

Finding NEMO: Finding the Child** who is Nervous around strangers, lacks Eye-contact, has Minimal social skills and who typically Over-reacts

Parul Kumtha*

(child **used throughout the article to denote either a child or adult with autism)

Apologies for the very contrived title, but there is a reason: just like in the film, ever so often, a child/ special child/ special child with autism, sets out to explore the world and wanders from the protective enclaves of home and school or workplace. Every parent, even those of us who have been fortunate to not have first-hand experience, can identify with Nemo's father Marlin's readiness to go through anything to find the lost child ... all the time harbouring a fear of the worst having happened. This rings especially true when most parents of persons with autism are, not unlike Nemo's parents, very, very, very protective of their young ones.

Add to this scenario the chaos off Mumbai with its population of 21 million (last estimate) with all kinds of dangers lurking at every corner and the stress goes through the roof if ever a child goes missing.

At Forum for Autism, we've lived through many lost and found incidents and the most important learning is that the first four hours are crucial. We have had pre-teens wander in search of water-bodies: pools, rivers, the sea; adults wandering on the local trains for over three days and on one occasion, a young man had travelling out of the state on a passenger train, only to be located after two days, walking the tracks in the dead of night in a forested area of Madhya Pradesh; and on one occasion, a middle-aged man left from his barber's and decided to get into an auto instead of walking home.

The result: at Forum for Autism, we appear to have gained the unenviable reputation of the experts of the 'lost and found' cases. Most times, the search has ended happily.

This is an attempt to disseminate this expertise to other parent support groups and families.

FORMAL (POLICE) PROCESSES

Parent support groups and other organizations associated with persons with autism/special needs must maintain a regularly updated photograph (once a year, especially in the teen years, when growth spurts are a given) of their child members: one 10 inches x 12 inches in 5 megapixel and four passport size photos. This is the size required by the Missing Persons' Bureau. The information can be in soft format and printed if and when needed. At Forum for Autism, we use the following format:

1. Register a police complaint, with a proper complaint number at the local police station where the child was last seen AND at the local police station closest to your residence AND the child's school/workplace. This is because your child may be trying to get home or to the school/ workplace - the familiar hangouts. In case any of these places are at the border of a police jurisdiction, inform the neighboring police station as well. When making the complaint, take along a photo (in the size mentioned above) and give a detailed description of the child's clothes, birthmarks and other physicals.

2. Register the police complaint number onto the Missing Persons' website AND at the central office of the Missing Persons' Bureau. Certain larger cities may have several. For example, in Mumbai, there are separate ones for South Mumbai, Western Suburbs, Eastern Suburbs, Thane, Navi Mumbai and Kalyan-Dombivli. But if the complaint is made in the South Mumbai centre, it gets sent to the extents that local transport (trains) travel, which would mean all the other mentioned centres. If you belong to an organization, please ascertain such details and keep them handy.

3. Contact all transport system authorities in your city/ town. Each have their own missing persons bureau,

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where a formal admission will need to be made. In Mumbai it is the local bus networks, the local train networks and the metro networks. Additionally, we would reach out to the outstation railway networks and state transport networks. This would be done immediately for such children who are fascinated by travel, trains, etc.

4. Follow up with the police after 24 hours if the child has not yet been located, to get the child registered as a missing person. Once the complaint is registered on the Missing Person Bureau's website, it goes nationwide to all police stations. They, in turn, are in contact with the Railways and the State Transport networks.

Given that police searches don't acknowledge that a person is missing unless un-located for over 24 hours, it is imperative that parallel searches are organized.

SELF-HELP PROCESSES:

This involves creating a search party of parents and families of persons with autism along with neighbours and well-wishers. The search needs to start as early as possible; remember the first four hours are crucial as the lost child would not have strayed too far.

Contrary to middle-class beliefs, the larger the group of people who know about the missing child, the less likely that the child will be abused and the faster the chances of locating the child.

5. Print posters with the photo of the missing child with a contact number preferably not either parent's. This is to avoid the parents from being further stressed.

6. Share the poster on social networking sites with an introduction that says that you know the child personally.

7. Concentrate on areas of particular interest of the missing child. Most of our children have focused areas of interest and would probably have wandered to explore these. Some pet favourites are trains, water bodies, parks, eateries.

8. Distribute and put up posters in public places frequented by the child. Involve static by-standers to keep a look-out eg vegetable/fruit vendors, chaatwalas, taxi and auto stands, etc.

9. Contact local special schools/centres. Not surprisingly, well-meaning persons who come across a

wandering special child will take the child to places where they know such children go to, from where they may get directed to the nearest police station.

