

## POLICEONE.COM News

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**Editor's Corner**  
with Doug Wyllie, PoliceOne Editor in Chief

### Police and autism: Know the basics

Newly-released [statistics from the CDC](#) offer an ideal moment to remind ourselves of the sensitivity of police contacts with subjects with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). First and foremost, we must remember that while many do show some outward signs indicating their affliction some individuals with ASD exhibit no outward signs, making some contacts even more difficult for officers. In addition, people "in the spectrum" have differing personalities, personal interests, levels of intelligence, social interests, and romantic and sexual desires. Simply said, they can simply blend into the fabric of a cop's beat such that you'd not have any clue what you're really dealing with — until things have gone well and truly sideways, and an encounter becomes "the next big thing" on YouTube.

So, please advised that ASD subjects tend to react very differently — and sometimes unpredictably — to outside stimuli such as lights and sounds and physical contact. Everything from a police officer's command presence to "going hands-on" are very different for an ASD person than someone who might be considered to be neurotypical. The light bar atop your squad car may cause an ASD subject to become transfixed, or to lash out unexpectedly. ASD subjects might be fascinated by — and uncontrollably attracted to — your sidearm, your badge, or another part of your duty gear. The mere presence of you or your squad can set off an ASD subject, or set them into an inexplicable, intransigent silence.

Further, we must bear in mind that about half of people with ASD either cannot speak or they have some degree of difficulty speaking — even their ability to interpret nonverbal communication is typically impaired to some extent. Finally, people with autism — as well as people with other cognitive or developmental disabilities — are less likely to commit a crime than others, but are more likely to...

- Live independently without support
- Be out in public alone, without family or care providers
- Work, attend school, use public transportation, and drive vehicles
- Have their access to public places and other freedoms challenged
- Have a medical emergency
- Be harassed and otherwise bullied
- Be a victim of sexual assault and other serious crimes
- Attract the attention of the police

While there is no known single cause for Autism Spectrum Disorder, it's generally accepted that ASD is caused by abnormalities in brain structure or function. Under the umbrella of Pervasive Developmental Disorders, there are five disorders that share distinct characteristics unique to classify and identify an Autism Spectrum Disorder:

- 1.) Autistic Disorder
- 2.) Asperger's Disorder
- 3.) Rett's Syndrome
- 4.) Childhood Disintegrative Disorder
- 5.) Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified

When I first wrote about this topic back in 2009, I quoted liberally from an excellent report entitled, "[Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Special Needs Subject Response Guide for Police Officers](#)" and I will do so again here.

"Subjects with ASD may reply with seemingly meaningless answers to your questions or discuss irrelevant topics," that report stated. "Don't let this frustrate you. It is best understood as an attempt to reach out, socialize, or establish communication."

Furthermore, persons on the autism spectrum often will "make little or no eye contact. They may appear to be ignoring you or failing to pay attention. Don't mistake unusual or inappropriate eye contact as disrespect."

You may be advised to not force eye contact on a person with ASD because it may unnecessarily frighten them. Further, "people with ASD may act-out when stressed," that 2009 report stated. Such behaviors may include "yelling, pounding table tops, throwing things, or knocking over chairs. Often if you ignore the acting-out behaviors, the behaviors will stop. In order to ignore the behavior, the police officer could step back and look bored. Conversely, reacting immediately and forcefully to acting-out behavior will more likely reinforce it. Instead, use the technique of modeling calm behavior; give them time to decompress, and then continue with your contact."

Finally, people with ASD may not know what is — or isn't — appropriate or safe in a given situation and frequently will not understand what others want or need from them.

Even cops.

Maybe especially cops.

When it comes to interacting with people with ASD, the onus of responsibility falls upon the Sheepdogs to learn to speak and act in a way that the Sheep can understand. At the very least, the Sheepdogs must understand the Sheep, because the opposite is almost never going to be the case.

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About the author