

ACCIDENTAL DROWNING

Autism poses special risks

THE FEAR of a child wandering off afflicts every parent, but that fear can be all-encompassing for the parents of children with autism. A study published last year in the journal *Pediatrics* shows that nearly half of all children with autism are prone to wandering — also called eloping or bolting — away from caretakers and towards objects of fascination, which for many children is water. The results are often tragic: Between 2009 and 2011 accidental drowning accounted for 91 percent of all wandering-related deaths among autistic children in America under the age of 14. This is a startlingly high rate of preventable deaths, and it should serve as a call to action for state and municipal governments.

There are ways of mitigating this problem, but they are often expensive or not readily available. For example, LoJack — a company better known for making equipment used to find stolen cars — has a ser-

vice available statewide called *SafetyNet*. Users wear a waterproof bracelet which emits a radio signal, allowing the police to locate the missing child. However, the cost — \$30 a month plus a \$99 enrollment fee — could be prohibitive for many families. A modest government subsidy would enable more families to protect their children. This, coupled with swimming lessons designed for people with autism such as those provided by the YMCA of Greater Boston, can dramatically decrease the likelihood of accidental drownings.

Wendy Fournier, the president of the National Autism Association, believes that informing both the public and law enforcement about the dangers autistic children are liable to face is key to preventing deaths. That's why her organization helped create *AWAARE.org*, a website that provides information on wandering. In the summer, when pools are full and inviting, it's an especially useful tool.