

An Educator's Perspective on Teaching Child Safety

By Peter Lewis, Ph.D.

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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The normal priorities of educators encompass for the most part the teaching of academic and social skills with the ultimate intent of insuring a child's success in the world and the marketplace. Over the past years, I have observed how, over time, the primary ethos in support of rigorous academic and intellectual training at school alongside appropriate socialization skills has remained consistent and fully supported by educators, parents and

politicians. But, over time, there has been considerable debate on the place of "other matters," particularly those of the "heart," in the training and nurturing of our youth.

As an educator entrusted with the lives and welfare of over 300 children, I am emphatic in my resolve to bring these skills to the forefront of school life alongside the traditional academic and social skills that are part of mainstream education across the country.

Kidpower grew out of the personal experiences and insights of Irene van der Zande, the co-founder and current Executive Director of the organization. For 17 years, I have been associated with the organization in my capacity as a Head of School and Kidpower Board member. The program has received the support and insights of experts in education, mental health, child development, martial arts, rape crisis intervention, child safety and law enforcement.

In my mind, Kidpower teachings are a necessary part of the overall school program. The statistics from various federal agencies demonstrate just how vital the Kidpower training model has become to insure in so many ways the welfare and education of all young people. Most notably and alarmingly, these statistics point to violence and abuse as being among "the leading health issues of our time."

- In the United States alone, more than 100,000 children each year will become victims of reported attempted kidnappings by strangers
- One out of every three girls, and one out of every four boys will become victims of sexual abuse before the age of 18

- One out of every seven school children is harmed by bullying
- 85% of today's 12-year-olds will be victims of a violent crime in their lifetime.

This means that the risk of being assaulted is greater than the risk of being in a serious car accident. These statistics are relevant to all of us but they are also vivid reminders of the society around us and challenge our own beliefs on how safe and well-guarded our lives, and those of our children, might appear to be. Prior to Kidpower, I was myself readily complacent about issues related to safety and self-protection within the context of a school program as well as within my own family. I felt in control and was confident that the children under my care were safe and were being nurtured with professionalism and with passion.

But, over time, I had a revelation that impacted my commitment to the children under my care. While I took responsibility for them on a daily basis, I saw that they did not possess the training or the intuitive understanding of how to respond to dangers and personal fears when “responsible grown-ups” were not around. As I read about children who had suffered through assaults and abuses, I saw too that the overall damage to their self-worth and sense of being was extremely painful and difficult to overcome. As Irene van der Zande writes: “Too many people find their freedom limited by fear and their joy in life diminished by loss of self-confidence.”

In the early nineties, I met Irene van der Zande and my entire educational ethos and direction transformed dramatically as Kidpower soon became a standard part of the curriculum and teacher training regimen at my school. The program taught then and teaches today simple and effective skills for helping children to prevent and stop most bullying, molestation, assault and abductions. Kidpower is a pro-active response to the terrible injustices and threats that unfortunately abound and are often commonplace in our communities. I have seen how these skills can be used on an everyday basis to prevent most trouble before it starts.

Practicing and learning skills can reduce anxiety, raise self-esteem, and build competencies. This means that children can learn techniques of response and reaction to awful circumstances—however dangerous and perplexing. And, in the end, they can gain self-confidence and advocate for themselves.

In my mind, schools must prioritize the adoption of Kidpower programs for their students so that the dangers of society do not remain a secret at school but are brought out into the open beyond the scope of CNN and newspaper accounts of the horrible occurrences involving children. While educators cannot change society overnight nor keep children fully safe out of school, they can train children and their parents in the insights and skills for contending with the many trials and tribulations that await them as children and as adults.

Ms. van der Zande notes: “Just telling children about the bad things that might happen makes them anxious. Coaching children so they can be successful in actually practicing skills helps them to become more confident and capable.”

Through their teacher trainings and parent education programs, Kidpower gives adults essential tools that they can use effectively to protect the emotional and physical safety of themselves and of the children and youth in their lives. In their direct services with children and teens, Kidpower gives every child the opportunity for successful practice of each skill taught. As an educator, I am impressed with how quickly these crucial ideas and skills prepare people of different ages and abilities to express their needs and take charge of their well-being.