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Students With Autism Get Virtual Reality Lessons in How to Interact With Police



Student Logan Patterson, 18, center, gives Kristen Powell, left, a high-five after using a virtual reality headset at the Technical College High School Pennock's Bridge Campus in West Grove, Pa. The manufacturer of the device aims to help people with autism prepare for real-life encounters.
—Hannah Yoon for Education Week

Tech allows students with autism to practice interactions with law enforcement

By Sarah Schwartz

October 22, 2019

Being approached by a police officer can be a stressful situation for any teenager. But for students with autism, encounters with law enforcement can be especially dangerous.

Children with autism spectrum disorder may not be able to respond to directions or questions from the police. They may avoid eye contact, or be hyperfocused on something else. Police can interpret these behaviors as defiance or aggression.

In attempts to keep kids safe, some autism advocates have created guides for children and their families that encourage building relationships with local law enforcement, or practicing specific ways to act and speak in front of the police.

One company is taking this training a step further, placing students in a virtual interaction with an officer.

Floreo, an educational virtual reality program for students with autism, offers seven different lessons that students can experience through a VR headset. Some focus on foundational social skills, like nonverbal communication. Others, like the police interaction simulation, give students an opportunity to practice and problem-solve in situations that

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they may encounter in the real world. One of these modules has students practice crossing the street; another that's currently in development walks students through an airport TSA checkpoint.

Prepping students for police interactions is controversial: Some critics say that it's the police who need to be trained to better serve the community, and it's not fair to place this burden on children. And strategies that work for white children might not for black children, they say, noting recent high-profile police shootings of young, unarmed black men.

Still, educators have said that practicing handling dangerous situations in a controlled environment, like VR, can be powerful.

"It's difficult to go from a small group setting, where we're doing very contrived social interactions, to 'here's the real world,'" said Kristen Powell, an assistant technology trainer and consultant in the Chester County Intermediate Unit, a regional education agency that serves 12 districts in Chester County, Pa. Several special education programs run through the agency use the police simulation.

In the virtual world, teachers can monitor students' reactions—like intimidation, or excitement—when confronted with an actual officer, and provide feedback, said Powell. Schools teach a lot of personal safety skills to students with autism, like how to set boundaries and how to recognize abuse, said Zoe Gross, the director of operations at the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, a disability rights organization run by people with autism. There's a real use for programs that give students practice in situations that may be unfamiliar, she said.

"That said, this isn't the solution to police violence—and it's a weird response to police violence," Gross said. "It's the duty of police to not injure or kill people."

Laurie Reyes, an officer with the Montgomery County Police Department in Maryland, agrees that law enforcement should be better prepared. Reyes, who provided feedback for Floreo on the development of the program, helps lead an [outreach unit at the police department](#) for people with autism and intellectual disabilities.

"We always talk about safety in layers," Reyes said. "We're doing the best we can to educate the officers in Montgomery County. ... But also having a layer of educating the individual has been huge for our program."

Floreo CEO and co-founder Vijay Ravindran, whose 9-year-old son is on the autism spectrum, said the company is focusing on variables that it can control—preparing children as well as possible for what could be a stressful moment.

"There are all sorts of aspects of the world out there today that could be better," he said. "But we accept it for what it is, and try to help people who want to gain skills to traverse that world."

Minimizing Risk?

It's hard to know how often teenagers with autism have dangerous encounters with the police, mainly because national databases that track police violence don't provide clear and complete numbers. Recently, national attention to the police's use of force, especially in communities of color, has forced more data collection.

There's evidence to suggest that students with disabilities are likely to encounter law enforcement. A [recent study from the Autism Institute at Drexel University](#) looked at parent reports and student self-reports of police confrontations, collected in a nationally representative database of special education students. The researchers found that by age 21, 20 percent of students with autism had been stopped and questioned by the police, and 5 percent had been arrested. (This is lower than estimates of the national average for teenagers overall.)

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Even so, children with autism may be especially vulnerable in these interactions. In their databases of people killed by law enforcement, the [Washington Post](#) and the [Guardian](#) both kept track of victims' disability status. The Guardian found that 1 in 5 people killed by the police in 2015 had a mental health disability, and the Washington Post found that 1 in 4 people killed had a mental health disability, as of October 2017. While autism isn't a mental illness, it's likely that people with autism would have been included in these numbers, advocates say.

One solution to this problem would be to train the police—to teach them how to recognize markers of autism, and to alter their response and not escalate the situation by using force.

