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## Autism rescue: Firefighter teaches how to help autistic people in emergencies

By Lisa A. Flam

As an experienced firefighter and a devoted father to an autistic son, Bill Cannata is combining the two worlds he knows so well to help protect others.

Being in a fire can be confusing and overwhelming -- especially for someone with autism, says [Cannata](#), a fire captain in Westwood, Mass. And autistic people may react in a way that seems combative to emergency first responders. His mission: teaching first responders around the country how to identify someone with autism and how best to help them in an emergency, when every second counts.

Cannata knows about autism first-hand: His 21-year-old son, Ted, who has the disorder, is unable to speak and is highly sensitive to sight, sound and touch.

"They're going to react differently," Cannata told TODAY. "They're going to resist rescue because of the confusion. They may have extreme behaviors because of the situation."

That could mean getting out of control, acting aggressive, or simply shutting down, Cannata says.

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"People with autism follow a routine and if that routine is broken, this is where the confusion begins with a lot of them and they don't know what to do," Cannata says. "People with autism have left a burning building, but because of the confusion, went back in because that's their safety [place], or some people will run away just to get away from all of the noise and the confusion."

The fire/rescue autism program has educated more than 15,000 first responders, as autism spectrum disorders affect a growing number of families each year.

An estimated **1.5 million Americans** may have autism, a developmental disorder marked by impaired communication and social skills. An estimated **one in 110 children have an autism-spectrum disorder**, making the first-responder education more crucial than ever.

"There's such a need," Cannata says. "I'm getting calls pretty much every day for training requests."

His work is paying off.

Shortly after participating in a training session with Cannata, emergency responder Bill Turner encountered an autistic boy who was out of control at a house fire.

"I go to grab the young boy and I got him and he started pounding me on the chest and he was just beating me like he was going to beat me to a pulp," Turner told TODAY. "And I remembered that the class had taught me that if I put my arms around him and put him kind of in a bear hug, that he will simmer down."

Turner did the right thing to keep the boy safe until his parents could care for him, Cannata says, adding, "It was perfect."

For all of the teaching Cannata has done, the person he learns the most from is close at heart.

"He's my best teacher," he says of his son Ted, "and what I do is just convey that message to other first responders."