

OASIS · AT A GLANCE

Adult elopement and wandering: safety that respects autonomy

When your autistic adult walks away, the goal is not a locked door. It is a layered plan that keeps them alive without dismantling the dignity of legal adulthood.

BY JIM PALASTY · ROUGHLY 12 MINUTE READ

1 in 2

RISK PROFILE

Of autistic children studied attempted to elope at least once. The behavior does not always end at 18.

How it works

THREE STEPS

STEP 01 · ENVIRONMENT

Make leaving harder. Do not make staying a cage.

Door chimes, fenced yards, magnetic latches on outside doors, a clear sight line from where you cook to where they sit. Friction, not lockdown.



STEP 02 · TECHNOLOGY

Pick the tracker that fits the adult, not the parent.

GPS watch, AngelSense pendant, Project Lifesaver radio tag, AirTag in a shoe insole. Match the device to consent, sensory tolerance, and the actual risk pattern.



STEP 03 · SKILLS

Teach the words, the route, and the safe stop.

Carry an ID card. Memorize one phone number. Practice the walk to the corner store and back. Identify a "safe building" where staff will sit with them until you arrive.

Tools by prevention layer

Environment	Door chimes, magnetic latches, fenced yards, visual barriers
Technology	AngelSense, Project Lifesaver, Apple AirTag, GPS smartwatch
Identification	MedicAlert bracelet, sewn-in label, lanyard card, shoe insert
Registry	Local police, Take Me Home, premise alert, fire/EMS, district
Documentation	Recent photo, one-page medical, sensory profile, route list
Skills	Phone number, ID card use, safe building, refusal scripts

A STORY WE KNOW

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Marcus is 27. Last March he walked out of his day program because the fluorescent lights had started buzzing in a way nobody else could hear. He made it three quarters of a mile down a four-lane road before a school crossing guard saw the OASIS lanyard and called us. He was not lost. He was leaving. There is a difference.

WANDERING IS COMMUNICATION

What matters, at a glance

Water draw

Drowning is the leading cause of accidental death after autism wandering events. Pools, ponds, retention basins, rivers, drainage ditches. Plan the search around water first.

Triggers

Sensory overload, a denied request, an unexpected schedule break, a fight in the house. Track which ones precede your person's leaving. Patterns emerge inside three months.

Adulthood

At 18 every monitoring decision becomes a legal question. Consent, supported decision-making, or guardianship determines which tools you can actually deploy without crossing a line.

Hour one rules

The first sixty minutes after someone goes missing decide the outcome. Call 911. Do not wait to be sure. Do not drive around hoping to spot them while time runs out.

ID layers

Medical bracelet. Lanyard card with sensory needs. Phone number sewn into a jacket label. Tracker in a shoe. One layer can fall off. Redundancy gets your person home.

Routes

People almost always head toward something they love. The library. The McDonald's. The pond behind the elementary school. Map those places now. You will search them first.

BRING THESE · CHECK AS YOU GO

☐ Two recent photos (close-up and full-body)

☐ One-page medical and sensory summary

☐ List of favorite destinations and routes

☐ Communication style (verbal, AAC, gestural)

☐ Triggers and de-escalation phrases

☐ Clothing description for today

☐ Tracker login or sharing link ready

☐ Contact list of staff and family on call

YOUR MOVE

When your adult goes missing, here is what you do

1

Call 911 immediately. Do not wait the "she always comes back" wait. Tell dispatch this is an autistic adult who may not respond to their name and may be drawn to water.

2

Give the officer your one-page emergency profile: photo, height, weight, clothing, sensory triggers, communication style, medications, known destinations.

3

Activate your search tree. Ten people in a group text who can each walk a route within fifteen minutes of the call.

4

Check water first. Pools, ponds, drainage basins, rivers. Always water first.

5

File a formal missing-person report and request the case be flagged for autism awareness. Get the case number in writing.

6

Do not stand down until your person is in your arms. Police can call off a search. You do not have to.

Print this packet. Put one copy in your wallet, one on the refrigerator, one in the glove box. The full story · For readers who want context The crossing guard was the one who called. She told me later that she did not even know what the OASIS lanyard was. She just thought a young man walking that fast, that far from any neighborhood, with no jacket on a forty degree day, was a person who needed somebody. She was right. Marcus was not running from anything. He was walking toward home, twelve miles away, because the fluorescent ballast in the new wing of his day program had started cycling at a frequency that put his teeth on edge. He told no one. He had no words for it on a Tuesday at two in the afternoon. He simply opened a door and started walking.