

Autism Advocacy: Dealing with the Police

Purpose:

Encounters with law enforcement can be stressful for autistic individuals. This handout provides strategies to promote safety, understanding, and respectful communication between autistic people, their families, and police officers

Remember: The goal is *safety, respect, and understanding*. Advocacy means preparing autistic individuals and educating law enforcement, so encounters are positive, not traumatic.

Tips for Police Officers

- **Recognize Autism Behaviors:** Lack of eye contact, repetitive movements, or delayed responses are common and not necessarily defiance.
- **Give Extra Time:** Allow processing time before repeating or escalating commands.
- **Use Simple Language:** Avoid idioms or sarcasm; speak slowly and clearly.
- **Reduce Sensory Stress:** Limit sirens, flashing lights, or loud commands when possible.
- **Seek Support:** If unsure, request assistance from crisis intervention teams or autism-trained officers.

Key Points for Autistic Individuals & Families

- **Stay Calm if Possible:** Police may misinterpret behaviors such as avoiding eye contact, stimming, or delayed responses. These are not signs of guilt.
- **Use Clear Communication Tools:** Carry an *autism ID card* or “Meet Sheet” with key information (diagnosis, communication style, emergency contacts).
- **Practice Scenarios:** Role-play interactions with trusted adults to reduce anxiety and prepare for real encounters.
- **Know Your Rights:** You have the right to ask for a support person, interpreter, or advocate during questioning.
- **Safety First:** If overwhelmed, use coping strategies (deep breathing, sensory tools) and let officers know you need time.