

Victimization & Abuse of Persons with Autism

By Carolyn Gammicchia

One Police Officer's Personal Perspective

When I was a teenager, I remember asking myself, "How can people treat others so cruelly," as I watched my older brother shuffle out of a jail cell barefoot and covered in a yellow plastic blanket. Still dazed from the events that had taken place the previous evening, he appeared to be too ashamed to look my father in the eyes. His face was bloodied and bruised and while I was able to look at my father, who by then was teary-eyed, I could see how deeply affected he was by his son's dehumanization at the hands of those who were supposed to protect him.



Officers Carolyn and Andrew Gammicchia

SPECIAL REPORT

Thirty years later, treatment of persons with disabilities by law enforcement officers has improved a bit, but much more attention needs to be given to this important issue. Civil litigation has brought about change, but the genuineness and commitment to the delivery of mandatory training programs

continues to be lacking in local communities today.

It is unfortunate how I learned that it takes the death or serious injury of an individual to bring about court-ordered awards. And often the seriousness of the court's decision is lost along with the memory of the harmed individual.

A Sister Remembers

On the night my brother was arrested, his "crime" was having a seizure. Authorities found him completely naked outside of his home, in the middle of Michigan, one wintry night.

He had an eccentric nature; he felt shame, which he associated with his disorder, and so he was

alienated from his neighbors. They relished in calling the police when odd occurrences took place.

There was a violent struggle, and the officers took him away, without clothing which only further stripped him of his dignity. Also, the authorities failed to secure his home, which was an income property that my brother had worked very hard to purchase. He was proud of it and, that night, it mysteriously succumbed to a fire.

This situation involving my brother was one of many where law enforcement officers were involved. His rights were constantly ignored and violated and unfortunately, his life was one of misdiagnosis.

Despite testing with a genius I.Q. at the age of 12, he began having seizures shortly thereafter, a common occurrence in males with autism, and he was diagnosed with epilepsy. His condition ultimately resulted in the loss of his outgoing and confident soul.

His life ended in a state facility, where he was dehumanized by the people our family thought would provide him with necessary care.

Today I look at what happened to my brother, not only as a sibling of someone on the spectrum, but also as the mother of a child affected by autism. I also have an additional prospective as a police officer. In my years growing up and especially following my brother's death, I realized that if first responders are not appropriately trained, my son as well as others with autism, could be subjected to the same types of situations that my brother had faced.

Getting Involved

My journey and drive to influence change began when I attended a two-day symposium entitled "Under-

standing and Preventing Violence Against Persons with Disabilities." It was there that I learned the possibility that my son, and others, could be victimized were statistically greater than I had imagined. In addition, I noticed I was the only law enforcement officer present. Why weren't more law enforcement agencies sending their personnel? What could be done to ensure that the appropriate services were provided to those with disabilities who have been victimized?

Taking Action

My husband, Andrew, also a police officer, and I created the LEAN On US organization. LEAN stands for The Law Enforcement Awareness Network, and was founded to share resources, provide a path for individuals with hidden disabilities or mental illness to obtain information and ask for assistance, and provide an arena for law enforcement officers and first responder personnel to share situations involving persons with autism that they have faced.

Our child, like others with autism, is five to 10 times more likely to have contact with police officers, and four to 10 times more likely to be a victim of a crime. In addition, he was 50 to 99 percent more likely to be victimized by someone he knew such as a family member, care provider, bus driver, etc.

One study also indicated that 83 percent of women and 32 percent of men with developmental disabilities experience sexual abuse. In the non-verbal population amongst all disabilities, the chances of victimization are even higher due to the inability to properly communicate and/or lack of methods available to do so.

So with these statistics we knew we needed to do everything to ensure the safety of persons with autism.

What To Do & How

Some may find this odd, but our first reaction was to stop taking our son into the community. Parents wanting to protect a child, have been known to do this. But we soon realized that knowledge is key. Abuse prevention allows individuals with disabilities the ability to identify, prevent and stop violence. It teaches ways to keep safe.

To protect a child, it is essential to provide education to loved ones, and reiterate the importance of safety. To do this, you have to be able to identify the true risks factors for individuals with disabilities, and find ways to address each one. The following are examples of common risks with appropriate actions in identifying and dealing with victimization and abuse of persons with autism:

Risk 1:

Persons with physical disabilities may depend on others to meet some of their basic needs. Personal care providers may be involved in the most intimate and personal parts of the individual's life, which can increase the opportunity for abusive acts.

