



Stranger Danger: Helping Children Stay Safe ***by Robin F. Goodman, Ph.D.***

Parents want to protect their children at all times, but they can not be with them every minute of every day. Children need to learn how to stay safe, be smart, and protect themselves from strangers and abduction when on their own at school, at play, and even at home. Parents can help children learn what to do when in an uncomfortable or unsafe situation.

The following tips may help parents and children feel safer.

1. Parents must have the right attitude and approach: Parents must set the right tone for their children. When parents are calm when discussing tough or scary topics, children will be better able to listen and learn. Parents must monitor their own fear and be careful not to alarm their children.
2. Consider the child's age.
 - 3-5 year old children are curious and may be naturally trusting. They also easily respond to attempts by adults to be kind or supportive. Toddlers and pre-schoolers do not necessarily grasp the long-term consequences of potentially dangerous situations.
 - 6-9 year old school age children are more capable of understanding right from wrong. They are able to remember information and put it into practice but may get overwhelmed in a difficult situation.
 - 10-13 year old children may overestimate their ability to handle a bad situation. They also may feel they should not be scared and be nonchalant in their attitude about risk.
3. Deliver information in an age appropriate way. Younger children will benefit from playing and repeated conversations. Parents of older children can discuss current events or real situations to educate them about danger.

4. Be aware of specific ploys used by strangers. Teach children not to help strangers look for lost puppies, accept gifts or candy, or get in a car with someone they do not know.
5. Use the TASK strategy: the following components
 - Talk: Have a discussion with children about safety and strangers. It can be useful to find out how a child defines a "stranger". Parents are often surprised to hear that only ugly creatures in story books are considered dangerous.
 - Ask: After talking to children, it is important to ask them what they heard. This allows parents to correct misinformation and determine what needs to be reviewed or discussed differently.
 - Show: It can be helpful for parents to practice with children what they have learned. This can mean going to a mall and having a child ask for help from a store clerk, or walking through the neighborhood and watch as the child goes to an identified neighbors house.
 - Know: Make sure children know who, when, where, how to get help. For example, they should know their name, address, and phone number; how to dial 911; who will pick them up from school and activities; other friends and family who have been approved
6. Monitor media: Especially when child abductions and murders are in the news, parents should be aware of what their children are watching or hearing. Help them separate out fact from fantasy. Parents should be sensitive to any changes in their children's behavior, especially sleeping problems and nightmares, and seek additional guidance.

About the Author

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