

Kidpower Answers For Parents With Small Children

Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought "People Safety" education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit www.kidpower.org.

Copyright (c) 2008 Irene van der Zande. All rights reserved. Permission is granted to print this PDF and copy this article for personal or free charitable use only as long as the Kidpower information and this copyright notice are clearly visible. For example, this means you can use this article as an educator in your classroom. However, prior written permission is required to reproduce this article in any other printed or digital form for any other purpose including on websites, in newsletters, or as part of a paid publication or service. Please contact safety@kidpower.org.



Here at Kidpower, we believe that babies are learning about "People Safety" even before they are born. However, as babies, toddlers, and preschoolers start to become more independent and move on their own out in the world, parents often have many questions about how to support their children in being safe as they start to meet new people and interact with other children and adults.

Some parents worry because their children are "too shy" and will get anxious and withdrawn around people they don't know well. Other parents worry because their children have no discretion and

will treat everyone as their new best friend. Some parents worry that their children will be so eager to please that they might be dominated by others. Other parents worry that their children will push against the boundaries of both peers and adults.

Here are some Kidpower answers for the concerns that we hear from many parents and other caring adults with small children in their lives.

What should I be most worried about in terms of someone who might hurt my child?

At Kidpower, we believe that most people are good. Unfortunately, a few people do very destructive things, which can have a huge impact on everyone's safety. The reality is that anyone can be a potential danger to a child. Statistically, children are far more likely to be harmed by someone they know than by a stranger, which is why teaching about boundaries is so important. However, in even the safest of places, there is

always a risk that children might be traumatized by getting lost or by having an adult do something dangerous, which is why children need Safety Plans to follow. On a day-to-day level, children are most likely to deal with social problems such as getting their feelings hurt because they are being left out or someone says something unkind; reacting either too passively or too aggressively when they get frustrated; getting caught up in doing something potentially dangerous together; and not knowing how to persist in getting help from busy adults.

How can I best protect my children's safety before having them be on their own with others for the first time at school or with another group?

There is no substitute for supervising the people who are caring for your children. No matter where your children are, it is important to make sure that the people responsible for their well-being are ensuring a safe, respectful, caring environment where the adults are paying close attention and fully in charge. What you can do to prepare your children to learn to protect their own well-being is to give them a strong foundation of the "People Safety" skills that Kidpower teaches. Most problems can be prevented if children and their adults have practiced how to ask for help; set boundaries; protect their feelings; stay in charge of their bodies; know their Safety Plan if they get lost; and check first with their grownups before they change their plan about where they are going, what they are doing, and who they are with. It's not enough just to tell children what to do; they also need to practice.

Resources such as the *Kidpower Safety Comics* and workshops provide useful tools for introducing and practicing these basic People Safety skills and concepts with your children in a fun age-appropriate way.

How can I encourage my children when they are with groups of children their age at school or elsewhere to get along well with their peers and respect the adults in charge while still taking care of themselves?

Good boundary-setting tools prepare children (and people of any age) to speak up for themselves and others in respectful powerful ways. Getting along well means knowing how to ask for what you want and explain what you don't want while understanding that some things are not a choice (e.g. you have to be quiet at circle time or story hour and keep your hands to yourself). Getting along well also means understanding that you won't always get your way, so you have to listen and learn about other points of view in order to play in ways that are caring and fun for everyone.

No matter what, your children need to know that problems should not be secrets and, if they have a problem, their job is to keep asking until they get help. Having clear rules and understanding how they work help to prevent vulnerability. For example, as children, you learn to wait for the light or crossing guard at the cross walk; you know what the rules are about playing games with friends or at school recess; you know how to throw away hurting words and how to stop yourself from saying hurtful things to others; you know to move away from someone who is not acting safe; you know that touch and games have to be okay with everyone, safe, and allowed; you know how to set boundaries; you know to check first; and you know how to get help when you need it.

What are appropriate social boundaries for us to teach our children—and at what age should these lessons begin?

