

The Courage NOT to Fight

Using Target Denial to Be Safe

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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.

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My heart breaks every time I hear another story about someone, typically a teen boy or young man, who was killed because he argued instead of leaving a potentially dangerous situation. Not all such tragedies can be prevented, but preparing young people to use target denial can keep them safe most of the time.

Target denial means denying a potential attacker access to you, physically or emotionally. Another definition is, "Don't be there!" Skills include:

- Planning ahead
- Using your awareness
- Leaving in a powerful, respectful way
- Getting help

Sadly, young people have far more role models glorifying "tough" behavior – fighting over possessions, insults, or challenges – than role models powerfully showing the courage NOT to fight. As adults, we can give them stories to counter-balance these unsafe messages and the opportunity to practice target denial skills in a potential assault.

One Kidpower instructor, Jamiko Allen-Hercules, held a large gym full of 13-year-old boys spellbound when he told this story at a middle school:

"My great friend, Mark, went out with some of his friends to visit a bar we all went to a lot. We must have been there maybe a thousand times before and never had any problems. It was a night like any other night. Mark had probably had a little bit too much to drink. When he was walking home, a man came up and demanded his wallet. Mark said he'd never give up his wallet. The man shot him, and my buddy died right there in the street.

"For me, I wish my good friend who I'd known since junior high had given up his wallet. I wish Mark had said, "Never mind the money! I can always make more money!" Because he fought over his stuff, I'll never see my buddy again.

Jamiko's voice choked up. The normally noisy gym was utterly silent as he continued, *"If Mark had thought about it, he'd have thought about his brother, who is a couple of years younger than him, and his mom, and all his friends who don't get a chance to have him in our lives anymore.*

I can never get my buddy back, but maybe in my telling this story, you'll be prepared to make a wiser choice. What I want people who believe it's cool to fight over their stuff or over insults to do is to THINK ABOUT IT. Think about what the world will be like for the people who love you without you. Think of all you'll miss. It is not cool or honorable to be dead or in jail because you got into a conflict over stupid things like money or rude words. It's just sad."

Jamiko then demonstrated target denial. Ryan, another Kidpower instructor, took on the role of the attacker and shouted at him, "Your mother is a BLEEP!" He told the boys to imagine that BLEEP stood for the worst words they could imagine.

Jamiko walked calmly away and said in a peaceful voice, "I'm leaving!"

As the "attacker," Ryan shouted after him, "Get back here, you wimp!"

Jamiko glanced back, said, "No, thanks!" without a trace of sarcasm, and continued on his way with awareness, calm, and confidence.

All the boys cheered, and then they each practiced the skills of staying centered and walking away when their teacher pretended to be an attacker.

Many years earlier, while I was teaching a high school workshop, a boy called Fernando raised his hand. "Everybody would think I was weak if I didn't stand up for myself," he protested. "In fact, I'd think I was weak!!"

Since arguing would have been a waste of time, I decided to give a demonstration. I asked Fernando to imagine that I, instead of looking like someone's grandma, was a guy who might be a danger to him and that he was cornered in a place that was isolated.

I coached Fernando to get into a non-aggressive Ready Stance and to keep repeating in a strong, respectful voice, "I'm sorry I offended you. I just want to leave."

I then took on an attacker role, waving, pointing, and shouting insults and threats at him, but not moving closer to him. Fernando held his ground without escalating the conflict. Finally, as the "attacker," I turned away so he had room to leave. I coached Fernando to walk away, paying attention to what I was doing, but with a peaceful, powerful attitude - and to let me have the last word. Finally, I shouted one final insult after him, and he continued on his way without re-engaging with me.

Since no attack is over until you've gotten help, I coached Fernando to tell his teacher what had happened and coached his teacher to say, "That sounds upsetting, but you handled yourself really well! Let's keep talking to see if there's anything else we need to do."

As the whole class applauded, Fernando said in a surprised voice, "I just learned that it takes more courage NOT to fight than to fight!"

You don't need to be a self-defense instructor to teach young people to use target denial. Discuss the kind of courage it takes NOT to fight. Point out positive examples and role models. Tell them to imagine you are a potentially dangerous person and coach them through acting out giving up their money and walking away from insults. Taking the time to help them become mentally prepared could save their lives.