

From DSAM insights, September 2009, newsletter of the Down Syndrome Association of Memphis and the Mid-South (DSAM)'

Source: Down Syndrome Association of Central Texas (DSACT) Newsletter May 2009

'STOP WANDERING - BE PROACTIVE'

From the Kansas City Down Syndrome Guild

Parents and teachers should prepare for the possibility that a child with Down syndrome will wander, just as you would prepare for a fire or tornado; create a plan and review it once or twice a year. Don't dismiss it just because it hasn't happened. There is a greater likelihood than not that a child with a developmental disability (such as Down syndrome) will wander. One reason children with Down syndrome have a tendency to wander is because they often have an inability to assess danger or to process the consequences. The medical term for wandering is Elopement - like the couple who sneaks off to be married quietly without anyone realizing it until they are gone. A child who wanders will slip away quietly when your attention has been diverted, even for just a few seconds. The child will not yell or scream and cause a lot of disruption; you will just suddenly notice he/she is missing. It can happen in an instant and can result in a tragedy.

Safety Tips for Students Who Wander:

Rearrange the classroom

My son wandered off once while the teachers were preoccupied cleaning up paint that another child had spilled. My son used the opportunity to simply walk right out of the classroom. The teachers thereafter rearranged the classroom and positioned a 3 foot high bookcase with wheels in front of the doorway.

Add a bell or noisemaker to the door

The daycare center my son attended didn't have a good security system and couldn't afford to get one. But they did install a \$30 alarm so that when the door was opened a chime would sound and alarm the teacher that someone was exiting the classroom. A set of bells attached to the door handle or above the doorway would also do the trick.

Know the attractive nuisances around the school

Parents and teachers should discuss the things the child is attracted to. For example, water is an attractive nuisance for my son. He loves water. When the teachers were cleaning up the spilled paint and my son walked out of the classroom, he was located down the hall, in an empty classroom, at a sink attempting to wash his hands.

Direct Route Home

Include in the search plan the daily route to and from school taken by the child. The child may have noticed on the daily school bus ride something that strikes her curiosity and when given an unsupervised opportunity she will go searching for it not realizing the danger she is placing herself in.

Chain of Assignment or Buddy System

Do not trust that a low student to teacher ratio will prevent the child from wandering. If no one is assigned to be responsible for a particular child that child can wander off. When my son wandered onto the school parking lot unsupervised he was one of 5 pre-schoolers that 2 or 3 teachers were "watching." However, since no teacher was assigned to watch him specifically he used this as an opportunity to simply walk off the playground. Teachers should make assignments so that one teacher is responsible for the child of concern.

10 Minute Radius

Create a lost child plan that would include a 10 minute circumference search starting from the child's classroom. Search the most dangerous areas first; such as storage facilities, sources of water and busy streets. School staff should be assigned specific locations to search upon hearing the lost child signal. Staff should remain in those areas until the child has been located.

School Code

Review the school's lost child policy once or twice a year. Create a plan for the child of concern. Name the emergency plan after the child and advise the school personnel what to do specifically (be sensitive to siblings who might attend the same school when thinking of a name for the school code.) For example: Code Adam
Step One: Staff member who notices the child is missing should contact the school office. Step Two: The office announces Code Adam over the intercom system. Step Three: Staff members search their assigned locations. Step Four: Call 9-1-1 after a predetermined number of minutes has passed. Factors to consider when determining how many minutes you should wait would be the age of the child and the proximity of the school to a busy intersection.

Identification

Parents should obtain an identification bracelet or badge for their child. Particularly if the child is non-verbal. A very talkative child might become so frightened if they become lost that they will not be able to tell someone their name. This is especially needed if the child rides the bus and during field trips.

Teach Safety Rules

Students with Down syndrome can learn to follow the safety rules. Keep the rules simple and clear. Incorporate safety games into the lesson plan. Insist the student obtain permission before leaving the class. Review this with the child often and ask him to repeat the rules (if he is verbal).

Good Job Chart

The teacher might consider adding a line to the Good Day/Good Job chart rewarding the good safety behaviour they want the child to model. This is positive re-enforcement and encourages the good safety behaviour.

For additional articles and tips about wandering, see

- dsaq.org.au/content/Document/Strategies%20for%20Wandering.doc
- www.disabilitysolutions.org/newsletters/files/four/4-3.pdf