

A RECIPE FOR ADDRESSING

Eloping

Serves: 1 classroom safety team | Prep time: ongoing, all year | Safety first, always

INGREDIENTS

- A clear, practiced safety/headcount protocol
- A secured environment (gates, chimed/alarmed doors) wherever possible
- A calm, non-reactive response team approach
- Knowledge of the individual child's likely triggers
- A written safety plan shared with families and administration; this is a safety plan that is for all students so that families and admin know what the plan of action is for any student who may elope.

PREP (BEFORE IT HAPPENS)

- Secure the environment: latched gates, door alarms, clear sightlines
- Identify patterns: what precedes it — noise, transitions, a specific demand, a pull toward something exciting?
- Teach and rehearse a check-in cue with the child during calm times (i.e., teach the Freeze Game to entire class and student); also teach where “to go when upset” routine
- Build a strong, trusting relationship as a protective factor
- Create an individualized safety plan for any child with a known elopement history; consult with admin & specialists to determine next appropriate steps (e.g., data, consult)

DIRECTIONS (IN THE MOMENT)

1. **Respond immediately, without panic** — Move quickly and calmly to close the distance and ensure safety — this always comes first, before anything else. Take breaths to calm your own nervous system.
Why this works: Elopement is a safety emergency, but a visibly panicked, chasing adult can unintentionally turn it into an exciting chase game for the child, which reinforces running rather than reducing it.
2. **Use the practiced check-in cue** — If one has been taught and rehearsed (e.g., “Freeze”), use the same consistent word or signal to call the child back.
Why this works: A cue practiced repeatedly during calm moments has a better chance of being heard and acted on even when the child's impulse-control system is overridden by the urge to run.
3. **Keep your reaction neutral once safe** — Once the child is secured, avoid a big emotional response — stay matter of fact. Keep modeling breathing, offer gentle comments on what is happening as redirection
Why this works: For a child whose elopement is driven by sensory-seeking or attention-seeking needs, a dramatic reaction can inadvertently reward the exact behavior you're trying to reduce.
4. **Identify the underlying need** — Ask what the elopement was communicating: escape from noise or demands, a pull toward something exciting, or a need for movement.
Why this works: Eloping is always a form of communication — escape or sensory-seeking — rather than defiance. Understanding the function is what allows you to actually prevent the next one.
5. **Offer the appropriate replacement** — Build in what the behavior was seeking — a movement break, a quiet retreat space, a designated safe zone to request, escape from a non-preferred activity, etc.
Why this works: Meeting the underlying need directly gives the child a safer way to get it, which reduces the motivation to bolt in the first place. Practice replacement behavior frequently when child is calm.
6. **Debrief and tighten the plan** — After every incident, note the trigger, time, and location, and adjust the environment or plan with your team.
Why this works: The still-developing preschool brain has very limited impulse control and risk awareness, so environmental and procedural safeguards do far more to prevent recurrence than in-the-moment reactions alone.

THE SCIENCE IN BRIEF

- Eloping is most often escape-driven or sensory-seeking behavior — a form of communication — rather than intentional defiance.
- Preschoolers have limited impulse control and risk assessment, so the urge to move or escape can override safety awareness in the moment.
- Big emotional reactions from adults (panic, chasing, alarm) can inadvertently reinforce elopement for a child seeking attention or excitement.
- Consistent, practiced safety systems and team protocols reduce risk more reliably than any single adult's in-the-moment response.

CHEF'S NOTES

- This is a safety-first behavior — always follow your center's and county's elopement/safety protocol above all else
- Avoid punitive consequences after retrieval; they raise anxiety without addressing the underlying function
- Document every incident: trigger, time, location, and what happened right before
- Involve your admin, behavior specialist, and family promptly to build a formal, individualized safety plan
- Teach your entire class how to respond to “Freeze”, “Stop” and “Come back”. Make this a fun game for the entire class to learn. Practice it for a couple of minutes (as a game) each hour of preschool. Start in the classroom then eventually rehearse out on the playground or other areas of campus that students may go to. Have the “elopers” practice teaching the rest of the class too because kids love playing “teacher”
- Never leave a known eloper unsupervised, even briefly

INSTEAD OF SAYING...	TRY SAYING...
<i>“Get back here right now!”</i>	“Stop — I need you safe. I'm coming to you.”
<i>“You could have gotten hurt!”</i>	“I was so worried about keeping you safe. Let's stay together now.”
<i>“Why did you run off like that?”</i>	“Something felt like too much just then. Let's figure out what you needed.”
<i>“You're in big trouble.”</i>	“We need a plan so I can be sure you're always safe.”
<i>“Don't you ever do that again!”</i>	“My job is to keep you safe. Let's practice staying close.”
<i>“I can't watch you every second!”</i>	“Let's practice our check-in signal for staying near the group.”
<i>“That was so dangerous!”</i>	“That scared me. I'm glad you're safe with me now.”
<i>“You always run away.”</i>	“Running off tells me you needed something. Let's find a safer way to ask.”

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