

**Elopement**  
 UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING  
 ELOPEMENT BEHAVIOURS

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**Disclaimer**

This presentation is intended to provide general strategies and foundational understanding of elopement to help teams better support children. It does not constitute clinical advice. Intervention plans should be individualized, based on thorough assessment and evidence-based practices, and closely monitored. Teams are strongly encouraged to collaborate with qualified professionals with advanced training in behavioural interventions when addressing complex or high-risk situations.

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The toddler room is buzzing with activity: hand-washing, snack cleanup, toys everywhere. Liam, a curious three-year-old, is waiting for his turn at the sink.

An educator enters with a cart of supplies, and for just a moment, the door stays open. At the same time, another child spills their water bottle, pulling everyone's attention toward the spill. In that tiny window, Liam slips out silently. By the time anyone realizes he's missing, "Has anyone seen Liam?", he's already down the hall. The main exit is propped slightly open because a staff member just stepped outside to check the playground. Liam pushes through the gap and walks straight into the fenced yard.

When they finally spot him, he's outside at the far end of the playground, standing near the gate and tugging at the latch.

**As professionals who work with children, how prepared do you feel to recognize and respond to behaviours like the one in the scenario above?**

**What strategies or tools do you currently use or have in place to ensure the safety and well-being of these children?**

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## What is elopement?

- Elopement, also known as:
  - Wandering
  - Running
  - Fleeing
  - Bolting

Refers to leaving a safe environment or caregiver without permission or notification. *Hotz et al. (2023)*

- For children, this could mean leaving parents, caregivers, the boundaries of their home, yard, early learning childcare centre or playground.

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## The Reality of Elopement

- Elopement can be a terrifying reality, especially for children who are unaware of dangers.
- Some children with autism and developmental delays struggle to understand potential hazards
  - They may not perceive danger in the same way as their peers.
- Lack of danger awareness increases risks, including running into traffic or bodies of water.
- Sensory overload situations (e.g., fire drills) can trigger elopement.



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## Statistics on Elopement in Autistic Individuals

- 50% of autistic individuals attempt to elope at least once after age four (4x more than neurotypical peers). *Anderson et al. (2012)*
- 35% of individuals who elope attempt elopement at least once a week. *Anderson et al. (2012)*
- Over 60% of parents of autistic individuals cite wandering as a direct source of increased stress and reduced quality of life. *Hotz et al. (2023)*
- Over 26% elope long enough to cause concern, increasing the need for vigilance. *Anderson et al. (2012)*
- 35% of autistic elopers cannot communicate basic information like name, address, or phone number. *Arky (2025)*

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### Perception of the Behaviour Matters

<p><b>VIEWING ELOPEMENT AS A DELIBERATE CHOICE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They are doing it on purpose</li> <li>• They know better than this</li> <li>• They need to be punished</li> <li>• They are a bad kid</li> </ul> <p><i>This perception leads to blame and punishment.</i></p>	<p><b>VIEWING ELOPEMENT AS A SKILL DEVELOPMENT AREA</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is making them want to leave?</li> <li>• What do they need to feel safe here?</li> <li>• What skill do they need to learn?</li> <li>• What might be missing?</li> </ul> <p><i>This perception leads to prevention and support.</i></p>
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### Reflection Moment

- What emotions or perceptions come up for you when you hear the word "elopement" in a behavioural context?
- If you imagine an autistic person eloping, what do you think they might be trying to escape, avoid, or communicate?

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### Some Reasons that Elopement Occurs

ELOPEMENT IS NOT RANDOM, IT IS ALMOST ALWAYS GOAL-ORIENTED.

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### Seeking Interest

- Some autistic children have strong interests.
- Strong interests or passions can drive a child to leave.
- They may elope to access a place or activity they enjoy.



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### Seeking Specific Toys or Objects

- Some children elope because it results in gaining access to a highly preferred item.
- For example:
  - They might leave a space because there are cooler toys in the next room.
  - They might leave after being denied access to something they want.




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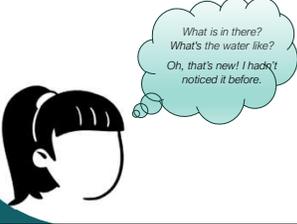
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### Curiosity

- Some children elope due to curiosity.
- A child may be drawn to an interesting sight or sound (e.g., water, animals, distant noises).
  - Example: *Following an animal sound or running toward water.*

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## Diapositive 11

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**AC1** I have put these as examples as there would be other examples, and these are ones.

