

A Big Nose or Burnished Badge: Helping Individuals with IDD Become More Comfortable Around Police

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My mother was an actress when I was small. Save the occasional cameo on a daytime soap and one surprisingly popular bra commercial (oh, my first grade shame!), the bulk of her career was contained to a children's theatre troupe who performed at sundry establishments across the state. In "The Invisible Dragon," she played The Princess. In their thinly-veiled Aladdin knock-off, she was The Genie. In "The Emperor's Nightingale," she found herself royalty once again. But their magnum opus, the production to end all productions in my adolescent opinion, was "Hansel and Gretel," brought to the unwashed masses at the bandshell behind the Paramus library. That one knocked me right out. I remember spending hours watching the cast-cum-crew creating the gingerbread house, a tempting confection of cardboard and poster paint. I recall running around the deck-chair-peppered library lawn in the hours before opening evening, my blankie flying behind me like a sail. But, as I look back, what I remember most is the moment my mother revealed herself in costume to me for the first time as... The Witch.

It was an experience that quite literally changed me.

She was exiting her hair and makeup trailer (also known as our idling station wagon, windows sticky with Aqua Net) when I caught sight of her. She peeled herself off of the passenger's seat, noticed my approach, and – without missing a beat – abruptly struck the haggiest, orphan-eating-est, most terrifying posture into which she could contort her black-bedecked body, conical cap piercing the darkening sky. My mother was nothing if not committed. A silent moment passed between us before her eyes flicked down at me and she straightened, bemused. I suppose she was waiting for a giggle – or at least for me to resume breathing – but I was frozen in fear. It was the nose. The giant, twisted, mole-infested latex nose that sat in the middle of her suddenly unfamiliar face. I had no idea who this woman was, but the one who read me to bed every night, she was clearly not.

It took an accelerated attempt to snap me out of my stupor (showtime approached!), my mother rocking me and repeating the mantra, "Jen, I'm still Mommy! My face is from Party City!," and I finally either absorbed her assurances or tired of her recital just before the play began. I sniffed an "I'm

ok,” and she hurled herself on stage in time to terrify a significant section of Bergen County’s most astonished spectators and a small mob of mosquitos. Job well done.

After the curtain call, she plucked the aberration from the center of her face and hugged me, asking how it might be less scary for me in the future. My childlike mind immediately raced to, “DON’T EVER DO IT AGAIN, THAT’S HOW!” but my mother gently rebuffed that suggestion. I can now accept that it might not have been the most practical antidote, as well.

The fact is, whether due to a synthetic schnoz or intimidating accessories like a police person’s badge, fear happens. So, how can we make terrifying things a little less so when it comes to incidents over which we may have no control, especially in serious situations such as interaction with law enforcement?

Advocacy, services, research, and innovation organization Autism Speaks reported in a 2019 study that 53% of autistic adults recounted having had four or more interactions with police in their lifetime, many characterizing the exchange as negative due to officers’ lack of understanding or awareness of (sometimes hidden) disabilities. Because of inexperience with people with disabilities, police are prone to misconceive markers of developmental disabilities as recalcitrance; difficulty with personal expression, unresponsiveness, overwhelm, and the impulse to flee may make an officer assume these symptoms are impudence warranting a harsh response. Police are also in danger of unwittingly accepting false confessions due to the subject’s eagerness to please, vulnerability to influence, or desire to hide their disability. According to online law enforcement information source Police1.com, “people with often-invisible disabilities and conditions like autism, deafness, mental, illness, dementia, fetal alcohol syndrome or a range of other conditions may be inhibited in their ability to communicate, follow commands or behave in accordance with social norms, putting them at risk during encounters with law enforcement.”

These circumstances - compiled with a relatable fear of authority - can leave people with IDD even less likely to stay calm in the presence of an officer or to seek one out in times of need. But there are ways to make it easier!

Teach Your Children Well

Acquainting your children with the appearance and responsibilities of police professionals will allow them to grow up with a feeling of security around them. So get ‘em while they’re young!

Read books featuring police officers to your kids! Stories like “Topsy and Tim Meet the Police,” “I’m Afraid Your Teddy’s in Trouble Today,” and Richard Scarry’s “A Day at the Police Station” will solidify the idea of police in your child’s mind. Picture books are also helpful, both for language-building and communication skills, as well as getting comfy with the idea of law enforcement.

