

## ‘ELOPEMENT’ HAS HUGE DANGERS

*Autistic son's death after leaving home drives mother's awareness cause*

---

**Cybele Mayes-Osterman**

USA TODAY

---

When 2-year-old Jermaine Jones slipped out of his home while his aunt was showering earlier this month, it was not the first time he had wandered away.

- A month earlier, the curious curly-haired toddler, who had autism and was nonverbal, disappeared from his family's house in a rural area outside Lansing, Michigan, only to be found 300 yards away.

When Jermaine's mom, Victoria Jones, learned her son had vanished again, she called police, setting off a furious twoday search that saw helicopters, police dogs, drones, a dive team, and more than 500 volunteers join the effort to bring the little boy home safe.

As the searchers scoured the area near Jones' house, many stopped to pray with her for his safe return.

By late afternoon of the next day, those fervent prayers were dashed when Jermaine was found dead in the nearby Looking Glass River.

A young child wandering away in the few minutes a caregiver's back is turned is a parent's worst nightmare.

For parents of children with autism and other intellectual or developmental disabilities, it's a possibility for which they must plan.

“We have a hard time battling with reality and feeling like this is just a dream,” Jones told USA TODAY. “But at least we try to tell ourselves that now we have to at least help other parents because it's so easy to happen so quickly.”

Advertisement

Jones hopes Jermaine's story can bring greater awareness to wandering, or the propensity of children and adults on the autism spectrum to slip away from a safe environment and into possible danger.

“Elopement,” as it is known to the disabilities community, affects almost half of children and adults diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, according to a 2016 study. A National Autism Association review of more than 800 elopement cases between 2011 and 2016, found nearly a third were either fatal or required medical attention, while another 38% involved a close call with water, traffic, or another life-threatening situation.

Megan Boyle, the associate vice president of applied research at nonprofit Upstate Caring Partners and an expert on wandering, called it a “public health issue and crisis.”

**‘Beyond terrifying’** Parents of children who have survived elopement describe the terror of realizing their child has vanished from a secure environment and the rush of relief when they are found safe.

Angela Wendling, a Fox Cities, Wisconsin, mother of two children with disabilities, remembers when her oldest son, 4 years old at the time, wandered away from a Thanksgiving family gathering just before sunset.

“I don’t know how long he was gone, but as soon as we noticed, I called the county sheriff’s office, and all of the adults and teenagers that were there went outside and started looking all over for him,” she told USA TODAY.

Finally, a family member found him in a cow pasture across a country highway down the road. “It was absolutely beyond terrifying,” Wendling said. “He could have gotten very seriously hurt or killed. It was so cold and rainy that day. He didn’t have shoes on, he didn’t have a coat.”

Elizabeth Vosseller, the director of Growing Kids Therapy, said elopement is an impulse. The therapy center is dedicated to teaching individuals who are nonverbal how to communicate through spelling.

The experience can be especially frightening for people with autism themselves, especially those who are nonspeaking, like Jermaine.

“We aren’t in control when it happens, our bodies just take off,” Jack Haynes, a 21-year-old who is nonspeaking from Herndon, Virginia, said in a statement shared by Vosseller. “It often happens for me when my sensory system is overstimulated. My body just needs to get out of there even if my mind wants to stay.”

For 17-year-old Caden Rainey, of Wadsworth, Ohio, “It is a fight or flight situation, and my body’s response is flight.”

“In my mind, I am aware that I am not going where I want to go, but I am like the conductor of a train that has derailed from the tracks,” Rainey wrote in a statement shared by Vosseller.

Boyle said her research shows that while some people with autism elope because they are overwhelmed with sensory stimulation that is too loud or bright, the most common trigger of elopement is a desire to get closer to an object that draws their attention or curiosity.

“They remember something that was in a certain spot and they want to go get it, or they see something that they really like,” she said. In rarer cases, individuals elope because they simply enjoy “the sensation of walking or running.”

Christie Mandeville, an educational consultant at the Weinfeld Education Group who works with special needs children, said some children elope to hide from an environment they perceive as too big or overpowering. “They’ll tend to go someplace a little more quiet, a little darker, a little more closed in so that they feel safe,” she said.

