



DEPARTMENT NOTICE

23-037

Published: 3/17/23

Expires: 3/17/26

Autism Awareness

The Autism Society of America, the nation's oldest leading grassroots autism organization, is proud to celebrate Autism Acceptance Month in April 2023 with its #CelebrateDifferences campaign, designed to build a better awareness of the signs, symptoms, and realities of autism.

As police officers, we respond to hundreds of calls for service each day and encounter individuals involved in emergency situations under the influence of substances, engaged in fights or arguments, or those who are victims and witnesses to criminal acts. Among those people we encounter are those individuals in our community who are on the autism spectrum. People who are on the autism spectrum can exhibit mannerisms and characteristics that can be easily misinterpreted by law enforcement. Being aware of the range of ways autism presents will allow you to better assist these members of the public and more safely carry out your job.

The Department has collaborated with the Autism, Asperger's Spectrum Coalition for Education, Networking and Development (AASCEND) to create a training video for law enforcement. The video discusses some of the common characteristics exhibited by people on the autism spectrum and how those characteristics may be misinterpreted by police. The video also provides strategies to effectively interact with people on the spectrum when responding to calls for service. In addition to the video, the Department has created the attached resource sheet that lists common traits and how they may be misinterpreted. This sheet also provides a list of resources for autism information and services.



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "William Scott".

WILLIAM SCOTT

Chief of Police

Per DN 20-150, all sworn & non-sworn members shall electronically acknowledge this Department document in PowerDMS. Members whose duties are relevant to this document shall be held responsible for compliance. Any questions regarding this policy should be made to sfpd.writtendirectives@sfgov.org, who will provide additional information.

Autism Police Training

Autism is a spectrum condition. Not every autistic individual exhibits every trait. These traits are easily misunderstood.

Autistic Trait	Possible Inaccurate Interpretation
1. Does not make eye contact	Could be interpreted as being shifty or lying
2. Poor auditory processing, so may miss and not respond to commands	Could seem uncooperative or resistant
3. Loud monotone voice	Could seem belligerent
4. Expressive language difficulties, so may not be able to answer questions or explain quickly or clearly	Could appear uncooperative
5. Poor spatial abilities, may stand or sit too close to someone, may hold up hand to keep the area around self clear	Could appear threatening
6. Uncoordinated or jerky body movements or gait	Could be interpreted as being drunk or on drugs
7. Difficulty multitasking or responding to more than one command at a time	Could be interpreted as being uncooperative
8. Does not understand social big picture or social relationships	May seem not to respect authority
9. Often unable to read facial expressions	May appear unwilling to engage
10. Easily overwhelmed by loud language or multiple commands. Might put hands over ears.	Could appear to be refusing to cooperate
11. Honest and literal	Could be interpreted as being personally rude or sarcastic
12. Inappropriate laughter	Could be interpreted as mocking or disrespectful
13. Can be unusually sensitive to touch, may experience touch as pain and pull away	Could be interpreted as resisting or fighting
14. May not show facial expression or smile	Could appear angry or dangerous
15. May be drawn to shiny or reflective objects such as badges or eyeglasses	Might seem to be invading officer's safety zone

Possible Distinguishing Characteristics

- Odd, wooden, or jerky body movement
- Poor eye contact
- Repetitive body motions like hand flapping
- Voice too loud or soft

Tips for Interacting with Autistic Adults

- Minimize sensory stimulation of lights and siren.
- Give calm, clear commands, one at a time, with time to comply after each command.
- A victim may need an advocate to explain what happened.
- If arrested, a person with autism should NOT be put with other prisoners. People with autism can be socially naïve and easily victimized.

Resources for Autism Information and Help

AASCEND - Support and action organization for autism spectrum adults, their families, educators and professionals; P.O. Box 591021, San Francisco, CA 94159-1021; www.aascend.org; info@aascend.org

Autism Society SF Bay Area - Advocacy and resources for autistics and their families; (650) 339-8477; PO Box 25191, San Mateo, CA 94402; www.sfautismsociety.org; info@sfautismsociety.org

Golden Gate Regional Center - Services and support to individuals with developmental disabilities including autism in Marin, San Francisco, and San Mateo County; 1355 Market Street Suite 220, San Francisco, CA 94103; (415) 546-9222; **After-Hours Response: (415) 517-4503**; www.ggrc.org

People with Disabilities Foundation - Education and advocacy for people with psychiatric and/or developmental disabilities, with or without physical disabilities; 507 Polk St, Suite 430, San Francisco, CA 94102; (415) 931-3070; www.pwdf.org; info@pwdf.org

UCSF Center for ASD and NDDs - Offers state-of-the-art, evidence-based, comprehensive assessment, treatment, and support for people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), developmental delays, learning disabilities, and intellectual disabilities, including individuals with genetic and chromosomal disorders; 675 18th Street, San Francisco, CA 94107; autism.ucsf.edu; autism@ucsf.edu

Support for Families of Children with Disabilities - Support, advocacy and resources for families of children with disabilities; 1663 Mission St. Suite 700, San Francisco, CA 94103; (415) 282-7494; www.supportforfamilies.org; info@supportforfamilies.org

The San Francisco District Attorney Victim Services Division - Support and assistance to victims and their families in the aftermath of a crime, during criminal prosecution, and after a verdict has been reached; (628) 652-4100; 350 Rhode Island Street, 400N San Francisco, CA 94103; sfdistrictattorney.org/victim-services; victimservices@sfgov.org

The Mayor's Office on Disability - Assists City departments in making all programs, services, benefits, activities, and facilities owned, operated, or funded by the City and County of San Francisco accessible to and useable by individuals with disabilities, 1155 Market Street, 1st Floor, San Francisco, CA 94103; (415) 554-6789; TTY (415) 554-6799; sf.gov/departments/mayors-office-disability; mod@sfgov.org

Bay Area Autism Consortium - Advancing the understanding and treatment of autism spectrum disorders by supporting multidisciplinary collaboration among researchers, care providers, and the Bay Area's technologically innovative community; bayareaautismconsortium.com; bayareaautismconsortium@gmail.com

PACE (Pacific Autism Center for Education) - To enhance the lives of people impacted by autism, through innovation, exceptional education and compassionate care; 1880 Pruneyard Avenue, Santa Clara, CA 95050; (408) 245-3400; www.pacificautism.org; info@pacificautism.org