Incorporate badges, hats, and uniforms to their dress-up wardrobe! (Why should doctors and farmers get all the fun?)

Bring home some coloring books about police people, or print out coloring pages for free from iStock (<https://www.istockphoto.com/illustrations/police-officer-coloring-page-for-kids>) or First-School Preschool Activities and Crafts (<https://www.first-school.ws/theme/coloring-pages/community-helpers/police-officer.htm>) or

Bridge Over Troubled Waters

Even if the waters are calm, a bridge is always a good thing. (Remember The Bridges of Madison County? The Bridge to Terabithia? Bridge of Frankenstein? ...Wait, that last one was a type-o.) So, work on building a bridge with your local police department early and often. Familiarity breeds comfort, especially when we are acclimating our loved ones with IDD to living among law enforcement. They will come to see their friendly neighborhood police as just that: friendly!

New Jersey is dedicated to strengthening community trust, and has implemented a number of initiatives to that end. In 2018, the Attorney General’s Office instituted the 21 County, 21st Century Community Policing Project, also known as “21/21,” in which community stakeholders and law enforcement leaders convene quarterly to discuss important topics relating to their ongoing relationship. It has also launched the “Officer Resiliency Directive” dedicated to promoting stress management for police, a program which would ensure calmer, more positive community interaction.

Families can also “adopt a cop,” so to speak, by inviting a member of your local police department to visit your home, block party, or neighborhood gathering. Just becoming more accustomed to a person can make it much easier to be around them. You can also offer to help out with a police event, drop in to meet the police chief (bringing bagels benefits everyone!), and loop in your local police to issues of concern to you and your community. Staying in

touch will lessen the distance between you, and make you a team!

You can also highlight the “fun” in “fundamental rights” (see what we did there?) by making your visits entertaining! Become pen pals with a member of your local police, invite an officer to your next birthday party (have them bring their cruiser!), or take a tour of the department with an excited group. The more face time they get, the better they’ll feel.

Most important, not only will your loved one become more comfortable around these professionals, but your local police force will become more familiar with your loved one! That means understanding their regular day-to-day behaviors (which is also good for helping them recognize when something is wrong) as well as getting to know them as the beautiful people they are! (We love a win-win!)

Ardor and Diligence

First lady Abigail Adams once said, “Learning is not attained by chance, it must be sought for with ardor and diligence.” But we say, “Forget the sweat, we’ll come teach you!”

The fact is, no one can identify something if they don’t know what to look for or what they are seeing. So, it is up to us to make sure that our local officers understand who they are serving and how best to do it, even if those citizens do not reveal their cognitive differences! Providing the police with essential information can mean the difference between a negative interaction and an empathetic one.

Here’s a quick primer:

Possible behaviors by people with autism, courtesy of Autism Speaks:
Exhibiting an impaired sense of danger

Wandering

Feeling overwhelmed by police

Fearing people in uniform

Reaching for objects out of curiosity, such as shiny badges and handcuffs

Exhibiting fight or flight responses

Not responding to commands such as “stop!” or to provide a name

Delayed speech/language

Avoiding eye contact

Repetitive behavior like rocking

Sensory perception issues

Seizures

Pathfinders for Autism adds:

Self-soothing behaviors, such as fidgeting with an object in a pocket

Running away

Touching or trying to touch a police officer

Standing too close

Also from Autism Speaks, potential signs of meltdown, a common stress response for people:

Withdrawal

Non-speaking

Emotional outbursts, including crying or other atypical behaviors
Communication challenges

Possible symptoms of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), courtesy of the CDC:

Poor coordination

Hyperactivity Difficulty with attention

Poor memory
Learning disabilities

Speech and language delays

Low IQ

Intellectual disability

Poor reasoning skills

Poor judgment

Vision or hearing difficulties

If a law enforcement officer observes behaviors like these but is still unsure of whether they stem from a cognitive difference, they should approach the person as if they do, indeed, have one. Erring on the side of caution is always preferable.

An Ounce of Prevention

Although we know that the police are meant to serve and protect, the stark reality is that, well, oversights can still happen. That's why we want to arm our children and loved ones with as much protection as possible. Here are some easy ways to keep them safe:

FOR YOUR LITTLER LOVED ONES:

Wear it on Their Sleeve

Gift your child with IDD an identification card. These accessories can be personalized with the child's name, age, address, diagnosis, and medications. Providing these details when approached by the police can mean the difference between an upsetting experience and an enlightening one. (But don't forget to teach your loved one to alert the officer as to what they are reaching to show them before putting their hand in their pocket!) Medic alert bracelets are also helpful in such situations; they can even be adorned with a QR code that will bring the officer directly to your child's information on their Database.