10. Contact local municipal/government hospitals. Leave details of the missing child with them at the front desk, casualty desk, etc. This is another place where persons who seem incoherent/wandering/hurt are taken to by well-wishers.

11. Similarly, contact Remand Homes and Homes for the Mentally Ill. (In Mumbai, Forum for Autism is known to the Remand Homes and we have requested them to contact us in the event of any child with cognitive deficits being brought in. We figured that even if the child is not from one of our member families, we will be in a better position to understand the child than the officials. Also, we could utilize our network to try and locate the family).

12. Contact Childline. Their number is 1098. They have a system by which their team reaches the place where a child in distress has been reported. They then remove the child from the situation and in case of a lost child, check for police complaints of missing persons and hand over the child to the Remand Home, if family not located. (Forum for Autism is known to them too).

13. NGOs that work with street children are also a great asset in cities like Mumbai and they too can be contacted.

14. Contact the local cable operator for cable TV. Many hutment areas in big cities still rely on cable TV.

Operators are kind enough to interrupt a film and run the details.

15. Put out a flier in newspapers of the area of disappearance. Local newspaper vendors willingly slip these in before delivery.

16. Contact taxi and auto unions with details.

17. Contact FM radio persons to run details by the hour. Many local shops and autos play FM radio through the day.

18. If you have any influence with TV channels, request to run a scroll at the screen bottom.

19. Many housing societies, shops and malls have CCTV cameras. Request to go through footage in areas where you expect the child to have wandered.

EXPLORING OTHER POSSIBILITIES

On one occasion faced in Mumbai, a special adult was missing for a second night:

20. Search parties on foot scanned areas of public toilets and food joints of the missing person's preference in areas where the person was expected to be.
21. A family member (in this case, the mother) taped a personalized message to the person, in which a phone number and a location was shared, where the mother said she's waiting. (This recording can be aired on FM Radio too.) In Mumbai, we have played the recorded message at junctions and chowks, playgrounds and parks in areas that the person was familiar with. Nighttime is a less crowded and calmer time to locate a worried special person, who will probably be seeking a familiar place to eat and/or sleep.

Most times, the missing child is found within the four hours. Sometimes, within 24 hours and other times, within a couple of days. But each time a child is missing for more than 3 days, it falls upon some of the core group members of Forum for Autism to steel ourselves and to approach the morgues. We have never had a positive visit and we hope we never do.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

At Forum for Autism, we are also exploring stand-alone trackers and cell phone trackers. Some of our children carry a dose of medicine and an information card on them. Others wear a bracelet or a chain on the neck. Still others have every T-shirt and shirt printed with details on the collar. Different things work for different children and their families. Explore what works for you.

May your child never need to wander. But if it does happen, may Forum for Autism's collective experiences help you.

(In memory of Sudha Ranganathan, mother of Prasad, who set us on the path of planned processes for finding a lost child ... unfortunately we lost our finder to a cycling accident on 26 Aug 2015).

**Put together by Parul Kumtha, Kabir's mother and President, Forum for Autism, based on collective experiences, many of which have been shaped by Sulekha Doshi, Geet's mother and Rajendra Kshirsagar, Rahul's father, both dynamic mobilizers of search parties within the Government and the general public.*

Why Teach Play?

Maithri Sivaraman*

It is not uncommon for us to meet a little girl with autism who enters a room full of exciting toys, but picks up a small piece of thread, holds it between her fingers and twirls it around all day long.

This repetitive, stereotypic and non-functional 'play' behaviour is typical of children with autism. Play, unfortunately, is not seen as the behavioural cusp that it actually is. That play exposes children to consequences beyond just the game at hand is generally overlooked.

Play is, for want of a better metaphor, a child's workshop where rules, behaviours and consequences are explored (Bruner, 1975) and appropriate responding is imbibed. A child taught to play hopscotch, for instance, is more likely to make a social initiation to play the game, and play with peers results in increased opportunities for communication and social skill development.

Despite the glaring deficit in the social development of a child bereft of play, it is an area that is often relegated to the lowest echelons of skills prioritised by both parents and by interventionists. Self-care, communication and academic skills often take precedence over learning to play.

Play provides children with opportunities to make friendships, collaborate with one another and work towards a common goal. Typically-developing (TD) children learn to navigate the intricate complexities of the social world through play. Negotiation, winning/losing, sharing, helping others, taking turns etc that are often described as 'automatically learnt' by TD children are, in fact, learnt through play.

Language development and play

All social skills, language being the foremost, develop effectively to levels of fluency required in the natural environment only when children participate happily in relevant social activities (Ward, 2011).

Often times teaching language in traditional one-on-one instructional settings does not result in generalisation of