Interactions with Law Enforcement

Officer Billy Yoder & Lucinda Thelen

Who we are

Officer Billy Yoder

Bryan Police Department

Father to a son with autism

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Retired educator (special ed., general ed., and Driver's Ed)

Works for A&M's Center on Disability and Development

Mom to an adult autistic son

Why would your child need to interact with police?

- They might need help
  - *Someone gets hurt*
  - *They are lost*
  - *They need to call 911- fire or other emergency*
  - *There is a serious car accident*
- They see them in the community or at school
  - *School resource officer*
  - *At events*
- They may be in trouble
  - *Breaking the law*
  - *Hurting someone*

So- how can you prepare your child for these interactions?

Prepare them ahead of time for possible interactions both in person and on the phone

The younger you start the more understanding and practice they will have.

This is especially important because-

There aren't "special" rules for individuals with disabilities when it comes to interacting with a police officer- **Everyone** is expected to obey the law

Ways to prepare……

Age-Appropriate & Ability Level Strategies

How does your child learn or communicate?

- Use visual aids or social stories
- Work on their self-advocacy skills- Identification & Communication Cards
- Share by example or “live out loud”- talk about what is happening and explain your actions- 5 is Against the Law
- Role playing or scripting
- Community engagement
- Develop a safety plan

The following is a social story or information list to use as an example

There are several items you will see when you see a police officer:

Uniform: Special clothes worn by officers—shirt, pants, hat, boots

Badge: Hand sized piece of metal that shows the person is a police officer

Handcuffs: Two metal rings that open and close to lock on the wrists to keep a person from moving their arms and hands

Gun: A weapon that fires bullets

K-9: A dog that is trained specifically to work with officers

Radio/Mic: This is how the police officer communicates with the dispatch center and other officers.

Taser: A weapon that releases electric shocks

Things to Remember when Meeting Police

1. Keep your hands to yourself and do not touch their badge or body.
2. Do not touch any of the equipment the police use to do their job.
3. NEVER touch a police officer's gun or any other weapon.

When you Interact or Are Questioned by the Police

DO these things:

- Pay attention and stay focused when the police talk to you.
- Listen to what the police say.
- Follow their directions.
- Stay calm when the police approach you or talk to you.
- Stay where you are (do not walk or run away)

DO NOT do these things:

- Ignore the police
- Run from the police
- Fight with the police
- Argue with the police
- Disobey the police

Identification and communication cards- teach self-advocacy and how to share them

https://www.justdigit.org/wallet-cards/

Requirements for a Wallet Card®:

you must be a person living with a disability that is either autism spectrum disorder or an intellectual disability,

you must be 14 years old or older, and

you must be verbal enough to say “can I show you my wallet card”

Requirements for a Wallet Card® for a caregiver:

you must be the caregiver for a person living with a disability that is either autism spectrum disorder or an intellectual disability

Texas Driving with Disability (used for ID cards as well)

"Communication Impediment" is divided into two groups.

Group One

Diagnosis in this group include:

Autism (including Asperger Syndrome)

Mild Intellectual Disability

Down Syndrome

Parkinson’s Disease

Speech and Language Disorders (mutism, stuttering, speech delay Aphasia and Spasmodic Dysphonia)