Choquette, Ariane (EECD/EDPE-O3; 2025-12-15T19:39:14.507)

### Sensory Overload



- Loud noises, bright lights, or overwhelming environments can trigger elopement.
- Overwhelming sensory input (e.g., loud noises, bright lights) can cause elopement as a coping mechanism.
- The child may leave to find a quiet, safe space.

*This environment is overloading me. It's triggering me. I'll just find a safer, more comfortable place.*



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### Escape or Avoidance



- Some children elope to avoid situations that are stressful, that are difficult, unpleasant, ones where they are not sure what is expected, an activity they find boring, etc.
- Elopement can be a strategy to avoid stressful situations or demands.
- Example: Avoiding work or activity by leaving the area.

*Oh no! I don't know how to do this, it's too hard. I am out of here.*



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### Seeking Attention

- Some children elope as a way to get attention
- Elopement can sometimes be a way to gain attention, even if negative.

*Hi Hi! I love playing chase.*




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## Diapositive 13

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**AC1** I find these note a little subjective. While this is true, I wonder if there is a way to make it a little more «fact» based.

l. e.

Elopement can sometimes be a child's way of coping with sensory overload. Loud noises, bright lights, or busy, chaotic environments can quickly become overwhelming. The child may be trying to escape the noise or stimulation to find a quieter, calmer, and safer space where their body and brain can regulate again.

Understanding this helps us shift our focus from simply stopping the behaviour to reducing sensory triggers and intentionally creating environments that better align with a child's sensory preferences.

Choquette, Ariane (EECD/EDPE-O3; 2025-12-15T20:32:39.239)

## Playfulness

- Running or exploring can feel exhilarating for some children.
- Elopement may provide a sense of freedom and excitement.



I love being free!

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## Communication Challenges

- Some children struggle to express needs.
- If they can't ask for permission, they might leave without warning. In fact, they may try to meet their needs in another way, and sometimes that "other way" is simply heading out the door before anyone notices.
- Some children struggle to express needs or discomfort, leading them to leave without notifying an adult.

*\*Some children may have limited speech and limited language skills. Others may have great speech and language skills but still have challenges communicating in some situations.*

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## How to Find Out Why a Specific Child Elopes

**Be Curious**

Think about what happened before the child eloped.

**Observe**

Watch where the child goes. What do they engage with when they get to the location? How do they engage when they get to the location?

**Track**

If elopement continues consider collecting data on how often it happens, when it happens, and what the child is going to/doing when they elope.

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## Diapositive 16

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### AC1 Perhaps:

In these moments, the child may not only be trying to escape the structure, tasks and routines planned for them but, they may also be seeking the joy of movement, exploration, and independence. The act of running itself can feel playful and fun, especially if it includes open spaces, novelty, or a sense of "I'm in charge right now."

Choquette, Ariane (EECD/EDPE-O3; 2025-12-15T20:35:32.798

## Taking Data on Instances of Elopement

Child: Corali

Date	Time	Who was present	What was happening before	What happened during	Where was the child found	Notes:
Nov. 12, 20XX	10h45	Educator: Annie Pass: 8 Tom's group entered the gym.	Location: Gym Activity: Free play Corali was playing blocks with Mickel.	She ran out of the Gym. She went in the washroom and sat in the corner of a stall.	In the upstairs washroom in the middle stall	First day back to the ELC after a 4-day weekend
Nov. 12, 20XX	2h30	Educator: Annie Pass: 8 And 4 other children walked into the room.	Location: Blue Room Activity: Sensory play Note: Corali was watching 2 other children playing with the water bin.	She went into the washroom and sat in the middle stall.	Upstairs washroom in the middle stall	Second elopement of the day
Nov. 28, 20XX	2h15	Educator: Jon Pass: 12	Location: Gym Activity: Free play Ageup of 8 or 10 children were playing in the gym.	Corali ran down the hall and left the building using the back door.	Under a tree in the back of the parking lot.	

