



# Autism's many levels makes it hard to know how being held hostage will affect Ethan



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MADISON, Alabama -- It's possible social hindrances that often affect people with autism could help insulate 5-year-old Ethan from the emotional trauma he was exposed to while held hostage for a week, said Alabama's autism coordinator.



Sherry Johnson of Brundidge, and her two children, Olivia Parker and John David Parker, hold signs on U.S. 231 urging motorists to pray for Ethan, the little boy held hostage in Midland City for a week. (AP photo)

The amount of stress the child felt depends on the level of his Autism Spectrum Disorder, said Anna McConnell, autism coordinator for the Alabama Department of Mental Health, so it's difficult to say how being a hostage and possibly witnessing the bus driver being shot and killed will impact him psychologically.

Some people with ASD have such a limited ability to connect and communicate socially that it's possible they are not fully aware of the danger they are in, she said. But, along the

same lines, an autistic person could be traumatized but also be unable to communicate those emotions.

"Danger is really an iffy subject," said McConnell, who was in Madison's Horizon Elementary School on Monday night to speak to North Alabama parents about how the state is developing an ASD support system.

McConnell became the state's first autism coordinator last March. She previously worked as program manager for the Autism Society of Alabama and project coordinator for the Alabama Autism Needs Assessment Project.

She explained there is a wide range of developmental disabilities for people with ASD. Some are high functioning and can hold jobs in the work force, while others must live with a caregiver even as adults.

The FBI reported that Ethan was taken hostage and held in a bunker by by Jimmy Lee Dykes. Dykes also was accused of entering a school bus on Jan. 29, attempting to take children from the bus, and then shooting and killing the driver, Charles Allen Poland Jr.

Ethan was freed from his captor Monday afternoon. He was reported to be [laughing and eating with family](#) at a hospital hours after his rescued.

Because Ethan would need to be under close supervision, it seems likely he would have been up front near the bus driver when the shooting occurred, McConnell said.

Whether or not Ethan recognized the danger of being the hostage of a man whom he also may have witnessed shoot and kill his school bus driver, the 5-year-old would have been under stress from not having all familiar things that comfort him, she added.

"He wants that routine and he looks for that routine. So he didn't have his routine or his caregiver," McConnell said.

It was helpful that Ethan's mother was able to get him some medication while he was a hostage, probably something to help with symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. And giving him coloring books was probably extremely helpful, so he could focus on that activity and block out everything else, she said.

"Having a TV in there would help, too," McConnell said.

The hostage situation in Midland City is the second time national attention has focused on autism in recent months.

Adam Lanza, the shooter who gunned down 26 people in Newtown, Conn., in December, had autism, according to his brother. After media reported that, autism awareness advocates quickly began fighting a false image that autism leads to violent behavior.

Ethan's plight might have helped raise better awareness for ASD, McConnell said, "because it shows the other side of the spectrum.

"Just because you're autistic, it doesn't make you violent. You're more likely to be bullied than to be a bully," she said