Intended or not, these lessons begin from before birth. The most important social lesson parents can give their children is to have good social boundaries themselves and then to use an understanding of these boundaries in their interactions with their children, starting from birth. Even if a baby doesn't understand, he or she will respond to stress, tone of voice, and body language. As soon as they can move around and begin to understand, children can be coached in learning different kinds of social boundaries. Start with noticing and appreciating what each child **can** do and then build from there. Even if you have to guide the child every single time for a few years, these lessons are being absorbed. Don't force affection on children of any age. Advocate for your child with relatives and friends to make sure that touch and games are okay with each person, safe, and allowed by the adult in charge (you!). A crawling baby who wants to pet a cat needs close supervision as she is coached verbally and physically to "be gentle" - and children can learn to "be gentle" when touching anyone. Even at young ages, children need to start to learn about **not** touching sometimes. You don't touch the stove because it's "HOT!" You can jump on Daddy, but not when he's ill. Many things are okay to touch, but **not** put in your mouth. Having good social boundaries means knowing your rights and being able to speak up about what is and is not okay with you; knowing how to be careful with your body and your words, so that you don't cross the boundaries of others; knowing that all of your feelings are okay, but that you can learn how to express your feelings in ways that are not destructive to others; and, ultimately, knowing how to advocate for the rights of others to help make the world a safer happier place for everyone. As they develop more speech and understanding, toddlers and preschoolers can start use one-step very specific skills for themselves. For example:

"Say, 'Please stop. I don't like that.'" "Listen to his words." "Give her more room." "Move away." "Throw those hurting words away." "Use your Mouth Closed Power." "Use your Hands Down Power." "Say, 'I'm using that now. You can have it when I'm done.'" "You'll have to wait your turn."

What should we be teaching our children about how to interact with strangers?

It is very unfortunate that in English the word "stranger" rhymes with "danger" because the "Stranger Danger" concept promotes fear without making children safer. Instead, we want to teach children about Stranger Safety and Stranger Awareness.

The Stranger Safety Rules are different when children are with their grownups or when they are on their own. When your children are with you, they can do all sorts of things with all sorts of people as long as this is okay with you. However, small children are only truly with you when they are touching you or within your immediate reach and you are paying attention. If you are even a little ways away from them and get distracted for even a moment, they are on their own.

This is why it is important to teach your young children to move away and Check First with you or another caregiver anytime they encounter something or someone that is unfamiliar to them – be it a shiny piece of broken glass, an interesting book of matches, a very red pill, a cute bug, a furry animal, or a friendly person. You also want them to learn Check First before running off on their own or before hiding.

When your children are together with you, you can tell them when it's okay with you for them to say "Hello" or wave to a stranger, to take something from a stranger or, if they wish, even to shake someone's hand. The rule is that **you** get to decide when it's okay and when it's not. Kids might protest, but they are used to the idea that grownups get to decide lots of things that they can't.

With younger children, we often start by introducing the safety rules with animals you don't know well and then applying these same rules for people you don't know well. The safety rule is that children need to check with their grownups first before they get close to an animal or play with an animal, unless they know that animal very very well.

Once children are old enough to understand, you can practice this with stuffed animals. Play the Check First game by letting the child know where they are - the park or the playground and where their grown-up is - perhaps on the park bench. Pretend to have the animal approach the child and coach the child to move away and check first. Their adult can say, "Thank you for checking first. Let's ask the owner." Or, "Thank you for checking first. A squirrel is a wild animal so let's just watch."

You can teach children that the Safety Rules with people are the same as with animals. You don't need to worry – you just need to follow your Safety Plan. A stranger is simply a person you don't know well. When you are on your own, your job is to move away and Check First with your grownup before you talk to, take anything from, or get close to a stranger.

You can practice with children by pretending to be a stranger who wants to shake hands (or let them play with a puppy or give them a ball) and coach them to move away and tell their grown-up, "A stranger wants to shake my hand." Their grownup can say, "Thank you for checking first. Let's go together."

In settings where children will be encountering lots of people they don't know, tell them what the rules are for that particular setting. For example, "We are going to a neighborhood party where I know lots of people but you might not remember them. You can be close to people and say "Hello" anywhere in this room, but don't leave the room without Checking First with me."

Or, "This is the first day of Kindergarten and you are going to meet lots of people for the first time. They are strangers to you and you are strangers to them. The teacher is also a stranger to you right now and it is okay for you to be with her because I say so. The teacher is the grownup in charge of keeping you safe when I'm not there, so you can talk with her if you have any problems."

Or, "We are at the park. I am going to sit on this bench and talk with my friend while you play. You can play with kids you don't know, but stay right here in this area and come to me and Check First before you change the plan. Because I am talking and might not hear you, be sure you are holding my hands and looking into my eyes when you Check First.

What should we be teaching our children about interacting with adults they do know?

Some children are very friendly right away and others are very shy or reserved at first. We believe that younger children should not have to engage socially with adults until they feel ready. Being polite by

acknowledging people socially is an adult need, not a child's.

Children can learn to greet an adult they know by making eye contact, waving, sharing hands, and saying, "Hello" or "Good-bye." However, this should be suggested gently rather than forced. If a child finds greeting new people to be difficult, the best plan is to model the behavior yourself and to let the child decide to greet others in his or her own way at his or her own pace.

