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One-third of autistic youngsters wander from safe places, study finds

April 29, 2016 By Delthia Ricks delthia.ricks@newsday.com

More than one-third of children and teens with autism wandered away from safe environments within the past 12 months, according to a Long Island doctor who has uncovered a growing number of youngsters who have eloped from safety and can't determine when they are in danger.

Dr. Andrew Adesman, chief of developmental pediatrics at Cohen Children's Medical Center in New Hyde Park, has produced two analyses on the problem involving hundreds of children who wandered. Data from both investigations are to be reported Saturday at the Pediatric Academic Societies meeting in Baltimore.

Adesman and colleagues found that among the 1,420 youngsters between 6 and 17, more than 33 percent wandered, some traveling miles away. He calls it one of the most serious crises facing parents and teachers and predicts the problem will only worsen because of the rising number of children with autism spectrum disorders.

"I think, realistically, that the statistics are an underestimate," Adesman said of his own data. "Obviously, there are households where kids wandered more than a year ago and that has not been captured by the data. The statistics belie the magnitude of the problem.

He also said his research misses "close calls," situations when children bolt from home, school, malls and other places, but are quickly caught.

"Elopement, or wandering, put children with autism spectrum disorders at risk of serious injury or even death once they are away from adult supervision," Adesman said.

Parents of autistic children are well aware of the tendency to wander, Adesman added, but the scientific literature needs further strengthening because it has yet to fully explore an issue that frightens and vexes parents — and increasingly has resulted in tragedy nationwide.

In January 2014, the body of autistic teen Avonte Oquendo was found on the stony banks of the East River following an intense search that had lasted months. The boy, 14, escaped in October 2013 from his Long Island City school, slipping past several layers of security. In August 2014, Mayor Bill de Blasio signed Avonte's Law, designed to bolster protections for children in special education programs.

Federal legislation, meanwhile, is pending in the Senate that would incorporate many of the

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tenets in Avonte's Law, but add further safeguards for children across the country. Under the federal measure, the Department of Justice would provide grants to state and local law enforcement agencies for electronic tracking devices, enabling schools and families to know the whereabouts of autistic children at all times.

Adesman, senior investigator of the two analyses on wandering, found that autistic youngsters have difficulty distinguishing between strangers and familiar people and tend to easily panic.

Rosemary Barlone-Schaefer, a licensed behavior analyst at the Family Center for Autism in Garden City, said parents have quietly suffered for years — putting extra locks on doors and buying global positioning systems — doing whatever is necessary to keep their children safe.

At the family center, she and her colleagues recommend GPS devices that are in the soles of shoes because other types of tracking systems tend to be taken off or lost, especially by younger children.

Many autistic teens, she said, like wearing watches, and those can be purchased with embedded GPS technology. The aim, regardless of the type of device, is to be able to quickly trace a child who escapes, Barlone-Schaefer said.

"Elopers really want to leave the premises," she said. "They jump up and dart out of the door. They want to leave the environment.

"A lot of behaviors we see in autism are due to the inability of the child to communicate verbally. They can't tell us their intent. If the environment is too loud or too stimulating they can't fully communicate that concern," she said.

Additionally, youngsters with autism "can't regulate what's dangerous or not dangerous; I may be hit by a car," Barlone-Schaefer said.

She and Adesman noted that wanderers are drawn to bodies of water and that reports of drownings are increasing.

Adesman is planning a research project that will begin later this year, examining GPS devices and the best types of technology for children on the autism spectrum.

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