traffic or where you are.

Reading people is hard

It can be difficult to tell if someone is safe from their face or tone of voice. A friendly stranger may seem like a friend.

Supervision and safety measures come first. Understanding grows slowly, over time.

Teaching safety: what helps

Clear, concrete and practised again and again

Use clear rules, not warnings

- Say what to do, not what not to do: **"Stop at the kerb"** rather than "Don't run off".
- Keep rules short, the same every time, and the same for every adult who cares for your child.

Show it visually

- Use social stories, photos of real places and picture rules (see "My Safety Rules", page 8).
- Short videos of people crossing roads or asking for help can help your child see what to do.

Practise in calm moments

- Rehearse in quiet places first: a quiet street, an empty car park, a quiet shop.
- Repeat in lots of different places and with different people so the skill transfers.

Notice and praise

- Praise exactly what they did: **"You stopped at the kerb — brilliant!"**
- Use their special interests to help — a favourite character can "teach" the rules.

Road safety

Roads and car parks are some of the biggest risks

The road crossing steps

Teach the same steps every time, using the pictures below. Practise them at quiet roads first.

Stop

At the kerb

Look

Both ways

Listen

For traffic

Wait

Until it is clear

Walk

Keep looking

Keeping your child safe while they learn

- **Hold hands, or a hand on the buggy** near roads. If holding hands is hard because of touch sensitivity, try a wrist link, a buggy strap or holding a sleeve.
- **Use proper crossings** (zebra or traffic-light crossings) whenever you can, so the routine is predictable.
- **Car parks:** have a rule such as "hand on the car" while you unload and get your child in or out on the pavement side.
- **In the car:** if your child unbuckles themselves, talk to your health visitor or occupational therapist about specialist seats or buckle guards.
- **Plan for busy trips:** bring ear defenders and a familiar item to reduce sensory overload near traffic.

Blue Badge: some children who have little awareness of danger near traffic may qualify for a Blue Badge. Check with your local council.

Safe people and getting lost

Moving beyond "stranger danger"

"Never talk to strangers" can be confusing. Some strangers — like a police officer or a shop worker — are the right people to ask for help, and some unsafe people are people a child already knows. **Teaching "safe people" and clear rules usually works better.**

Circles of safe people

Draw circles with your child's photo in the middle. Add photos of people in each circle:

- **Inner circle:** family and carers who can hug, help and collect them.
- **Next circle:** friends, teachers and familiar adults — who can say hello and help at school.
- **Outer circle:** people they do not know — we can wave or say hello, but do not go anywhere with them.

Simple rules

- **I never go anywhere with anyone** unless my grown-up says it is OK.
- Agree a family password that anyone collecting your child must know.
- Teach that it is OK to say "No" and to tell a grown-up if someone makes them feel unsure.

If I get lost

- **Stand still** — it is easier for you to find them if they stay in one place.
- **Find a helper:** someone at a shop till, a police officer, or a grown-up with children.
- **Show my card:** an ID card, wristband or autism alert card with your phone number.

Safety at home and when out

Practical steps that reduce risk

Doors and windows

- Fit high or extra locks on outside doors, and window restrictors upstairs.
- Door alarms or chimes can alert you if a door opens.
- Keep keys out of reach, but where adults can get to them quickly in an emergency.

Gardens and climbing

- Check fences and gates and keep bins and garden furniture away from fences.
- Anchor heavy furniture such as wardrobes, bookcases and TVs to the wall.

Medicines, cleaning products and kitchen risks

- Store medicines and chemicals locked away and out of sight.
- Use cooker guards and keep hot drinks and kettles back from edges.
- Tie up or remove blind and curtain cords.

Water

Many autistic children are strongly drawn to water, and water is one of the biggest dangers if a child wanders. Never leave your child alone near baths, ponds or pools, check neighbours' gardens for ponds, and consider swimming lessons — some pools offer quieter or SEND-friendly sessions.

If your child goes missing

Act straight away

Call 999 immediately

Do not wait. Tell the police your child is autistic, how they communicate, what they are wearing, and any places they like or are drawn to — especially water.

Be prepared before anything happens

- Keep a recent full-length photo of your child on your phone.
- Write a one-page profile: name, age, description, how they communicate, what calms them, what upsets them and favourite places.
- Give your child an ID card, wristband or clothing label with your phone number.
- Some families use a GPS tracker, especially for children who often wander.

Tell the people around you

- Let trusted neighbours, school and family know that your child may wander and what to do if they see them alone.
- Share the profile with anyone who looks after your child.

My Safety Rules

Read these with a grown-up

When I cross the road:

Stop

Look

Listen

Wait

Walk

I hold my grown-up's hand near roads and in car parks.

I stay with my grown-up when we are out.

I ask my grown-up before I go anywhere with anyone.

If I am lost, I stand still and find a helper.

I show my card to the helper.

I only go near water with my grown-up.

I only take medicine from my grown-up.

Where to get help

You do not have to do this alone

Keeping a child safe when they do not yet understand danger can be exhausting. It is OK to ask for help and to put safety measures in place without feeling you have "failed" at teaching.

- **Your GP, health visitor or school nurse** — for advice and referrals, including to occupational therapy.
- **Your child's school or nursery** — so safety rules and visuals can be the same at home and at school.
- **Your local council** — for the Local Offer, Blue Badge applications and short breaks.
- **Sycamore Trust UK Family Services** — family support, workshops and advice for autistic children and their families in Barking and Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge.
- **National Autistic Society** — information and advice for families: autism.org.uk

In an emergency, always call 999.

Disclaimer

This guide is for general information only and does not replace individual advice from a health, education or safety professional. Every child is different; please use the ideas that suit your family. If you have concerns about your child's safety, contact your GP, health visitor or Sycamore Trust UK Family Services.