

## **Staying Safe While Helping Others** *By Erika Leonard, Manager of California Services*

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"Wait! Please help me!" a woman called to me as she hurried across the secluded parking lot, struggling to carry her baby in an infant car seat.

Darkness had fallen, and the lot was almost empty, though two other families of people I knew were close by and loading into their cars. Park rangers would close access to the lot in minutes, I had my own two children with me, and a stranger had just asked me for help. Giving help should be a choice; it should never have to be a rule. However, because time pressure and safety issues are often at play when a request for help is presented, we can make that choice more efficiently and effectively if we can stay calm in order to consider the unique situation before us, assess realistic risks, and be clear about our own personal boundaries.

For many of us, being approached by a stranger and asked for help can act as a trigger for a myriad of emotional responses that could include irritation, anxiety, fear, anger, or overwhelming compassion. Often, these triggered feelings grow from other experiences, beliefs, or preconceptions unrelated to the situation before us. When we are triggered with any emotion, the task of making wise choices for ourselves becomes far more challenging.

Awareness of our own emotional triggers can help to prevent them from ruling our behavior. We can improve our capacity to manage triggers we might have about being asked for help by taking the time to reflect on our own experiences asking for, and being asked for, help. We will be stronger when we are aware of any personal tendency to respond reflexively -- Do I ALWAYS ...turn away when I anticipate a stranger might ask for help? ... do what is asked? ... feel anxious? It is both safer and more effective to respond to requests for help in a variety of ways based upon different circumstances.

In the parking lot, I considered the fact that I was in the driver's seat of my van with the motor running and that my children and I were belted in and headed up the road. Four other adults were within 100 yards. The woman herself was dressed in clothes more suited to a casual business meeting than to a muddy visit to a wildlife rehabilitation center. Her thick-soled slip-on shoes complicated her efforts to walk quickly. She seemed panicked and was fighting tears, though the baby was awake, alert, and peaceful. I was well positioned to leave, and pausing to listen seemed to add few realistic risks without eliminating the option to drive away easily. The woman and her child truly seemed to need help.

"What do you need?" I asked.

"Do you have a cell phone? I can't find my keys! We're going to get locked in here! I can't open my car! I can't call my husband because my phone is in the car!" The more she talked, the more upset she became; her voice was thin and shaky. Her eyes were brimming with tears, and she kept looking to her car as if it had betrayed her.

Though I had never let a stranger use my cell phone before that day, this seemed to me a reasonable form of assistance, given all of the circumstances. I asked for the number and dialed it myself. When her husband failed to answer, the woman crumbled visibly. She explained that she was frightened of being locked in at night with her baby. Continuing to assess the risks of what I was considering, with the well-being of my children as a primary concern, I felt that offering her a ride through the gate and down the street to a restaurant posed few risks while getting the woman and baby access to light, heat, people, restrooms, and a phone.

She appeared relieved by the offer and thanked me. Before I unlocked the door, I said, "Do you have a locking clip to secure the car seat?"

"The clip is locked in the car. I'll just hold the baby on my lap. It'll be OK."

"I can't do that; we'll need to find another solution."

"I can't get the clip! What can I do? I can't find my keys! They aren't ANYWHERE!" The woman's anxiety was rising again. She was panicked because the clip, along with everything else she had, was locked in the car, but she was not pushing my boundary or blaming me for keeping it.

Because I felt my boundaries were being respectfully treated, I was willing to continue looking for a solution with her. If she had been pushy or belligerent at this point (for example, by trying to get into my vehicle), I would have left and called the police to assist her, establishing space for myself but still helping the woman and baby.

I did NOT unlock my car. Choosing to give help does NOT mean we have to choose to do everything the person in need is asking for. In addition, feeling overwhelmed with fear can make it hard to make the safest choices; I doubted the woman would really want to put her baby at such risk if she could think the situation through when she wasn't so scared.

"I understand that you're scared about being left here," I explained, "and quite a few people are still around. We can get help so you won't get left alone here in the dark with your baby. I'm willing to stay until the problem is solved, or to try to find the rangers or call the police if necessary. Riding in a car without being strapped in securely would be much more dangerous for your baby than staying here together. It's also not legal, and I can't give you a ride without the locking clip."

I realized that if I could come up with a safety plan, the woman might feel calmer -- this often happens -- and perhaps when she was calmer she could think more clearly about where to look for her keys -- which must, of course, be SOMEWHERE.

"If you'll go look for your keys, I'll go over to my friends on the other side of the parking lot," I said. "They have a small child too, and they might have an extra locking clip for the car seat. Let's meet right back here. The keys or the clip will solve the problem. If we can't find either one, we can call for some help."

She agreed, and we parted. Though my friends did not have an extra clip, the woman came back buoyed by relief. "I found the keys! I found them! Thank you!"

"You're welcome!" I called, and we went our separate ways.

How, when, and why we give help are extremely personal choices. The story above is not a recommendation for any "correct" choices, nor is it an assertion that any amount of assessment can eliminate risks or guarantee outcomes. However, if you believe that acts of kindness, giving, and generosity enrich your life and your community, you deserve to have a structure for offering your time and your resources in ways that feel safe and comfortable for you and the ones you love. This story offers just one illustration of how this process might look.

By giving ourselves permission to hold our own safety and well-being in high regard and to adhere to our own boundaries, we put ourselves in a stronger position to give to others while taking care of ourselves at the same time.