Book 'em with Social Stories!

According to the National Autistic Society, social stories are "short

descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity, which include specific information about what to expect in that situation and why.” Educating your child about who the police are and what an encounter with them might look like can help ease the anxiety surrounding the event. You can work together to create a social story or pool your resources with other families!

FOR YOUR MORE GROWN UP LOVED ONES:

Tell Hard Truths

Although we know that most law enforcement professionals are dedicated to serving and protecting every citizen, we’ve all heard stories on the news about those who are not as impartial. Once kids are old enough to accept this reality, it may be helpful to educate them about racism, ableism, and the police. Ways to approach this can include arts and crafts or games, which can be easier to understand and less intimidating. The Anti-Defamation League suggests mask-making, self-portraits, and other activities at <https://www.adl.org/resources/tools-and-strategies/thinking-about-social-Justice-through-crafts-and-conversation>.

Later, says website Learnbehavioral.com, you may want to talk about the history of the police force or the effects of bias-based policing such as George Floyd’s killing. It is important to underscore to young adults that most law enforcement professionals are sources of safety to all of us, but to inspire an awareness of potential dangers, as well. Your autism provider or care manager can help navigate these difficult discussions.

Play the Part

Like social stories, role playing can help your child “experience” a police encounter without the fear! Take turns playing the police officer and child with autism, and work through different scenarios. Don’t forget to pay attention to lessons you can teach along the way (“Always show your hands,” “Do not touch them or reach for an officer,” “Do your best to communicate with the officer to let them know that you have a developmental difference or if you do not understand what they are asking you”).

You can also take advantage of the Center for Autism Research at Children’s Hospital in Philadelphia’s virtual reality training simulations, found at <https://florevr.com/>. Request a demo and see how immersive experiences can make learning gentler.

Keep Calm and Carry On

Staying calm is the first step to easy interaction. Some helpful suggestions

include:

Deep breathing

Ask for a family member or advocate in an even but clear voice; letting the officer know that your loved one has a disability will help them understand this need

Do not move around too much; keep arms relaxed

If there is too much noise, feel free to ask the officer, “It is too loud here, can we please move to a quieter spot?” or “The noise hurts my ears, do you have any headphones I can wear?” Informing the officer of an IDD diagnosis is especially helpful in this circumstance.

Cop to it

Many law enforcement officers go above and beyond their everyday obligations. Here’s a way they can continue that practice...

Police should understand that many people with IDD will attempt to self-soothe when confronted. They may also be sensitive to stimuli, so officers should avoid loud noises - including shouting - and sudden movements. Officers should also refrain from making physical contact with a person suspected of having neurodivergence, as it can be extremely stressful for Them.

Don’t Just Meet ‘Em, Join ‘Em!

Think the police are just people to view from afar? That’s not how it has to be! People who are neurodivergent can accomplish so much in life, and joining the law enforcement profession is one of those things!

Awareness site Autistic and Unapologetic featured an interview with Ben, a British police officer with Asperger’s, in 2019. Here’s what Ben had to say: “I developed a personality that wanted to be part of a community and I already had experiences which gave me motivation to do something good. Then very, very quickly I knew that I wanted to be in the cops.

I think it’s important that autistic people are given the chance to be in the cops in the same way that the police should be a mix of all ethnicities, sexualities and religions, because the fabric of the community is just as diverse and we should represent who we are policing. Also, there are many autistic people who will need support. They are victims of crime so why can’t they be soldiers against crime?

“...but then, I suppose it would be unfair for me to turn around and say that every autistic person can be a cop - because I don’t think that’s true. You

have to be realistic. Some people who are autistic and regimented and you don't get that in the cops. In a split second they could say you're working another [shift] and you are going to really struggle."

As with all people, not every profession is right for everyone. However, there is a place in the policing profession for every interested and able person (neurodivergent or -typical, it doesn't matter!). Those for whom policing is not a good fit can explore positions within the police without actually donning a badge, jobs such as dispatcher, file clerk, or interpreter for the hearing impaired. Like any dream, it may require exhausting Plans A, B, and C before arriving at the one that works. But, also like any dream, it's worth it!