

Officer Friendly Day Event Guide

Tips to Hosting your own Successful Event



What is Officer Friendly Day?

Officer Friendly Day is a free, family-friendly event to celebrate autism and build relationships between autistic individuals and their families and law enforcement officers. This event is geared toward individuals with autism and their families. It is an opportunity for individuals on the spectrum (all ages) and their families/caregivers to engage with law enforcement officers, explore their vehicles, and engage in fun activities.

Why Create an Officer Friendly Day?

There are a lot of reasons to create your own Officer Friendly Day. Here are a few:

- (1) To give autistic individuals the opportunity to engage with law enforcement officers and become familiar with their uniforms, vehicles, and job, so that in the event of an emergency they are familiar with the sights of police vehicles and uniforms as well as the overall duties of law enforcement officers.
- (2) To give autistic individuals and families/caregivers the opportunity to ask law enforcement officers questions they have about safety and autism disclosure

(3) To give law enforcement officers the opportunity to interact with autistic individuals to become more familiar with the characteristics of autism so that when they are on a call that involves someone on the spectrum law enforcement officers may be more comfortable recognizing possible signs of autism and engaging with autistic individuals.

(4) To create a safe space and a judgment-free atmosphere for community members on the autism spectrum and their families/caregivers to be able to engage in a fun, family event where each individual is welcomed and valued for who they are.

What Activities are Included in Officer Friendly Day?

A variety of activities can be included in Officer Friendly Day. Here are some suggestions:

- Law enforcement vehicles to explore
- Hot wheels track with vehicles to zoom
- Sidewalk chalk
- Duplo blocks
- Legos
- Large foam blocks for building
- Bubbles
- Story time with an officer (officers read stories every ½ hour)
 - Here are some suggestions for books:
 - *Officers on Patrol* by Kersten Hamilton
 - *Let's Meet a Police Officer* by Gina Bellisario
 - *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña
- Crafts
- Games with a cop (e.g., playing catch, racing)
- Coloring
- Chat with an officer
- Question and answer session with an officer
- Traffic stop simulation

A few things to keep in mind:

- Autistic individuals have different levels of motor abilities so think of activities that are inclusive to all. For example, if you have a bubble station, consider taping a couple bubble cylinders to a chair or table so individuals can easily insert their wand. Holding the cylinder and inserting the wand may be too challenging for some individuals. If you have a car station where people can “zoom” vehicles, consider having some small vehicles (e.g., hot wheels) and some larger vehicles (e.g., construction truck) that are easier to grab and move.
- Autistic individuals may put objects in their mouth so activities with small pieces (e.g., legos) should be excluded or require close supervision.
- Each activity should have a clear location, so it is obvious to the individual what they are expected to do at that station. For example, a large table with blocks on it signals that on that table they build blocks.
- Individuals will have varying interest levels in the different activities provided. Younger children may truly enjoy some activities but not all. They may shy away from activities that are crowded or where there is a lot of noise or they may be drawn to noisy activities. Older individuals may be equally interested in activities

such as bubbles and blocks or they may prefer activities such as playing catch with an officer or simply asking questions and engaging in a conversation. The goal is to allow individuals to explore the activities that are of interest to them and also allow them to engage with officers to build relationships.



What do Law Enforcement Officers do During Officer Friendly Day?

At the event, law enforcement officers will show autistic individuals and their families/caregivers their vehicles, answer any questions families/caregivers and autistic individuals have, and get to know the individuals – ask about what their favorite thing to do is, what they are learning in school, what they want to be when they grow up, etc. Officers engage in activities with the autistic individuals, such as blowing bubbles, making sidewalk chalk art, building blocks, playing catch, sitting down and eating a snack with them etc. We suggest having a specific station with a sign that says “Ask Me Safety Questions” with an Officer present. That way, families and autistic individuals know exactly where to go if they want to ask safety questions.



What do Volunteers do During Officer Friendly Day?

We suggest having at least one volunteer at each activity station. Volunteers are encouraged to engage the autistic individuals and their families in the activities - play blocks with them, ask what they are building, etc. We suggest having a “Welcome Table” where volunteers welcome community members to the event and pass out any information they would like (e.g., bags with safety related information, trinkets to play with). Volunteers may also serve food. It is helpful if all volunteers wear the same shirt so families and autistic individuals can easily identify who they should go to with their questions.



What is Included in Welcome Bags?

Passing out welcome bags is a great opportunity to educate autistic individuals and their families/caregivers about what they can do to support their own or their autistic child/children's safety. You may also consider adding items for the autistic individuals and their siblings to engage with at the event, such as coloring books and fidget spinners. You may consider including:

- ID cards similar to this one created by the National Autism Association: <https://nationalautismassociation.org/store/#!/Safety-Alert-Cards-Pack-of-50/p/13684412/category=2416348>
- Safety flyers for families/caregivers. The Be REDy Booklet for Caregivers provided by the National Autism Association has a lot of helpful information <https://nationalautismassociation.org/store/#!/NAAs-Be-REDy-Booklet-for-Caregivers/p/57859415>. During our event, we included the last page of the booklet in our welcome bags.
- A social story on how to stay safe with the police, such as this one provided by Police Autism Community Training (PACTautism.com): https://www.pactautism.com/files/ugd/640c83_ef4841fcecc544439794889e2e065d76.pdf
- A guide sheet on how to interact with the police, such as this one provided by Pathfinders for Autism: <https://pathfindersforautism.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/How-to-Interact-with-Police.pdf>
- A guide sheet on what to do during a traffic stop, such as this one provided by Pathfinders for Autism: <https://pathfindersforautism.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/What-to-do-during-a-traffic-stop.pdf>
- Police themed coloring pages and crayons
- Police badge stickers
- Fidget spinners or pop its
- Autism acceptance bracelets

Food

Free food is always a nice gesture at a community event. It is important to be mindful of allergies, such as nut and gluten allergies. Be clear what food will be provided and ask guests to keep the event nut free.