That's what Emily Iland, an autism researcher and advocate, set out to do in the early 1990s. When her son was diagnosed with autism at age 14, she worried about what might happen if he were pulled over by the police while driving. She developed a training program for law enforcement, Experience Autism, and partnered with the police department in Los Angeles, where she lived, to deliver it.

Iland's program is one of a few options that police departments have in the U.S. if they want to train their officers on autism awareness. But training on these issues is still relatively rare, and it doesn't ensure that officers will change their practice.



Salina Foster, 20, uses a virtual reality headset to experience a real-life situation during a transitional living program class at the Technical College High School Pennock's Bridge Campus, in West Grove, Pa.
—Hannah Yoon for Education Week

"One day a cop said to me, 'Emily, I can know someone has autism, but if they run from me, I still have to chase them. And if they fight with me, I still have to fight them and win,'" she said. Iland decided then that she needed to develop training for teenagers, too.

Her program, [Be Safe](#), uses video modeling to demonstrate skills like how to follow police instructions, understand arrest procedure, or give information to a 911 operator. An accompanying curriculum is available for schools to purchase.

"People blame the police—and the police need to be educated," said Iland. But in the meantime, she said, there are potentially life-saving benefits to training programs that attempt to equip children with these skills.

Opportunity for Practice

Floreo's training module is a program in this tradition.

For the police simulation, Floreo worked with Reyes and the Montgomery County Police Department to develop a virtual experience that would most accurately represent an officer's demands and behavior. The simulation goes through skills like being able to show

ID when an officer asks, keeping hands in sight, or sitting and waiting patiently when an officer walks back to the squad car. A handful of schools currently use the program.

In Chester County Intermediate Unit, the regional education agency in Pennsylvania, teachers generally use the program with students ages 14 to 19, said Powell. Along with the police simulation, they also use the crossing the street exercise and a module focused on self-regulation.

Powell said she could see some students developing the targeted skills—they started off giving short answers to questions, or using hand gestures in response. In the simulation, they could practice giving full answers.

In 2017, Floreo received a grant from the National Institutes of Health to pilot-test the program's effectiveness with participants age 12 and older, in partnership with the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's Center for Autism Research. So far, the **first phase of the pilot found** that the VR intervention is safe and feasible. The second phase will compare its effectiveness to a non-VR training program: Iland's Be Safe video course.

The opportunity for personalization could be a potential benefit of VR over a traditional program, said Julia Parish-Morris, one of the researchers on the project and an assistant professor of psychology at the children's hospital.

"They have an opportunity to practice, over and over again, whenever they want in a ton of different conditions," she said.

The program also adapts based on student responses. Virtual officers within the simulation can be set to one of three emotional levels, which Parish-Morris described as positive, a more neutral option, and annoyed. Following the officer's instructions will make the officer behave more positively, while not following instructions could move the needle toward a more negative demeanor.

Having these variable mood settings can be helpful, Powell said. A few teachers had been doing meet and greets with police, but one told her that friendly conversation in school wouldn't really prepare students for a confrontation on the street.

"[Students are] not used to having the experience of having a police officer coming over saying, 'Hey, what are you doing here,' " Powell said. "It's not that Floreo's [interactions] are negative, but they're more realistic."

'Challenging History'

Others think they're not realistic enough.

Some families of participants have doubted that a calm interaction in the controlled environment of virtual reality can prepare kids for what they would actually experience, said Parish-Morris. As part of the research, the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia has solicited feedback on the program from the local police department. Law enforcement has raised the same concerns, she said.

"If I'm running down the street, chasing after someone, and I ask a teenager [a question], they can't not reply and look at their shoes," Parish-Morris remembers a police officer telling her. If that happened, she remembers the officer saying, he would probably yell at the kid.

And Gross, of the Autism Self Advocacy Network, said that the techniques Floreo is teaching may "work differently for different people."

Even if black and white teenagers with autism have the same behaviors when interacting with officers, the police may be more likely to see the black child as a threat, Gross said. A teenager could do everything "right," and still be killed or injured, she said.

It's hard to anticipate every variance of every situation in the simulation, said Parish-Morris. For one thing, research protocols put a limit on how distressing a simulation can

be—even if it means it would be more realistic. Still, the researchers plan to add modifications that can dial up an officer's aggression for kids who are more likely to experience it in real life, Parish-Morris said.

"Some folks come in with a bit more of a challenging history with interacting with police officers," she said, which can make them feel defensive toward the simulation. "It's understandable."

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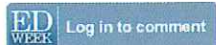
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