

How To Intervene ~ The Safety Of Kids Is Everybody's Business

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Personal safety for children depends largely on adults doing what they can to help.

I often ride my bike through a large park. The path to the beach is sometimes peacefully empty, sometimes crowded with families, and sometimes isolated with only a drunk man or two stumbling out of the bushes. The latter gentlemen I always wave to cheerfully, but their behavior occasionally makes me glad I know self-defense.

One day, I saw a very little girl, barely walking and clutching her doll,, wandering apparently alone. I looked around but could see no one at that moment except for two women on a trail to the side far in the distance.

I stopped and the little girl came trustingly towards me and said, "Hi! I'm Annie!"

"Where's your Mommy, Annie?" I asked.

She pointed towards the two women, who waved at her. Absorbed in their conversation, the two women then turned their backs and started to walk quickly down the trail, leaving Annie alone except for me.

Personal safety for children can be compromised by many factors; there are so many different kinds of hazards in the world for an unsupervised toddler that I couldn't bear to leave her. "Annie, show me how quick you can run to your Mommy," I said. Doll tucked under her arm, she started running towards the women, but her baby legs couldn't possibly catch up.

I called out to the women and they stopped just around the bend of the trail, almost out of sight.

"You keep doing a good job of running and we'll wait for you, Annie," I told the little girl.

Then I rode my bike up to the women, glancing back to make sure Annie was still on her way to us.

The two women stood there silently looking at me uncertainly.

With all the warmth and kindness that I could muster, I started talking. "Thank you for stopping. I don't mean to be rude, but there are news stories about all sorts of awful things that happen to kids and I don't want them to happen to Annie. I feel scared when you let her get so far from you. This is a beautiful place and I think you feel safe here because we are in nature. But I have had some scary incidents with men myself here. Anyway, young children need you right next to them **all** the time **everywhere**. Personal safety for children depends on adults. You can't believe how quickly they can get hurt by doing things that would never occur to us."

The women thanked me, and we kept talking until Annie caught up with us.

This situation was clear, but sometimes it's tough to know when to step in and when to mind our own business. It's hard to know what to say. When we see situations that might be dangerous or abusive for children, we often hesitate to speak up. We worry about whether we have the right to interfere. After all, these are not **our** children. We also worry about making the situation worse for the child.

I have come to believe that personal safety for children is always everybody's business. Child abuse and neglect thrive when people mind their own business instead of taking action when they can.

To intervene successfully and safely in order to promote personal safety for children, we first need to notice what is happening and try to have compassion for the adult as well as for the child. People do get overwhelmed. People often lack child management skills. People are often damaged by things that happened to them and have poor boundaries. Most of us are not born knowing how to take care of ourselves or each other.

The most effective approach is usually to acknowledge the feelings of the adult in a respectful way and then state our concerns in a positive way. If we become attacking, we will most likely make the problem bigger, not better.

With permission, we might offer to carry something for an exhausted adult, or entertain the child for a few minutes to give the adult a break. I usually carry stickers and crayons in my bag just to have something easy to give a child to do.

If a parent is screaming at a child, we might say something like, "It looks like you are having a hard time. It is hot and crowded here, isn't it. I am wondering if there is anything I can do to help." My experience is that people are often hungry for kindness and embarrassed, but appreciative. People might get annoyed, but realizing that their behavior is noticed by others usually makes them more likely to control themselves.

On a couple of occasions, I have literally stopped people from slapping their young children. In one situation, a little boy had wandered out of an open front door and I was bringing him back to his mother. In the other, a little girl had slipped through the railing around a cliff while her babysitter was sitting on a bench, and I had called out to the woman to grab the child before she fell.

Both times, the adults had their hands raised to hit but I stepped in very close and distracted them by saying very sympathetically and firmly, "Hi. I can see that you feel upset because that was scary, but your little one is too young to understand. I believe that kids learn the wrong things when you hit them." Both times, the women didn't hit, looked surprised, and we talked some more.

Once I waited by a car in the middle of a huge parking lot where two young children were playing in the back seat with no adult in sight. When their father got back, I said, "Hi, I know you are busy, but I am sure that you must really care about your children. I felt afraid when I saw them left alone like this." He looked startled, but then thanked me.

Since children spend so much time in school, personal safety for children in school relies on adults being advocates for creating school environments that are emotionally and physically safe. We should hold schools at least to the same standards that we would hold a professional work setting in terms of addressing harassment and bullying.

Of course, if we suspect that serious child abuse is occurring, it is each of our responsibility to report our concerns to the appropriate authority in our area.

Personal safety for children is everyone's business. Kidpower's underlying principle is that the safety and self esteem of a child are more important than anyone's embarrassment, inconvenience, or offense. By setting aside our own discomfort about speaking up and by risking the displeasure of someone else when we do it, we are sending a powerful message to young people that their well-being is our top priority.