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## Identifying Patterns (Analyzing the Data)



Look for common themes in the data:

- **When does the wandering happen?** (time of day, specific activities)
- **Where does the child go?** (exits, objects of interest, specific people)
- **What is their behaviour trying to communicate?** (seeking a specific sensation, escape, attention, access to items)

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## Reflection Moment



- How might predictable routines or visual supports reduce the need to elope?
- In what ways does feeling understood change someone's ability to stay in a space during a tough moment?
- What strengths or interests could be used to make the environment feel safer and more engaging?

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# A Focus on Prevention!

HOW CAN WE PREVENT THE ELOPEMENT BEHAVIOUR FROM OCCURRING?



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## Knowing the Child

We want to intentionally take time to understand:

- What brings them joy
- What motivates them
- What feels comforting
- What helps them stay engaged

Tools like **The Preference Checklist** allow us to identify what we can intentionally build into the day to strengthen connection, increase engagement, and support regulation before challenges arise.



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## Adjustments to the Schedule

- **Proactively offer alternative** ways to meet those needs, incorporate their preferences and support their interest.
- Use data to match supports to the reason elopement occurs.
- For example, you might:
  - ✓ Schedule access to preferred items or places
  - ✓ Build in quiet or low-stimulation spaces
  - ✓ Offer breaks and ways to request them
  - ✓ Provide frequent, proactive attention
  - ✓ Plan safe exploration opportunities
  - ✓ Schedule regular movement and sensory breaks
- When needs are met **proactively**, elopement becomes less necessary



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## Modify the Environment to Support Safety

- Design spaces that make it less likely that the child will leave.
- Key strategies include:
  - ✓ Enriching the environment with preferred activities and attention
  - ✓ Maintaining close adult proximity and supervision
  - ✓ Adjusting seating to reduce focus on exits
  - ✓ Managing doors and exits within safety regulations
  - ✓ Reinforcing safe behaviour consistently

\* Before making any changes to the environment, always discuss them with your early learning and childcare centre administrator to ensure compliance with fire, safety, and licensing regulations.



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## Have Clear Safety Expectations

- Safety expectations must be **clear, consistent, and predictable**
- Children are safer when adults share a **common understanding of safety rules**
- Clear expectations reduce confusion and support regulation
- Consider having visual representation of your expectations

Examples of safety expectations may include:

- ✓ Stopping when an adult says "stop"
- ✓ Asking before leaving an area
- ✓ Staying with the group during transitions or outings



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## Being Prepared

Supporting a child who elopes often takes both a big-picture plan and in-the-moment tools. While you can't plan for everything, there's a lot you can prepare for, and that preparation can make a huge difference in safety, peace of mind, and overall confidence.

**A well-structured safety plan is essential for handling elopement efficiently.**

**Key Elements of a Safety Plan:**

- Identify potential elopement triggers.
- Outline emergency response steps.
  - Who do you call first?
  - Where do you search first?
- Keep updated information on the child readily available.



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**Basic Reactive Strategies**

## What to do if a Child Elopes

**During the elopement:**

- Stay calm
- Follow the child and ensure **safety**
- Use clear, firm and positive instructions  
*"Walk back to me safely" or "Let's walk back to our room"*

**Afterwards:**

- As a team, reflect of what could have been done differently so that there is less chances that it happens again.
- Create or revise the safety plan

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## Reflection Moment

- When elopement happens, what does an ideal support response look like for your team?
- How do you personally stay regulated when someone else is dysregulated?
- What is one thing you want to try, change, or observe differently after this presentation?

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## Final Thought

- Elopement is not random
- When children leave a space, they are often telling us that something in the environment does not meet their needs: whether they are seeking access to something, trying to avoid a situation, or needing something to stop.
- By shifting our focus from stopping the behaviour to understanding the need, we move toward prevention rather than reaction.
- Through careful observation, data-informed decision-making, proactive supports, and clear safety planning, teams can reduce risk while preserving dignity, connection, and trust.
- When children feel regulated, supported, understood, the need to elope is significantly reduced and everyone benefits.

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## Resources

- Autism Speaks. (2023). *Autism elopement alert form: Person-specific information for first responders*. [https://link.assetfile.io/1vcFhOS0OVsh4AUT8x6wI/Autism\\_Elopement\\_Alert\\_Form\\_RGB\\_06-2023.pdf](https://link.assetfile.io/1vcFhOS0OVsh4AUT8x6wI/Autism_Elopement_Alert_Form_RGB_06-2023.pdf)
- Child Preference Questionnaire
- Data Tracking - Instances of Elopement

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