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Brain Injury

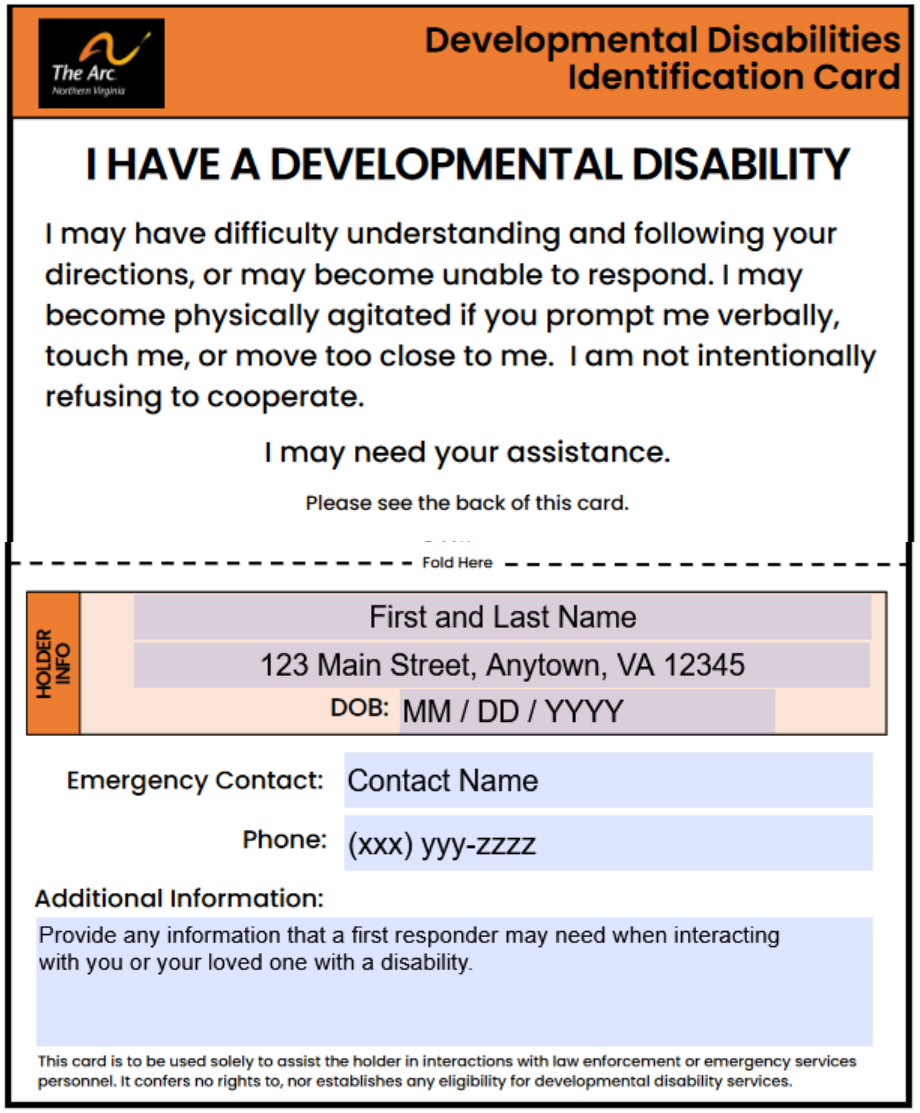
Cerebral Palsy

https://gov.texas.gov/organization/disabilities/texas-driving-with-disability

Card information examples

Card examples “My name is ____. I have Autism. I may find it hard to communicate and interact with other people and understand how other people think or feel. I may find things like bright lights or loud noises overwhelming, stressful, or uncomfortable. It may take longer to understand information. I may do or think the same things over and over. Please do not touch me or my belongings and do not move too close to me. (Situation may dictate if a Law Enforcement Officer has to touch or move close, but mitigating is best)

You can include parent or caregiver contact information



The Arc Northern Virginia

Developmental Disabilities Identification Card

I HAVE A DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY

I may have difficulty understanding and following your directions, or may become unable to respond. I may become physically agitated if you prompt me verbally, touch me, or move too close to me. I am not intentionally refusing to cooperate.

I may need your assistance.

Please see the back of this card.

Fold Here

HOLDER INFO

First and Last Name

123 Main Street, Anytown, VA 12345

DOB: MM / DD / YYYY

Emergency Contact: Contact Name

Phone: (xxx) yyy-zzzz

Additional Information:

Provide any information that a first responder may need when interacting with you or your loved one with a disability.

This card is to be used solely to assist the holder in interactions with law enforcement or emergency services personnel. It confers no rights to, nor establishes any eligibility for developmental disability services.

Living out Loud……

When you see a police officer share your observations

Talk about what they are wearing and how to identify that they are an officer

Talk about what they are doing-

if it's a traffic stop- talk about them going up to the driver and how the driver should respond

If they are at a community event- share how they are there to help and what kind of circumstances require help. If appropriate you can talk to the officer and introduce you child. Model how to interact

If the officer(s) are in action- share how you stay away and discuss what is happening

Point out the school resource officer and talk about why they are at the school

5 is against the Law

1

Very Informal Social Behavior. This is like waving to someone or smiling at someone in the hallway at school. If you just say "Hi' and keep on walking it is also a 1. This is totally OK and is the way most people first notice each other.

2

Reasonable Behavior. This type of behavior is like going to a party you have been invited to and talking appropriately to someone you know. It might be playing a game with someone, working with someone in a group at school or eating lunch with someone. People are enjoying each other's company at this level. This is where people get to know each other better.

3

Odd Behavior. This behavior could make other people uncomfortable. It might include sitting too close to someone or putting your face too close to someone who wasn't expecting it. It could also include showing up at a party you weren't invited to. You might get fired from a job because this behavior makes other people nervous. This is not against the law.

4

Scary Behavior. This could include swearing or staring. You would probably get fired from a job for this behavior or suspended from school. This behavior could also end up being against the law.

5

Physically hurtful or threatening behavior. These are behaviors that are against the law. For example, hitting someone or grabbing them in a private place. You will get fired from a job, suspended from school and maybe even go to jail if you engage in these behaviors.

Role playing or scripting.....

Identify scenarios when your child would need to engage with a police officer and practice them

- Calling 911
- They are lost
- Someone is hurt
- There is a car accident
- They witnessed a crime
- If they are stopped by the police

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Some specific skills to target in role play:

Practice how your child will disclose their disability to the officers (e.g. help them develop a statement or show card, ID bracelet, etc.)

