



Elopement in Autism

When to Engage vs. When to Pause



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A safety guide for parents & educators



FIRST: UNDERSTAND THE FUNCTION

Eloping (wandering/bolting) is **not misbehavior**. It is usually one of four functions:



Escape

- avoiding demand or overwhelm



Access

- trying to get to something (water, bookbag)



Sensory regulation



Access

- trying to get to something (water, book bag, etc.)



Communication

- unable to express a need



Sensory regulation *seeking movement or relief*

→ **Your response must match the function.**

→ Use fast, calm, low-language physical guidance to a **safe space**.



WHEN TO ENGAGE IMMEDIATELY

- ✓ Traffic or parking lots
- ✓ Water (pools, lakes, bathrooms)
- ✓ Leaving a supervised building
- ✓ Nighttime elopement
- ✓ Loss of visual contact
- ✓ Child is dysregulated and running without awareness.

→ This is a **safety response**, not a **teaching moment**.

Use **fast**, calm, low-language physical guidance to a **safe space**.



REMEMBER:

“Elopement is a nervous system response, not a behavior choice. Safety first. Teaching happens when calm.”



WHEN TO GUIDE BUT NOT CHASE

- ✓ Moving within a safe, enclosed space
- ✓ Seeking distance but not in danger
- ✓ Attempting to regulate (pacing, moving away)

→ Stay nearby, reduce demands, and lower language.

Chasing can increase flight response.



WHEN TO PAUSE & OBSERVE

- ✓ A form of **communication**
- ✓ A **break attempt**
- ✓ Early signs of **overwhelm**

→ Then **adjust**:

- ✓ reduce demand
- ✓ offer choice
- ✓ provide a regulation option