Action:

Educate those with autism spectrum disorders on what is appropriate touch and what is not. Identify all parts of the body in either words or with visual supports. This is vital in cases where personal care providers are involved, as it allows the person with autism to know if they are being victimized.

Risk 2:

Many individuals with disabilities have limited vocabulary or communication skills, which pose barriers to disclosing abuse or assault. A perpetrator may believe that he/she can get away with abusive behavior since the individual would not be able to report it.

Action:

Educate those with autism that touching, beyond what you normally do to show affection to people they know or who assist with hygiene, may not be appropriate. Some parents have felt that explaining such things could encourage inappropriate behavior, but this has been found to be untrue. Even in the most severe cases, overt or negative changes in behavior are often a sign that victimization has occurred. Allow communication through behavior to come out.

Risk 3:

Some persons with disabilities use a communication board or electronic device to communicate. But many of these devices do not include vocabulary for reporting abuse or other victimization.

Action:

In cases where a device is used, ensure it is equipped with appropriate vocabulary and that your child understands the device can be used to describe inappropriate situations, too. If the device is taken away, ensure that another mode of communication, such as a visual support or sign, can be substituted.

Risk 4:

Individuals with autism are taught to be compliant, obedient, and passive to the wishes of others. They may not be taught about boundaries - that they have the right to say no to painful or unwanted touches.

Action:

Provide individuals with autism the opportunity to make choices daily and empower them to be non-compliant and that some activities are not appropriate. Allow them to say "no," and give them an "action plan," to escape in instances such as attempted abductions.



Left to right: Andrew, Nicholas, Carolyn and Alex Gammicchia.

Risk 5:

Many people with autism grow up unaware of the dangers of abuse. Without information on sexuality, abuse prevention education, and personal safety strategies, your child may not know how to get help from others or how to access emergency services.

Action:

Include requests for this type of education in your child's IEP. If provided to the general education population, your child has a right to the same. Oversee that the proper modifications are made; the use of visual supports may assist with anxiety experienced due to the subject matter.

Risk 6:

Many communities lack an accessible domestic violence shelter or a rape crisis center specifically centered on supporting individuals with disabilities.

Action:

To address this, order, "Sexual Assault: A Survivor's Handbook," a series of three paperback books written by Nora Balaerian, Ph.D., for and about people with developmental disabilities who

have been sexually assaulted, and to teach others about sexual assaults. Also, confirm that a trained forensic interviewer is on hand to assist should you need him or her. If the center does not staff one, call your state protection and advocacy agency obtain one. Remember that having someone who is unfamiliar with disabilities administer an interview will be very uncomfortable and is likely to increase the anxiety level of the victim.

Risk 7:

People with autism and other disabilities have traditionally been oppressed and segregated from their communities, and placed into congregate care residential facilities (i.e., group homes, state schools, nursing homes, foster homes). They are at a high risk of repeated victimizations from multiple perpetrators, and may lack access to telephones, family, social support, police and advocates.

Action:

We must make sure that programs such as recreational activities, classes, higher education opportunities, and employment opportunities are available and

accessible. Families that have a loved one living outside of their home should have an emergency backup plan should victimization occur. Remember, never place blame on yourself, the victim or others.

Legal Action Against Those Who Hurt Others

It is very important to prosecute individuals who victimize those with autism. An article published by Raja Misha, "In Attacks on Disabled Few Verdicts" in the June 10, 2001 edition of *The Boston Globe*, indicates that despite the evidence, many law enforcement agencies end up dropping a majority of their cases.

It was revealed that out of 342 cases reported between 1997 and 1999 in the state of Massachusetts, only 5 percent of those obtained a conviction, compared to 70 percent of crimes involving those without disabilities. A victim's inability to testify, the reluctance to initially report the crime due to blaming themselves, and lost evidence due to a lack of experience in handling crimes with

those diagnosed with a developmental disability, were to blame.

Drawing Conclusions

Where do we go from here? We need to become active advocates in this area and to take what has been created, and use it to implement an across-the-board-agenda for every individual who is involved in the life of someone with autism.

We need to ensure that our loved ones with autism are active within their communities, and become educated in the ways that will best protect them. We must allow them to harvest healthy and empathic relations, not dependent ones that can create abuse. And we need to train all of those who have contact with those affected by autism so they are able to provide a safe haven in a time of need.

It is imperative we have a Federally-legislated program to assist with the training of teaching first responders about *all* developmental disabilities. Awareness efforts would help to lower horrendous numbers of victimization. That, and the education process for those affected, may be the only chance for our son to not repeat his uncle's fate.

