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The Police Need to Understand Autism



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Rob Zink, an officer with the St. Paul Police Department in Minnesota, talked with a 12-year-old boy who has autism. Officer Zink founded a program to train his fellow officers how to interact with autistic people.

LEILA NAVIDI / STAR TRIBUNE

By **STEVE SILBERMAN**

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Diane Craglow was caring for a 14-year-old autistic boy named Connor Leibel in Buckeye, Ariz., one day in July. They took a walk to one of his favorite places, a park in an upscale community called Verrado. She was not hesitant to leave Connor alone for a few minutes while she booked a piano lesson for his sister nearby,

because he usually feels safe and comfortable in places that are familiar to him, and he learns to be more independent that way.

When Ms. Craglow returned, she couldn't believe what she saw: a police officer looming over the boy with his handcuffs at the ready, pinning him to the ground against a tree. Connor was screaming, and the police officer, David Grossman, seemed extremely agitated.

As Ms. Craglow tried to piece together what had happened, more officers arrived, spilling out of eight patrol cars in response to Officer Grossman's frantic call for backup. Soon it became clear to Ms. Craglow that the policeman was unaware that Connor has autism, and had interpreted the boy's rigid, unfamiliar movements — which included raising a piece of yarn to his nose to sniff it repeatedly — as a sign of drug intoxication.

As a graduate of Arizona's Drug Evaluation and Classification program, Officer Grossman is certified as a "drug recognition expert." But no one had trained him to recognize one of the classic signs of autism: the repetitive movements that autistic people rely on to manage their anxiety in stressful situations, known as self-stimulation or "stimming." That's what Connor was doing with the string when Officer Grossman noticed him while he was on patrol.

Images from Officer Grossman's body camera show how the encounter turned into a situation that rapidly escalated beyond Connor's ability to make sense of what was happening to him.

POLICE BODY CAMERA: Arizona officer detains teen with autism



POLICE BODY CAMERA: Arizona officer detains teen with autism
VIDEO BY ABC15 ARIZONA

When an unfamiliar policeman rushed up to Connor and asked, “What are you doing?” he was honest, as autistic people usually are. “I’m stimming,” the boy said brightly. But Officer Grossman was unfamiliar with the word. On the body-cam audio, you can hear the officer’s uncomprehending response: “What?” You can also hear Connor try to calm himself down by saying “I’m O.K., I’m O.K.,” as he sustains abrasions on his back, arm and cheek by being held on the ground by the officer.

This is basically a [worst-case scenario](#) for anyone who cares for someone with a developmental disability, as well as for disabled people themselves, who live every day in fear that their behavior will be misconstrued as suspicious, intoxicated or hostile by law enforcement. And the encounter could have ended up a lot more tragic. Imagine if instead of being fair-haired and rail-thin, Connor had been powerfully built and black or Hispanic. A tense police officer, approaching a young man he thought was a threat to himself or others, might have been tempted to reach for his Taser or service weapon instead of his handcuffs.

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That’s precisely what happened last year in North Miami, Fla., when a young autistic man named Arnaldo Rios briefly wandered from a group home to play with his toy truck on the street, and a passer-by called the police to report an “armed and suicidal” man sitting in the road.

When Officer Jonathan Aledda arrived, he had no idea that Mr. Rios had autism; no idea that the black man trying to calm him down, Charles Kinsey, was his behavioral therapist; and no idea that the flashing silver object in Mr. Rios’s hands was a toy, not a weapon. Officer Aledda fired at Mr. Rios. The bullet missed him,

but struck Mr. Kinsey in the leg. The therapist survived, but the trauma of the incident resulted in Mr. Rios's being placed into more [restrictive institutions](#). He was unable to eat, suffered from night terrors and said to himself over and over, "[I hate the police](#)." In April, state prosecutors [charged Officer Aledda](#) with attempted manslaughter and culpable negligence.

Studies show that these kinds of interactions between disabled people and law enforcement are terrifyingly common, and often go unreported. A [white paper](#) published last year by the Ruderman Family Foundation reported, "Disabled individuals make up a third to half of all people killed by law enforcement officers."

Connor Leibel's mother filed a complaint about her son's treatment that resulted in an internal investigation by the Buckeye Police Department. It not only cleared Officer Grossman but also came to the unsatisfying conclusion that because the autism label covers a large spectrum of symptoms and behaviors it "would be very difficult to teach officers to recognize them all."

That's certainly true: Another way to frame the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's estimate that [one in 68](#) American schoolchildren is on the spectrum is that autistic people make up a large and extremely diverse minority population. But police officers do not have to become experts in every aspect of autism to learn how to recognize people on the spectrum and treat them with respect.

Last year I attended a presentation by Rob Zink, an officer from the St. Paul Police Department in Minnesota, [who started](#) the Cop Autism Response Education Project to train his fellow officers how to interact with autistic people, inspired by his experience of having two sons on the spectrum. Officer Zink pointed out that sirens and flashing lights alone can be catastrophic sensory overload for people with autism, while a calm voice and a reassuring demeanor can go a long way toward de-escalating a tense confrontation.

He also stressed that law enforcement personnel should not expect autistic people to behave in the ways that non-autistic people do. For example, officers should not regard a refusal to look them in the eyes as a sign of guilt, as Officer Grossman did with Connor Leibel. In fact, many autistic people find it easier to interpret spoken instructions if they're *not* compelled to simultaneously look the speaker in the eyes.

Similar programs are underway in several police departments across the country and around the world, but they are still too few and far between. The scarcity of these programs is a sad legacy of the decades when autism was mistakenly believed

to be a rare condition, and many autistic people lived out their lives in state-run institutions.

Now that we know that autism is common, and comes in all the hues and shades of a broad human spectrum, we need to give law enforcement officers the knowledge that they need to avoid turning a routine call into a life-altering calamity.

Correction: *September 21, 2017*

An earlier version of this article incorrectly described a detail of the encounter between Connor Leibel and Officer David Grossman. It is not the case that Connor was handcuffed.

[Steve Silberman](#) is the author of "[NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity](#)."

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