Practice putting hands up and/or keeping hands visible at all times. If possible, teach them to never put their hands in their pockets, in a bag, or behind their back.

Have them always face the officer and never turn around when they are in the presence of the officer.

Practice remaining still and not running or moving quickly.

Practice self-calming and coping strategies such as deep breathing

Items to practice if a police officer stops them

Show your hands

You always want to let a police officer see your hands, otherwise she may be concerned that you are hiding a weapon. You may have an item in your pocket that helps you feel calm – like a fidget – but NEVER put your hands in your pocket when you are approached by an officer. Explain that you are feeling stressed and your calming item is in your pocket and ask if you may reach into your pocket to get it.

Stay in place

Running away might make a police officer think you have done something wrong, even if you haven't. Just stay where you are and allow the officer to come and talk to you, or to continue doing his job.

Don't stand so close

Sometimes it may be hard to judge how far apart you are standing from another person. But that can get you into trouble if you stand too close to an officer. She may mistakenly think that you want to pick a fight with her, or worry that you want to grab something from her belt. If you aren't sure if your distance is ok, then ask.

If a police officer stops them

Disclose your diagnosis

You may have difficulty looking at someone's face during a conversation, may not respond quickly to instructions, or you may not be able to tolerate the lights and sirens from the police cars. If a police officer understands these difficulties you may have, she will have an understanding of the accommodations you may need. Items you could show an officer include a medical alert bracelet or a disability disclosure card.

It's ok to say you don't understand or don't know

It's understandable to want to please someone. So we might be tempted to answer a police officer's question even if we don't understand what we're being asked. Or we might provide information that isn't correct, just so we can feel like we've responded. But we're not helping if we aren't offering good information. Or worse, the police may mistake our attempts at being helpful as outright lying to cover up something. And that can get us into trouble. Police would prefer that if we don't understand what they are asking, or if we truly don't know an answer, that we tell them.

Caregiver Interactions

Allow the individual to be addressed
Police are being taught to address the individual with autism or other intellectual/developmental disabilities rather than assume that a caregiver needs to speak on the person's behalf. This does not mean that the police will not still want to speak with you, just that they will also want to hear from the individual. If the individual does not use verbal communication, please let the officer know which method of communication is most effective for the person.

Be clear you are there to help
In a crisis situation, your presence could be mistaken as someone attempting to obstruct an officer's efforts. Identify your role as a caregiver and offer assistance. You may also request to be present during an interview.

Offer up triggers and passions
You may be the only person on a scene with the key to end someone's meltdown or crisis. The person's passion may be the redirection tool that can turn a situation around. Providing a list of a person's triggers can help prevent an officer from creating a meltdown situation. If your loved one is missing and police are called, knowing the person's passions can assist the officers in their search.

The truth is necessary
As parents we might alter the truth for different reasons; fear we'll look like bad parents, or fear we'll portray our loved one in a bad light. But police absolutely need the truth. If you call for help to find your missing child, the police need to know how long the child has been missing because the amount of time gone changes their search parameters. If your loved one has missed medication which helps him function, the police need to know that. If your loved one has carried out threats in the past, the police need to be aware of that fact. These pieces of information could change how they approach your situation.

Community Engagement

Never touch a police officer
If you try to touch any part of a police officer's uniform, the officer may think you are grabbing for her gun, badge, or that you are attempting to hurt her. If the police think you are trying to hurt them, they may put you in handcuffs to keep themselves safe.

No hugging
If you really love police, offer a handshake. If you really, really want to hug an officer, ALWAYS ask first.

Never touch a police officer's dog
Police officers' dogs, also known as K9s, are actual police and are working when they are in uniform. They are police officers too, so just like all other officers, you may not touch them.

It's ok to ask someone if they are law enforcement
Some police uniforms have light blue shirts and dark blue pants, some are all dark blue, some are all black, some are brown, and some police don't wear a uniform at all – just regular clothes. With so many different looks it can be confusing. So if you aren't sure, it's always ok to ask someone if they are police. All police carry a badge AND have a police identification card that has their picture, like a driver's license.

Safety Plan

Have a safety notebook

Have a list of what to say when calling 911- include your address

Keep the information from this presentation as a reference

List of helpers and how to contact them

Identify safe places

One page information sheet about your child- medicines, behaviors, communication tips, calming suggestions

Always Remember

Police are moms, dads, and other regular people too
Police officers have regular lives outside of their jobs just like you have different interests and activities outside of school or your job. And, just like you, they want to have friends. So if you see an officer out in the community, it's ok to say hello, ask them how their day is, and introduce yourself. You may just make a new friend.

Officer Billy Yoder

Lucinda Thelen (lathelen@tamu.edu)

Resources

parent-tips-how-to-interact-with-police

parents 911

texas-driving-with-disability

justdigit.org wallet-cards

pfa-tips-traffic-stop

guide with pictures for police interaction

Developmental-Disabilities-ID-Card-Fillable

ARC library law enforcement resources