

Disability Inclusion and Runners

What is Elopement?

Elopement refers to a person who has a developmental disability who runs or wanders away from a caregiving environment. In other words, it means that a student may leave your classroom when you aren't expecting it and be at risk for getting lost. It is a serious, yet common, concern with many students who are on the autism spectrum. Understanding what may help prevent elopement, and what to do when it happens, is an important part of creating an inclusive church.

5 Tips for Students who Elope

1. Get Information. Parents of children who have developmental disabilities are often familiar with elopement. So ask them if their child has a history of it. If the answer is yes, ask these questions next:

- What often triggers this behavior?
- Does anything help prevent this behavior?
- If the child elopes how should we approach her to get her back to class?

2. Educate Your Team. Share what you learned about the student with your volunteers. Also, educate them on common reasons why students elope, which include enjoyment of running or being chased, visiting a place they are interested in, or trying to avoid a stressful situation or task. Then help your team look for ways to reduce these triggers.

Some common things to try include:

- Preparing students for transitions when an activity is about to switch (this reduces stress).
- Providing a calm, quiet space for the student (this also reduces stress.)
- Providing engaging activities for the student to enjoy in the desired environment (this reduces the temptation to look for interest elsewhere).
- Provide an acceptable place for the student to stretch her legs like a sensory break room. (this allows her to meet her needs in a safe and controlled environment).

Make sure that someone on your team is assigned to keep track of the student throughout the entire service and that exits are secured or monitored. Also, before service begins, be sure to go over the protocol for what to do if a student tries to elope.

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3. Communicate Expectations To Your Student. Use visual boundaries to create a clear picture about where a child is supposed to, or not supposed to, go during class. Social narratives can also be used to teach the student appropriate ways to ask for a break or another desired activity.

4. Create A Safety Plan. Talk to parents and your church leadership about a safety plan for students who elope. Consider incorporating the following ideas:

- Make your church safety team aware of a student's history of eloping and how they could help.
- Keep the student's current photo and information on hand, which could be quickly shown to the church in case of an emergency.
- Have the student wear identification that includes important information such as their name, disability diagnosis, how they communicate, and where the student should be taken if found on their own.

Example: Sally McStudent, Autism, Verbal, Please take me to the Child Center if I am without my family or buddy.

- Know where all exits are, especially those that lead to the outside.
- Form a plan for how to get the student back to class safely.*

* Each student is different, so plans may vary.

5. Know What To Do In The Moment. Stay calm. Ask others to help you keep track of the student and monitor exits. Do your best to keep your eyes on the student to make sure she is safe. Follow your church protocol on how to approach the student and implement your full safety plan if necessary.

BONUS: If a student elopes and is missing near a body of water, have someone check the water first. Statistics show that many elopers go to ponds, pools, rivers, and other bodies of water, which increases the chance of drowning. So, if a student is missing ask someone to check near the water.

Thank you for what you do. Ministry isn't always easy, but it is always important. So remember this:

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us - Hebrews 12:1

If God called you to this mission, don't give up. Running your race matters too.