Physical Space

When preparing the physical space for the event, it would be ideal if the event space could be fenced in since autistic individuals may wander and/or elope. If a fenced area is not an option consider putting up cones to create a physical boundary of where the event is taking place.

On the tables and/or at the stations, you may consider including a communication board, such as this core language communication board:

<https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/CORE-Language-Communication-Board-for-Functional-Language-No-Tech-AAC-2421709?st=197b279f9679b3cc1cb5122186bdc00c>

A communication board may help autistic individuals with limited verbal communication and volunteers engage in conversations.



Preparing Autistic Individuals for the Event

Attending events can be exciting for some people on the spectrum and overwhelming for others. You can help prepare autistic individuals for the event by providing a short video explaining what will happen at the event. Here is an example:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RelmKzY5JwY> Or, you can create a social story and share it with community members. Here is an example:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1S80rvxlyBC3uGw7el9bRVq9Mze8jLrVx/edit?usp=sharing&oid=105675432262208204453&rtpof=true&sd=true> (you can download and edit this social story to describe your event)

Whether your department decides to create a video or a social story, it is important to share the video and/or social story with the invitation so that autistic individuals can view it prior to attending the event.

Preparing Volunteers for the Event

Prior to the event, brief law enforcement officers and volunteers on autism. Provide a brief overview of autism, different ways autistic individuals may communicate, and ways they can engage with autistic individuals. For example:

- Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder, meaning that the brain of an autistic individual is wired differently than someone without autism and autism occurs when the brain is still developing.
- No two people with autism are alike. Some people with autism are completely independent, hold jobs, drive, are married, and have children. Some people with autism require a caregiver for some, most, or all daily living skills.
- Autism impacts a person's ability to speak, communicate, and answer questions. At the event you may get to interact with people on the spectrum that use sign language or a communication device to communicate (this may be on an iPad or another electronic device, or could be on a laminated card). You may also interact with people on the spectrum who communicate verbally and who may have an advanced vocabulary. Verbal communication skills are not a reflection of someone's intelligence.

- Autism impacts a person's ability to socialize and understand social cues. At the event you may say hello to someone on the spectrum and they may not respond back. That is okay. Sometimes it takes the person longer to process the information. Just smile and be friendly. Some autistic individuals may not look you in the eye or look away from you when you are talking. That does not mean they are not listening. Keep talking and engaging in the conversation, but try to just ask one question at a time and give a lot of wait time (at least 10 to 15 seconds) for the person to answer.
- Autism affects a person's behavior. You may see autistic individuals (young children, adolescents, and adults) engaging in escalated behaviors. Today, you just get to have fun. As long as everyone is safe and a caregiver/family member is nearby, the caregiver/family member will support the autistic individual. If they ask for help from a law enforcement officer, then by all means support the family and the autistic individual.
- Have fun! Autistic children, adolescents, and adults are more like "neurotypicals" than different. Blow bubbles, eat some snacks, engage in conversation, and have a great time.

Have questions or want to learn more? Please feel free to contact Dr. Melissa Sreckovic msreck@umich.edu and Dr. Christine Kenney ckmeyer@umich.edu. We are happy to help!

Meet the Team!



First photo from left to right: Chief Ray Hall, Dr. Melissa Sreckovic, Sergeant Heather Bromley, Dr. Christine Kenney

Second photo from left to right: Dr. Melissa Sreckovic, Matthew Wallace, Dr. Christine Kenney

Melissa Sreckovic and Christine Kenney are Associate Professors in the Education Department at the University of Michigan-Flint. They have worked with individuals with autism for more than 15 years, including young children, adolescents, and adults. Drs. Sreckovic and Kenney began their careers as early childhood/elementary educators before entering academia. Drs. Sreckovic and Kenney's research agendas are centered

on creating inclusive spaces in schools and communities for individuals with autism spectrum disorder. They provide autism training to first responders and are currently examining the efficacy of training to increase safety of autistic individuals and first responders during safety interactions.

Ray Hall is the Director of Public Safety at the University of Michigan-Flint. Director Hall began his career with the University of Michigan-Flint Department of Public Safety (DPS) in 2012. Before joining the University of Michigan-Flint DPS team, he served as a patrol officer for the Lansing Police Department before being promoted to the rank of Sergeant and serving as a road patrol supervisor. He was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant in 1998. In 2002, he was promoted to the rank of Captain and was assigned as the North Precinct Commander. He has also served as the department's Special Operations Commander, Special Tactics and Rescue Team Commander, and he was responsible for supervising the Detective Bureau.

Heather Bromley is an Executive Sergeant at University of Michigan-Flint DPS. Sergeant Bromley began her law enforcement career with Washtenaw County Sheriff Department in 1996. In 2000, she proceeded enthusiastically into campus policing. While at the University of Michigan Police Department in Ann Arbor, Michigan her experiences included the management of processes related to compliance, budgeting, strategic planning, training and human resources through program creation and implementation contributing to organizational efficiency and effectiveness through continuity of operations. In April of 2016, she transferred to the Flint, MI campus as an Executive Sergeant.

Matthew Wallace is an admissions counselor at the University of Michigan-Flint. He previously worked as a middle school Technology and English teacher in diverse learning environments. Matthew is inspired to create just, equitable, and community-based learning opportunities for all learners and families.

*Event photos taken by Katelyn Stuck - see <https://news.umflint.edu/2022/04/26/officer-friendly-day-sparks-conversation-and-fun-during-autism-acceptance-month/>