

Safety Habits to Keep Your Kids Safe

Teach Your Child How to Stay Safe

'Stranger danger' has traditionally been used in personal safety education for children, but over the years this strategy has become outdated and we have learned that it is ineffective in reducing a child's risk of abduction and victimization. Here's why:

1. The concept of a 'stranger' is difficult for children to understand.
2. In certain situations children may need to approach someone they don't know (i.e., a 'stranger') for help.
3. Children are more likely to be abducted by someone they know or have come in contact with (i.e., not a 'stranger').

Rather than focusing on stranger danger, it is far more effective to teach children **not to go anywhere with anyone** without first getting permission from their parent/guardian. This reinforces to children that the duty of supervision lies with parents/guardians, as opposed to leaving it up to them to assess motives of individuals.

Pay Attention:

- Watch for individuals hanging around places where children play (e.g., parks, schools), but not accompanying or supervising any particular child(ren).
- If you notice a young child on their own, get involved. See if their parents are nearby, or call police or a child welfare agency to assist.
- If you notice an adult trying to take a child away from a public place or children's area and you suspect something isn't quite right, get involved. Simply drawing attention to the situation may be enough to stop a child abduction from happening.
- Be aware of an individual paying an unusual amount of attention to a child or children in your community.
- If your child or a child you know tells you about someone they met online who made them feel uncomfortable, report the information to police or Cybertip.ca — Canada's tipline for reporting the online sexual exploitation of children. While your child made the right decision by telling you, the next child approached online by the same individual may not feel they can tell a safe adult and may be victimized as a result.
- Pay attention to children or youth who seem to be in distress, and seek help when necessary.

If you have concerns about an individual as outlined above, contact the police immediately so they can investigate. Provide a complete description of the individual, and any vehicle they are using (including license plate number).

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What Children Need to Know

Children Ages 4 to 6 Years

- Teach your child that they must always have parental permission before going anywhere with anyone.
- Teach your child to always have a buddy with them when they are going places (i.e., use the buddy system).
- Teach your child active resistance skills — shouting, kicking, biting or screaming if anyone (other than you) physically tries to take them somewhere. Use the slogan “If asked to go and your parents don’t know, SHOUT NO!”
- Teach your child what to do if they’re lost. In most cases, children should immediately sit down, stay in one place and call out for their parent.
- Teach your child to never leave with someone other than who they came with if they’re lost in a shopping mall, amusement park, or other public place/event.

Children Ages 7 to 8 Years

- Reinforce safety tips included above for children ages 4 to 6 years. Children 7 to 8 years of age still need to be reminded that they must have parental permission before going anywhere with anyone, and that they should use the buddy system when going places.
- Teach your child to trust their instincts. Explain that their instincts are the feelings inside them that warn them of danger. They need to pay attention to their body, and if they’re in a situation that makes them feel uncomfortable, they need to trust that feeling and leave to go tell you or another safe grown-up.
- Practice assertive behaviour with your child — teach them to resist, make noise and make a scene if someone tries to get them to go somewhere or do something that makes them feel uncomfortable, and then go tell you or another safe grown-up.
- Teach your child the difference between Keep and Speak Secrets:
 - » Secrets that are okay to keep are secrets that are fun, don’t hurt anyone, and will eventually be told.
 - » Secrets that need to be told to a safe grown-up are secrets about touching or picture taking that they are told never to tell.
- Discuss with your child what they should do if they become separated from you while out in public in busy places like amusement parks, shopping centres, and events.
- Practice scenarios with your child. Ask them what they would do if...
 - » Someone approaches them on the street
 - » Someone asks them to help find their kitten or puppy
 - » Someone says that their mother sent them to pick them up
 - » Someone tries to pull them into a car
 - » They find themselves alone and are considering walking home alone

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Children Ages 9 to 11 Years

- Reinforce safety tips included above for children ages 4 to 6 years and 7 to 9 years.
- If your child is going out with their friends (e.g., to the mall or to the movies), make sure their transportation to and from the location is organized. Also, make sure you are available while they are out in case they need to call you. Discuss with your child what they should do if they become separated from their friends while they're out.
- Teach your child how to stay safe when they are home alone. Home alone safety strategies you can teach your child include:
 - » Keep the doors of the house locked when home alone
 - » Don't open the door or let anyone in the house when home alone
 - » Don't let anyone know that they will be home alone
 - » Make sure all emergency and contact numbers are by the phone/programmed into the cellphone
 - » Call you (parent/guardian) if they need anything
- Talk openly with your child about safety and begin to talk about different types of lures adults may use to gain the trust of children. Frequently go through possible scenarios with your child to help them understand how to respond in different situations. Common lures may include:
 - » Offering gifts
 - » Asking for help
 - » Saying there is an emergency
 - » Claiming to be an authority figure
 - » Using flattery
- If your child is going to a friend's house, have them call or text you when they arrive, or have their friend's parents call you when your child has arrived. When your child is returning home from their friend's house, have them let you know when they're on their way. Know the approximate distance and time it takes to get from one house to the other.

Children Ages 12 to 13 Years

- As children are entering their teen years, they should still be reminded of the safety strategies included above for children ages 4 to 6, 7 to 8, and 9 to 11.
- Teach your child to anticipate potentially dangerous situations — use "what if" scenarios to provide your child with opportunities to practice responding safely to these situations (e.g., "What if someone came up to you, said you were pretty, claimed to be a modeling agent and wanted you to come with them?").
- Teach your child the difference between a healthy relationship and an unhealthy relationship.
- If your child wants to meet an online friend in person, arrange to speak with the parent of the online friend. Together, you and the other parent can make plans for the children to meet with both of you present.

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Children Ages 14+

- Continue to teach your child assertiveness skills. Use “what if” scenarios to help them anticipate possible situations (e.g., “What if you met someone online that wanted to meet you in person?”). Find natural opportunities to reinforce assertiveness skills and safety strategies, and discuss your child’s increased independence and how they might reduce their risk of being harmed.
- Continue to teach your child the importance of using the buddy system when they go out with friends. Emphasize the importance of sticking with their friends wherever they go — they should be agreeing with friends before they go out that everyone leaves together. Explain to your child that part of being a good friend is looking out for each other and not leaving a friend behind, as it may cause them to be more vulnerable to victimization.
- When your child goes out for the evening, they need to have a transportation plan in place. By ensuring that your child and their friends have appropriate transportation to and from a place, that no one is left on their own to get home, and that nobody walks home alone, everyone is much safer.
- Ask your child to text you when they arrive at their destination, change plans, or decide to stay over at a friend’s house.
- Tell your child to call you at any time if they need help. Your child may, at some point, find themselves in a difficult and/or bad situation they don’t know how to get out of. Tell them to phone you, and you will come and get them immediately. Reassure your child that they will not get into trouble for calling you. Keep in mind that you need to mean it! Letting your child know that they can phone you acts as a very important safety net, especially if your child is in a compromising or potentially dangerous situation.
- Talk to your child about the difference between healthy relationships and controlling relationships. If an adolescent’s first serious dating relationship is controlling, it can negatively impact their development and create risks to their safety.

Make Safety a Habit!

During times of crisis we are often reminded about the importance of teaching children about personal safety.

As adults, we often shy away from teaching children about sexual abuse and abduction, feeling we will frighten them. Safety education helps build a child’s confidence and critical thinking skills, and prepares them for dangerous situations they may encounter.

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