As in Jermaine’s case, many children with autism are drawn toward bodies of water. “That’s one of the primary concerns with students with autism when they elope,” Mandeville said. “Unfortunately, you will hear many times on the news about how a person has gone missing from home, and then you’ll find out they were found in a lake or a pond or a swimming pool.”

As she gets to know her students, Mandeville becomes familiar with the specific locations and spaces that they gravitate toward – the first places to check if they elope. One student in the Washington, D.C., area, “used to leave his house, and he loved the Metro, and he would just go ride on the Metro for hours.”

### **When law enforcement gets involved with elopement**

Elopement can often lead to an encounter with law enforcement, whether officers were called to find a child or run into them by chance. Those who are either nonspeaking or have limited communication abilities are at risk of a miscommunication with police that can escalate if officers aren’t aware they’re dealing with someone on the spectrum.

The frequency of such encounters spurred the Montgomery County Police Department's 2004 launch of its Autism and IDD (Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities) Outreach Unit. The program, which also includes Alzheimer's and dementia outreach, seeks to educate officers on best practices to safely respond to calls involving elopement.

"The odds of an officer having contact with an individual on the spectrum for us, at least, is one or two calls a day," Laurie Reyes, an officer in the unit, told USA TODAY. "Officers need the awareness to know how to effectively interact."

In a recent instance, officers received calls about a 7-year-old boy who had wandered close to a major thoroughfare in Silver Spring, Maryland. "When officers arrived, they, through their training and experience, knew immediately this was a nonspeaking child who had autism," Reyes said.

Reyes said the department hopes to encourage parents to dial 911 as soon as possible when they discover a child has eloped. "There's many reasons why people don't call 911. The most common reason is that people think they're going to find their kid and then a half hour passes or an hour passes and they just didn't find them."

When officers are called to respond to a child who has eloped, their first task is to identify the child's name and family. Once officers have located the family, "We go to the house, we talk to the family about calling 911 right away, about what resources and safety measures that they can put in place," Reyes said.

### **When parents are charged**

The week after Jermaine wandered away, two Florida parents were charged with manslaughter in the death of their 3-year-old with autism spectrum disorder who police found drowned in a pond behind their apartment.

The toddler had previously wandered and been found in the same pond at least once prior to his death, according to previous reports.

Deciding to charge a parent in a wandering case is made on a case-by-case basis, Reyes said. Sometimes, police departments will tap child or adult protective services to help determine whether an episode of wandering constitutes a case of neglect, she said.

In those instances, Reyes said she conveys to the family that child welfare involvement isn't necessarily a bad thing. "If it's neglect and it needs to be looked into, the looking into could mean additional services," she said. "It doesn't always mean it's going to be punitive."

Reyes said she has worked with some parents who hesitated to call 911 when their child eloped out of fear they would be blamed for their child's disappearance. "What I say is this, 'I need you to put that aside and call 911 regardless of your fears,' " she said. " 'Don't avoid calling 911 because you're worried about the consequences of CPS at the expense of your child who's in need.' " Reyes stressed the necessity of educating both police departments and parents of children with autism about elopement and best practices.

More awareness is needed as it relates to the court system, state attorneys and police officers, on the dynamics of autism, she said.

Parents, on the other hand, should receive more information on elopement when their child is diagnosed with autism, she said. "Wandering safety tools need to be provided at diagnosis, and there needs to be more outreach about what can be done to prevent it."

### **Keeping children who elope safe**

Caring for children with autism can require near-constant vigilance as even seasoned caregivers and well-secured school areas can experience unexpected child elopement.

More and more parents have employed the use of electronics and tracking devices to keep track of an elopement-prone child. Some parents attach a GPS tracker to a child's shoes or hair tie, Mandeville said.

Wendling uses an Apple Watch for her oldest son and a Jiobit smart tracking device for her youngest. "Also, if we're going someplace that has a lot of people and I'm worried that they might run off, I always write my phone number on their forearm," she said.

Although more and more parents have found success using trackers, the cost of newer technology is still prohibitive to low-income families of children with autism.

"I think the data on the tracking devices are promising, but the issue with those is that they're so expensive and that not everybody can afford them," Boyle said, adding that if families of children with autism had a public funding mechanism to obtain a tracking device, "so many of these cases I think would be resolved a lot better."