A Special Thanks

Our family would like to thank the many advocates and parents who work tirelessly on this subject. Two other *Advocate* contributors, Dennis Debbaudt who, for many years, was the only individual who trained first responders about autism; and Bill Davis for his endless efforts to promote safety for those with autism. I would also like to thank Craig Stoxen of the South Carolina Chapter of the Autism Society and his staff who have trained many first responders through their "Autism Informed Response" program.

I'd like to pay tribute to my brother, Mark Coriaty, who also had many triumphs in his life. He taught me two things: 1) empathy and; 2) to make sure that we celebrate and cherish every person and honor the differences between us all. These lessons have assisted my husband and I in raising our sons. ■

References:

Austin Safe Place Web site, www.austin-safeplace.org.

Author's note: Remember to stay abreast on the progress of the H.R. 1350 bill which, if passed, would add provisions for training of school safety personnel and first responders to teacher training programs.

Carolyn Gammicchia and her husband, Andrew, are the proud parents of two boys, Alexander and Nicholas.

Carolyn is on the board of director's for the Autism Society of Michigan, and serves on two National ASA committees as well. She is an advocate for the Autism Tissue Program. Her brother was a donor into the program, in 1999, following his death.



Nicholas Gammicchia enjoys personal attention from his dolphin friend.

Autism Safety Resources

Bill Davis joins Carolyn Gammichia and Dennis Debbaudt as having the longest track record of advocating for the safety of persons with autism. His career as an instructor and activist began after his son, Chris, today age 9, was diagnosed with autism. Concerned about how police, firefighters and others might misinterpret his son's traits, Davis began a mission to educate his community about the disorder and, today, is a tireless crusader for the rights of all persons with autism.

He also created the three one-of-a-kind products below to assist you in keeping your child protected:

1) Video: Encountering Autism

An excellent training aid for emergency responders, retailers, hospitals and more. Addresses challenges emergency responders may encounter when they arrive at a scene and provides guidance on how to communicate and interact with autistic individuals. Also discusses uncontrollable behavior. Price: \$39.00.

2) Book: *Dangerous Encounters: Avoiding Perilous Situations with Autism: A Streetwise Guide for all Emergency Responders, Retailers and Parents* By Bill Davis and Wendy Goldband Schunick.

Targeted toward emergency responders, retailers and retail security, to name a few, *Dangerous Encounters*, takes readers through everyday situations, stressing safety and awareness. Discusses situations such as a person with autism rearranging CDs or books by color, which could be misinterpreted as suspicious behavior. Price: \$19.95.

3) Autism Safety Sticker

Sticker reads "Person with Autism," which Davis advises parents to use in their home and vehicle. Price: \$5.00.

Visit www.amazon.com to purchase book and www.discountlearning.com to purchase video or sticker.

Additional Resources:

1) **SafePlace**, an Austin, TX-headquartered organization offers a variety of services to people with disabili-

ties, such as: a **National Training and Technical Assistance Project**, a three-year project being funded by the U.S. Department of Justice; a **Resource Lending Library**, which features over 350 items featuring books, curriculum kits, videos, audiotapes, anatomically correct dolls, models, games, and more available for checkout either in-person or via mail; **Sexuality Education**; and **Caregiver Abuse Prevention**.

Type www.austin-safeplace.org/programs/disability/default.htm into your Web browser, or visit their main Web site, www.austin-safeplace.org, to learn more.

2) **The Autism Society of Illinois** sells decals that read, "**Emergency Alert – Occupant with Autism – May Not Respond to Verbal Command.**" Call (630) 691-1270, send a fax to (630) 932-5620, or send an e-mail to: AutismIll@aol.com for more information.

3) **The South Carolina Autism Society** publishes a brochure with important reminders and tips for ensuring the protection of your loved one with autism. To obtain a copy, visit their Web site at www.scautism.org, where you can download a PDF version; their toll-free number is (800) 438-4790.

4) **Medic Alert** provides low-cost bracelets and medallions that you can imprint with the wearer's name, key details (i.e. has autism, seizures, etc.) and a toll-free number which, if dialed, will pull up file information such as appropriate contact information, medications, etc. For more information, visit www.medicalert.org.

5) **The Autism Society Of North Carolina** bookstore offers a video, *Autism Awareness for Law Enforcement Video*. The video, narrated by Dennis Debbaudt, highlights five teenagers with various levels of autism from the spectrum. Price \$15.00.

E-mail Group:

Join "The Law Enforcement Awareness Network," an e-mail discussion group geared toward first responder agencies and those serving the community, by sending an e-mail to: TheLawEnforcementAwareness-Network@yahoogroups.com.