Today’s piece was prepared by Florence Wu, MD based on an October 8, 2012 *New York Times* article, “Study Shows Children with Autism Tend to Stray:” http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/08/science/study-shows-autistic-children-are-likely-to-wander.html?\_r=1&ref=health

This article describes Patrick Murphy, a 14-year-old boy with autism, who frequently runs away from home, beginning at age 6. For his parents, this is the most stressful feature of his autism. They have double bolts on the doors, brackets on the windows, and an alarm system to protect him from endangering himself.

Patrick’s story is one example of a phenomenon characterized in a recent article in *Pediatrics*, “Occurrence and Family Impact of Elopement in Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders.”[[1]](#footnote-1) An online survey distributed to members of an online autism registry found that 49% of 1218 children with autism spectrum disorder had eloped at least once after age 4. Likely motivations included their enjoying exploring, seeking a happy place, escaping uncomfortable stimuli, or pursuing special topics. Elopers had higher scores on the Social Responsiveness Scale (where higher scores suggest higher autistic impairment); lower intellectual, communication, and development quotients; and were less likely to respond to their name. Elopement limits families from enjoying activities outside the home, causes stress, and affects sleep. There is a significant risk of drowning or traffic injury in those who go missing.

This study is the first to describe the scope of this problem, widely discussed anecdotally in autism communities. One limitation of the study is that participants in an online registry tend to be white and highly educated, which may compromise generalizability. Furthermore, the study did not investigate features of autism severity that may be linked to elopement behaviors or within-family risk of elopement for unrelated reasons. Many questions remain regarding how to help families manage this behavior. The NY Times journalist presents a fairly presented statement regarding the current status of autism prevalence based on CDC reported estimates, and does not appear to provide editorial slant in this article.

Resources:

* Families frequently turn to neighbors, the police, first-responders, and store employees.
* Interactive Autism Network (IAN): http://www.ianproject.org/
* Autism Wandering Awareness Alerts Response Education (AWAARE): http://www.awaare.org/

And that’s today’s Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics: IN THE NEWS!

1. Anderson C, Law JK, Daniels A, Rice C, Mandell DS, Hagopian L, and Law PA. Occurrence and Family Impact of Elopement in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Pediatrics*; originally published online October 8, 2012. http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2012/10/02/peds.2012-0762 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)