If an adult is a family member or close friend, you might need to explain to this person that the rule in your family is that children don't have to hug or kiss anyone or sit on anyone's lap unless they want to. Children get a very mixed message about their personal boundaries when they are pressured to be affectionate. Our Kidpower principle is that touch or games for play, teasing, and affection should be the choice of each person, safe, and allowed by the grownups in charge.

Finally, children are very literal and parents need to be explicit with their children in different settings about what the plan is about where they are going, who they are with and what they are doing. Except in emergencies where they cannot check first, a child's job is to check first with their parents before changing the plan, even if they are with adults they know.

How can I teach my children about handling emotionally-charged social situation such as being bullied, dealing with name-calling, or other conflicts?

Tell your children that they have the right to be and feel safe everywhere they go - and a responsibility to act safely towards others. If another kid is saying or doing something that is hurtful or scary, their Safety Plan is to speak up if they can - and, if this doesn't work, to leave and to get help. Children can learn to protect their feelings by throwing hurting words into an imaginary Trash Can and saying something good to themselves.

For specific suggestions on how to handle different problems, please see the Articles on Bullying in our website Library.

How can I build my children's social confidence?

Teach your children that life is an adventure and they are heroes who can take charge of their emotional and physical well-being most of the time. The best ways to build confidence of all kinds is to give children opportunities to practice how to handle different kinds of challenges - and to coach them in being successful each step of the way.

Kidpower's Successful Practice teaching method shows how to take situations that are relevant to children, create role-plays that address concerns, adapt for a given child's abilities, and break skills down into achievable steps. For younger children, demonstrations on what to do and not to do can be also be very effective when done with toys or puppets.

How can I help my children learn to protect themselves from physical conflicts?

Most physical conflicts can be prevented by proper adult supervision combined with good Kidpower skills

for everyone. More aggressive children can learn to be in charge of their bodies and words. More passive children can learn to set clear boundaries and to move away when someone is acting like trouble. For children six and older, we do teach physical self-defense skills to be used **only** when they are about to be hurt and they cannot leave and get help.

My friends and family members say that I should not get involved when our children have problems, because they believe that kids should be left to just work it out on their own. What do you think?

Until they have the skills to manage problems on their own, children need adult supervision. Most adults will not let children work things out for themselves with cars, fires, knives, or lakes because someone might get hurt. Most adults will not stand by if a child starts throwing blocks through the window or smashing food into the carpet, because this behavior is destructive even if no one is about to get hurt. So why would adults abandon children by expecting them to work things out for themselves when dealing with problems with people?

As adults, we are responsible for creating cultures of caring, respect, and safety for the young people in our lives. Parents of younger children should step in when things start to become unsafe and children are not able to work things out well for themselves. Positive simple interventions can be very effective in teaching children how to speak up for themselves and to listen to others.

For older children, adults can model powerful positive leadership by stepping in to discuss what is going on, stating the values, asking questions to explore whether these values are being met, and exploring options so that everyone can have a good time.

At any age, we believe that the most effective consequence of unsafe behavior is for everyone to practice how to do it safely by role-playing the problem and coaching children to be respectful and caring with each other.

How can I protect my children from getting lost?

Being lost is traumatic for a child and having a lost child is very traumatic for parents. First of all, try to prevent children from getting lost by doing your best to make sure you stay fully aware of where they are when you are out in public. It's easy to become distracted by talking with someone or looking at someone. Remember that a small child is not truly with you when you are at a store or other busy public place unless you are holding onto that child or that child is holding onto you. Next, have a Safety Plan in case a child does get lost. As soon as children can understand, each time you go into a busy public place, ask, "What's our Safety Plan if we get lost?" Children can practice how to **not** leave the public area, to go to the check-out counter, interrupt a busy adult, and ask for help. They can learn to ask a mother with small children for help. At larger group activities designed for small children, parents sometimes write their cell phone numbers on their children's arms just in case they get lost in the crowd.

How else can I help my children to have safe, positive experiences with new people?

As an adult, be sure you are setting a good example. Children learn more from your example than from anything you can tell them.

Remember that fearful messages do not make children safer- they just make them anxious. Successful practice is much more likely to reduce anxiety and raise competence. With some support, most children can come to enjoy meeting new people, build positive relationships, and see problems that come up as opportunities to learn and to grow.

When children are having problems in how they interact with others, we have found that the best way to change their behavior is to practice with them what you want them to do and then coach them in the moment to use this behavior in real life.

Educate yourself. Explore resources such as our kidpower.org website, which has a wealth of resources, including a free monthly e-newsletter, free articles, free podcasts, publications for sale including an eBook in English and in Spanish, and service information.

Look for workshops such as those offered Kidpower that you can take together with your children.