Returning an eloping child to safety can come down to a good Samaritan checking on a child who is alone or who appears out of place. Vosseller said bystanders can spot a potential elopement situation by staying "alert for someone who does not seem to be going somewhere with intention."

"If you ask somebody a question and they're not able to answer you, there's a very good chance that they're a nonspeaking person and that they don't have that ability to use their mouth to tell you or indicate that they're scared or lost," Vosseller added.

When news of Jermaine's disappearance hit the local news, four people reported seeing the toddler walking alone down the road. The fact that none of them stopped to check on her son is one of the reasons Jones wants their story shared.

"I want people to know how important 10 seconds is," she said. "It's such a small little decision that could really change somebody's life."

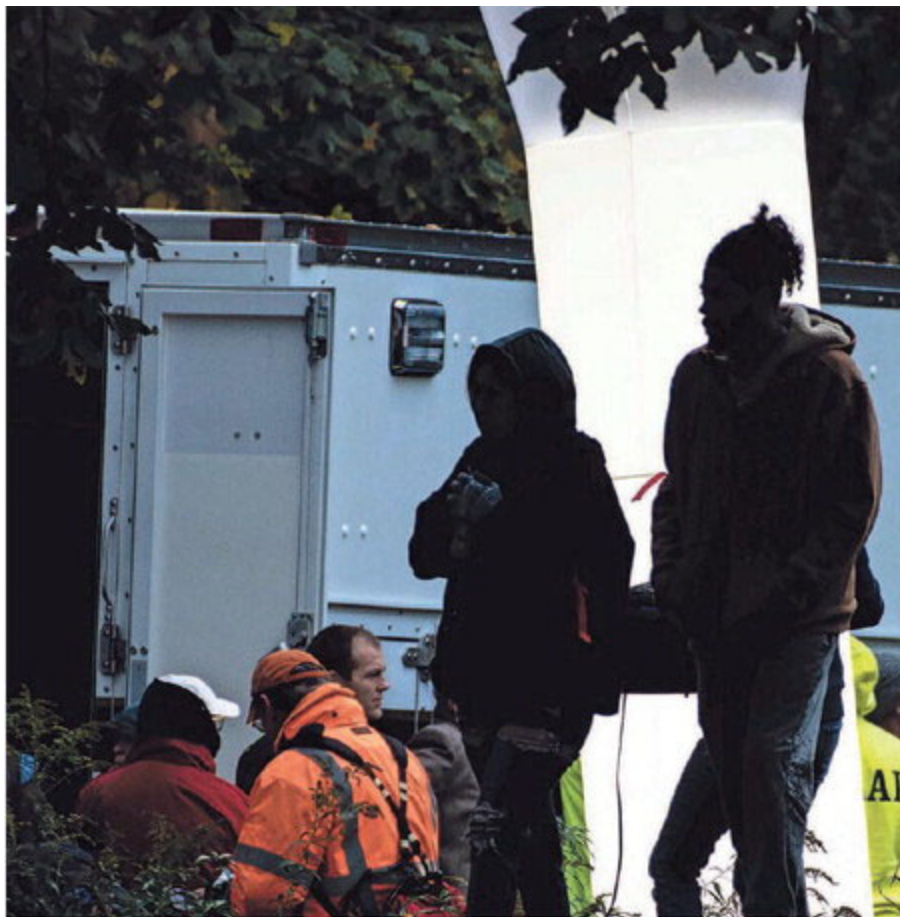
Advertisement

**"We aren't in control when it happens, our bodies just take off.**

**It often happens for me when my sensory system is overstimulated. My body just needs to get out of there even if my mind wants to stay."**

**Jack Haynes**

a 21-year-old nonspeaking autistic person, in a statement



**Victoria and Brandon Jones, the parents of 2-year-old Jermaine, are silhouetted against a light near a police command center. First responders and volunteers searched the area for their missing toddler for about 28 hours. The search ended when Jermaine's body was pulled from the Looking Glass River in Michigan. MATTHEW DAE SMITH/LANSING STATE JOURNAL**



**A photo shared by the Clinton County Sheriff Department of 2-year-old Jermaine Jones, who went missing on Oct. 9. SCREENSHOT**

---

[Copyright © 2023 Democrat and Chronicle 11/2/2023](#)  
[Powered by TECNAVIA](#)

---

